

Shunga: Erotic Art in Japan by Rosina Buckland

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Shunga (literally ‘spring pictures’) are sexually explicit or erotic prints, paintings, and illustrated books produced in Edo (1600–1868) Japan. *Shunga: Erotic Art in Japan* looks at the history of *shunga*, including its production, content, and function. To illustrate this history, Dr. Rosina Buckland, formerly of the British Museum and now a senior curator at The National Museum of Scotland, offers the reader a selection of 140 colour illustrations from the British Museum’s collection, many of which were previously unpublished. She also provides translations of inscriptions, which help the reader achieve a better understanding of the images.

Chapter one, ‘Picturing Sex in Japan, 1600–1900’, starts with a broad overview explaining how attitudes to sex in Japan differed from those in Europe, with religion, unsurprisingly, playing a key role. This is followed by short sections outlining production, formats and possible uses of sexually explicit art. Buckland, whilst accepting Timon Screech’s bold acknowledgement of *shunga* as an aid to masturbation (2009), does not agree with his assertion that it was the *only* use. *Shunga*, as well as being art, could also be used for sex education. The author contextualises erotic art within its Edo period society and culture, which on the one hand celebrated pleasure and sexual freedom, yet on the other was subject to censorship and strict restrictions. This shows

that the complicated relationship between sex and art is not unique to the West, or to the modern era.

As an art form, *shunga* can perhaps seem strange to viewers because it is distant both in terms of time and place. Chapter two, 'Features of *Shunga*', explicates characteristics unique to Japanese erotic art in order to aid viewers' understanding of it. Other works on *shunga* have tended to focus on their sexual content, which is not surprising given the prominence of exaggerated sexual organs, but it can mean that humour, an important aspect, is often overlooked. However, Buckland's translations of the inscriptions on the pictures, which often contain puns, innuendo, and witty dialogue, reveal some of this humour to the modern reader. She helpfully explains two other features which may seem atypical because they contrast with Western erotic art: the lack of the nude and the portrayal of women as equal and active sexual partners. The dialogue, which can also give an insight into the characters depicted, and the tendency to keep them partially clothed – narrowing the viewer's focus to the face and genitals – emphasises the passion and mutual enjoyment of the participants.

By explaining the features and functions, and their cultural and historical context, the author assists the reader in seeing *shunga* as art rather than just titillating images. Having set the scene and given readers the knowledge to understand the art form, chapters three through five chronologically examine some outstanding examples in more detail and give information about the artists who produced sexually explicit art.

Chapter three, 'Patterns of Sensual Pleasure: From Luxury Paintings to Popular Prints, 1600-1750', includes anonymous scroll paintings as well as works by Hishikawa Moronobu, Nishikawa Sukenobu, Torii Kiyonaga I, and Okumura Masanobu. Although these

names will probably be familiar to Japanese art enthusiasts their erotic output might not be. By using these reputable artists as examples Buckland normalises *shunga* and shows how it was part of their oeuvre and as legitimate a subject as actors, warriors, or landscapes.

Chapter four, 'Poem of the Pillow: Masterpieces of the Late Eighteenth Century', continues in a similar vein discussing erotic art produced by well-known artists including Suzuki Harunobu and, one of the most prominent Japanese artists, Kitagawa Utamaro.

The other giant of Japanese art, Katsushika Hokusai, is discussed in chapter five, 'Erotic Adventures: Heightened Drama in the Nineteenth Century', along with Utagawa Kunisada, Utagawa Kuniyoshi, and, crossing over into the Meiji era (1868-1912), Kawanabe Kyōsai.

The book concludes with a chronology, glossary, and some suggested further reading. The book is well structured: by first of all setting up a contextual overview and then breaking *shunga* down into smaller time periods and then smaller again to individual artists Buckland highlights that it is not a homogeneous term. *Shunga* was never an artistic school or movement, but a euphemism used to refer to art created over a 300 year period in a variety of media by artists of different schools and for a variety of purposes which all happen to depict erotic or sexual scenes.

A more comprehensive discussion of current attitudes to *shunga* and of its potential historical uses, both of which are contentious issues, as well as a more extensive bibliography would have strengthened the book. However, the book's aim is to trace the history of *shunga* production and illustrate this with examples from the British Museum's collection; a difficult task which it achieves admirably. Therefore, it is perhaps unfair to expect the book to deal with such polemical issues as

they are outwith its scope and, if covered, may have changed its tone. Buckland achieves a balance between explanation and contextualisation for more casual readers who are unfamiliar with *shunga*, or perhaps Japanese art in general, and more in-depth analysis of individual works, particularly the translations, for those scholars who have prior knowledge. This is one of the book's strongest features.

Shunga: Erotic Art in Japan offers enjoyable reading, and viewing, for a wide audience: the illustrations throughout have succinct but illuminating captions which decode symbolism and give an insight into the personality, status, and relationship of the characters portrayed. Furthermore, the text is informative yet easy to read – the author explains terms clearly and does not assume that readers have prior knowledge. The inclusion of many previously unpublished artworks and the translations which accompany them are a valuable source of information. This book is a useful addition to the emerging field of *shunga* scholarship.

Bibliography

Screech, Timon. 2009. *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan, 1700-1820*. rev. repr. London: Reaktion Books.

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