

Brian Platt

How to Cite This Source: Brian Platt, "Analyzing Paintings and Prints," in World History Commons, <https://worldhistorycommons.org/analyzing-paintings-and-prints>.

1. What are these prints and who created them? (2:58)

These are woodblock prints from the genre that's known as ukiyo-e in Japanese. Ukiyo-e were images of the floating world or the ukiyo. These were pictures that usually glorified the exploits and circumstances from this urban world of attachments. All of these images are from a single artist, Utamaro, who was a 17th and 18th century Japanese artist.

The prints come from a series of 10 prints called "A Parent's Moralizing Spectacles." Most of his prints focus on the upper half of the female form and particularly on the face. The body is usually in some sort of dramatic or unusual pose, sometimes at an angle or with the arm in a strategic or sometimes erotic position. In the upper right hand corner of each of the prints, there's a pair of spectacles which reflects that the parents' moralizing gaze is the perspective from which these women are seen. Each individual print has a title of the woman who's being depicted. There's "The Drunkard," "The Know-it-all," "The Gullible One," "The Party girl," "The Clever girl," and so on and so forth.

All of the images from this series represent not actual women but typologies of women of this floating world. They all appear to be in their 20s and 30s. They are beautiful women almost universally. This is a subculture that celebrates beauty and women. But these prints take a moralizing view of woman and each one depicts a type of woman who manifests certain negative qualities. The application of a moralizing tone towards beautiful women deviated from the mainstream of the genre. How to read these prints, whether to see them in a didactic mode or a celebratory mode—that's one of the issues.

One possible factor behind the moralizing gaze is the fact that around 10 years earlier there was a reform initiative from the government that involved the censorship of images and texts from this urban commoner culture. It is sometimes suggested that the commentary of these prints was added separately in order to get around the censors—that the images themselves were not consistent with the messages that the government wanted to transmit. It's really in the commentary that we see an explicit disapproval of the kind of behavior that the commentator associates with the woman, but the picture conveys a very different message.

The artist was responsible for the image alone in this case, so we don't know for sure who produced the commentary. Very likely it would have been produced by the printer or the publisher.

2. Who was the audience for these prints? (1:51)

Utamaro's prints are for male viewers. They are idealizations of women for a male audience and created by a male mind. The women are objects of a male gaze here. The audience was for the most part an urban commoner audience.

At the time, Japanese society was divided into four status groups. At the top were the samurai who were responsible for governing the society. The next tier were the farmers or peasants who were responsible for agriculture. The lowest two tiers were the artisans and the merchants and they would reside in the cities and in Edo (modern-day Tokyo), the primary city during the Tokugawa period. Even though they were at the bottom of the hierarchy, many of the merchants became very wealthy.

The city of Edo had a district that was outside of the city proper at the time and it was positioned there intentionally by the authorities so as to move immorality outside of the urban space. It's within these pleasure quarters that the urban commoner culture really developed and flourished. The artist and print makers were living within these quarters and the women depicted -- the teahouse waitresses and the courtesans-- were participants in this culture.

Within that urban population it was the artisans and the merchants who were both the subject and the audience for the prints. These were not necessarily for a highly literate audience. What's significant is that a very broad audience is participating in the viewing, creation, and consumption of this shared body of knowledge. The shared set of assumptions and reference points prevailed not only among elites, but also among the general population as well.

3. How were the prints made and reproduced? (1:43)

Initially this genre of art was done through painting, but in the late 17th century a new medium developed. That was the medium of woodblock printing. It could be produced in large number, sold at a lower cost to meet the demand of a growing urban consumer audience. These prints would be drawn first by an artist, then carved into a wooden block. The block would be stamped onto paper and they could make anywhere from a hundred to thousands of prints. The block would wear out, so they would sell first edition prints at a higher cost. Later edition prints were quite inexpensive, so ordinary urban commoners could buy them and put them on their walls or

in greeting cards.

During the later part of the 18th century, the techniques for full color woodblock printing were developed so that prints would be created through multiple applications of different blocks. So the first block printing would produce the black and white outline of the image, another block to apply the red, another, the green. The application was done by hand by specialists.

The artist, the carver, the printer, and the publisher were all involved in creating the work of art, even though we usually associate the works with an individual artist. In all cases the artist is the original designer who would draw the image, and the engraver would carve the image into the block. The printer's role was also crucial because when we get to color prints, the lining up of the different colors in segments of the picture was quite complex.

4. How is the commentary related to the image in “The Drunkard”? (2:17)

“The Drunkard”, Namayoi, depicts a woman with her arm positioned strategically holding a saucer upside down, indicating that she is drunk or tipsy. Her kimono is draped immodestly across her chest and off her shoulder. It's a little unclear whether the picture is portraying her in a negative or erotic light, or both. Similarly, in the commentary, there seems to be a condemnation of her drunken behavior but more so, a humorous re-creation of a scene that would have been very common to participants in the floating world.

The commentary goes like this:

“What women should most avoid is saké. Even a courtesan has to be careful what she drinks. For the proper wooing of a courtesan you do not need for the woman to be drunk. And yet there are clients who like a woman who is fond of drink, in the mistaken belief that her bedroom tricks will be even better. Here are the words of a drunken prostitute in bed.”

And here the language shifts to the slurring words of a drunken person and they go like this:

“Oi, this's crazy. You look like you've got ten faces, sir. I feel like I'm in a shop selling scary masks. Oh, stop movin' about. I'm going to puke. Agh! I can't stand it. I'm fed up being in this rotten job...”

At this point the prostitute lapses into drunken song, in which she says:

“My man's done gone and left me,” and sings a song that continues that theme. Then she stops and says, “Wait! The room's goin' round 'n' round, like this and it gives me the creeps. Uh, it's

horrible!”

Then the commentary shifts back to the observer’s perspective and describes her bumping and crashing into things as she goes out leaving the client in bed. Finally she keels over. The statement that wraps up the commentary is this:

“This is an example of having revealed true feelings under the influence of saké.” Saké is rice wine that’s roughly as strong as grape-based wine. This was the alcoholic drink of the pleasure quarters in which these courtesans would’ve worked.

The language is not modern Japanese. It is colloquial Japanese that was widespread in literary and print genres in artistic works from this time period. It was written in the phonetic alphabet. The literature or the art would be accessible to an audience which would not be able to read classical literature and official documents, but would be able to read the syllabary alphabet that’s used here.

5. What is the message in the print “Vulgarly Called the Wanton”? (2:22)

Another print in this series is referred to by the title “Vulgarly Called the Wanton” or “Zoku Ni Iu Bakuren.” The print depicts a woman with a glass of saké in one hand and a crab in the other indicating that she is partying heavily. She is drinking and eating with both hands, so much so that she neglects to notice that her kimono has fallen open. Her breast is concealed strategically by the one hand with which she is drinking saké. The commentary that accompanies it describes an explicit attitude of condemnation towards the woman’s behavior. Even her body motions, here with the one glass, her head tilted back and the glass tilted very sharply. It’s very undelicate.

The moralizing tone is not overly strong and there isn’t an explicit alternative for how women should act. Partying is not condemned, drinking is not condemned. This woman seems simply to have carried it to extremes and therefore manifests some kind of negative character trait.

The artist is more interested in making a good picture with the yellow crab in one hand and the unusual body position and draping of her kimono. One of the subtexts to this print is that in her kimono one can see the trademarks of different saké companies. So it’s a very creative print visually. The print is aimed less at moralizing than at interesting, unusual, striking art.

The commentary is:

“This woman imagines that it is good not to keep up any sense of appearance. Chattering away in a loud voice she isn’t afraid of anyone nor does she despise herself in any sense. She just acts as

if she's "fancy-free," though these are not her true feelings. She doesn't want to know about proper things. Isn't it so lacking in discretion to display your faults openly. In the past the conduct of a woman who had no experience of service in a mansion was unworthy of attention."

She clearly is a courtesan or a waitress at a teahouse in the floating world. There was a hierarchy in some women who were highly skilled courtesans. There were different expectations for behavior and manner for those women than for lower status women. She would appear to be a lower class courtesan. Perhaps the message here is that what is wrong about her is not necessarily that she's engaging in this behavior, but that it's inappropriate for a woman of her particular status within this world of female employment.

6. How do you analyze these prints? (2:38)

One of the prints in the series is called "The Know-it All" which depicts a woman reclining, reading a book. The positioning of the body is interesting here because she's shown lying down with her head propped up with a book in front of her. And the fact that she's reading a book is reflective of the fact that Japan's urban areas are becoming increasingly literate. Higher status women would be literate and be able to enjoy the print culture. This woman is depicted negative in some ways, not completely. She's reading a book called the Ehon taik-ki, which is a military tale, one of the common genres of popular literature during the time. The commentary depicts a woman who becomes engrossed in matters that the artist views as being irrelevant to her life and neglects household affairs, losing her sense of discretion and propriety.

So the traditional responsibilities of a woman are described here as devotion to parents, devoting ourselves to the exchange of letters, needlework, and so on. These are conveyed as the right responsibilities of the woman, yet she is abandoning these in her interest in other things. And yet her cleverness allows her to disguise her neglect of these other duties.

Within both these prints and early modern Japanese literature in general there's the strong assumption that people are going to get these allusions and once you call the allusion to mind, then everybody knows what it is and they know all the implications of it. That's what makes reading these rather difficult because we don't understand exactly where the allusions come from and what the message of those allusions would be to this contemporary audience.

There're two prints which illustrate this point, one of which is this Know-it All print. It's a mass-produced book that was read widely. The fact that the artist would assume that the viewer would be familiar with the book illustrates the shared set of common reference points.

The print on the “Wanton” woman—her kimono displays the trademarks of different saké brewers. And again, the artist would assume that the viewer would be able to pick up on that visual clue. The viewer knows their trademarks at first glance. So it reflects this increasing commercialization of society, the growth of a commercial market and a consciousness of that commercial market.

It also reflects the growing body of shared visual knowledge, textual knowledge, and cultural knowledge. The growth of that shared body of knowledge was really instrumental in the relatively rapid creation of a shared national identity during the Meiji period in the late 19th century.

7. How do you use these prints to teach about the Tokugawa period in Japanese history? (3:32)

In teaching this period of Japanese history, one of the most characteristic features was the flourishing of a commoner urban culture. It’s something that cannot be adequately described simply through printed documents or through lectures. I started looking for digital images trying to present this social milieu visually. These prints provide striking evidence of how women were idealized and what were the common conceptions of womanhood during the Tokugawa period. I also find that they are evidence of a society that was becoming increasingly integrated in terms of information. Along with the commercialization and urbanization, we see a sharing of information across territorial boundaries, across status lines, and across class lines. The sharing of visual images of texts was part of a larger cultural integration that helped to create the foundation for nationalism.

When I teach with these prints, I gradually disclose more and more information about the images that would help students to make sense of them. But I would begin by simply showing them the prints, ask them to describe what they see. Most people who would view the prints without seeing the commentary would not come to the conclusion that these prints are didactic. Not only are some of them somewhat strikingly erotic, they are incredibly colorful and vibrant and beautiful and dramatic. Gradually I reveal more—the title of the series and see if they can come up with some sort of hypothesis about the purpose of the prints.

In the process of this discussion, hopefully the students will come up with the observation that the images are not of actual individual women but of typologies. That’s significant. I introduce the context—the growth of an urban commercialized social milieu, the growth of the printing industry, the commodification of art. What I want them to come to is a recognition of this

ambivalence between the celebration of feminine beauty and the moralization of female behavior. I'd ask them whether these two elements are in fact contradictory. And most of them seem to think so, but I try to guide them along to a recognition that that's in fact quite common cross-culturally. The ideal of feminine beauty is accompanied by a recognition of the danger of feminine beauty and the kinds of misbehavior that are associated with that.

And so I bring them along from a strict and simple visual appreciation of the work to more complex questions of historical context and, ultimately, to the level of reading cultural idealizations, specifically idealization of women. These images don't necessarily describe how women should act, but rather they're simply descriptions of how women did act and that they could serve both a didactic function and simultaneously as entertainment or titillation. That ambivalence, that convergence of lots of different messages and meanings, are inherent in any work of art and they're certainly here in these specific prints.

These images are very striking to them. They usually contradict the impressions that students have of Japan, Japanese women. One of my purposes is to complicate those stereotypes that they might have coming into the subject matter.

8. What other sources could you use to understand these prints? (3:41)

There's a broad literature on these woodblock prints. Ever since the late-19th century, American and European collectors were fascinated with these prints. They were not recognized as being worthy of the title "art" in the minds of the Japanese artists themselves because they were common and vulgar. And they depicted the commoner world. And they were by artists who were not necessarily part of the official art schools. But they were the picture of exoticism in the minds of western collectors.

During the Tokugawa period there were a number of texts, one in particular called *The Greater Learning for Women*, which depict a very rigid ideal for female behavior about submissiveness to husbands, modesty, loyalty, diligence, and other kinds of characteristically female virtues. When westerners first begin going to Japan in earnest in the late-19th century, this was a document they were very interested in. From that document they painted a picture of womanhood in the Tokugawa period as being incredibly oppressive and confining. And the reality is very different.

What I do in a women's studies course would be to read that document and talk about the ideal of womanhood as conceptualized by Confucian intellectuals, and then move directly into these prints. They're really useful because on one hand they contain an element of that moralistic,

oppressive cultural ideal of womanhood in the commentary. On the other hand, they seem to convey a very different message. The fact that these prints are directed at an urban, mass audience suggests that the audience themselves knew of women who behaved like this. So it provides an ideal teaching moment to talk about how historical documents need to be read carefully and in a nuanced fashion.

The existence of such a document does not necessarily mean that that's how women actually behave. A document like *The Greater Learning for Women*, which details what women should not do in minute fashion, is evidence of the fact that there are lots of women who were doing those things. After reading documents like that, then we can come to these images which capture the complexity of the situation and reveal that deviant women can be celebrated and at least be seen as objects of desire.

One of the other sources that I use to accompany these prints is a short story from this time period that depicts women within this urban commoner milieu. A woman who is married has an affair with an accountant who's taking care of her husband's finances while the husband is away. The story in the literature from this urban commoner milieu is salacious and titillating at one level. On another level, it seems to take a moralizing stance towards the behavior of the women and the people in the story. On still another level, it's mere entertainment that tells an exciting story and talks about the growth of a celebrity culture and the emergence of a cultural integrated society with a shared set of assumptions. That shows it from multiple perspectives, from the perspective of art and from the perspective of fiction, and then also from the perspective of officials who condemned this behavior and who were very suspicious and wary of the activities that took place within this floating world.