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**Viewing and re-viewing Nishikawa’s Inkwell: a case study**

Between 1710 and 1720, the Kyoto artist Nishikawa Sukenobu (1671-1750) produced over sixty *shunpon*, or erotic picture books, which transformed contemporary discourses on erotica. These were both collaborative and innovative: they contained extensive erotic narratives by the *ukiyo-zôshi* (popular fiction) author Ejima Kiseki; they extended the erotic gaze (hitherto restricted to the affluent, leisured lover) to the underclass, and they re-cast erotica as a means of cultivating models of affective behaviour for the masses. But perhaps most importantly, they contained elements of social critique, of social inversion, and irreverence; a suggestion of subversion, often insufficiently recognised in shunga studies.¹

This paper will attempt to retrace the biography of a Sukenobu *shunpon* entitled *Nishikawa fude no umi*, or “Nishikawa’s Inkwell” (FIG 1).² In many ways, it is an odd book on which to expend any attention at all: Hayashi Yoshikazu, the great apologist for the erotic throughout the twentieth century, through whose hands it briefly passed, called it a pig’s ear, a worthless muddle that was a disgrace to the publishing industry – for reasons that will become apparent.³ Yet this book, impoverished though it is, is of interest in that it bears the marks of, even the scars of, its reception over a two hundred year period. Being an erotic book, this reception is inextricably linked with changing attitudes toward the erotic.

The story of “Nishikawa’s Inkwell” begins in 1719 (FIG 2), with the publication of an erotic work by Sukenobu entitled *Kôshoku yakusha makura gaeshi*, or “Under the Pillow of Libidinous Actors”. It consisted of three volumes - “Pillow of Osaka”, “Pillow of Edo” and “Pillow of Kyoto”; with each volume retailing the sexual exploits of men who resembled, and whose names invoked those of, actors in the three cities.

By the middle of the twentieth century, all three volumes had disappeared. By good fortune, the Kyoto volume remerged about five years ago in the Lane collection, now in Honolulu. This volume bears a preface which permits us to date the work, since it announces that its publication marks the renewal of the partnership between the publisher Hachimonjiya, and the author Ejima Kiseki, a partnership which had been severed for nearly a decade as a result of professional differences (FIG 3).⁴ Hachimonjiya was the leading publisher, and Kiseki the leading author of the day; and during this period of estrangement, Sukenobu had continued to illustrate the fiction, and the erotica, of both.

Sukenobu’s erotic work was often interventionist, in the sense of socially engaged – there are, for example, recurrent tropes in his work absent from earlier

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¹ The claim that Sukenobu’s erotic works contain subversive elements is based on close readings of around 25 of the shunpon and is discussed in detail in three chapters of my thesis. However, it is a suggestion that provoked anger amongst Japanese scholars at a shunga conference in Kyoto in December 2009.
² Nishikawa Sukenobu, *Nishikawa fude no umi*, Nichibunken, Kyoto.
erotica: the articulation of female sexual frustration resulting from segregation at court or in daimyo service, the routine subversion of class proprieties – of authority in general. But the cluster of erotic works produced by Sukenobu and Kiseki between 1719 and 1722 (thus including Kôshoku yakusha) were particularly provocative. In the same year that he published Kôshoku yaskusha makura gaeshi, he also published – in collaboration, again, with Hachimonjiya and Kiseki – a work entitled Enjo tamasudare, “Beautiful Women of the Jewelled Blind” – which offered a damning critique of the brothels. As a final gesture of defiance, the work ends with the marriage of the protagonist to a part-time geisha, and celebrates the felicity of sex, with your own wife, in your own home: that is, it takes sex out of the brothel. In 1720, Sukenobu published a shunpon which took as its focus the desperate frustration of women in service either at court or in a daimyo’s mansion. The images assign parodic court rank to a miscellany of women, and comprise some of Sukenobu’s most outrageous depictions of sex. Here we have the Kairô no tsun, or “tsun of the corridor” (FIG 4), and the Iwaki no tsun, or “tsun of no feelings (rock and tree)”. These images take as their subject rank and institution: and they challenge them. This is a translation of a section of the text, which illustrates the type of content to be found in the work (FIG 5). This element of social critique in Sukenobu’s erotica was equally manifest in its routine endeavour to turn social convention on its head: both to depict the illicit (sex between a daimyo’s daughter and the gardener, for example), and to illicitly depict – for example, sex at court, as in Fûfu chûgir ga oka, a work which was eventually banned. This takes us back to the actors (FIG 6). Actors are such familiar subjects in Japanese eighteenth century art that it may at first seem unsurprising to encounter them in shunpon. Yet, actor shunpon are extremely rare. The Edo artist Torii Kiyonobu published a nanshoku actor shunpon in 1702; Sukenobu also published a nanshoku shunpon in 1708-9. In both of these, the actors were depicted as beautiful boys, or wakashû. Kôshoku yakusha was the first actor shunpon to draw actors into the heterosexual domain: but it had a more radical agenda. Torii school actor prints circulated in Edo from the late seventeenth century, but actors were only ever depicted in role. In the Kamigata, or Kyoto-Osaka region, actor prints didn’t emerge until the 1770s. Even then, Kamigata actor shunpon are almost non-existent. Actors’ names and crests appeared in the actor guides published each year, but these, again, were about actors in role. They also appeared in the ukiyo-e of the 1710-20 period, with their crests displayed on the clothes of protagonists in the illustrations. Kiseki’s Fûryû kyoku shamisen – “A Modern Tune on the Shamisen” – published in 1709, is a typical example. Yet in these fictional works, the actors’ names are simply used as passing metaphors of male beauty, or visualization aids: for example, the protagonist looks like, walks like, sings like, Sakata Tôjûrô. But the reference, once invoked, is not sustained. Sukenobu’s Kôshoku yakusha was different. The crests are displayed prominently in the corners of each image, much in the manner of actor albums published around the same time by Torii Kiyonobu (there may be a deliberate element

5 Nishikawa Sukenobu, Enjo Tamasudare, 1719, Nichibunken, Kyoto.
6 Nishikawa Sukenobu, Makurabon taiheki, Richard Lane Collection, Honolulu.
7 For a discussion of this work. see Taihei Shunin ed., Nishikawa Sukenobu makurabon issô: Fûfu narabi no oka, Waraku iro nando (Tokyo: Taihei Shooku; 2009).
8 Hayashi Yoshikazau, Edo enpon besutosera-
of parody). They reference contemporary actors, all active on the stage in 1719.¹⁰ The chapter titles refer specifically to the crests – thus, for example, this crest (FIG 3) (Sakakiyama Shirotarô) inspires thoughts of romance: *kono mon no omowaku arî*; the characters in the stories look like, and are named after, the actors in the chapter titles; and in the speech bubbles, the women address the actors by name in their pleasure. This for example, (FIG 3) is the story of a girl in daimyo service, no longer able to tolerate her enforced celibacy, feigning illness, leaving for Kyoto and contriving an assignation with the son of her old *uba* by the riverside – who happens to be the spitting image of the actor Sakakiyama Shirotarô. It is followed by the story of two brothers, one who likes his sex up market, the other who prefers it rough. They decide to swap territory. The elder brother – the double of Yamatoyama Jinzaemon – forces himself onto a woman making paper in the river (FIG 6), the younger one – Bandô Hikosaburô – now a cloth seller, goes to a tea house, but is so frustrated by the prolonged ritual, that he, too, resorts to non-consensual sex.

Metaphors of beauty, visualization mnemonics: yet, these beautiful men are now represented as occasional rapists (FIG 7-8), cloth sellers, stone merchants, the unemployed son of the old nursemaid; or, at the other end of the scale, yet perhaps more audacious, as an impostor (resembling OginoYaegiri) who seduces two reticent but beautiful sisters by giving them to believe they are being summoned to play the koto for the emperor.

Authority, as I have suggested earlier, was something Sukenobu questioned extensively, particularly in his *shunpon* which are amongst the most radical of his works. In the notorious *Fûfu chigiri ga oka*, he depicted classical court poetesses as contemporary provincial prostitutes.¹¹ In *Kôshoku yakusha*, celebrities are depicted in a range of roles, from the emperor to the very dregs of society: but, most significantly, they are depicted out of role.

This is a departure from conventional forms of actor representation; it is also a departure from Sukenobu’s previous actor *shunpon*, which is also his earliest known erotic work. This was a *nanshoku*, or male love, work; it depicted the actors (or their look-alikes) as beautiful young men or *wakashû*, and the text, by Nishizawa Ippû, was largely lifted from a conduct book of male love.¹² Thus even if the actors are depicted out of role, they remain models of elegant behaviour. *Kôshoku yakusha* represented a major shift. The licence it displayed in its depictions turned on its head the convention for representing actors: in the same way that a court poetess could be a prostitute, an actor could be a down-and-out: within the world of the *shunpon*, social difference – dictated by class or celebrity – was routinely dismissed.

We leave *Kôshoku yakusha* at this point. Sukenobu’s erotic production came to an almost complete halt shortly afterwards, with the Kyôhô edict of 1722 banning erotic

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¹⁰ All the actors are listed in "Yakusha Budai Kosode" (Kyoho 4) in Tsuchida Mamoru, Marunishi Michio and Yamane Tameo, *Kabuki hyôbanki shûsei daiikki geinô sakuin*, vol 7 (Osaka: Izumi Shoin; 1994).

¹¹ It has been argued that this work is in fact *Fûfu narabi no oka*, which contains similarly salacious references to the court. See Taihei Shunin ed., *Nishikawa Sukenobu makurabon issô: Fûfu narabi no oka, Waraku iro nando*, 1994.

works on grounds that they were bad for popular morals (fûzoku). It has become increasingly apparent that this edict was not aimed solely at shunpon, but applied also to fiction (ukiyo-zôshi) that made reference to distinguished families. It is possible to argue that the authorities had come to recognize in shunpon, and in ukiyo-zôshi, the vehicle for a strand of discourse that challenged social, and, often, political institutions. The edict had a significant effect: not a single ukiyo-zôshi was published for the next two years; and while Sukenobu published an illustrated book (ehon) entitled Hyakunin jôrō shinasadame the following year in 1723, it, too, was immediately banned. Kurakazu Masae has suggested that the image of the empress on the opening page, which she convincingly argues was a reference to Empress Meisho – was now too alarming for the fraternity of booksellers to countenance. In 1771, the book appeared on the banned book list Kinsho mokuroku. Reproductions of the book in the Taisho and Shôwa era, omitted the image. Defying restrictions on representation: making a claim for unrestricted expression, seem to have been on Sukenobu’s agenda at this period. But the Kyôhô edict, the change of climate it introduced, the banning of Hyakunin jôrō shinasadame, marked a turning point. For the next four years, this phenomenally prolific artist published – nothing.

Sukenobu abandoned erotica – almost entirely – for the rest of his career. In 1751, he died, having turned almost exclusively to the production of educational illustrated books or ehon. He became, in fact, the most prolific producer of ehon in the Edo period. Who read these works is a question still not fully answered. Women and children certainly were a major part of the audience, but it is highly possible that at least at the time of publication, they also attracted a literate male audience. Still, the works sold, and they resold. Sukenobu remained a household name. Senryû of the 1760s continued to use the term Nishikawa-e for erotic books. A guidebook to Kyoto in the 1780s instanced the illustrated works of Nishikawa as one of the distinctions of the city. An itinerant lending library in Kinosaki Onsen, in Hyôgo prefecture, still boasted over fifty works by Sukenobu when it sold up in the early Meiji period. Sukenobu had left a significant legacy in the popular mind.

Following his death in 1751, Sukenobu’s son Suketada appears to have produced under his name for a while, but didn’t make the cut. The publisher Hachimonjiya was in financial difficulty, and the blocks were sold off. Many, however, were bought up by Kikuya Kibei, the Osaka publisher who, in the 40s, had become Sukenobu’s chief publisher. For the rest of the century, old works would be

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13 For an account of the Kyôhô reforms and literature, see Kurakazu Masae, "Kyôhô shichinen shuppan jômoku to hachmonjiya-bon", Bungaku, vol. 3, no. 5-6, 2002.
14 Ibid., pp. 78-90.
15 This argument has been made with respect to ukiyo-zôshi in Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 For the most comprehensive list of Edo-period ehon, see Ōta Shôko. ed., Edo no shuppan bunka kara hajimatta imêji kakumei : ehon edehon shinpojiumu hôkokusho (Kanazawa: Kanazawa Geijutsugaku Kenkyûkai; 2007).
20 In an unpublished translation by Timon Screech of Mita Kyô monogatori (Tales of the Capital I have Seen) by Kimuro Bôun.
21 Nagatomo Chiyoji, Kinsei kashihon’ya no kenkyû, pp. 111-2 (Tokyo: Tôkyôdô Shuppan; 1982).
anthologised and reissued under new titles. They could now be ordered gift wrapped in box sets. For Kikuya Kibe, the Nishikawa brand was clearly a brand asset that functioned off its nostalgia value, and the new compendia often advertised the name Nishikawa in their titles.

It is to this period of nostalgia printing – from 1760-1780 – that it seems reasonable to ascribe the production of “Nishikawa’s Inkwell”. For, the work is, in fact, a very clumsy reprint, in one volume, of disparate sections of Kôshoku yakusha, with a few extra Sukenobu illustrations thrown in for good measure. It is indeed, as Hayashi suggested, a pig’s ear. As an example of the deplorable production standards that pertain in the work, the final narrative finishes midstream; even more absurd, the opening text is, in fact, the final section of another narrative altogether. The first words the reader comes across are, “Mata iku wai na”, “oooh I’m coming again”. There was little effort – there was no effort – it appears, to achieve textual coherence. The only story reproduced in its entirety is the tale of the himekimi and the uba’s son, from the Kyoto volume; this is followed by the first four pages of the tale of the two brothers.

The inattention to textual detail must reflect, in part, the time lapse between the original work and the reprint: the narratives of Sukenobu shunpon were penned by the most successful novelist of the day, they were often subversive, they were topical, and they were above all contemporary. Forty years later, what seemed modern at the time of production might well have lost its relevance. But there are other anomalies in the work. It was assembled from the original blocks of Kôshoku yakusha; it is, in fact, our only evidence of the existence of the original Edo volume, because the images bear the original pagination (thus, Kyô no makura ichi, Edo no makura ni, etc). But although the images have been taken from the blocks of Kôshoku yakusha, they have been modified. Here, for example, where, in the original, we find the actor’s crest, is an absence: the crest has been erased (FIG ------). In fact, the crests have been erased in all of the images: where you think you see one, it’s an illusion, or rather it has been stuck on at a later date, in one of the work’s subsequent incarnations. These erasures may simply reflect the fact, once more, that, forty years on, the actor references had lost their topicality. But actor crests were generic; many changed only minimally over time, and the za, or family, could often still be identified. The actor referent was also removed from the title – which has dropped the term yakusha; and the crests were excised from the heads of chapters. The only lingering traces are in the chapter titles, which still make reference to mon, or crests, and in the mouths of the women as they call out in pleasure. Moreover, the new title – Nishikawa fude no umi – was the title of an illustrated book of bijin (or beautiful women) published during the artist’s lifetime.

It is possible that the publication of “Nishikawa’s Inkwell” was simply opportunistic: the blocks fell into the publisher’s hands, and there was still an existing

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23 The work has previously been dated to 1719, hot on the heels of the original Kôshoku yakusha. This dating is dubious, since to publish an erotic work in 1719 bearing the name of the artist in its title – when there is evidence that the eye of the censor was becoming increasingly severe – would have been foolhardy. No other erotic works published by Sukenobu contain his name in the title; and the date does not explain satisfactorily the shabby production state.
24 Nishikawa Sukenobu, Nishikawa fude no umi,
market for Sukenobu erotica. This is surely partially true. Yet the market for Sukenobu shunpon in the sixties, seventies, eighties, was, presumably, different to the market for the same product in the seventeen teens and twenties: there were, after all, new artists producing their own contemporary shunpon. Ōta Nanpo (1749-1823), a literary figure and influential intellectual of the last decades of the century, owned several Sukenobu shunpon himself and noted that his friend, the author Komatsu Hyakki – who provided the texts for the erotic works of the popular artist Suzuki Harunobu’s shunpon – had been especially fond of Sukenobu’s erotic works since an early age, and also had a collection. For Baba Bunkô, the author executed in 1758 for circulating his tales of historical events and personages, Sukenobu’s distinction was the irreverent mixing of class in his erotic works; the various improprieties of the notorious Fûfu chigiri ga oka – which Bunkô enumerated – were common knowledge, he wrote in 1757, the year before his death. Meanwhile a satirical work issued at the time of the Tenmei famines (1780), cited episodes from Sukenobu’s notorious banned shunpon in its preface – the one that graphically detailed sex at court – and provided an illustration of Confucius, Buddha and Lao Tzu laughing at his irreverent depictions of courtiers. The painter Eisen would later note that Sukenobu had increased the purview of erotic art: certainly, compared with the work of earlier erotic artists, Sukenobu had taken it outside of the boudoir where it had languished, and re-located amidst the common people. He had also harnessed its capacity for social comment.

“Nishikawa’s Inkwell” was never intended as a simulacrum of an authentic Nishikawa shunpon. The images, for one thing, are clustered at the front, rather than interspersed, as was the convention, within the narratives. The frontloading of the images, the sense of an omnibus edition; and the selection of a work which was inherently provocative, make it seems more likely that the publication of “Nishikawa’s Inkwell” was intended to invoke the legacy of an artist who had challenged the system, one who had trodden territory regarded both hitherto, and thereafter, as out of bounds. By extracting the artists’ crests to avoid unnecessary difficulties, yet showcasing some the work’s most audacious images; by presenting it under the title of an existing and wholly anodine work (one that conveniently advertised the Nishikawa brand), the publication of “Nishikawa’s Inkwell”, clumsy, poorly printed, hastily assembled, was a response to, indeed a consequence of, the residual symbolic value of “Nishikawa”.

Almost a century later, around 1880, another reader would discover “Nishikawa’s Inkwell”, and leave evidence on the page of his contact with the work. This new reader appropriated the work in a very different way, and re-presented it, for his private purposes at least, under a new title: hatsuho no kyôkasha – “A Text Book of the First Fruits of Love”. The style of the handwriting seems to belong to the Meiji

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26 Cited in Katô Yoshio, Ukiyo eshi sôkan, p. 9; for a discussion of Bunkô's writings, see Konta Yôzô, Edo no kinsho (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kôbunkan; 2007); and Peter Kornicki, The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century, pp. 108-10 (Leiden; Boston: Brill; 1998).

period – Meiji text books, and indeed Meiji period letters, were often written in katakana – but this is confirmed by the term kyōkashō, for it was only in the Meiji period, with the reform of education and the introduction of science, geography and history into the curriculum – that the concept of an educational subject – or kyōka – emerged.\(^{28}\)

But this reader wasn’t being wholly parodic in calling the work a text book, as his subsequent addenda show. His intense engagement with the images is very evident, but his comments on the iconography – while betraying his gender – are, at times, instructive. Here for example, (FIG ) the text reads:

The woman’s face, she really looks like she’s about to die, the very sight of it gives you a hard-on: isshi ga gazen toshite tatsu.

More interesting is this exhortation to the viewer (FIG):

The triangular marks (the Japanese character for eight 八) on the woman’s forehead suggest an overflowing of sadness and happiness, this is the expression of ninjō.

It is of no small interest that the reader should invoke here the concept of ninjō. This was an important concept in the early eighteenth century – certainly in Sukenobu’s shunga, perhaps more enduringly in Chikamatsu’s love-suicide plays; but in the early Meiji period, it had acquired a new cluster of meanings. It had become a seminal term in theories of the novel; beyond that, in discussions of the meaning of life, or “raifu”, as one novelist termed it.\(^{29}\) “The essence of the novel”, wrote another, “is ninjō… the human passions (jôyoku), the so-called one hundred and eight lusts….”\(^{30}\) Articles appeared in academic journals on the significance of the “inner life”, on “passion”, on “desire”.\(^{31}\) Ninjō was now the key to realism; no longer simply the binary opposite of giri, or duty, as it had been in the eighteenth century, it was the vehicle through which human emotional realities could be explored and should be expressed. The analysis of ninjō was now the duty of the novelist: “the anatomy of the human heart, displayed through true emotion in an imaginative framework”\(^{32}\).

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\(^{30}\) Kornicki, *The Reform of Fiction in Meiji Japan*, p. 27.


\(^{32}\) Kornicki, *The Reform of Fiction in Meiji Japan*, pp. 37-40. The obsessive analysis of ninjō is evident in the preface to Ryokusadan, “The Green Raincoat” (1886) by Sudô Nansui (1857–1920), one of the leading writers of the 1880s (cited in Kornicki): “My plan is to exercise my imagination in seeking to advance one step beyond the realistic and to delve into the hidden mysteries of ninjō; to infer logical conclusions, such as ‘the true nature of the world would probably go as far as this’, ‘ninjō would probably reach as far as this’, ‘this is how emotions would work in such as situation’… to depict elements of the
Thus, a century and a half after the initial production of the book, our anonymous Meiji viewer was re-reading the images, within the intellectual paradigms of his own time, as an example of the true and complex depiction of human feeling. Female sexual satisfaction had been a key theme in Sukenobu’s work; yet our Meiji reader is less concerned with the empirical fact that the woman has achieved orgasm (so desperately sought by the Sukenobu female), than with the graphic depiction of the complex set of human emotions, or ninjō, associated with orgasm. The irony is that while ninjō was privileged as an aesthetic term in the Meiji period, it explicitly excluded the erotic.33 Mori Ogai’s “Vita Sexualis” was, after all, an exercise in the clinical extraction of sexual desire from its humanizing context of love.

From this now untraceable reader, the work somehow passed into the hands of the well-known collector of Tokugawa fiction, Ozaki Kyūya (1890-1972): and Ozaki too left his mark on the work (FIG.). This postscript records Ozaki’s efforts to reconstruct the history of the book: at this period, Shōwa 2, he is aware that it is a reprint, that the actor’s crests have been erased –for some reason – jijō ga atte – and notes that he is re-presenting it – oshirashi tamaete – as a work relating to actors (yakusha ni kanshite). Indeed, he notes that he has repaired the work on this date: which explains, at last, the crests which have been stuck back on to the original. The actor, once suppressed, now returns, restored as a token of history. In this second note, a year later in Shōwa 3, he records that he has discovered the original work, Kôshoku makura gaeshi, three volumes.

Ozaki was perhaps the earliest apologist of shunga in the modern era. He collected all manner of Tokugawa literature, including shunpon (although most of the latter had been divested by the time of his death in 1972); he wrote about them, and he published his own journal about them.34 In Showa 3, the date of the inscription, he in fact published an essay on Nishikawa fude no umi in Ehon zakkō, a book of erotic miscellanies, where he supplies the names of some of the missing actors.35 In the preface to this work, he notes that the erotic is part of Japan’s culture; part of the indigenous Japanese character.36 Although some people have the view that it is obscene, this is the fault of their own minds.37 This defensive note was clearly important in the climate of the times: Ozaki was responding to the contemporary condemnation of the erotic. The emergence of a distinction in the Meiji period between ren’ai, the neologism ascribed to express the concept of pure love, and sex, meant that shunga, in fact, even the comparatively tame ninjōbon of the late eighteenth century, were categorized firmly as obscenities. Ozaki’s claim that the erotic was part of Japan’s past; part of its indigenous fûzoku, was an anatomy of the human heart without using psychological theories and to display true emotion in an imaginative framework”.

33 For a discussion of Meiji distinctions between pure love and sexual love, see Saeki Junko, Ai to sei no bunkashi (Tokyo: Kadokawa Gakugei Shuppan; 2008).
36 This claim is further elaborated in Ozaki Kyūya, "Erochishisumu ni nijimu kokochi", Edo Nanpa Kenkyū, vol. 1-27, 1923, pp. 245-56.
37 See also Ozaki Kyūya, Ukiyoe to bijinga, pp. 2-3 (Tokyo: Fûzoku Shiryō Kankôkai; 1931).
important moment in the very gradual rehabilitation of the erotic within intellectual circles over the twentieth century.

Ironically, the study of *shunpon*, which owes so much to collectors and scholars like Ozaki Kyûya and Hayashi Yoshikazu, remains today, to some extent, hostage to the same concept of *fûzoku*, of Japan’s unique cultural heritage. A recent exhibition of shunga in Milan, reiterated these very words. Yet even a cursive study of the much maligned “Nishikawa’s Inkwell” points to different readerships and different modes of reception at different points of time: say, 1720, 1760-70; 1880; 1920. And while the two readers who left their personal mark on the text represent only individual instances of reception, both appealed to a wider audience; and both clearly believed they belonged to an imaginative community of similar minds, to an episteme of reading.

“Nishikawa’s Inkwell” suggests, perhaps, that the erotic, rather than a genre, should be viewed as a medium, a medium commandeered at different times by different discourses, serving different audiences. Roughly stated, it would here be represented by the anti-authoritarian rhetoric of Sukenobu, with a composite audience that notably included women and those of lower class; the nostalgia of the 1760s-80s, fuelled perhaps by an intellectual appreciation of the symbolic value of the Sukenobu *shunpon*; the Meiji discourse on *ninjô* (our young male reader) and finally the early twentieth century re-appropriation of the erotic in academic circles as *fûzoku*. Exploring the erotic in this way enables us to apprehend aspects of contemporary popular discourse often submerged in other forms of media; it enables us to chart shifts in perception – the perception of women, of status; but it also provides access to what can perhaps best be understood as a sub-literature of protest.

“Nishikawa’s Inkwell” eventually found its way the Nichibunken collection in Kyoto, where it is today, and where it forms part of that institution’s growing collection of *shunpon*. Much of this paper has been speculative. The ultimate legacy of the common reader’s experience will always remain elusive. When I went to view “Nishikawa’s Inkwell” at Nichibunken, in December, it had unaccountably gone missing. (They tracked it down, in the conservation department, the next day). The exquisite irony only struck me later.


http://www.ne.jp/asahi/kato/yoshio/kobetuesi/sukenobu.html

Kornicki, Peter, The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century (Leiden; Boston: Brill; 1998).
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