

SANTŌ KYŌDEN AND YOSHIWARA

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Abstract

The relationship between the artistic world and the literary world of the Edo period(1600-1868) Japan, on one hand and the Yoshiwara, the licensed quarter from Edo, nowadays Tōkyō, is well-known. My paper will discuss how this relationship developed in SantōKyōden's case.

Keywords: Kyōden, Yoshiwara, *kibyōshi*, *ukiyo-e*

1. INTRODUCTION

SantōKyōden山東京伝 (1761-1816) is today a well-known *kibyōshi* writer and illustrator. *Kibyōshi* is part of a genre named *kusazōshi* 草双紙. It refers to woodblock-printed illustrated popular fiction. This was a genre that developed from the middle of Edo period (1600-1868) to the beginning of Meiji period (1868-1912). The text in a *kusazōshi* together with the illustrations are enclosed within the space of a page. *Kibyōshi* 黄表紙, also called yellow booklets because of their yellow covers, along with *akahon* 赤本, red booklets, *aohon* 青本, blue booklets, *kurohon* 黒本, black booklets and *gōkan* 合巻 is part of this genre of illustrated literature.

However, he started his career as an *ukiyo-e*² artist under the name of Kitao Masanobu 北尾 重信. In the beginning, he illustrated *kibyōshi* (illustration 1), under his brush name, Kitao Masanobu for other writers, but in 1780 he illustrated and signed the text of two *kibyōshi* under his artistic pseudonym. Both his careers, as a writer and illustrator, had a close connection to Yoshiwara.

Yoshiwara was the red light district from Edo³, present day Tōkyō. It was a regulated center for prostitution in Japan from the early Edo period until 1958. It was a walled-in structure with only one access point. Yoshiwara was founded in Edo, in 1617 when the shogunate granted a license for a piece of land situated outside the city

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² Woodblock prints or paintings which first started being produced in Edo period (1600-1868)

³ Edo refers to the city of Edo, but also to Edo period (1600-1868) that was named after it. The same period has another name Tokugawa period, referring to the shogunate. The *shogun*, Tokugawa Ieyasu, chose this place to be his new headquarters and the city practically grew around his castle.

of Edo. Strict rules were imposed on the owners of the brothels as part of a control dominated society. The *bakufu*⁴ kept a close watch on all the activities in Japan and rule-breaking was severely punished. Cecilia SegawaSeigle (1993, 8) explains that the construction of such a place was made possible because of a “background of wide acceptance of prostitution prior to the seventeenth century”. Moreover, “the appearance of the Yoshiwara in the burgeoning community of Edo, the new seat of the shogun’s government, was a natural and predictable development” (SegawaSeigle, 1993, 9). In time, it proved to be more than a brothel: “isolated in a small walled-in world, assured of government protection and special privileges, the Yoshiwara developed a strong sense of pride in its identity. It nurtured its own unique customs, traditions language, fashion” (SegawaSeigle, 1993, 9). All these helped to develop a special culture that shaped certain aspects of Japanese society. One of these aspects concerned *ukiyo-e* and its artists. Courtesans were often a favorite theme along with scenes from the licensed quarter. Artists were customers who enjoyed their company and the entertainment they provided.

But, art was not the only thing that found its inspiration in the Yoshiwara. Woodblock-printed illustrated popular fiction like *kibyōshi* or *sharebon* also drew on it. *Sharebon* described the manners, the clothes and the proper language to be used in the licensed quarter. They had pages that contained hairstyle depictions (illustration 2) and clothing patterns revealing what one should wear in order to be fashionable.

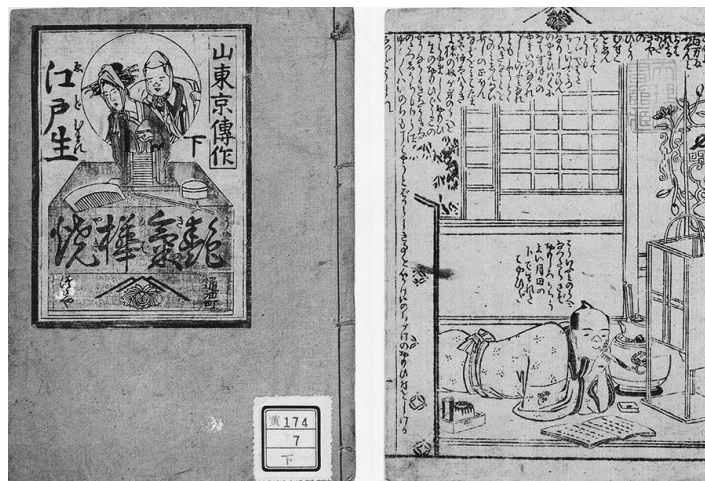


Illustration 1, Santō Kyōden, writer, Kitao Masanobu, illustrator, *Edo umarewaki no kabayaki*, 1785
(Courtesy of Waseda Library)⁵

⁴*Bakufu* is a term used to refer to the *shogun*’s office or government

⁵http://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/he13/he13_01961_0017/index.html

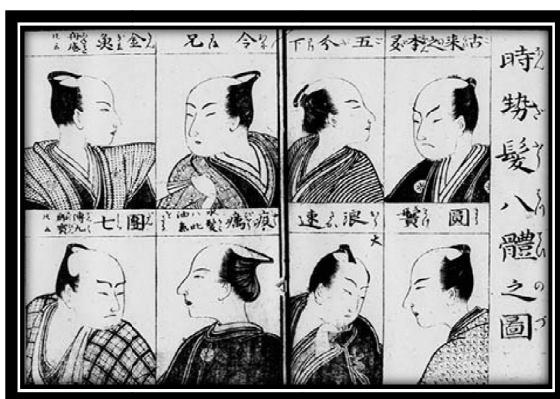


Illustration 2, Koikawa Harumachi, *Tōsei fūzoku tsū* (1773)
(Courtesy of National Diet Library, the Digital Collection)⁶

Kyōden as *anukiyo-e* artist and as a *kibyōshi* and *sharebon*, had a strong connection to the Yoshiwara. My paper will focus on how this relationship was built.

2.

As it was mentioned earlier, he started his career as an *ukiyo-e* artist. In 1761, he was born in the family of a merchant, in Edo⁷ and around 14 years old, in 1775, he started studying wood-block printing with Kitao Shigemasa (1739-1820). Kitao Shigemasa, though less known today was an influential artist of his time. His school was named Kitao, whose students were Kitao Masayoshi (1764-1824) and Kubo Shunman (1757-1820)- except Kyōden. His works have two specific characteristics, his large number of book illustrations, on the one hand, and the fact that “Shigemasa concentrated on depicting not the high-class courtesans of the Yoshiwara, but the lower-ranking geisha and female entertainers” on the other hand. “He did this with incomparable verisimilitude, attending to minute details of kimono patterns, crests, and even individual strands of hair flared out by bodkins in the chic *bin* coiffure” (Kern, 1997, 66).

In 1776, Shigemasa’s career reached its peak with the publication of *Seiro bijin awase sugata kagami* (*A Mirror of Beautiful Women of the Green Houses Compared*) an illustrated book. The Green Houses referred to the courtesan houses in Edo and the book depicted them in all four seasons (illustration 3). The last volume of the book had verses written by the courtesans themselves on the four

⁶ <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2534201>

⁷ My information related to Kyōden’s life draws on Mizuno Minoru *Santō Kyōdennenpukō* (*A Biography of Santō Kyōden*) (Perikansha, 1991) which is to this date the most comprehensive account of his life

seasons⁸. This shows the close relationship among *ukiyo-e* artists and the courtesans, on one hand, and the owners of the brothels, on the other hand. They saw this as a good way to promote their businesses.



Illustration3, Kitao Shigemasa, *Seiro bijin awase sugata kagami* (A Mirror of Beautiful Women of the Green Houses Compared), 1776 (Courtesy of British Museum, online collection)⁹

Around the same year, Santō Kyōden starts frequenting Yoshiwara. Mizuno Minoru in *Santō Kyōdennenpukō* (A Biography of Santō Kyōden) (1991, 17) does not give this exact year but he writes¹⁰ that it happened from the second half of Anei (1772-1781)¹¹ period which would be around 1776. Though, the year is not certain, Mizuno explains that from Anei 8 (1779) and Anei 9 (1780) his artistic style and technique had changed and it can be accounted for as a result of his entering the world of the licensed district.

As an *ukiyo-e* artist, the Yoshiwara was a rich source of inspiration. Illustrating beautiful courtesans was more than a paid job. It often happened that artists themselves became customers. Haruko Iwasaki (1984, 283) explains that “Kyōden’s cultural education was completed in Yoshiwara, the most extensive and costly school of Edo culture. He totally submerged himself into the Yoshiwara life, he spent ‘two days out of three’ in the quarter and remained a faithful customer [...]. What Kyōden acquired there, beyond fluency in the art of love, was an extensive knowledge of its cultural complex—its intricate rules, subtle manners, fastidious tastes, and symbolic language”.

⁸ http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=1348409001&objectid=779437

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Mizuno Minoru quotes Koike Togoro’s study on Kyōden, *Santō Kyōden no kenkyū*, from 1935

¹¹ Anei is the name of a Japanese era. Each Japanese historical period is divided in sub-periods corresponding to the enthronement of a new emperor

Soon after, around 1780, Kyōden meets Kikuzono 菊園 or Okiku お菊, a *shinzō* 新造 (Mizuno, 1991, 15). Each high-ranking courtesan had several attendants called *shinzō*, who were practically trained to become courtesans. There could be two types: *furisode-shinzō* (*furi-shin*) and *tomesode-shinzō* (*tome-shin*). The first ones had “long-sleeved (*furisode*) kimono. Their ages ranged from thirteen to eighteen, and they were full-fledged prostitutes” (Segawa Seigle, 1993, 273). The second ones had short-sleeved kimonos as they were promoted from *furishin* with a sponsor. The change in clothing was considered a “sign of maturity” (Segawa Seigle, 1993, 277).

The same year, Kyōden publishes the *kibyōshi*: *Yonemanjū no hajimari* 米饅頭始 (*The Origin of Yone Dumplings*) as its illustrator and writer of the text. It has been assumed that he used her as the main character, as Yone. Nevertheless, Mizuno Minoru (1991, 15) writes that this is rather difficult to prove.



Illustration 4, Santō Kyōden - *Yonemanjū no hajimari*,
1780, Santō Kyōden Zenshū 1, Perikansha 1992

One detail that could bring light into this matter, as I reckon, could be the patten on Yone's kimono. In illustration 5, the name of Yone, marked by the Chinese character, 米 *kome* (rice), is placed on her left shoulder so that the readers identify her. In the next illustration, we have the flower patten that can be observed all over her kimono. The patten, as I believe it to be, is that of a *kiku*, a chrysanthemum. A rather similar design is to be observed, for example, in another *kibyōshi* by Kyōden, *Gozonji no shōbaimono* (illustration 7), published in 1785. The text, here, clearly refers to this patten as that of a chrysanthemum. Even if this kind of proof is put forward, it is still debatable whether Yone is Kikuzono/Okiku or not.

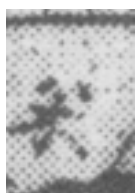


Illustration 5, Yone, お米, SantōKyōden- *Yonemanjū no hajimari*, 1780 (detail)



Illustration 6, SantōKyōden- *Yonemanjū no hajimari*, 1780 (detail)



Illustration 7, SantōKyōden- *Gozonji no shōbaimono*, 1781(detail), (Courtesy of Waseda Library)

However, a stronger proof of the influence of Yoshiwara on Kyōden is more visible in an exquisite *ukiyo-e* album: *Shin bijinawasejihitsukagami* 吉原傾城新美人合自筆鏡 produced in 1784. It was an album of seven large courtesan portraits. Each portrait was accompanied by a poem in a courtesan's own hand writing.



Illustration 8, *Shin bijinawasejihitsukagami* 吉原傾城新美人合自筆鏡, 1784 (Courtesy of British Museum)¹²

¹²http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=779415&partId=1

Two years later, in 1786, Kyōden mentions Kikuzono in one *kibyōshi*: *Akushichibenmekagekiyo* 明矣七変目景清 and a *sharebon*: *Kyakushūkimokagami* 客衆肝照子.

In 1788, he mentions her name again in his *kibyōshi*: *Fuji no hitoanakenbutsu* 富士之人穴見物 (Mizuno, 1992, 30). The same year, he publishes *Keisei kei* 傾城觴, a guide to thirty courtesans. Knowing more about the Yoshiwara and being known, by now, for his knowledge of the licensed quarter “Kyōden assures his readers in the forward that these are courtesans that he knows very well from their temperaments, likes and dislikes, accomplishments and even childhood names and that the illustrations were copied exactly from life” (Iwasaki, 1984, 299). Contemporary readers were avid of learners about the courtesans and a guide like this with what appeared to be truthful information, proved to be a great accomplishment.

Two years later, he finally marries Kikuzono. Marrying someone from Yoshiwara was not unusual but it did not happen very often. Social in 1793, in his *kibyōshi* *Kanninbukuroojime no zendama* 堪忍袋緒 善玉 (illustration 9), in an illustration at the beginning of the book, there is a woman who serves tea and the *kiku* 菊 pattern is visible, again, on her kimono (Kern, 1997, 89). Kern believes that this type of “references, while not advertisements in the strict sense of the word, must have provided Kikuzono with a certain pride, the pride of knowing that her husband was plugging her, so to speak, in his writings” (1997, 89). Unfortunately, the same year Okiku/Kikuzono dies.

A few years later, in 1797, Kyōden meets Tamanoi 玉の井, later known as Yuri and she was also a *shinzō*. In 1800, he marries for the second time to someone from the Yoshiwara. An illustration of the couple remains in a *kibyōshi* from 1804, *Sakusha tainai totsuki no zu* 作者胎内十月図 (illustration 10). The scene is a domestic one, he, the writer and illustrator, at his desk working and she, a faithful wife, sewing.

If we assume that Kyōden did refer to his wives in his written works, both Kikuzono and Tamanoi are portrayed as married women, not as women from the Yoshiwara. They seemed to have embraced their status and to have enjoyed it. His relationship to the licensed quarter of Edo is a much deeper one and it provided him with a certain inside view.



Illustration 9, SantōKyōden, *Kanninbukuroojime no zendama*, 1793 (Courtesy of Waseda University)



Illustration 10, *Sakusha tainai totsuki no zu* 作者胎内十月図, 1804 (Courtesy of Waseda University)

CONCLUSIONS

Kyōden had started his career in the same way as many young artists and writers of his time did. As an apprentice for an *ukiyo-e* master, he stepped into the world of courtesans first, to observe them and draw them, then as a costumer. He deepened this relationship which developed into a life-long one. He did take advantage of it in promoting his works, being *ukiyo-e*, *kibyōshiorsharebon*.

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