

# The Ukiyoe Boom and Twenty-First Century Japonism

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Abstract | Ukiyoe precipitated Japonism in the West more than 150 years ago but has yet to receive a fair evaluation in the country of its birth. In twenty-first century Japan, Ukiyoe has been publicly popular and has served as a government resource representing Japanese culture. There has thus been a significant time lag between its being embraced in the West and in Japan. In this article, I trace changing Japanese perceptions of Ukiyoe. The recent shift is related to the surging popularity of popular culture media such as *manga* and *anime*, and the government's emphasis on popular culture as a component of its soft-power policy. Ukiyoe has come to serve as a symbol of Japanese cultural power in discourse praising all things Japanese, also known as "Edo Utopianism" and the "glorification of Japan discourse." This discourse has also influenced conservative historical views. The Society for Writing New History Textbooks emphasizes Ukiyoe and Japonism as representative of Japanese culture. However, this view overlooks the West's reception of Ukiyoe in terms of its own particular interests, depicting Ukiyoe as a Japanese "gift to the world." It thus reflects a distorted pride in the "superiority" of Japan, which also serves to obfuscate censorship issues with regard to Ukiyoe. Japanese society needs to reconsider Japonism. It was not a product of Japanese art infiltrating the West, but cultural exchange. Japanese society also needs to reflect on the tendency to consider Ukiyoe merely in terms of its achievements.

Keywords | Ukiyoe, Japonism, Hokusai, Hayashi Tadamasa, Shunga

## Introduction

Introduced to France under the term "Japonism," Japanese culture stimulated the creativity of French artists in the nineteenth century. Just as Hokusai inspired van Gogh and Monet, and Debussy wrote *La Mer* [The sea], there is a spiritual resonance between Japan and France. This year many Japanese will visit France in order to witness the "hundred flowers" (*hyakka ryōran*) of Japanese culture that have bloomed. Inspired by *Japonismes 2018*, a Japan exposition held mainly

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in Paris, many French will also visit Japan. It is my hope that through *Japonismes 2018*, the spiritual resonance of Japan and France will continue, stimulating new cultural creativity and extensive civic exchanges in the twenty-first century. (Abe 2018)

*Japonismes 2018* was held from July 2018 to February 2019. The sentiment expressed above is from Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech, opening the exhibition. In his words, one can discern the Japanese government's interest in Japonism, which took root in France and across Europe during the nineteenth century. One can also detect the manner in which the government seeks to associate Ukiyoe with contemporary Japanese culture. Behind this official effort, complemented by a mood in Japan that is generally conducive to Japonism's reappraisal, one can find the popularity in Japan of Ukiyoe, Japonism's driving force. In 2017 alone, three exhibitions on Ukiyoe and Japonism attracted more than 200,000 visitors. More than 370,000 attended *Japanese Dreams around van Gogh (Gohho-ten meguri yuku Nihon no yume*, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, October 24, 2017 – January 8, 2018), more than 360,000 *Hokusai and Japonism (Hokusai to Japonismu*, The National Museum of Western Art, October 21, 2017 – January 28, 2018), and more than 260,000 *Hokusai: Beyond Fuji (Hokusai: Fuji o koete*, Abeno Harukas Art Museum, October 6 – November 19, 2017). Collectively, the three exhibitions attracted more than one million visitors ("2017 [Heisei 29]-nendo" 2018).

As is well known, Japonism refers to the late nineteenth-century influence of Japanese art on the West, which began with Ukiyoe. The best-known Ukiyoe artist, as mentioned in Abe's speech, was Hokusai. In a *Life* magazine special publication *The 100 Most Important Events and People of the Past 1,000 Years*, Hokusai was the sole representative of Japan (Friedman 1998). This fact became widely known in Japan and served only to increase his popularity: "In first place was Edison. In second was Columbus. Then there was the [Hokusai's] splendid achievement of eighty-sixth place. This fact prompted Japanese to reconsider Hokusai. 'Everyone knows Hokusai is outstanding,' they would say" (Nakamura 2018, 37). This "splendid achievement" became the subject of much public discussion and was quoted by the majority of books on Hokusai that followed his inclusion in *Life's* list. Hokusai's popularity was such that it transcended exhibitions, overflowing into other fields. An animation and drama were produced about Hokusai's daughter, respectively entitled *Miss Hokusai (Saruberi)*, (2016) and *Kurara: The Dazzling Life of Hosukai's Daughter (Kurara: Hokusai no musume)*, (2017), both of which were well received and won numerous awards. Additionally, ahead of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has redesigned the country's passport, lining



Figure 1. *Hokusai and Japonism (Hokusai to Japonismu)* exhibition pamphlet



Figure 2. *Van Gogh's Beloved Ukiyoe (Pan Kohû ga saranghan UK'iyoe)* pamphlet

it with twenty-four of Hokusai's *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji (Fugaku sanjūrokkei)*. This frenzy over Ukiyoe has also extended to Korea. The exhibition *Van Gogh's Beloved Ukiyoe (Pan Kohû ga saranghan UK'iyoe)*, which opened in 2018 (July 11 – October 7, Kuri Art Hall, Kuri-si, Kyōnggi Province) did not feature any original works but only reprints and replicas.

When did the Japanese Ukiyoe boom begin? According to Naitō Masato, “Twenty to thirty years ago it was all but a heresy for a fine arts major to focus on Ukiyoe at university.” He claims that Ukiyoe was largely ignored in Japan but that it “suddenly rose to prominence when Japanese began to blindly follow positive—not entirely thought-out—Western appraisals” (Naitō 2017, 1-2). If this was the case, however, might not Ukiyoe's apparently sudden rise to prominence have been a little late? Favorable Western appraisals had existed for the past 150 years, but Ukiyoe had been a heresy in Japan just twenty to thirty years ago. In that case, might there be something besides favorable Western evaluations to explain the Ukiyoe boom?

As another example, one may consider the exhibition *Ukiyoe and Impressionist Painters (Ukiyoe to Inshōha no gaka-tachi)* held at the Sunshine City Museum in Tokyo between December 1979 and January 1980 with

generous support from Japan's Ministry of Finance, Agency for Cultural Affairs, and the French and Dutch embassies. The founder of the Ukiyoe Association (whose name was changed to the International Ukiyoe Scholarly Society in 1998) and Ukiyoe researcher Narazaki Muneshige explains the significance of this exhibition in the following passage:

In the Edo period, Ukiyoe was treated as particularly inferior due to feudalist values, Confucian ethics, and the Buddhist denial of temporal life. Furthermore, Ukiyoe's value was excessively low in the Meiji period due to aristocratism, militarism, and bourgeoisie tastes that neglected or belittled the social creativity and utility of art. Ukiyoe liberated painting from exclusive possession by a privileged minority, advancing civic rights. My ultimate wish is to restore Ukiyoe's association with civic rights within Japanese culture and endow it with a legitimate status based on an international historical perspective. (Narazaki 1979, 21)

This quote reveals Narazaki's desire to break down Ukiyoe's historical "inferiority" and grant it "legitimacy." Narazaki and Naitō share in common the recognition that Ukiyoe has been evaluated differently in Japan and abroad. In that case, to explain the latest Ukiyoe boom, one should pay attention not to Western evaluations but the change in Japanese evaluations of Ukiyoe. I thus trace the shift in perceptions and evaluations of Ukiyoe in twenty-first-century Japanese society and analyze the meaning of Ukiyoe discourse.

## The Altered Evaluation of Ukiyoe

The influence of Japonism in the late nineteenth century precipitated by Ukiyoe went beyond painting, spilling over into crafts, architecture, literature, theater, and music (Mabuchi 2015, 9-10). In particular, Hokusai's popularity "conquered the entire Western world in the late 1800s, but especially France, where it reached fanatical levels and turned Hokusai into a mythical figure" (Paternolli 1978, 3).

Although enthusiasm for Japonism also extended to Japan, domestic perceptions pertaining to Ukiyoe did not change so easily. At the time, Japan was in the midst of establishing "art" as a "new" institution. In 1876, Minister of Public Works Itō Hirobumi oversaw the establishment of the Public Works School of Fine Art (*Kōbu Bijutsu Gakkō*), the first art school in Japan. Its curriculum consisted of two major fields, drawing and sculpture, excluding Japanese art. Ernest Francisco Fenollosa, an American who taught philosophy and political science at Tokyo University, spoke out against this tide of

Westernization. He had been a student of oil painting in Boston and initially intended to encourage Westernization in Japan. During travels around Japan, however, he encountered Buddhist images, leading him to associate traditional Japanese art with Greek and Roman classicism, and thus turned toward the perpetuation of Japanese art (Takashina 1996, 129-38).

The problem was that Fenollosa's conceptualization of "Japanese art" was quite narrow. He was dismissive of the literati painting that had a long history in East Asia. Unable to understand the ideals of literati arts, consisting of the three arts of poetry, writing, and painting, he defined the driving force of Japanese art in terms of the Kano school, which had occupied a dominant position as official, state-sanctioned art for more than three hundred years (Kitazawa 2010, 242-44).

What, then, might have been Fenollosa's opinion regarding Ukiyoe? In 1884, Fenollosa published a magazine article criticizing Louis Gonse's *L'Art Japonais*, which was published in France a year earlier. He accused Gonse's book of being unbalanced, since it devoted an entire chapter among the ten that it comprised to Hokusai. This point of view regarding Ukiyoe was also manifested in the Japanese government-sanctioned book published for the World Exposition in Paris (May 6 – October 31, 1889), *Histoire de l'art du Japon*, which limited content pertaining to Hokusai to but a few introductory lines (Inaga 1999, 153-74).

Okakura Tenshin, who was involved in the publication of *Histoire de l'art du Japon* and who spearheaded the establishment of Japanese art alongside Fenollosa, stated the following regarding Ukiyoe:

As their [Edo commoners'] sole means of expression, Ukiyoe involved a great deal of skill in terms of color and description. However it was lacking in the idealism that served as the basis of Japanese art. The charming woodblock prints brimming with the vigor and practical ability of artists such as Utamaro, Shunman, Kiyonobu, Harunobu, Kiyonaga, Toyokuni, and Hokusai deviated from the overall evolutionary flow of Japanese art since the Nara period. (Okakura 1986, 174)

Okakura acknowledged Ukiyoe's technical skill and charm, but his assessment that it "deviated from the overall evolutionary flow of Japanese art" revealed a perception not unlike Fenollosa's. The curriculum of the Tokyo School of the Arts (now known as Tokyo University of the Arts) founded in 1887, of which Okakura was the first principal, was limited to Japanese art and handicrafts such as woodcraft metal casting, and lacquering, and excluded Western art. It took nearly a decade before departments of Western art and design were established

in 1896, when Kuroda Seiki took over as principal. Even in this atmosphere of change, however, Ukiyoe was unable to secure a place in the curriculum. It is in this context that one can also understand the restricted number of articles on Ukiyoe in the pages of *National Essence (Kokka)*, a scholarly journal specializing in Japanese art with a more than 130-year history that was established in the same year as the Tokyo School of the Arts (Sugawara 2009, 9).

One can understand such low regard for Ukiyoe for the following reasons: Ukiyoe's worldly subject matter was vulgar; Ukiyoe works were sold not by special order but in unspecified large quantities through mass production of woodblock prints; and Ukiyoe artists were typically of low social status. On the one hand, these were precisely the characteristics that defined modern and contemporary art in the West, and perhaps this is why Ukiyoe has been so attractive to Western observers. On the other, as discussed thus far, Ukiyoe failed to obtain similar recognition in Japan, and until very recently research pertaining to Ukiyoe in the field of art history has even been considered a heresy.

The change in this state of affairs, which occurred in the twenty-first century, did not originate in the field of art history, but in popular culture in the form of *manga* and *anime*. In the mid-1990s, Japanese popular culture began to achieve worldwide renown. Building on the previous popularity of *manga* and television *anime* programs, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) reached number one on the US *Billboard* video charts in August 1996, the *Pokémon* movie (1998) reached the number one spot at the US box office on November 10, 1999, and Miyazaki Hayao's *Spirited Away* (2001) won an Oscar for Best Animated Feature at the 75th Annual Academy Awards in 2003. This powerful influence of *manga* and *anime* engendered a major change in Japanese cultural policy. The rise of Japanese popular culture also occurred in the post-Cold War era, when an emphasis on soft-power was overtaking hard power based on military and economic might. Recognizing popular culture as a source of soft-power, the Japanese government positioned it as a future growth industry under its "Cool Japan" policy. It accordingly emphasized popular culture in official international cultural exchanges previously characterized by tea ceremonies and flower arrangements (Kang T'ae-ung 2011, 205-20). In 2008, "Aiming to promote diverse aspects of Japanese culture along with *anime* abroad and connect them to a more general interest in Japan," the Japanese minister of foreign affairs designated the *anime* character Doraemon an "Anime Cultural Ambassador" ("Anime bunka taishi" 2008).

Referred to as a new form of Japonism, the *manga* and *anime* boom played a role in Ukiyoe's revival. Symbolic in this regard was "Japonism and *Manga*: Two

Forms of Japanese Beauty” (*Japonisumu to manga: futatsu no Nihon bi*), a symposium jointly organized by the Japonism Scholarly Society and the International Manga Research Center in 2010. Debate at the symposium revolved around the following questions: “Does the international *manga* boom that began in the late twentieth century represent a new form of Japonism? Is the globally dominant *manga* the new Ukiyoe?” Many argued that *manga* and Ukiyoe were similar since they were both internationally influential forms of Japanese popular culture highly regarded in the West (Miura 2011, 50-53). The public also tended to treat Ukiyoe and *manga* in a single category. *Eshi*, the traditional Japanese term for artists that includes Ukiyoe artists, was recently revived, referring to artists who produce works of popular culture. These include *manga* and *anime* creators, light-novel illustrators, and even character designers (Naitō 2017, 170-71).

Some studies emphasize an even stronger association between Ukiyoe and *manga/anime*, examining the ways in which *manga* and *anime* have “succeeded” Ukiyoe in terms of expressive techniques (Fujisawa 2013, 254-72). Nonetheless, research pertaining to the direct influence of Ukiyoe on *manga* and *anime* cannot but encounter limitations. As Tokyo University Professor Miura Atsushi (2011, 50) points out, Ukiyoe and *manga* are separated by a century, and it is difficult to ignore their differing social contexts and media. Although Hokusai’s work, *Hokusai Manga*, contains the term *manga*, the meaning of the term is far removed from its contemporary usage, simply referring to a collection of drawings of customs and objects.

Nonetheless, buoyed by government support and mass popularity, Ukiyoe now enjoys a different status. The government-supported Cool Japan Council began implementing a qualifying exam pertaining to Ukiyoe in 2018. Those who pass the test are granted the title of “Ukiyoe Concierge.” Aside from this test, the Cool Japan Council introduced Japanese culture through its website, Cool Japan Navi. On the site, one can find an article on art below articles on Japanese food and kimonos, with links to Japanese painting and Ukiyoe. While the distinction between Ukiyoe and Japanese painting reflects a timeworn perception, their equal treatment in a single context is novel (Cool Japan Navi n.d.).

## Ukiyoe and the Glorification of Japan Discourse

Ukiyoe is a basic element layered with multiple meanings in discourse on the influential power of Japanese culture. This is apparent in observing portrayals of

## Ukiyoe and Japonism as the origins of Cool Japan:

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from when the industrial revolution began in England until the industrialized West came to dominate the world, the monarchy, aristocracy, and a minority of wealthy merchants embodied the cultural center. In other words, Christian society's ruling elite dominated culture. Meanwhile, at the core of Japanese culture—from which Japonism originated—was the so-called “common culture” of the lower classes, produced by the *chōnin* [townsman] and merchants. While a coveted commodity among Western intellectuals and artists, Ukiyoe was actually a form of art enjoyed by Edo commoners, consisting of reproduced images of attractive women and Kabuki actresses or the kind of landscape paintings one might find on a postcard. (Mitsui 2017, 22)

Through this passage, one might plausibly infer that Japan established a modern mass society prior to the West in the Edo period and that Ukiyoe was admired in the West and disregarded at home. The Ukiyoe boom is related to discourse glorifying the Edo period, justifiably referred to as “Edo utopianism.” A representative example of this discourse is Horiguchi Masumi's book *Magnificent Edo* (*Edo wa sugoi*, 2016), on the cover of which is written: “Edo was a miracle in world history.” Horiguchi draws on Ukiyoe to describe Edo as the “largest and most cutting-edge city in the world” and a “city of commoners” that did not adhere to a strict class system.



Figure 3. Cover of *Magnificent Edo* (*Edo wa sugoi*; Horiguchi 2016)

The propagation of Edo utopianism coincided with changing perceptions of Ukiyoe. While some embraced this trend, it was also met with criticism. Nagai Yoshio (2016, 5) wrote: “Glorification of Edo is spreading with phrases like ‘Edo was prosperous and clean and the streets were safe,’ ‘row houses (*nagaya*) were well regarded,’ and ‘the Edo people lived dynamic and free lives.’ Edo is thus glorified as an ‘earthly paradise.’”

Criticisms such as Nagai's reveal the reality of the Edo period, showing that it was not an earthly paradise. However, such criticisms do not explain the dissemination of Edo utopianism itself. One can understand Edo utopianism in the same context as the glorification of Japan discourse (hereafter

glorification discourse) currently prevalent in Japan. Glorification discourse reflects the power of beatifying the past to affirm the present. *Magnificent Edo*, the subtitle of which is *The Ukiyo Living of the Happiest People in the World* (*Sekai ichi shiawase na hitobito no ukiyo gurashi*), provides a typical example of such discourse. This title is not unlike those of other books one may associate with glorification discourse: *The World's Freest Country without Discrimination: Japan* (*Sekai ichi jiyū de sabetsu no nai kuni Nihon*, Takeda 2016); *The Beautiful Japan Only Foreigners Know* (*Gaikokujin dake ga shitteiru utsukushii Nihon*, Schauwecker 2014); *Why the World Is Crazy about Japan* (*Sekai ga Nihon ni muchūna wake*, Judo 2015); *Why Asian Countries Love Japan* (*Nihon wa naze Ajia no kuniguni kara aisareru no ka*, Ikema 2015); *The Real Reason Why British People Living in Japan Don't Return to the United Kingdom* (*Nihon ni sumu Eikokujin ga Igarisu ni modoranai hontō no riyū*, Igata 2014); and *I Have Lived in Germany, Japan Wins 8-2* (*Sunde mita Doitsu 8-shō 2-hai de Nihon no kachi*, Kawaguchi 2013).

Among such books, the bestseller that initiated glorification discourse was Takeda Tsuneyasu's *Why Japan is the Most Popular Country in the World* (*Nihon wa naze sekai de ichiban ninki ga aru ka*, 2011). In the following passage, Takeda describes Ukiyoe's role:

Western and other countries like China have captured the world's attention and elevated their international status through military or economic strength. Japan has also displayed its strength to the world, eliminating the Baltic fleet of the Russian Empire—the world's strongest—in the Russo-Japanese War in the thirty-eighth year of the Meiji period. On the other hand, the Pacific War's conclusion through the dropping of atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki perhaps drew the world's attention in quite the opposite manner. In any case, besides military and economic might, cultural power has significantly contributed to Japan's global recognition. Japan ceased its closed-door policy and opened to the world at the end of the Tokugawa Era. Japanese culture subsequently disseminated to the corners of the world through internationalization. The powerful impact Ukiyoe had on Western artists in the late nineteenth century provides an example of Japanese culture's global influence. (Takeda 2011, 18-19)<sup>1</sup>

While reiterating Japan's culpability for the Asia-Pacific War, Takeda emphasizes

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1. Without fail, author Takeda Tsuneyasu's television appearances and "introduction to the author" sections in his books reference his connection to the "old imperial family" (*kyū kōzoku*), which has undoubtedly impacted his book sales. His author introductions further describe how he is a "fourth-generation descendant of the Meiji emperor." Takeda is the Meiji emperor's fifth concubine's daughter's great-grandson. However, the postwar constitution excluded his grandfather from the imperial household. Therefore, rather than a "member," Takeda is technically a "descendant" of the old imperial household.

Japan's cultural power, citing Ukiyoe as an example. This logic aligns with that of the Japanese government's recent policy shift toward emphasizing soft-power. For Takeda, Ukiyoe is the driving force behind Japan's cultural power and a symbol of "peace."

Other proponents of glorification discourse also reference Ukiyoe as representing Japanese culture. O Sonfa's (2016, 204), a leading Korean critic, contributed to glorification discourse by pointing out the influence of Japanese *manga* in the West and referring to *manga* as the "contemporary version of Ukiyoe." However, there is no concrete analysis or evidence to support such an argument. This reflects an overarching trend, in which there is much talk of Ukiyoe and Japonism, but scant references to solid evidence. One may observe another example of this in the following passage from *Why Japanese "Hospitality" Is Considered the Best in the World (Nihonjin no "omotenashi" wa naze sekai ichi to iwareru no ka)*:

In the twenty-first century, there has arisen a Japanese boom corresponding to a "return of Japonism." Japan's spirit and aesthetic sense are once again objects of global praise. Japanese culture is extremely appealing to foreigners because the Japanese aesthetic reflects a deeply rooted tradition. That is what is driving the current neo-Japonism boom. The appeal of Ukiyoe woodblock printing that once took the world by storm persists in today's *anime* and *manga*. In Japan's commercial *anime*, Ukiyoe techniques are strikingly represented. (Moriya 2015, 81)

Here, as well, Moriya portrays *manga* and *anime* as Ukiyoe's "successors" without referring to any substantive evidence.

Notably, the shift in perceptions of Ukiyoe occurred in tandem with the activities of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru Kai, hereafter JSHTR). Beginning with the *New History Textbook (Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho)* in 2001, the JSHTR has included brief columns exclusively dealing with Ukiyoe and Japonism in each of its textbooks. If these textbooks simply taught the facts, there would be no problem. Unfortunately, that is not the case, as exemplified by their representation of Ukiyoe and Japonism:

Ukiyoe was introduced to the West with the founding of the modern Japanese state in 1860. Ukiyoe's bright colors and bold composition stunned Western artists at the time. As evident in the example above, these artists drew Ukiyoe into their works, even using kimono-wearing models, but the influence of Ukiyoe went even deeper than that. Ukiyoe greatly influenced the impressionists in their pursuit of imagery full of light and shadow to depict nature as it is and methods for capturing particular moments. The French referred to Ukiyoe's

influence as “Japonism.” Above all else, Ukiyoe showed to Western artists the beauty inherent to everyday life, teaching them a free perspective regarding humanity and nature suitable to a new era. (Nishio et al. 2001, 163)

This excessively laudatory assessment sees Ukiyoe as liberating Western artists from their “restricted way of thinking” and offering them a new “free perspective.”

Subsequent to the publication of its first textbook, the JSHTR began to fracture due to the low rate at which schools adopted the textbook for classroom use, the polarization of views on the US following the 9/11 terror attacks, and differing degrees of association with the Abe administration. A number of JSHTR members went on to establish the Japanese Education Restoration Organization (Nihon Kyōiku Saisei Kikō). Currently, JSHTR affiliate Jiyūsha and Japanese Education Restoration Organization affiliate Ikuhōsha both publish conservative, right-wing textbooks (Ha Chong-mun 2018, 188-229). JSHTR’s 2015 middle-school history textbook added a new column, “Edo: City of Ecology.” The article claims that Edo’s water supply system was more advanced than those in London and Paris, and that Edo represented an “ecological society incorporating a highly developed system of waste recycling” (Sugihara et al. 2015, 147). It is in this Edo that Ukiyoe developed. With reference to van Gogh’s “captivation” by Ukiyoe, the column describing Ukiyoe’s influence juxtaposes Utagawa Hiroshige’s Ukiyoe work with van Gogh’s replication. Meanwhile, in the main text, a passage from a letter that van Gogh wrote to his younger brother is presented: “The impressionists all love and have been influenced by Japanese art. We are the Japanese of France” (Sugihara et al. 2015, 150).

The textbook provides no citation for the letter. Searching through the letters in “Vincent van Gogh: The Letters,” a database maintained by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the passage appears to be from a letter van Gogh sent on June 5, 1888. However, the second of the two sentences—“We are the Japanese of France”—is nowhere to be found. In the letter in the database, the first sentence cited above follows one concerning van Gogh’s settling into life in

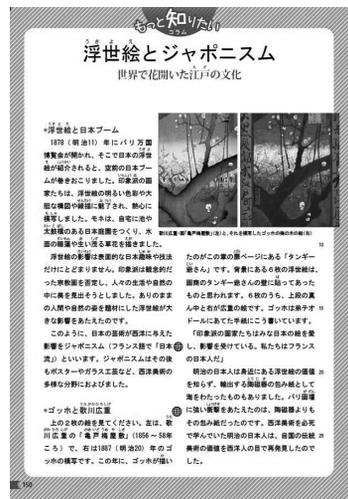


Figure 4. “Ukiyoe and Japonism” column (Sugihara et al. 2015, 150)

Arles, a city in southern France. Just as with the 2001 textbook, this kind of distortion likely arose from a desire to show that Ukiyoe did not simply influence Western artists but disrupted their very sense of identity.

Despite this exaggeration, the JSHTTR attributes still more roles to Ukiyoe. According to the JSHTTR, existing history textbooks are mired in a “historiographical inferiority complex regarding China and Korea” (*Chūkan reizoku shikan*). In other words, existing textbooks express the perception that “in East Asia, China is the top-ranking state with the oldest and most advanced culture, Korea is the mid-ranking state with the next oldest and advanced culture, and Japan is the inferior-ranking state with the newest and lowest ranking culture” (“*Rekishi kyōkasho*” 2015). The JSHTTR presents a list of fifteen criteria confirming the manner in which history textbooks manifest this “inferiority complex.” Some examples of the criteria include the following: “Is rice farming depicted as originating on the continent rather than Korea?” and “Is the Nanjing Massacre mentioned?” Likewise, there is a criterion pertaining to Ukiyoe: “Is Japonism’s origin in Ukiyoe clearly explained?” (“*Rekishi kyōkasho*” 2015). In Jiyūsha’s analysis of existing textbooks with respect to these criteria, only textbooks by Jiyūsha, Ikuhōsha, and Tokyo Books (*Tōkyō Shoseki*) received a passing grade, while the other five textbooks reviewed failed. Oddly enough, even though Ukiyoe and Japonism’s development was completely divorced from Asian exchange, the JSHTTR still considers them in terms of the inferiority complex historiography with respect to China and Korea.

Discussing such excessive emphasis on Ukiyoe’s influence on Western art, former director of the National Museum of Western Art Takashina Shūji (1996, 181) warns against overlooking “Western artists’ own search for novel methods of resolving problems inherent to Western art’s development.” The current director of the National Museum of Western Art, Mabuchi Akiko (2017, 261) also warns against “mistaking the influence of Japanese art on an important Western artistic movement as evidence of the superiority of Japanese culture.” Such warnings apply not just to art historians but also to the JSHTTR and other proponents of glorification discourse.

## The Ukiyoe Boom’s Obfuscation of “National Traitors” and Taboos

Ukiyoe has absconded from the art history discipline to function as a symbol of Japan. But is Japan evaluating Ukiyoe fairly? In order to determine the answer to this question, it is worth returning to *Life* magazine’s special publication, *The*

*100 Most Important Events and People of the Past 1,000 Years* (Friedman 1998). One can certainly consider Hokusai's selection as the sole Japanese representative a "splendid achievement." However, since Hokusai's selection has had such significant meaning for Japan, it should be understood more concretely, with reference to the other events and people represented on the list. Observe the following discussion in *Art Notes (Bijutsu techō)*:

[Hokusai] was included for several reasons: He engaged in a wide array of activities including engraving, painting, and illustrating; he dealt with diverse motifs, including scenery, plants, and animals; he left behind more than one thousand works; and he influenced artists like Gauguin. Of course no other Japanese was included on this top-100 list. Among artists, Picasso was listed at seventy-eight. (Bijutsu Techō 2017, 115)

Based on this passage, one might judge Hokusai as second only to Picasso in the art world. Furthermore, one might suppose he is the sole Asian represented on the list. However, considering the list as a whole, something rarely done in Japan, one observes Leonardo da Vinci listed at number five, precluding Hokusai's second-place rank in the art world. Moreover, compared to a single Japanese, there are five Chinese on the list: Zheng He was fourteenth, Mao Zedong twenty-eighth, Zhu Xi forty-fifth, Fan Kuan fifty-ninth, and Cao Xueqin sixty-seventh. Even if one looks only at the artists on the list, then, the inclusion of Fan Kuan, a landscape painter of the early Northern Song period, reduces Hokusai to number two just in Asia. What this means is that glorification discourse has also infiltrated evaluations of Hokusai in Japan. What, then, can be said for evaluations of Ukiyoe as a whole?

*Kōjien*, a representative Japanese dictionary, provides the following two definitions of Ukiyoe. First, Ukiyoe is "a form of commoner genre-painting that developed in the Edo period." This definition goes on to describe Ukiyoe's development in the Edo period, its influence on European art, and some representative artists. Second, without any additional explanation, the dictionary states that Ukiyoe is "Shunga" (erotic art). It is this definition of Ukiyoe that, more than the first, should arouse concern, since there are few if any mentions in glorification discourse of Ukiyoe as Shunga. In fact, as perceptions of Ukiyoe have shifted within Japanese society, two features have remained hidden: "national traitors" and Shunga.

Hayashi Tadamasu has been called a national traitor (*kokuzoku*) who sold Shunga and a "national traitor who sent Ukiyoe overseas." Hayashi went to Paris for the 1889 World Exposition, where he worked as an interpreter for a craftwork manufacture and export company. Upon the exposition's conclusion,

he chose to remain, opening a shop to sell Ukiyoe works. Appraisals of Hayashi have been starkly different in Europe and Japan. In Europe, Hayashi is regarded as the progenitor of Japonism. In Japan, he is regarded as little but a national traitor. In a 2018 book, for instance, Nakano Akira refers to Hayashi as a “pioneering Japanese who introduced Japanese art abroad” but who “made off” with as many as 156,000 Ukiyoe works (Nakano 2018, 26, 234).

Not simply an art dealer, Hayashi also contributed to publication of Louis Gonsé’s *Japanese Art* by procuring and translating Japanese materials (Kigi 2009, 66-73). Of course, assistance in scholarly matters would hardly be grounds for labeling him a national traitor. Regardless of such “evidence,” the view of Hayashi as a national traitor itself is based on a logical contradiction. Nakano’s book, for example, is entitled *The Leaking of Japanese Treasures (Ryūshutsushita Nihon bijutsu no shihō)*, 2018), but in order to “leak” a Japanese treasure it would have to be a “treasure” in the first place. Paradoxically, the acknowledgement of Ukiyoe as a Japanese treasure owed to a large degree to its very leaking into and influence on the West. In other words, Ukiyoe was exported not because it was a treasure, but became a treasure because it was exported. If it had indeed been exported as a national treasure, it probably would not have triggered the Japonism movement, and current proponents of glorification discourse would have little reason to talk about it. Precisely because Ukiyoe was not a treasure, it could be exported cheaply and on a massive scale, making it accessible to Western artists at the time. Van Gogh provides a representative example. According to Louis van Tilborgh’s *Van Gogh and Japan* (2010), published by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, as many as 531 works remain from van Gogh’s Ukiyoe collection. Van Gogh was even able to hold a small exhibition of his collection at the Café Tambourin in Paris. It appears that van Gogh, perhaps doomed to poverty, incurred a financial loss from the exhibition (van Tilborgh 2010, 18). Considering this paradoxical aspect of Hayashi’s evaluation, more time and research is required to ensure he receives a fair assessment.

Hayashi’s granddaughter and artist Kigi Yasuko does not defend against criticisms that her grandfather was a Shunga-dealing national traitor by arguing that it was not just Shunga that he sold. She rather actively embraces Shunga, stating: “There is no Ukiyoe without Shunga. Removing Shunga from Ukiyoe would be like gouging out its heart” (Kigi 2015, 11). Many scholars point out the importance of Shunga to Ukiyoe. The chairman of the International Ukiyoe Society, Asano Shūgō (2017, 64-65), argues that since the majority of Ukiyoe artists created Shunga, one cannot know the character of Ukiyoe without studying erotic art. In *The Ultimate Ukiyoe: Shunga (Ukiyoe no kiwami: Shunga)*, Hayashi Yoshikazu approaches the issue in technical terms. He states that

portraits are more difficult to paint than still-lives and landscapes, and that the scenes of sexual intercourse depicted in Shunga constitute the most difficult kind of portrait. He thus argues that the true extent of an artist's ability cannot be known without observing his or her Shunga (Hayashi 1988, 59).

Shunga is also important for research on Japonism. This is because Shunga also had a considerable influence on many Western artists. Picasso provides a representative case. In 2009, the Museu Picasso (Picasso Museum), a Barcelona gallery dedicated to the eponymous artist, held an exhibition entitled *Imatges Secretes: Picasso i L'estampa Eròtica Japonesa*. The exhibition featured Hokusai's representative Shunga pieces collected in *Young Pines (Kinoe no komatsu)*, including *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*, depicting a woman sexually entangled with a pair of octopuses, and Picasso's *Woman and Octopus*, which was influenced by the former work.

The problem with Shunga in Japanese society, other than the fact that it is rarely mentioned, is that it is difficult to hold Shunga exhibitions. In cooperation with the British Museum in 1995, the Chiba City Museum of Art held the *Kitagawa Utamaro Exhibition* to commemorate its opening. However, the Shunga pieces featured in the British Museum exhibition were omitted from the Japanese one. Meanwhile, in the film *Sharaku*, released in the same year, there is a scene in which an Ukiyoe artist gazes at a Shunga work, but the main parts are covered by a mosaic. Bemoaning this state of affairs, Edo period scholar Tanaka Yūko (2009, 10-11) goes as far as to ask: "Is our current era really freer than the Edo era?"

Where might be Shunga's place in the twenty-first century Ukiyoe boom? The British Museum's 2013-14 exhibition *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* was a resounding success. However, when the organizers approached more than twenty Japanese art galleries about extending the exhibition to Japan, they were all rejected. Upon hearing this, former prime minister Hosokawa Morihiro decided to hold the exhibition at the Eisei Bunko, an art gallery of which he was director. For the first time in Japanese history, a large-scale Shunga exhibition was held in Japan without any support of a private company (September 19 – December 23, 2015). Hosokawa's statement at a press conference announcing the exhibition, in which he "gallantly accepted" the opportunity to host it, soon became a major topic of public discussion ("Nihon hatsu no shunga ten" 2015, 14-17). This statement implied that the art world was incapable of holding a Shunga exhibition in Japan without outside help. In other words, a Shunga exhibition required a politician's "gallant" intervention.

Did Eisei Bunko's exhibition manage to dispel the taboo surrounding Shunga in Japan? It appears not. The police warned four weekly publications—*Weekly*

*Post* (*Shūkan posuto*), *Weekly Contemporary* (*Shūkan gendai*), *Weekly Public* (*Shūkan taishū*), and *Weekly Asahi Entertainment* (*Shūkan Asahi geinō*)—that reported on the exhibition with photos of potentially committing the crime of “distributing pornography.” Although the police did not come out openly to say that Shunga constituted pornography, they maintained that the images in the magazines exhibited “pornographic features” (“Shunga, nūdo ni” 2015). Clearly, Shunga still causes some discomfort among authorities.

One may also observe two productions about Hokusai’s daughter. Prior to the Ukiyoe boom, Hokusai had actually been the “number one most hated Ukiyoe artist.” Not only were Hokusai’s Shunga works excessively provocative, but they were also best known (Nakamura 2018, 37). Hokusai’s devotion to art is well represented in a scene in the 1981 film *Hokusai Manga*, in which Hokusai composes a Shunga work using a model. Conversely, the recent *anime* film and television drama about his daughter, who actually composed Shunga in her father’s stead, do not even mention Shunga. Public broadcaster NHK thus transformed Hokusai’s daughter’s story into a simple, idealized depiction of a female protagonist succeeding in her endeavors through hard work and dedication.

Major Japanese art galleries’ avoidance of Shunga and the accompanying pornography controversy shows how Japanese society has yet failed to reach an undiluted appreciation of Ukiyoe. It is here that one may discover yet another role for Ukiyoe: It may function as a yardstick to measure the point at which art and pornography, and art and censorship, come into conflict.

## Conclusion

Recently an exhibition entitled *Marcel Duchamp and Japanese Art* was held at the Tokyo National Museum to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Duchamp’s death (October 2 – December 9, 2018). After opening in Japan, the exhibition went to Korea and Australia. Unlike in the latter two countries, however, the exhibition was split in two in Japan. The first part included all of Duchamp’s work. The second part was entitled *Viewing Japan through Duchamp* (*Dyushan no mukō ni Nihon ga mieru*). Based on this title, one might reasonably assume that the exhibition displayed contemporary Japanese art influenced by Duchamp. However, it actually featured pre-modern Japanese art. For instance, alongside Duchamp’s *Fountain*, a signed urinal, was Sen no Rikyū’s *Bamboo Vase* (*Take ichi j ūgiri hanaire*), explained as a “400-year old readymade.” The most prominent among the Japanese works were Ukiyoe, primarily Sharaku’s works



Figure 5. Viewing Japan through Duchamp (*Dyushan no mukō ni Nihon ga mieru*) exhibition pamphlet (left)



Figure 6. Clear file folder sold at the Duchamp exhibition (right)

as representing Japanese Realism. This was a baffling exhibition that completely ignored the historical context in which Duchamp developed his own aesthetic and which presented Japanese works as somehow preceding Duchamp's. It serves as a conspicuous representation of a tendency in Japanese society to overestimate the influence of Ukiyoe and Japanese art. The kind of provocation Duchamp had aimed at the art world was rather discernible outside the exhibition space, on a clear file sold at the exhibition featuring the mustache from Duchamp's *Mona Lisa* superimposed over Sharaku's Kabuki actor.

Ukiyoe precipitated Japonism in the West more than 150 years ago, but has yet to receive a fair evaluation in Japan. In this article I have analyzed the reasons why Japanese evaluations of Ukiyoe shifted around the turn of the century. This perceptive shift coincided with the rise of Japanese popular culture in the form of *anime* and *manga*, and the government's emphasis on popular culture in its soft-power policy. Amid the prevailing self-congratulatory mood in Japan, represented by Edo utopianism and glorification of Japan discourse, Ukiyoe has come to serve as a symbol of Japanese cultural power. However, such an understanding of Ukiyoe omits "impure" Shunga. Japanese society should

recognize Japonism as a product of cultural exchange rather than an example of the superiority of Japanese art. It also needs to reconsider its tendency to focus purely on Ukiyoe's achievements.

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