Advertised Beauty: Idealized Japanese Woman in Media during the Meiji Era

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The introduction of Western influence in Meiji Era Japan (1868-1912) sent a ripple effect across all economic, social and cultural aspects of daily life. Japanese society, previously closed off from the global world, suddenly found itself under the West's unfamiliar gaze. New customs, practices, clothes and technology were all into Japan; as a result, the culture began to adapt and adhere to the rapid changes. The arts were one of the areas that saw shifts in traditional customary practices. Ukiyo-e woodblock prints, which had been the most popular art form in Japan, clashed with photography, the newest mode of seeing. Photography offered a technique in replication that had previously been impossible – it allowed subjects to be captured through an authentic lens that "accurately" depicted real life. As a result, woodblock printing was no longer the only method to depict subjects. However, as Ukiyo-e was the model for photography, the subjects that were most often seen in early photos were those that had been predominant in prints until that point in time. Famous places, actors and women were consistently represented in Ukiyo-e prints, and when foreigners began to trickle into the country, Japanese artists saw an opportunity. The traditional aesthetics of Ukiyo-e carried over into early Japanese photographs – while they were familiar to the Japanese, foreign visitors associated Japan with these traditional and "historical" visions. Both prints and photographs were revered by Western collectors who took delight in the "exotic" world they connoted.[1] This gave birth to the tourist photograph, which presented an ideal vision of Japan. Thus, Ukiyo-e prints and early Japanese photography romanticized Japanese culture to pander to the foreign gaze. Women, in particular, were subject to this conceptualized trope, long before they were captured in photos.

This essay will examine the depictions of beautiful Japanese women, or *bijin*, in popular art and how that image was contextualized in Japanese prints and photographs. Originally portrayed in prints, the *bijin* was the "ideal" woman, both an art form as well as a model for women in Japanese society to replicate. As photography spread, the way women were snapshotted through the lens was modeled off of how they were printed on paper. Both photos and prints portrayed women in a provocative light, one that illustrates Japanese beauty standards of the Meiji era. The shift from print to photograph reflects consistency in the image of the *bijin,* an image that defined and curated Japanese women's societal expectations and aesthetics on both a domestic and global scale. Media depicting beautiful women created an idealized, and advertised, view of Japanese culture. They set a fabricated standard for the Japanese female image, one that characterized and defined modern Japanese aesthetics itself.

Photography was more than just a new technology in the context of Japanese society. It revolutionized how people viewed things, places and people, re-contextualizing what it meant to represent and approach life. At the turn of the Meiji restoration, the easement of travel restrictions brought flocks of tourists to Japan. As cameras integrated into Japanese society, photographs quickly became a popular and portable souvenir. However, many foreigners were more interested in perceived ideas of traditional Japanese culture than the Japanese society that was transforming and modernizing before their eyes.[2] For many tourists, Japan promised an escape from modern industrial life – thus, they were attracted to photos and prints of Mount Fuji, cherry blossoms, temples, samurai and women, regardless of whether the scene was a reality or a fantasy.[3] In other words, despite photographs being the most "accurate" depiction of reality, they only captured a manufactured viewpoint. Photos functioned as emblems of a preconceived

Japanese culture, their production further serving to feed stereotypes on what lay within the enigmatic, freshly opened country. This stereotype is discernable in one example, *Two Young Women* (Fig. 1). The two female subjects blankly stare into the camera, apparent from their stiff stance that they had been staged for the photograph. The hand-colored shades elucidate folds of their kimono, but also accentuate the garment with bright tones that would have been unnatural for the traditional garment. It is important to note here that after the Meiji restoration, the popularization of photographs put many printmakers out of work. However, many transferred their fine technical skills to the hand coloring of photographs.[4] The blockish coloring of the photos speaks to the printmakers' previous artistry and techniques. Artists were well aware of their primary customers – tourist attention on Japanese culture incentivized early Japanese artists to seek out, or stage, what they knew foreigners desired to see. They made portraits that stripped subjects of individual personalities, stylizing them instead as representations of their social class. In the eyes of outsiders, Japan was a whimsical, yet archaic, nation. This pinhole perspective on Japanese Meiji society insulated the culture, and as a result, limited its ability to modernize alongside the rest of the world. Here, the photographic gaze conceptualizes both a world and an object, one that produces an illusion cut to the measure of desire.[5] Women, or the idealized image of them, perpetuated that illusion, and were especially susceptible to its debasing effects.

Even before the ports opened to Western trade and influence, Japan viewed women as the embodiment of national cultural purity. Ukiyo-e prints illustrate this notion. The print *Woodcut of Kimonoed Woman in a Boat* (Fig. 2) encapsulates the *bijin* image. Depicted lounging on a boat alone, her beauty as the focus of the image, the woman is most likely a *geisha*. She is poised, mysterious and above all, captivating. In their research paper *Alluring Faces: Beauty Standards*

in Japanese Society Through the Ages, Laufey Magnúsdóttir deconstructs the idealized image of the "Japanese beauty" as seen in Ukiyo-e prints from the Edo Period (1603-1868) to the Meiji Era. Through these stages in history, there was consistency in the way Ukiyo-e prints portrayed women. The figures had oval faces, with gentle facial lines, and a straight nose and straight eyes. Flat, broad eyelids and a small, receding chin, which were signs of beauty in this period, expressed the peacefulness and charity of the human spirit. A small mouth with well-shaped lips enhanced the graceful appearance.[6] Artists represented these qualities in order to visualize and inscribe Meiji's new idea of modern Japanese beauty. During this time in particular, the Japanese *bijin* became the site of numerous projections, and emerged as an icon of the Meiji figure, as well as a figure for aesthetic value.

These descriptions of *bijin* allow for a re-examination of the piece *Woodcut of Kimonoed Woman in a Boat*. It is clear through the two girls' erect posture, immaculate dress and flawless hair and makeup that they are representing a gendered vision of Japan. The girls embody Japanese feminine ideals, as well as aesthetic archetypes; roles that were of high importance in Meiji society. This "ideal woman" was born by way of the Meiji government, which decided middle-class women should be in the home to protect traditional Japanese culture from Western influences, while middle-class men should learn about Western culture and technology outside the home to catch up with the West.[7] The Meiji government invented and imposed a traditional figure on Japanese women. Furthermore, they promoted a distinct image, using middle-class women as models of what was called "good wives and wise mothers" to encourage Japanese identity.[8] This meant serving the country indirectly by way of the household, raising children (specifically boys) who would grow up to serve their nation. Women's societal gender role was

nurtured even more when the ideal *bijin* image was produced, printed and widely rotated throughout the country. Among Ukiyo-e prints, what became known as *bijinga* (or "beautiful-person image") was one of the most popular. A guideline was established through printed women's enigmatic auras and encapsulating figures, one that utilized physical beauty as a figment of Japanese aesthetic value, while also dictating women on how to present to the public eye.

Bijinga were advertisements as much as they were art. As stated by Miya Elise Mizuta Lippit in *Aesthetic Life: Beauty and Art in Modern Japan*, the *bijin* assumed a significant role in shaping the cultural values of an era and became a central subject of art, forming the genre into itself called *bijinga*.[9] It can be said that they targeted a wide audience, and spoke to a diverse range of people. This included women, as the *bijinga* served as a model for women to replicate, but more pertinently, the images were those seen through and for the male gaze. *Bijinga* targeted Japanese and foreign men by epitomizing a fantasy; it allowed for the viewer to participate from afar in the glamorous mirage of the "floating world."[10] While images of women catalyzed the "good wives and wise mothers" expectation, it also instated women as objects of unreachable desire. Prints depicting *bijin* offered the broader public visual access to the most exclusive courtesans. These images led the changing fashions of the metropolitan capital, and were advertisements commissioned by brothel houses, theaters, and textile manufacturers. Whether in unlikely public settings or in the cloistered interiors of the *Yoshiwara* (Edo's brothel district), the women in these images are represented in such close detail that it is as if the artist, and consequently viewer, had the vantage point of an intimate voyeur.[11] Thus, the woman was a carapace for Japanese society, beauty and exoticism, and continued to be depicted as such as

Japan shifted towards modernization. It was only natural for the camera lens to focus on the ideal female figure. Both in the prints and photos, women were associated with frivolity and exotic desire, and in this exhibition of their gender, were made to be sexualized objects rather than participants. Across different media platforms, the *bijin* was treated as the pinnacle for Meiji aesthetics, and through it, a being of modern Japanese aesthetics.[12]

This reception came about through the deliberate concealment of women's identities. In doing so, a woman's beauty was her only redeemable, and essential, quality. It spoke for her worth, but more importantly, Japan's worth; therefore, she stood as an icon of national pride. Dating back to the Kanbun Era (1661-1673), a distinctive type of *bijin* image was produced that came to be called the "*Kanbun* beauty."[13] Through different mediums and interpretations, this dated image of female beauty prevailed. The *Kanbun bijin* prompts further analysis of *bijinga* of Edo prints and Meiji photography, as they attest to the definition of "beautiful," and signify its prevalence through Japanese history. As seen in one *Kanbun* image (Fig. 3), the artist has arguably used a basic template for the female face and figure. In this particular scroll, the woman's physical features have no specific features or differentiations, making it difficult to presume that the artist was drawing upon individual appearances.[14] In other words, the *bijin* has no features unique to her, and while she is ethereal and refined, her expression is devoid of personality and emotion. In smudging the female identity, there was no differentiation. It made the *bijin* into a unanimously recognized symbol. She was not an individual, but rather an emblem that came to characterize Japanese aesthetic value.[15] This figure and the weight of expectations she carried transcended Japanese history; as time went on, the *bijin* evolved as a personification of the idea of beauty. Moreover, prints and photographs projected this image further into

Japanese society and developed a concrete definition of what constituted modern Japanese aesthetic beauty.

Through visual references, women wielded the power to define and uphold Meiji society and values. This can be attested to Japanese women's relationship with foreign influence. After Japan opened its doors to the West, women often served as cultural interpreters and visual substitutes for Japanese thought, resulting in them being seen as a measure for Japanese civilization and development.[16] In other words, the figure of the woman aestheticized the country, resulting in them being imagines as an object of art and commodification. Prints and photographs were a take-off point for exhibitionism, making it easier to stigmatize women in mass media. In particular, photos and prints of geisha were fetishized images of femininity within Japanese culture. The woman in the photo *Geisha, Gion Street, Kyoto* (Fig.4), has no autonomy – that is to say, she exudes no distinctive personality. Commercial images such as this one exaggerated physical beauty, as *geisha* were predestined to be displayed as alluring objects.[17] Half clothed and just out of reach, the *geisha* mirrors the very essence of "exotic" Japanese femininity in the Western gaze. Thus, images of *geisha*, and of women in general, were reduced to a controllable device. This configuration reflected a paradigm of the West as an authoritative authority, and Japan as a submissive, and thus objectified, "feminine" one.[18] As such, the female image reinforced Japanese aesthetics as delicate, enticing and idyllic, while simultaneously reframing Japan as such for the rest of the world. Japanese visual medium strengthened the stereotype of female passivity and weakness, which was then projected onto the country as a whole.

Functioning as both art and advertisement, Japanese Ukiyo-e prints and photography bolstered the idea of Japan as a culture untouched by foreign influence. This was, in the wake of the Meiji Era, not the case, but their fabricated perspectives allowed for tourists and locals to believe in the dream-like bubble that existed in the lithographic reproductions and monochrome pictures. While the photograph took realism to new heights, making women's beauty standards more human than they could ever have been in woodblock printing, it nonetheless still held women to an unrealistic convention. The *bijin* was an unachievable ideal for women, and an unattainable object of desire for men. Her beauty was countlessly replicated and rotated. As a result, the *bijin's* aesthetic value defined a concrete, authentic depiction of Japanese culture in the domestic and global eye.

Images

Figure 1: *Two Young Women,* HC12-5524, 1865-1912, Japan, Albumen print on paper, 7 7/8 in. x 9 13/16 in., Haverford College Special Collections.

Figure 2: *Woodcut of Kimonoed Woman in a Boat,* HC2017-0439, Edo Period, Japan, Woodblock print on paper, Haverford College Special Collections.

Figure 3: Anonymous, *Kanbun Beauty*, late 17th century, Hanging scroll; ink, color and *gofun* on paper, 612 x 244 mm. In *The Kanbun Bijin,* Kobayashi Tadashi. Photograph attributed to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 4: *Geisha, Gion Street, Kyoto*, HC12-5533, Meiji Era, Japan, Albumen print on paper, Haverford College Special Collections.

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[7] Magnúsdóttir, 13.
[8] Magnúsdóttir, 14.
[9] Miya Elise Mizuta Lippit, *Aesthetic Life: Beauty and Art in Modern Japan*. Harvard East Asian Monographs, Volume 400, Accessed May 11, 2020, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019): 7.
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[11] Meier, 9.
[12] Lippit, 8.
[13] Tadashi Kobayashi, *The Kanbun Bijin* adapted from “The Coquetry of the Kanbun Beauty,” translated by Julie Nelson Davis, 211-20, ed. Miyeko Murase and Judith G. Smith, The Arts of Japan: An International Symposium, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000): 83.

[14] Kobayashi, 80.
[15] Lippit, 7.
[16] Lippit, 12.
[17] Wakita, 341.
[18] Wakita, 345.