Worth a Thousand Words

Children were not necessarily the only ones who read picture books in late, seventeenth century Japan. The appearance of Kibyoshi around the year 1775 changed the interaction between reader and literature, as these new “yellow booklets” would place greater emphasis upon the visuals that came alongside a written story. Though this mechanic would initially be used to tell children’s stories, it would eventually grow to encompass nearly every element of Japanese culture, including the more-risque romances, ghost stories, and other inappropriate tales. The pictures that appear alongside the text in Kibyoshi were of equal or greater importance, as they depicted many details that were not directly stated in the text, allowing even less-educated readers greater intimacy with the story.

Within *Mr. Glitter n’ Gold’s Dream of Splendor*, a young man named Kinbei falls asleep in a millet-cake shop, and dreams that he becomes the heir of an incredibly wealthy man named Bunzui. Even this first event in the story is shown on a deeper level through Kibyoshi, in which the man’s dream pours from his head as he falls asleep in the cake house, the next scene visually spilling directly over the first (Shirane, 324). There can be no mistaking that this tale is a mere dream, and this dramatic irony allows the reader to access the didactic elements that stem from more classical Japanese tales. Written by Koikawa Harumachi, this story manages to discuss not only the *folly* of a young man who rises and falls from wealth and glory, but addresses the class implications that would accompany such a vast jump in the social ladder. The condition of Kinbei’s fan is never described in the text, but as it falls next to him in the picture, it’s similarity to the fan of the god of poverty reveals his lower position on the social ladder (Shirane, 324). Later in the tale, after becoming Mr. Glitter n’ Glitz, every piece of clothing that he wears is especially fancy or stylish, visually portraying his ascension in class. Compared to his companions, who now travel humbly next to this spectacularly flashy man, Kinbei (now known as Seiza) stands out spectacularly - his clothing affords him more attention and importance than his petty, lower-ranked followers (Shirane, 328). The pictures also show many tiny details that the text itself does not address. Kinbei’s robe hanging over the screen in the Fukagawa pleasure quarter, for example, suggests the more promiscuous elements of the scene (Shirane, 331).

The Kibyoshi appealed to the masses because of how easy they were to “read”, and also due to their incredible fashionability of the time. Harumachi’s paintings were appealing because he drew upon his teacher’s style, and also because he was able to portray the latest fashions and trends with great familiarity. The painting style would also draw from the Western world, where scenes were drawn with extreme depth, allowing for them to feel very vast and even intimidating. This technique is used to relay just how splendorous and magnificent Bunzui’s quarters are (Shirane, 326). While Kibyoshi may have not been the first of Japanese works to incorporate a visual component, the additional level of understanding that these paintings allowed for, and the greater audiences that they reached, demands distinct recognition and appreciation.