

= Three Beauties of the Present Day =

Three Beauties of the Present Day ( 三才図会 , T?ji San Bijin ) is a nishiki @-@ e colour woodblock print from c . 1792 ? 93 by Japanese ukiyo @-@ e artist Kitagawa Utamaro ( c . 1753 ? 1806 ) . The triangular composition depicts the busts of three celebrity beauties of the time : geisha Tomimoto Toyohina , and teahouse waitresses Naniwa Kita and Takashima Hisa . The print is also known under the titles Three Beauties of the Kansei Era ( 寛政三才図会 , Kansei San Bijin ) and Three Famous Beauties ( 三才図会 , K?mei San Bijin ) .

Utamaro was the leading ukiyo @-@ e artist in the 1790s in the bijin @-@ ga genre of pictures of female beauties . He was known for his ?kubi @-@ e , which focus on the heads . The three models in Three Beauties of the Present Day were frequent subjects of Utamaro 's portraiture . Each figure in the work is adorned with an identifying family crest . The portraits are idealized , and at first glance their faces seem similar , but subtle differences in their features and expressions can be detected ? a level of realism at the time unusual in ukiyo @-@ e , and a contrast with the stereotyped beauties in earlier masters such as Harunobu and Kiyonaga . The luxurious print was published by Tsutaya J?zabur? and made with multiple woodblocks ? one for each colour ? and the background was dusted with muscovite to produce a glimmering effect . It is believed to have been quite popular , and the triangular positioning became a vogue in the 1790s . Utamaro produced several other pictures with the same arrangement of the same three beauties , and all three appeared in numerous other portraits by Utamaro and other artists .

= = Background = =

Ukiyo @-@ e art flourished in Japan during the Edo period from the 17th to 19th centuries , and took as its primary subjects courtesans , kabuki actors , and others associated with the " floating world " lifestyle of the pleasure districts . Alongside paintings , mass @-@ produced woodblock prints were a major form of the genre . In the mid @-@ 18th century full @-@ colour nishiki @-@ e prints became common , printed using a large number of woodblocks , one for each colour . Towards the close of the 18th century there was a peak in both the quality and quantity of work . A prominent genre was bijin @-@ ga , or " pictures of beauties " , which depicted most often courtesans and geisha at leisure , and promoted the entertainments to be found in the pleasure districts .

Katsukawa Shunsh? introduced the ?kubi @-@ e " large @-@ headed picture " in the 1760s ; he and other members of the Katsukawa school such as Shunk? popularized the form for yakusha @-@ e actor prints , as well as the dusting of mica in the backgrounds to produce a glittering effect . Kiyonaga was the pre @-@ eminent portraitist of beauties in the 1780s , and the tall , graceful beauties in his work had a great influence on Kitagawa Utamaro ( c . 1753 ? 1806 ) , who was to succeed him in fame . Utamaro studied under Toriyama Sekien ( 1712 ? 1788 ) , who had trained in the Kan? school of painting . Around 1782 , Utamaro came to work for the publisher Tsutaya J?zabur? .

In 1791 , Tsutaya published three books by Sant? Ky?den in the sharebon genre of humorous tales of adventures in the pleasure quarters ; deeming them too frivolous , the military government punished the author with fifty days in manacles and fined the publisher half his property . His luck was reversed shortly after with a new success : Utamaro began producing the first bijin ?kubi @-@ e , adapting ?kubi @-@ e to the bijin @-@ ga genre of portraits of beauties . Their popularity restored Tsutaya 's fortunes and made Utamaro 's in the 1790s .

= = Description and analysis = =

Considered one of Utamaro 's representative early works , Three Beauties of the Present Day depicts the busts of three celebrity beauties of 1790s Edo ( modern Tokyo ) . Utamaro 's subjects were not courtesans , as was expected in ukiyo @-@ e , but young women known around Edo for their beauty . These three were frequent subjects of Utamaro 's art , and often appeared together .

Each is identified by an associated family crest .

In the centre is Tomimoto Toyohina , a famed geisha at the Tamamuraya house in the Yoshiwara pleasure district . She was dubbed " Tomimoto " having made her name playing Tomimoto @-@ bushi music on the shamisen . Like the other two models , she has her hair up in the fashionable Shimada style that was popular at the time . But contrasted with the homelier teahouse @-@ girl garments of the other two models , she is dressed in the showier geisha style . On the sleeve of her kimono is a Japanese primrose design that was the Tomimoto crest . Toyohina 's birthdate is unknown .

To the right is Naniwaya Kita , also known as " O @-@ Kita " , well @-@ known daughter of the owner of a teahouse in Asakusa near the temple Sens? @-@ ji . She is said to have been fifteen in the portrait , in which she wears a patterned black kimono and holds an uchiwa hand fan printed with her family emblem , a paulownia crest .

At left is Takashima Hisa , or " O @-@ Hisa " , from Yagenbori in Ry?goku . She was the eldest daughter of Takashima Ch?bei , the owner of a roadside teahouse at his home called Senbeiya in which Hisa worked attracting customers . Tradition places her age at sixteen when the portrait was made , and there is a subtly discernible difference in maturity in the faces of the two teahouse girls . She holds a hand towel over her left shoulder and an identifying three @-@ leaved daimyo oak crest adorns her kimono .

#### Crests of the three beauties

Rather than attempting to capture a realistic portrayal of the three , Utamaro idealizes their likenesses . To many viewers , the faces in this and other portraits of the time seem little individuated , or perhaps not at all . Others emphasize the subtle differences that distinguish the three in shapes of the mouths , noses , and eyes : Kita has plump cheeks and an innocent expression ; her eyes are almond @-@ shaped , and the bridge of her nose high ; Hisa has a stiffer , proud expression , and the bridge of Hisa 's nose is lower and her eyes rounder than Kita 's ; Toyohina 's features fall in between , and she has an air of being older and more intellectual .

The print is a vertical ?ban of 37 @. @ 9 x 24 @. @ 9 centimetres ( 14 @. @ 9 x 9 @. @ 8 in ) , and is a nishiki @-@ e ? a full @-@ colour ukiyo @-@ e print made from multiple woodblocks , one for each colour ; the inked blocks are pressed on Japanese handmade paper . To produce a glittering effect the background is dusted with muscovite , a variety of mica . The image falls under the genres of bijin @-@ ga ( " portraits of beauties " ) and ?kubi @-@ e ( " big @-@ headed pictures " ) , the latter a genre Utamaro pioneered and was strongly associated with .

The composition of the three figures is triangular , a traditional arrangement Tadashi Kobayashi compares to The Three Vinegar Tasters , in which Confucius , Gautama Buddha , and Laozi symbolize the unity of Confucianism , Buddhism , and Taoism ; similarly , Kobayashi says , Utamaro demonstrates the unity of the three competing celebrity beauties in the print .

Portraits of the three Kansei beauties by Utamaro

= = Publication and legacy = =

The print was designed by Utamaro and published by Tsutaya J?zabur? in the fourth or fifth year of the Kansei era of the traditional Japanese era divisions ( c . 1792 ? 93 ) . Tsutaya 's publisher 's seal is printed on the left above Hisa 's head , and a round censor 's seal appears above it . Utamaro 's signature is printed in the bottom left .

Fumito Kond? considered the print revolutionary ; such expressive , individualized faces are not seen in the stereotyped figures in the works of Utamaro 's predecessors such as Harunobu and Kiyonaga , and it was the first time in ukiyo @-@ e history that the beauties were drawn from the general urban population rather than the pleasure quarters .

Records indicate Kita was rated highly in teahouse rankings , and that curious fans flooded her father 's teahouse ; it is said this caused her to become arrogant and cease to serve tea unless called for . Hisa appears to have been less popular and ranked lower , though still quite popular ? a wealthy merchant offered 1500 ry? for her , but her parents refused and she continued to work at the teahouse . Utamaro took advantage of this rivalry in his art , going as far as to portray the two

tearoom beauties in tug @-@ of @-@ war and other competitions , with deities associated with their neighbourhoods supporting them : Buddhist guardian deity Acala was associated with Yagenbori , and supported Hisa ; Guanyin , the Goddess of Mercy , was associated with the temple Sens? @-@ ji in Asakusa , and supported Kita .

The triangular positioning of three figures became something of a vogue in prints of the mid @-@ 1790s . The " Three Beauties of the Kansei Era " normally refer to the three who appear in this print ; on occasion , Utamaro replaced Toyohina with Kikumoto O @-@ Han . Utamaro placed the three beauties in the same composition three or four years later in a print called Three Beauties . Hisa holds a teacup saucer in her left hand rather than a handkerchief , and Kita holds her fan in both hands . To Eiji Yoshida , the figures in this print lack the personalities that were the charm of the earlier . Yoshida thought less of the further undifferentiated personalities of a later print , Three Beauties Holding Bags of Snacks , published by Yamaguchiya . The three again pose in the same composition , but holding bags of snacks . As testimony to their popularity , the three models often appeared in the works of other artists , and Utamaro continued to use them in other prints , individually or in pairs .

There are no records of sales figures of ukiyo @-@ e from the era in which the print was made . Determining the popularity of a print requires indirect means , one of which is to compare the differences in surviving copies . For example , the more copies printed , the more the woodblocks wore down , resulting in loss of line clarity and details . Another example is that publishers often made changes to the blocks in later print runs . Researchers use clues such as these to determine whether prints were frequently reprinted ? a sign of the print 's popularity . The original printing of Three Beauties of the Present Day had the title in a bookmark @-@ shape in the top right corner with the names of the three beauties to its left . Only two copies of this state are believed to have survived ; they are in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston , and the Koishikawa Ukiyo @-@ e Art Museum in Tokyo . Later printings lack the title , the names of the beauties , or both , and the position of the publisher 's and censor 's seals varies slightly . The reasons for the changes are subject to speculation , such as that the beauties may have moved away , or their fame may have fallen . Based on clues such as these changes , researchers believe this print was a popular hit for Utamaro and Tsutaya .

Group portraits of the three Kansei beauties by Utamaro