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Women and Cats

Ukiyo-e are Japanese woodblock prints; the word ukiyo-e means pictures of the floating world. These woodblock prints became common during the Edo period, the 17th century to the 19th, and were meant for mass consumption by the average person during this period. Ukiyo-e was fairly inexpensive and was not considered high art. Ukiyo-e were initially painted by the artist and then sent to the publisher where the woodblock would be carved and mass production of the painting would occur. The Edo period is known for its' strict societal rules and rigid class structure. Due to the societal regulations of the Edo period, ukiyo-e were often censored by the Edo government and artist were prohibited from printing pictures that would negatively impact society, such as pictures of geisha and nudity. However, many artists continued to print irregardless of the censorship rules, something that is exemplified in one of the ukiyo-e I have chosen.

The two ukiyo-e tha I have selected to examine further share the theme of women in some form of nudity playing with a cat. The time periods of the ukiyo-e differ. The older of the two is called, "Women After the Bath Playing with a Cat" by Kitagawa Utamaro I and was created in 1803. The second, and more recent print, is called, "Teasing-Black Cat" by Ishikawa Toraji and was created in 1934. I chose these two prints because they both represent a similar theme but the art style and colorations vary greatly. I also was interested in the depiction of the women and how a difference in time effects that depiction. The addition of the cats was also

interesting as they are used very differently in the two ukiyo-e. The time period and art style cause the pictures to be seen very differently, despite the shared theme.

The first ukiyo-e, “Women After the Bath Playing with a Cat” by Utamaro was produced during the Edo period but it lacks the censorship seal as well as a publisher's seal. It is unclear if this lack of censorship is because of the nudity in the picture and the inability to get it past the Edo government or not. The picture depicts two women wearing kimono, one standing and one sitting, that are only slightly preventing them from being fully nude and each woman has one breast exposed. The cat is at the feet of the standing woman and is playing with her kimono, to the enjoyment of the sitting woman. The art style of the ukiyo-e would be that of traditional Japanese woodblock print which fits with the Edo time period as the country was mostly closed off from outside influence. The colorization of the print is muted; none of the colors worn by the women are particularly bright. However, the line work is very delicate and small detailing in the kimonos and room decoration are clear. This particular print seems to have been intended for a heterosexual male audience given the depiction of the women as exposed and has elements of voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia. The viewer is slightly removed from the women and the women are depicted as delicate and playful, which is a depiction of women that often is used to appeal to male audiences. The addition of the cat playfully pulling on the kimono also hints at a sense of voyeurism, a moment between the women and her pet that the viewer is actively seeing. The overall image shows a mild form of sexualization of the female body and seems to be intended for an audience that will look in at the scene and see the attractive females, as well as a sense of playfulness attractive.

The second ukiyo-e print that I chose is “Teasing-Black Cat” by Toraji and was produced in 1934. The art style in this print is different from the previous print in several ways. One of the

biggest differences is that this art style is much more remnant of traditional western depictions of women. This change in print style could be because of the availability of European art in Japan since the country opened back up. The woman in this particular image is more curvaceous than the thinner women in the first print. The woman is also sitting on a bed in a position that looks posed compared to the previous print where the positioning looks more natural. The print also has very intense color palette and the woman herself, despite being nude, has much more colorization to her skin than the previous print. The detail on the woman herself, as well as her surroundings, is very detailed and the line work gives the fabric in the print texture. The cat plays a different role in this print; the cat is rubbing on the woman in a loving manner and the woman is gazing at it. The interaction between the woman and the cat seems to be an intimate and loving moment. The name of the print has a sexual connotation despite the fact that the print itself does not necessarily have anything sexual other than the woman being nude. This creates the idea that the print was created solely for the purpose of fetishistic scopophilia; the woman serves no purpose other than to be attractive to the eye. It is very similar to the first print in this regard. Both serve to appeal to someone who will gain visual stimulation from seeing seminude and nude women interacting with an animal in an intimate manner. Despite the time difference and the difference in art styles, both prints are reducing women down to simply something attractive to see and allows the viewer to see them in a voyeuristic manner.

Ukiyo-e prints were intended for mass consumption during the Edo period and were often censored to try and keep society well structured. The first print I examined came out during the Edo period. However, it is lacking one of the censorship marks and depicts nudity that would have not made it passed the censorship. The second print was done in 1934 and depicts a similar theme, but does so in more traditional western art style. Despite the changes that Japan went

through between the two prints and the differences that the prints physically share, they both depict women in a similar manner and for a similar purpose.

Bibliography

Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014.

Toraji, Ishikawa. *Teasing-Black Cat*. Minneapolis Institute of Arts. ukiyo-e.

Utamaro, Kitagawa. *Women after the Bath Playing with a Cat*. Museum of Fine Arts Boston. ukiyo-e.

URL's

First Print:

<https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/women-after-the-bath-playing-with-a-cat-234148>

Second Print: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/62420/teasing-black-cat-ishikawa-toraji>