

**Ambiguity of Identity in  
Katsukawa Shunsho's *October* from  
*The Activities of Women in the Twelve Months***

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Amidst the vast outpouring of prints and paintings in the popular *ukiyo-e* style of Japan's Edo period (1603 to 1868 under the Tokugawa shogunate), the works of Katsukawa Shunsho stand out for their delicacy and elegance. Produced largely at the end of the eighteenth century, they are considered by those who have studied them to be the greatest paintings of the day, even earning the popular saying at the time, that a "Shunsho painting is worth a thousand pieces of gold" (Stern 117; Lane 118). Despite such praise, very few of his paintings survive, and those that do have received little attention, compared to his kabuki actor prints. Although these prints are indeed remarkable for their innovative dynamism and identifiable character actors, they cannot compare with the ability displayed in his paintings (Stern 177; Lane 117). Perhaps this dearth of critical attention is due, in part, to the general disfavor of *ukiyo-e* paintings that emerged after the revealed forgery of the "Shunpoan collection" in 1934, which led to a preference for printed works (Naito 34). A scandal so long ago, however, hardly merits the dismissal of such a pivotal artist's work at the height of his career. I believe that the paintings of Katsukawa Shunsho continue to be neglected because, unlike his kabuki prints, they do not fit neatly into conventional categories.

*October* from *The Activities of Women in Twelve Months* provides an especially interesting case in point. Its sedate, domestic subject matter and ambiguity of audience created by his blending of popular stylistic elements with the more traditional forms makes it difficult to fit within

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the larger *Ukiyo-e* tradition.

The development of *ukiyo-e* art is tied to the social structure of Edo Japan, encompassing the emergence of a merchant middle-class. *Edo* is the city of present day Tokyo. At this point, power was wielded by the *samurai* military elites, the head of which was the *Shogun*. Although the *samurai* considered themselves to be intellectual elites, they ruled the country with an iron fist, especially trying to temper what they saw as the excess and immorality of the *chonin*, the newly developing urban middle class of merchants and shop keepers. Within Edo, the Shogun allowed for the establishment of the *Yoshiwara*, the pleasure district, offering all forms of entertainment and providing a pressure release for the *chonin*. The greatest fame of the *Yoshiwara* was held by the glamorous *kabuki* actors, male actors who performed in popular plays, specializing in character types, and the *courtesans*. Today, many confuse *geisha* with courtesans, however at this time they held distinctly different occupations: the former were prostitutes, the latter musicians and entertainers.

In the arts of the time, *bijinga*, translated as “beautiful woman,” refers to a set subject matter in painting and prints, encompassing both courtesans and *geisha*. *Yamato-e* are pictures done in the Japanese (*yamato*) style (as opposed to, say, Chinese), traditionally patronized by the aristocracy and *samurai* nobility. Within the *Yoshiwara*, there developed a new style, *ukiyo-e*, pictures of the *Ukiyo*, the “floating world,” a fanciful



name for the *Yoshiwara*. The word *ukiyo* actually has an extensive history of usage with a variety of meanings. An older sense indicated the “here and now”; another connoted the “sorrowful world” of transience; yet another Buddhist usage referred to the realm of the physical world (Kita 50-58). *Ukiyo*, as a name for the *Yoshiwara* district, encompasses all three of these senses into the “floating world.” The *Yoshiwara* was perceived as a world of fashionable immediacy and transitory pleasure, entirely subsumed in the physical enjoyment of life. *Ukiyo-e* applies the same themes to prints that sought to capture fashionable, beautiful people and scenes, but little depth beyond the visual enjoyment (60). Contrary to *yamato-e*'s elite patronization, *ukiyo-e* was driven largely by the use of woodblock prints to enable mass production of art to sell in the new consumer culture.

The themes of *ukiyo-e* depart from a long-standing emphasis in Japanese art that is captured by the concept of *mono no aware*, the “pity or pathos of things.” It is an aesthetic concept in all aspects of life that appreciates beauty for its transient quality; the beauty becomes more poignant when one knows that it cannot last.

The representation of the female figures in *October* suggests that Shunsho has blended the conventions of traditional *yamato-e* subject matter with *ukiyo-e* stylistic forms. *October* evokes the tranquility of a domestic scene and invites contemplation of the *mono no aware* of the passage of time. In contrast to the usual focus of *ukiyo-e* prints on clever amusements, popular actors, and trend-setting fashion, he instead focuses on the more abstract sentiment of the pathos of life in association with the fading of the season in the month of October. Typically, *ukiyo-e bijinga*, beautiful women, are idealized character types. With the Edo period concern for rigid social hierarchies, the artist would be certain to mark the woman's social class through her appearance, such as the elaborate coiffure and bare feet of courtesans, the simple, elegant robe and hair of the middle class woman, or the disarrayed hair and open robe of the lowest class of women (Asano 48).

Shunsho's *October*, however, is not so readily identifiable. The setting seems to be a wealthy domestic interior in a Japanese style: *tatami* mat floors, sliding and folding screens forming the rooms, paper covered screens for windows or doors outward, and a small central

fireplace at the bottom with the accoutrements for making tea. Contradictorily, atop the line of the ceiling, there is an exterior sign with three large archaic Chinese characters. In modern Japanese, they mean something like “pleasure garden” or “entertainment (earthly) paradise,” definitively referring to the sort of business one would find in the *Yoshiwara*. Oddly, the pleasure district establishment is cloaked in the guise of a wealthy middleclass home.

Identification of the scene within the *Yoshiwara* complicates the problem of identifying the women. They are decidedly not courtesans, whose appearance by this time had become rather ostentatious, requiring a distinctive, elaborate coiffure, and heavy robes with a broad obi belt tied in the front. Even without the most elaborate costuming, a courtesan is identifiable by deliberately displaying the back of the neck with a portion of the upper back, and the bare feet (45). At this point, *geisha* were rising in popularity, but had not yet developed their own distinctive costume, making them difficult to identify without an accompanying *shamisen*, a traditional three string instrument played with a plectrum and sounding reminiscent of an American banjo (47-48). In general, *geisha* dressed as older middleclass women in monochrome robes, white under-robes, and a simplified hair style, frequently wearing a masculine *haori* coat (Seigle 170). *Odoriko*, “dancing girls,” who performed with *geisha*, wore somewhat more decorative *furisode*, “long sleeved,” robes. Both always wore their obi tied to the back to indicate that they were not prostitutes. At first glance, it is nearly impossible to tell the difference between *geisha* and middle-class women at leisure. In *October* the older woman in the back room holds an object in her lap, which appears to be the end of a *koto*, a traditional large thirteen string instrument. While unusual for a *geisha*, it can be the hidden identifying marker of the women’s social identities, augmented by the appearance of musical instruments in most other paintings in the series.

The women’s ambiguous social identity serves to emphasize the point that Shunsho was not simply creating the typical *ukiyo-e bijinga* fashion plate, but instead a much more profound and lasting sense of *mono no aware*. A hanging scroll painting like this was intended to be displayed in an alcove in a public space, either an entertaining room or tea house, only for the appropriate interval of time, here the month of

October, as an object of quiet contemplation in relation to aspects of nature such as the seasons. Such meditation served both as a sign of intellect and nobility as well as providing respite from the cares of the world. Measuring only 115 by 25.7 centimeters, *October* is best viewed in a close, intimate manner. As with more traditional landscape scrolls, there is no single focal point; the viewer starts at the bottom, allowing his or her gaze to follow the flow of the painting and the development of the image across the space. In *October*, the image begins at the bottom with the group of three adolescent girls. Surrounded by writing implements, a tray of food, and tea instruments, they play with a tiny lap dog. Were the image composed of these three alone, it would be little more than then typical *bijinga*, but to call them the focus of the image is to ignore the entire upper two thirds. The gaze is drawn upwards, between the screens into the next room, to the figure of an older woman. With her robes of much more subdued colors slightly in disarray, she provides a sober contrast to the colorful young girls. She is distracted from the task at hand by the view out the window. The picture culminates in an autumn landscape. The colors of the falling leaves echo those of the young girls at the base of the painting. The whole effect is to focus, not on the immediacy of their beauty but on its transience. The young and beautiful are inevitably also aging and fading. The tension between the contrast and the continuity of opposed elements enhances the impact of the moment, inviting the viewer to reflect on the changes of time and the fading of the seasons. *October* thus depicts a far more profound subject than simply the elegance of feminine youth.

Shunsho develops a sense of *mono no aware* within *October* through his attention to detail of form and setting. Achieving a higher degree of delicacy than in woodblock prints, he evokes an elegant and believably wrought world with a complex interplay of stylistic traditions. The creation of the *ukiyo-e* style was considered so profoundly different from the older *yamato-e* as to require a whole new set of aesthetic terms (Bell 50). Shunsho here strikes a balance between the two opposing sets of values developing a unique style that is independent of both traditions from which he draws. From *yamato-e* comes an appreciation of the principles of *wabi*, *yugen*, and *miyabi*. *Wabi* expresses an appreciation of materials left to their natural, simple

form. Within *October*, the primary colors are soft earth tones on the golden-tan base of unpainted, raw silk (51). Tied to the use of soft, restrained colors, the painting displays *yugen*, which focuses on subtle tones to convey “mysterious beauty” with a touch of sadness (52). All of this is tied together in the principle of *miyabi* which appreciates refined understatement and courtly elegance (56). While not as restrained as earlier *yamato-e* painters, Shunsho does display here, a remarkable level of restraint in relation to the *ukiyo-e* style, which generally appreciates bright and contrasting colors. From the *ukiyo-e* aesthetic, *October* displays the more abstract concepts of *iki* and *akirame*. *Iki* as a sense of “self-contained urbanity” is created through the fashionable enclosed interior setting, while the figures convey the pathos of “urban resignation” and “knowledge of fate” typically qualified by *akirame* (67-68). Even within the domestic setting, the women convey a feeling of fashionable urbanity and elegance.

In a more concrete sense, Shunsho adapts different styles to each area of his painting. The *bijinga* employ a definite *ukiyo-e* style, but such figures would typically be isolated against a blank background or minimal setting. Shunsho displays his facility at creating fully realized settings for his characters, filling the picture plane with detailed setting (Stern 181). Incorporating elements from earlier *yamato-e* styles, Shunsho uses an elevated viewpoint so that the audience looks down into the room from an improbable perspective, while the floor below appears steeply slanted. Highly unusual is the incorporation of black ink brush painting in the manner of the *Kano* school to create the trees in the landscape. The extensive training Shunsho had as a painter, before turning to *ukiyo-e* prints shows itself in the quality of delicacy and detail he achieved through layers of under painting, giving his work a much richer tonality (181). The wide variety of techniques and styles used set this work apart from any single artistic tradition, creating a more sophisticated work of art.

Shunsho uses color choice and the composition of line work to make readily apparent the focal subject of *mono no aware*. A common characteristic of Shunsho’s work is well composed groups of figures, juxtaposing the curves of the figural forms with the rigidly straight lines of their surroundings (177). Here he has taken advantage of this contrast to create the upward flow of the composition. The direction

first drifts about the curving forms of the young girls as a self contained unit. The heads of the two top girls converged on the red edge of the screen, directing the eye upward to the second series of curves along the form of the older woman. The flow up along her body and arched neck follows her gaze out the window to wander into the myriad of curved and broken lines of the naturalistic landscape. The rigidly strait lines of the surrounding walls serve to frame the curves and contain the direction of attention along the set path.

The soft richness of *October's* palate immediately attracts attention. Shunsho's subtle use of colors in relation to each other lends power to his subject of the passage of time. Shunsho's work's palate typically consists primarily of browns and oranges, with strong black lines, but even compared to other paintings within the set, for *October*, he shows remarkable restraint, strictly limiting the vibrant red to a few details and eschewing blues altogether (Lane 118). Refraining from the more typically *ukiyo-e* colors, *October* uses the golden of the silk backing with a thin wash of green for the *tatami* mats to maintain soft, natural earth tones. Additionally present are muted green and maroon, black, soft orange, and a sparing use of vibrant red. The strangely bright red of the screen frame in the lower section serves to separate and contain the younger girls, designating the area of colorful frivolity separate from the darker, more subdued colors in the rest of the image. The black of the first girl's robe parallels that of the older woman. By using colors that parallel between the younger girls and the older woman, Shunsho draws the viewer's attention to the relationship between the two halves of the composition. However, while the young girl's black glitters with added touches of red and gold, the woman's is dulled by dark green and maroon. The soft pale maroon with thin white stripes of the second girl's robe, too, is matched and dulled in the older woman's deep maroon robe, emphasizing the inevitable progress of the girls from youth to age. Within the group of girls, the most distinctive wears the pale orange robe, with the dog in her lap, and is the only figure whose face is fully visible. Recalling the elegantly curved poses and delicate, distant expressions of *bijinga* portraits, she certainly captivates. When the flow of the painting is followed, however, it culminates in the autumn landscape where the trees shed leaves of the same pale orange. Thus the most charming and vivacious

of the girls is nonetheless paralleled with the fading and death of the natural world at the change of the seasons, a powerful allusion to the passage of time and ephemeral quality of beauty.

While audience may seem rather irrelevant to understanding the work, Japan was never more rigidly hierarchical than in Edo period, and thus the audience, by this meaning the patron who commissioned the work and his associates, elaborates on the conflict in blending the two high and low forms of art in a single composition. Because *ukiyo-e* artists primarily worked in a highly volatile, fashionable market creating works for mass production, many had very short careers. Thus, to last long enough, gaining notoriety, and earn painting commissions from wealthy patrons, required an artist to be very well adept, indeed (Naito 38). The limitations of cost for commissioned paintings means that there is a relatively small body of such comparable works and that the resultant paintings specifically reflect the will of the patron. To commission not simply one painting but a full set of twelve on silk by one of the most popular artists at the height of his career, would require a truly exorbitant amount of wealth. The difference between *ukiyo-e* and *yamato-e* paintings in this period has simplistically been described as a difference of social class: *yamato-e* for the aristocracy and *samurai* nobility, and *ukiyo-e* for the *chonin* the urban middle-class (Kita 42). While not an entirely accurate distinction, it stresses the problem of identification created by Shunsho's blending of the two styles.

The possibility for a wealthy *chonin's* commission is based on the popularity of the *Yoshiwara* primarily among this class. Of the ten surviving paintings in the series *The Activities of Women in Twelve Months*, *October* is the only one to establish a solid roof line to the scene, with a labeling sign; the rest use the convention of stylized fog or clouds filling unused areas, or simply an open horizon. The inclusion of this enclosure and sign identifying the room as a shop within the *Yoshiwara* emphasizes the importance to the artist of displaying the activities as within the pleasure district, most frequently patronized by the *chonin*. By this time, the standards of fashion had undergone a complete revolution, drawing their inspiration from the lowest of classes, in essence the prostitutes, rather than the historical standard of imitating the nobility (Maruyama 211). In this sense, the composition of *October*

could be especially appealing to members of the *chonin* for its seeming reference to their own lifestyle, making the message more immediate. Also in support, while many merchants remained simple shop owners, the elite of the *chonin* were incredibly wealthy and frequently searched for outlets to display their wealth, legitimizing their own social status. The series of paintings would certainly have made for an opulent commission, but with such a limited audience, who would only be able to appreciate them one at a time, such temporally specific paintings do not fit into the usual formula for ostentatious displays of wealth.

The other possible source of patronage is a member of the *samurai* elite, members of which commissioned the majority of *ukiyo-e* paintings as a manner of participating in contemporary culture without stooping to purchase the same prints that were popular amongst the lowest class of *chonin*. The art historian Tadashi Kobayashi argues that many of the elites saw patronage as an opportunity to “encourage greater refinement” in the arts and to foster further aesthetic development, in opposition to the immorally conspicuous consumption of the *chonin* (22). The primary presence of the *odoriko*, too, indicates a *samurai* patron. *Odoriko* were especially popular among *samurai* since they could be hired outside of the *Yoshiwara* for entertainment at parties, and because they largely came from wealthier *chonin* families who presented them as refined, virginal girls, instead of prostitutes (Seigle 171-72). The *odoriko* and *geisha* had a perceived higher moral standing than the courtesans. The argument against *samurai* patronage is that the series was painted in the 1780s, while in 1787 a new set of strict laws curbing the excesses of the *chonin*, *Yoshiwara* in general, and imagery within *ukiyo-e* were issued by the shogun (Hibbett 30). At this point, it may not have been politically wise for a member of the *samurai* to display such support of the *Yoshiwara*. However, the problem of identifying the audience comes back, once more to the sign. It is written, not in contemporary Japanese, but in a form of Chinese characters so archaic they had not been widely used since the third century BCE, before writing was introduced to Japan. When Shunsho painted *October*, these characters existed almost exclusively in the form of signature seals. It is likely that the characters would have been illegible to all but the most culturally sophisticated. Perhaps the label of the *Yoshiwara* on a painting emphasizing the fleeting nature of beauty and pleasure could

even have been read as a veiled criticism of the culture of self-gratification. The painting's dual usage as an intellectual meditation on fading beauty and as a savvy political statement leads one to assume that it was intended for an elite *samurai* audience.

Within the context of appealing to a noble *samurai* patron, Shunsho's *October* blends the characteristics of both contemporary *ukiyo-e* with traditional *yamato-e*, to create an object more appealing to noble taste. In order to accomplish this, he depicts the *Yoshimura*, not as the domain of working courtesans and actors, but as a domestic scene containing elegant *bijinga* of uncertain status. Stylistically, he partially employs aesthetic principles from both modes of painting in a manner truly unique to the artist. Altogether, the combination serves to create a strong sense of *mono no aware*, the most prevalent of all forms of Japanese aesthetics. Unfortunately, the intricate blending of the two forms excludes *October*, along with the rest of Shunsho's *bijinga* paintings from the lineage of both. In spite of the quality of the work, the paintings of Katsukawa Shunsho remain largely ignored to the detriment of understanding and appreciating the development of Japanese painting. Katsukawa Shunsho's paintings of *The Activities of Women in the Twelve Months*, deserve attention as true masterpieces that synthesize the aesthetics of a range of contemporary styles into sophisticated compositions.

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