CHAPTER 3

Hishikawa Moronobu and the Imprinting of ‘Love’ in Early Modern Japan

Joshua S. Mostow

Considering *ut pictura amor* in the context of early modern Japan presents a number of challenges. Not least is the concept of ‘amor’. There is no such thing in early modern East Asia. The word used in modern Japanese, *ren'ai*, is a nineteenth-century neologism, designed precisely to translate the European concept.¹ What there *is* is passion and longing, called *iro* (literally, “colour”) and *koi* or *omoi*. This is because the *epistemé* of early modern Japan, to restrict myself to it for the moment, was not Christian or Neo-Platonic, but Buddhist, where desire and attachment are believed to lead to pain. The eschatological goal is not mutual love in and of God, but a renunciation of all attachment and a realization of the Void.²

Next, *ut pictura amor* naturally presupposes a theory of *ut pictura poesis*, and this in turn assumes some kind of theory of painting, such as Alberti’s. Despite the fact that pronouncements on painting and its purposes appear as early as the third century BCE in China in the *Han Feizi*,³ and Gu Kaizhi’s *Essay on Painting (Hua-lun)* dates to the late fourth century CE,⁴ this lead was not followed by the Japanese. Although a section of the famous *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*, ca. 1008) is now referred to by art historians as the ‘kaiga-ron’ or ‘discourse on painting’,⁵ and the compendium of anecdotes, *Kokon chomonjū* (*Collection of Notable Tales Old and New*, 1254) by Tachibana no Narisue (dates uncertain), contains a whole section related to visual

---

² See LaFleur W.R., *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: 1983). Despite the absence of a concept of ‘love’ in pre-modern Japan, scholars still use the word to translate any number of terms from the Japanese; thus a major work by Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693), *Kōshoku gonin onna* (1686), where *kōshoku* means literally ‘to like colour (that is, passion)’ and *gonin onna* ‘five women’ has been translated as *Five Women Who Loved Love*, trans. Barry W.T. de (Rutland, VT: 1956). I shall follow the same convention below.
⁴ Ibid., 20.
art, a proper art history and theory do not start until the late seventeenth century with Kano Einō’s 1691 Honchō gaden, or Lives of Painters of the Realm, also known as the Honchō gashi or History of Painting of the Realm. Here, at least, we have some general historical and generic coincidence with Vasari and his 1550 Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects.

To be sure, China developed an explicit theory of the equivalence of painting and poetry—‘Tu Fu’s writings are pictures without forms, Han Kan’s paintings, unspoken poems’—especially in the development of literati painting in the Song-dynasty circle of Su Shih (1037–1101). But again this is not imported into Japan until the eighteenth century. Finally, as for any association between portrayals of beautiful women and eros and painting, orthodox Chinese painting theory generally denigrated the mimetic and discredited its baser emotional effects, looking to figure painting simply to reveal the righteous and the wicked, a function that was also applied in Japan in the representation of the sages—kings in the imperial palace. While pictures of beautiful women from the Tang dynasty are extant and also appear at the same time in Japan, and while bijin-ga was a dominant genre in Japanese early modern woodblock prints and painting, the genre of ‘pictures of beautiful women’ (meiren-hua in Chinese pronunciation) does not really establish itself until the seventeenth century and seems to have generated no philosophical discourse [Fig. 3.1]. Japan, however, had no ideological objections to mimesis, and erotic visual images, both of Chinese and domestic creation, circulated at court and in aristocratic circles as early as the Heian period (794–1185).

---


8 Bush – Shih, Early Chinese Texts 203.

9 Except of ethical and religious condemnation. Su Shih rejected ‘likeness in form’ as a basis for judging a painting, Bush – Shih, Early Chinese Texts 224. But Craig Clunas discusses the existence of erotically explicit imagery from as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and the apparent explosion in printed erotica in the early 1600s; Clunas C., Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China (London: 1997) 149–171. See also Cahill J., Beauty Revealed: Images of Women in Qing Dynasty Chinese Painting (Berkeley: 2013); and by the same author, “Beautiful Women and the Courtesan Culture”, in his Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China (Berkeley: 2010) 149–197.