Erotic Japonisme, The Influence of Japanese Sexual Imagery on Western Art

Ricard Bru


The other day I bought albums of Japanese obscenities. They delight me, amuse me, and charm my eyes .... The violence of the lines, the unexpectedness of the conjunctions, the arrangement of the accessories, the caprice in the poses and the objects, the genitalia. Looking at them, I think of Greek art, boredom in perfection, an art that will never free itself from the curse of being academic!” (1. October 8, 1863, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, Journal, quoted in Bru, Erotic Japonisme, 36)

So wrote the French art critic and collector Jules de Goncourt, describing his first view of Japanese shunga (‘spring pictures’) in 1863. Created by ukiyo-e (‘floating world’) artists, such as Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806) and Katsushika Hokusai (c. 1760–1848), these unconventional woodcuts, provocative in their sexual explicitness, were about to change the course of western cultural history. Ricard Bru’s intriguing book explores the impact of shunga on late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century art, and asserts the importance of the ukiyo-e tradition in the continuing international fascination with Japan.

Nineteenth-century westerners were familiar with erotic beauty as embodied by the antique goddesses Aphrodite and Venus, who, in their cool innocence and naked reserve, denied any accessibility. To viewers further schooled in Christian mores and Victorian prudery, the sexual act, over which the goddess presided, could only be intuited, never depicted. The classical virgin-sluts of art history, deplored by Jules de Goncourt as “boredom in perfection,” never acknowledged the intrusion of an active partner, let alone an engorged male member. De Goncourt was delighted, amused, and charmed by shunga’s technical virtuosity, frank depictions of frisky copulation, and exposed genitalia. But he was nonetheless schooled in the western academic tradition, and could not help but perceive these works as “Japanese obscenities.” In actuality, shunga offered uninhibited, unmediated views of intimate pleasure, untainted by western moral taboos and idealistic artifice. Erotic Japonisme eloquently chronicles the importance of this important sub-genre of the ukiyo-e tradition in western art. By citing the evidence of documents, correspondence, and collections, and marshaling astute visual analyses, Ricard Bru offers an engaging and erudite account of how the awareness of Japanese erotic traditions served as a catalyst for change in a world already primed for cultural revolution.
The book’s Introduction paves the way for the acceptance of Japanese eroticism in the west, beginning in the eighteenth century. Distinguished by secular subject matter and sensual abandon, the Rococo style marked a breakdown of restraint in the representation of erotic subjects, also demonstrated by Japanese ukiyo-e art. Both represented the world of pleasure in their respective cultures, and reveled in delicate effects and acute observations of daily life. Comparison of the two styles addresses the fraught definitions of ‘art’ and ‘pornography,’ and suggests that the blurring of boundaries between the two allowed the birth of modern European attitudes toward sexuality. Concurrently, the transformation of social roles, instigated by the Enlightenment, and spread of the sex industry brought the subject of eroticism out into the open in the popular sphere. The touchstone of this discussion is an illuminating examination of Gustave Courbet’s infamous The Origin of the World (1866), an explicit painting of female genitalia. Bru enlarges the artistic context of this work by analyzing photographic evidence, images by other artists, and genital close-ups in Japanese illustrated books, such as Keisai Eisen, Heard and Recorded in the Bedroom: The Pillow Library (ca. 1823). Contextualized in this way, Courbet’s painting emerges not as a unique, pornographic study, but as part of a larger trend toward modernism, perhaps instigated by intermediary shunga models. With this example, the book sets the stage for the reconsideration of other iconic works in the light of Japanese eroticism.

Like most fashionable phenomena in history, Japonisme simmered at the margins long before its explosive debut in nineteenth-century Paris. Chapter 1, “The Western Encounter with Shunga,” provides an account of early confrontations with Japanese art, beginning with Portuguese missionaries and Dutch traders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The first documented import of shunga, described as “certaine lasciuious bookes and pictures,” happened in 1615. Upon reaching England, they were promptly destroyed by the authorities, a process which was repeated in succeeding decades. The isolationist policy of the Tokugawa shogunate, combined with shunga’s perceived moral depravity in the west, explain the spotty documentation of these early encounters. However, Japan’s self-imposed obscurity became a thing of the past in 1854, when Commodore Matthew Perry forcibly opened the country to the rest of the world. The subsequent flow of Japanese works of art into Europe, and their display at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1867, had a momentous impact on nineteenth-century culture from this time forward. Paris was already the undisputed leader in the commercialized consumption of sex and erotica, and it was primarily from this city that shunga spread throughout Europe. Several importers of and dealers in Japanese art, including Siegfried