What is Ukiyo-e—the literal translation of this word “ukiyo-e” is “pictures of the floating world”. Floating world expresses a wide range of meaning. It might suggest pine clad islands vanishing in mists, but the oldest connotation of the word is derived from Buddhism, generally translated as “world of misery”, and expresses the ephemeral, transitory nature of existence. In this sense, the word was not without its pessimistic overtones. The traditional Japanese sensitivity to nature, to seasonal changes, to such phenomena as a bamboo bending under the wet snow or the fluttering fall of a single cherry blossom, ultimately stems from this sense of fragility of all life. This was not a gloomy view: it simply invested perception with a certain tinge of sadness, giving it a poignancy it might otherwise not have. By the 17th century, the term began to acquire a more specific connotation. The floating world became a particular form of life that one chose or drifted into, a world of hedonistic preoccupation with the present moment, world of fashions and styles, and the pursuit of pleasures in the pleasure quarters, and in the world of Kabuki Theater, that underneath he knew to be fleeting. But it also had the connotation of licentiousness. The classic definition of the ethos of enthusiastic pleasure seeking was given by a 17th century poet Asai Ryōi (d.1691) “… Living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossom and the maple leaves; singing songs, drinking wine, diverting ourselves in just floating, caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened. Like a gourd floating along with the river current; this is what we call Floating World …”.

Over the next three centuries, these prints mirrored the frivolous and idle bourgeois, attained great heights of grace and inventiveness. The inspiration behind this form of artistic inspiration was the bustling world of Edo. The crowded city of Edo with its trails of temptations, especially, the district of Yoshiwara—a world within the town came to symbolize place where illicit pleasures could be discovered. Most men aspired unashamedly to the pleasures that Yoshiwara held out. Yoshiwara with its parks, shops, restaurants, gardens and “green houses” (name given to pleasure and entertainment quarters)
could quench all desires and realize every fantasy. People in search of adventure, hedonists, artists, actors, merchants, businessmen thronged here—the world of dark illusions and secret rendezvous, where the courtesans and geishas who embodied the quintessence of Japanese refinement, ruled over the heart and senses with their sophisticated manners. Great artists belonging to Print making immortalized these ideal creatures, plucking the strings of their musical instruments, carrying out tea ceremony or timidly revealing the softness of their neck. Another parallel universe that fascinated these artist chroniclers was the Kabuki theatre and their actors. The performers and their exaggerated acting fascinated the public and they were portrayed with all their individual characteristics and peculiarities. All through the Edo period, the themes were taken from the same sources. The warrior class afforded very little themes for the pictures to the artists. The domestic life of the local lords (daimyo), immediate feudatories of the Shogun (hatamoto) and other members of the military class, was not represented as it faced the risk of incurring the wrath of the Shogun. Even the domestic life of the more sober trades people was not much represented in ukiyo-e either. Yet one would fall into serious error if one were to form an idea of the general manners and customs of the Edo period solely from the genre pictures of the ukiyo-e type. The ukiyo-e was generally confined to a very narrow sphere, thus, one gets an impression of a highly colourful metropolis full of lovely women strolling through its thoroughfares. It is not that the scenes of popular life were a modern innovation. Some of the earliest works of secular painting (notably certain scroll painting) of the 12th–13th centuries already included varied and realistic illustrations of the ways and manners of the common people. But these were always in the nature of incidental anecdotes or by-play, intended to enliven the main scene or suggest local colour. It is not until the Edo period that we find works in which scenes of daily life are treated for its own sake as the leading theme of the composition. The artists were catering to the taste of the common citizen by depicting scenes in the gay quarters and theatrical circles. The ukiyo-e painters far surpassed all other schools of graphic art in the representation of life in such circles. At first, the social sphere from which the ukiyo-e artists obtained themes from was limited, gradually, it got extended to cover all phases of life, with the result that the spheres of life represented by ukiyo-e became correspondingly enlarged. Ukiyo-e painters, sought to meet popular demands for other kinds of pictures to adorn picture books, illustrations for novels, and so forth, as well as landscapes, flowers, birds etc. Landscapes were not simple representation of scenery, for they combined with them both Japanese taste and love for travel.

So, ukiyo-e began as a form of popular and erotic entertainment catering to the urban migrant population of Edo. Gradually however, this middle class clientele became more refined and discerning. The popularity of crude and facile subjects waned. More refined prints with sophisticated compositions took their place. An inexpensive, cheerful, ambitious avant-garde art form had begun to emerge. Though ukiyo-e prints are an inexhaustible source of reference for cultural historians, it is all too easy to be bebuilded by their persuasive visual rhetoric into believing that Edo was a kind of happy go lucky paradise. Ukiyo-e pictures were always in the business of promoting and beautifying the image of the
floating world, concentrating on its most positive aspects. Though we learn from popular literature historical accounts and diaries of the time of the seamier side of the world of pleasure—the street walkers and the pitiful lower levels of the hierarchy of prostitution such as “night hawks” (yotaka) and “boat girls” (funa manjū)—these lower class women were never depicted along side the high class courtesans of Yoshiwara. Nor do we see passing visual references to other darker aspects of life in Edo, i.e., fire, famine epidemic, poverty, old age or infirmity. What was the point of a print of a Yoshiwara courtesan? Men may have viewed an ukiyo-e print of a highly ranked courtesan as a substitute for an unattainable beauty, but women were keen to scrutinize and emulate the latest fashion. In this sense ukiyo-e prints were not just passive records of the passing urbane scene but active agents for creating and reinforcing popular cultural values.

Historical and Cultural Background for the Rise of Ukiyo-e

The striking new art which developed in feudal Japan grew out of the social milieu, it was an accurate reflection of the times in which it grew up. The period of Japanese cultural history from the middle of the 15th century to the early part of the 16th century saw certain developments that completely altered the face both of Japanese society and Japanese culture. In the political sphere, this was the period during which the foundations were laid for the system of feudal society that was to dominate Japan for several centuries to follow, and this establishment of feudalism meant that every political vestige of the earlier stages of Japanese society had to be destroyed. Commerce and communication were opened with Europe, notably with Portugal and soon trade was flourishing. As commerce flourished, the economic influence and positions of the persons concerned with it also enhanced. These persons were the commoners and their growing economic positions tended more and more to give them a zest and an enthusiasm for living that they had conspicuously lacked up to this time. Their economic liberation brought about an amazingly sudden development in the arts, reaching out eventually into every imaginable area of creative activity in Japan.

The first change we see is the world of black and white, exemplified in the restrained and controlled Chinese ink painting preferred by the Zen sect and its painter priests, gave way before a gaudy new world of gold leaf and bright and lively colours. New themes arose quickly. The lower orders of society came to enjoy an increasingly lively way of life and even a higher standard of living. Together with both went a new emphasis upon plebeian pleasures, upon outings and excursions, in addition to new spirit of fun and gaiety in daily life. All these elements became, for the first time in Japanese art, the themes for painting. Painters also took a keen interest in the recreations and amusements of the people. The theatres grouped on the banks of the River Kamo formed the entertainment center of the city. They are shown in bird’s eye view in spirited compositions full of people in quaint and colourful profusion. Outings in the country, open air dancing, all the pleasures freely were indulged now, as peace had descended in Japan after a long period of disorder and civil war—these were the favorite themes with...
artists and in treating them they recreate the brilliant atmosphere of Japanese renaissance. As this new trend of secular painting gained ground and attained wider public, independent artists (known as city painters or popular painters began to specialize in the production of screens decorated with genre scenes. By combining the academic style of painting with that of Kanō school and other techniques, notably the Tosa school achieved a freer mode of expression better suited to the representation of contemporary life.

From early 17th century we find the art gradually beginning to lose much of its talent for presenting documentary records of places, people and events. In their place we find more and more the everyday common places of the lives of the townsmen. In response to the taste of the public, their interest shifted from general views to details, figure painting in particular, above all of beautiful women, unaccompanied either by architecture or landscape, met with immense success. Many of the charming works portrayed different types of feminine beauty, vivacious and appealing dressed in latest fashion, for example, the richly clad ladies in different poses. Moreover, the free and even licentious manners of the period gave way to pleasure haunts and gay quarters in the cities. Courtesans, dancing girls and Yuna (women of easy virtue who worked in the hot baths) accordingly played the leading part in these compositions. The most original of this genre is the celebrated painting of “Bath Women” from about the beginning if 17th century, these women are rather low class public prostitute employed in the public bathing establishments of Edo. Six Yuna in all their finery—a gaudy short sleeved Kimono with a thin belt—stroll down the street, and it intends to show a little of their sordid way of life. The artist has concentrated with great success on their decadent charm, and it is this masterful depiction that gives the picture its great interest. Instead of depicting conventional female beauty, the artist has given each of these women a pose and manner all her own.

Wood Block Prints—Japanese wood-cuts were produced as early as the 11th century. At first they represented Buddhist figures. Most of the wooden blocks used in those initial periods ranges from one to six inches in length. Each wooden block was used to produce a considerable number of the same sacred image printed on thin sheet of paper, to be used in Buddhist services. Such prints were produced in great numbers during the Heian (794–1185) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods, notably from the 11th to the 13th century.

Ukiyo-e prints were made by transferring an image carved into the surface of a wooden block— for traditional Japanese prints usually of cherry wood—to a paper. The artist first made a design on ordinary paper and had it transferred to a special thin semi-transparent paper, which is pasted face down on the block. The surface of the block is cut and chiseled away, leaving a design formed of raised lines and solid areas. Ink is applied to this surface and a piece of paper is placed over it. The exposed back side of the paper is rubbed with a disk shaped pad, which causes transfer of ink from the block onto the front side of the paper. Of all the artists, who helped to raise Japanese prints to their high artistic levels, Moronobu Hishikawa (1614?–1694?) must be regarded as the most deserving of honour. He was also one of the foremost ukiyo-e painters, and founded what may be styled the Hishikawa school of genre art.
Moronobu had learned the methods of the Tosa and Kanō schools, which were regarded as representative of orthodoxy in Japanese painting, and then so modified them in his own way as to render his art best suited for depicting the manners and custom of his time. In fact, Moronobu created a new style of genre picture for the hand-painted ukiyo-e. But he did not stop there. In the field of engraving he produced artistic print that most delighted the “new men of the new age”. He thus deserves the chief place of honour, both as an ukiyo-e painter and as an ukiyo-e engraver.

_Tan-e_ or “vermilion prints”—of all these artistic hand colored prints, those produced earliest have cinnabar or vermilion as their predominant color, and so are called tan-e or “vermilion pictures.” Yellow and green were used in _tan-e_ as subordinate colors. The more important _tan-e_ painters were Moronobu Hishikawa and his followers, Kiyonobu Torii and Kiyomasu Torii, the disciples of Kaigetsu-dō, and Shigenaga Nishimura.

_Beni-e_, or “crimson pictures”—after _tan-e_, what were known as _beni-e_ or “crimson pictures” came into popularity. In these hand-colored prints the predominant color was crimson, with yellow and green as subsidiary hues. In some instances powdered copper was applied to suggest or golden brightness. Pictures of this class were quite elaborately executed. Among the foremost “crimson prints” artists who used two or three pigments were Masanobu Okumura, Harunobu Suzuki, Kiyomitsu Torii, etc.

_Urushi-e_, or “lacquer-pictures” when coloring the prints with a brush the artist would sometimes make pitch-black spots of lacquer-like intensity and luster on human figures in the pictures, and then such pieces were called urushie. Among the workers in _beni-e_ and _urushi-e_ were the leader and followers of the Torii school. Kiyonobu and Kiyomasu have left us many works in these styles.

_Nishiki-e_ (literally means “brocade pictures”)—this term is applied to a still more improved and beautiful type of “crimson pictures” or _benizuri-e_. _Nishiki_ (brocade) is a very beautifully coloured fabric, and the term was transferred to a type of colour print that is as lovely as brocade. These prints first appeared in the markets in 1765.

The _nishiki-e_ was not a mere fruit of the combined efforts of painters, engravers, and printers, but there was a group of men who acted as their guiding spirit and made suggestions and plans for those artists, thus rendering it possible for them to produce such superb works of art. This group was composed of writers of comic and satirical verse, known as “mad songs” (kyōka). Some poets of this type in those days took a deep aesthetic interest in prints used in frontispieces of books, and they devised new and artistic colour prints for their purpose. Among those comic poets were many young men who were sons of wealthy tradesmen in Edo, and being free from the cares and worries of earning a livelihood for themselves, they could afford a devise or design artistic colour prints of purely aesthetic merit. It signifies, in other words, that the _nishiki-e_ was produced by a literary man with a keen appreciation for colour prints acting as a sort of conductor to a trio composed of a painter, an engraver, and a printer, all four working in perfect harmony.

Many new technical devices went to the making of the _nishiki-e_, the most notable of all being
those that facilitated the artistic colouring of the pictures. Not only was the work of engraving the colouring blocks executed with great skill, but the colours were increased in number. The papers used for printing nishiki-e was called hōsho, which was of a higher quality than the paper used for benizuri-e, so that it brought out the different colours and tints.

Depiction of Women

In the latter half of the 18th century ukiyo-e artists took the world by storm with the ukiyo-e woodblock representation of the ideal female beauty. The depiction of women by each artist had distinct characteristics. All the women are presented as uniformly gorgeous, (no attempt is made to distinguish particular physiognomies of individual women) with the particular cast of features that was the hallmark of the artist concerned. The women depicted are generally Yoshiwara courtesans, middle class women, servant girls in the inns, coquette ladies surprised in the bath, women getting dressed, young dreamy lovers, women putting make-up, women doing her hair, reading, smoking, humble prostitutes, haughty geisha, mother breast feeding child, were immortalized. There was nothing vulgar, perverse, or voyeuristic about these charming cameos. The pictures of the beautiful women reached its apogee during this period. The artists captured the very essence of women, her movements, her dreams, her intimate moments, the softness of her skin, the mystery of her charms: this was their constant obsession, a feverish passionate quest. The painter abandoned all anecdotes to express the whole range of feminine sentiments merely by the rhythm of a line or the nuance of colour.

In Indian art women has always been one of the main themes of art since ancient times. The artistic representations of women reflect the different cultural attitude towards her. In India, artistically sophisticated examples can be seen 1st–2nd century BC amongst both Buddhist and Hindu religious sculptures. The figure of a Yakshi from Didarganj, a 2nd century BC artistic creation from India shows an extremely refined, imposing and a seductive figure wearing jewelry and figure hugging drapery. These Yakshi or folk deities were extremely popular in Indian literature and were frequently depicted in art. The period of their flowering was the Kushana period (1st–3rd century AD) when they were carved on the pillars that embellished the platform of the Buddhist religious structures—the stupa, and they are the most artistic handiwork of the most skilled sculptors. These women are shown nude, are in full bloom of their youth, standing in alluring postures and sometime engaged in amorous pranks. Usually they stand in tribhanga pose, with one hand raised above and the other holding some object. These beautiful damsels are shown engaged in some activity and surpass all contemporary artistic creations in lyrical expressions and sensuous charm.

The Yakshis are shown playing lovingly with parrots, or bathing under gushing waters of the cooling springs or gently squeezing and drying long beautiful hair after bath. Beautiful women are also shown fully absorbed in drinking wine and in a state of intoxication. A man is giving a helping hand to his female beloved, while attendant females are shown carrying the wine in globular pot covered with
tumblers for their mistresses, some are gracefully carrying toilet trays for their mistresses, while some other damsels are performing difficult acrobatic dances, themes of *sringara* was also popular, for example, maiden adjusting necklace, pendant or simply looking into the mirror. Sometimes, mothers are shown fondling children in various playful postures.

These figures are admired for their charming facial features, proportionate bodies and sensuousness. A feature of these damsels is their nudity—it is connected with fertility and rain magic. The artist revealed the secrets of feminine beauty through voluptuous forms.

Centuries later, again we can see depiction of women being the central theme in the drawings of Kalighat style. Though themes were varied, but most of them were portraits of women. India was experiencing a new economic, social and cultural situation at the turn of the 18th and 19th century, especially in the eastern metropolis of Calcutta. Western manners, customs, and life styles, expansion of trade and commerce and advanced means of transport and communication generated new social conflicts and synthesis. They resulted in new measures of social status, an enormous turbulence in setting moral and ethical standards, a major change in aesthetic norms and above all, massive proliferation of visual imagery. The Kalighat artists boldly reflected these upheavals in the pictorial conceptualization of their work to become the first exponents of contemporary Indian art.

The artists belonged to the lower strata of society, they were not schooled artists and worked according to customary iconographical principles, their main customers were middle class Bengali society or belonging to the lower ranks. The drawings were low priced, their simplicity and directness was comprehensible to all. The drawings tell us about the ideas and views of their consumers and to a certain extent the latter determined the form and content of their drawings by their taste and demands. In the beginning secular themes were not so frequent, but as time went on, their popularity grew. They are of considerable importance and are remarkable from the point of view of cultural as well as social history giving information about certain aspects of life in Bengal in the 19th century. The popularity of these secular drawings was largely due to the secularization of all aspects of cultural life in Bengal in the 19th century.
century. The largest numbers of drawings on secular subjects belong to the scenes from daily life, and many were portraits of women. During the medieval period, women have been portrayed in art, that is, in the tradition of miniature painting, as they flourished in Rajasthan and in the Punjab hills or elsewhere under royal patronage, generally remained confined to limited conventional themes relating to Hindu mythology, court life, or celebrated love poetry popular in their times. Whereas Kalighat painting imbibed impressions from contemporary society at large and did not become tame or derivative, contemporary women of the Bengali society were depicted, for instance, with peacocks in their arms, with flowers and water pipe in their hands, playing musical instruments, women and their beauty care, men being ridiculed as they are being dominated by the women. The artist either gave the man the appearance of a lamb whom the women leads on a string, women’s daily chores as husking paddy (a fool’s labour), and the depiction of “public women” (i.e., courtesan). Just why the courtesan proved to be so popular a subject is a matter of curiosity.

All women (other than goddesses) have been labeled “courtesan”: a courtesan with a rose and mirror, a courtesan trampling on lover, a courtesan nursing a peacock, courtesan dressing her hair, et al. Many of these women may have represented theatre heroines or nayikas (heroines of poetry or actresses) or bibis (female counterpart of babus) and dandies. Courtesans and heroines were idealized as sensuous woman. The artist was mapping the swift transformation of the urban society of Calcutta of his times. Theatre and the new image of male and female was captured, and the flourishing courtesan culture in the city had played a significant role in the formalization of the image of the new stylish woman in Kalighat painting. Many theatre actresses too came from the prostitute quarters and their “public women” status as well as their musical skills and talents facilitated their entry into the theatre. The painters while conceptualizing the new female icon, must have derived elements from all the manifestations of the new female seen around them—holding a mirror, waving a rose, toying with a hookah, lazily asleep, dressing her hair etc.

In China, paintings of women can be seen as early as the 4th century AD where the ideal of feminine beauty emphasized upon serenity, yet she was portrayed as a woman of real flesh and blood, she displays all qualities of dignity and desirability befitting an imperial personality. During the Tang
period (AD 618–907), the standard of Far Eastern figure painting techniques had been established. The fine iron wire outlines in soot black ink on silk support, filled with meticulously layered natural dyes and mineral pigments often finished with gold leaf or pigment became the standard. The face was always shown in three quarter profile. In a very real sense the painters of ukiyo-e were the revivers of the sumptuous figure painting tradition.

Women in Japanese Art

During the 8th century in Japan, we find a beautiful painting of a woman created for religious worship. She has full cheeks, small red lips suggesting strong feminine features, by an anonymous artist, it was the depiction of Kichijō-ten, the Goddess of beauty and fecundity. He portrayed her as the most lovely court lady he could imagine. A Goddess was made into a beautiful woman of Tang China, dressed in gauzes of the utmost refinement and then further adorned her with the various iconographical attributes of the deity—a jeweled crown and necklace, flowing scarves and ‘wish fulfilling jewel’ held in her hand. The depiction of beautiful worldly women in Japanese art is often called bijin-zō, and is considered the ideal of Tang dynasty (618–907) China. They are depicted with full body, round face, full cheeks, small scarlet lips, long narrow eyes, and can be seen in a number of works (i.e., Torige ritsujo byōbu, “woman standing in feathered robe”, folding screen, Shōō-in, Nara, mid 8th century). Some one thousand years later, Katsukawa Shunsō (1726–92) painted a portrait of a grand courtesan in her most sumptuous costume of black coat embroidered with peacock feathers and turquoise brocade and then added jeweled crown and necklaces. Earlier the goddess was made into a beautiful woman, and here, a beautiful woman is made into a goddess. This shows the secularization of Japanese society in the intervening period.

The beautiful women of the Heian period (794–1185) are shown with body completely covered with ceremonial robes (jūnihitoe) of twelve layers of Kimono. The faces are done in a stereotyped hiki-mene kagibana style with narrow eyes and straight nose drawn in a simple line. Of course such simple lines can reflect individual emotions and represent subtle expressions, but these are not personalized faces revealing individual characteristics. It would not be exaggerated to say that the women of Heian court depicted in the scroll painting (e-makimono) are women without faces, simple beings reduced to nothing more than long black hair and clothing. It appears that Heian period seems to be more interested in clothing than in portrayal of the individual, and it was this element of Heian period that was passed on to subsequent periods. Perhaps the cultural emphasis was placed on the social significance of dress. The clothing of a woman is the symbol of her social standing.

During the 18th century, artists took the world by storm by the representation of the ideal female

Women of Ukiyo-e

Fig. 6
beauty in the ukiyo-e wood block. One of the earliest artist is identified by name, has simply been known as the kanbun master, after the period (1660–1674) to which his works can be dated. Courtesans and their lovers are depicted, outlined in flowing black lines, sometimes highlighted with rough hand applied colours. The first ukiyo-e artist who can be identified by name was Hishikawa Moronobu (about 1618–1694), was possibly the pupil of the kanbun master. His early works are largely erotic or suggestive depictions of the floating world, printed in black ink on paper. His women are full fleshed and plump cheeked, with narrow eyes and raised eyebrows, which give them a questioning look, as if they were calculating what a client might pay. With the death of Moronobu, ukiyo-e confronted crucial moments. Torii Kiyonobu (1664–1729) and Kaigetsudō Ando (dates unknown), though not members of Moronobu school, idolized his style and worked diligently on their own to master it. Kiyonobu specialized in wood block prints depicting popular Kabuki actors on stage while Ando produced original paintings that took as then subject the most beautiful courtesans of the pleasure quarters. Though their pictorial themes and artistic media were completely different, Kiyonobu and Ando were alike in their concern for the beauty of the human form itself, both freely discarded the detailed background settings that characterized Moronobu’s work, concentrating on the expressive human figures. It was in the work of these two artists that portraits of Kabuki actors and beautiful women were to become the two central genres of the ukiyo-e repertoire.

Kaigetsudō Ando—his typical beauty is a voluptuous courtesan of the pleasure quarters shown in a standing position against a blank background, each subject wears the same type of gorgeous kimono which has a bold flower and grass design and strikes a pose with her stomach thrust out and her head and shoulders back from her waist. The depiction of the subject is terse and straightforward. These compositional elements, together with Ando’s preference for colours were clear and bright, made it possible for him to create original paintings that achieved powerful visual effects. The simplicity of the composition made it possible for artists of the atelier to turn out paintings in large numbers.

Suzuki Harunobu (18th century) was a great innovator, designer and colorist. In contrast to the pervious artists who had usually shown the figures in isolation with little or no back ground. Harunobu most often shows then against a landscape or interior setting and the spatial relationship of the figures and background is one of the most interesting and aesthetically pleasing aspects of his work. He was the undisputed master of the deluxe nishiki-e, which he made using the finest materials and pigments and a large number of blocks to print his sumptuous spectrum of colours. He portrays those who are in the springtime of their lives, fresh youth caught at some poignant moment, hesitating at the passions that maybe were not quite understood. He immortalized the slender, graceful, fragile figures wrapped in the transparency of gauze kimonos, whose charming expressions suggest a pure, innocent elegance. He was designated as the ‘sweet singer of youth and innocence’. There was an intensely romantic atmosphere about his prints, and extreme refinement. The women in his works had slightly elongated faces that was outlined with a fine line, and their eyes are almost horizontal, so narrow as to appear half closed with fine
eyebrows raised at both ends. The nose is drawn in one stroke and the mouth is extremely small. Their eyes cannot be read and their mouth does not speak, Harunobu seems to have carried on the Yamato-e tradition of Heian period. Yet the women here show a quality of naivete. In addition to the extremely small mouth, another radical distortion in the Harunobu style is seen in the small hands that are found practically without exception in all his works. Their size is completely unrelated to the overall proportion and balance of the body. The painter looked at these immature women from a certain distance, thereby reducing them to objects of appreciation. The viewer does not feel empathy for them. The viewer is like a voyeuristic third person peeking at the subject. Harunobu’s work also included dreamlike sentimental scenes depicting his subjects in their own environment. Nothing dramatic happens in Harunobu’s paintings. No one fights or breaks into a run, and as there are no scenes of meeting, there are no scenes of partying.

Next, Torii Kiyonaga (1752–1815) became the unrivalled master of feminine portraits. He bid farewell to Harunobu’s literary themes and the beautiful woman of ukiyo-e were again placed to their natural setting, i.e., the urban culture of Edo’s townspeople. The women in his prints appeared tall, willowy in poses of perfect composure suggesting an elegant, statuesque beauty. His beauties enjoy their fashionable amusements in real, contemporary surroundings, not in poetic and dreamlike setting.

Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806)—excelled among the ukiyo-e artists for his pictures of the women who lived and worked in the pleasure industry of Edo. His works such as Ten Learned Studies of Women, Types of Women’s Physiognomies have been considered among his supreme achievements. In his work Large-head Pictures of Beautiful Women, he focused on his subjects face and depicted only the upper half of the figure. He attempted to capture differences in the characters and temperament of woman of every class and social background, and expressed even the subjective, individual qualities of fleetingly subtle emotional and mental states creating expressive figures of outstanding quality. It is obvious he spent his life studying them with great care; to understand the very nature of their femininity, their way with fashions, their skilled enticements and expressions…and he knew just how to capture them at moments when they were irresistible. The beauties look very much alike, for they embody the ideal of feminine beauty envisioned by the artist rather than the actual women themselves. They were tall and slender with well-articulated features, narrow slanted eyes with high painted eyebrows, pale oval faces and heavy black hair. The expression is aloof, rather haughty indicating that they were well aware of their appeal and elegance.

While Utamaro’s main subject was no doubt the green house and their inhabitants, he also made many prints showing ordinary woman in their characteristic pursuits among them are the series showing mothers taking care of their children, woman engaged in domestic work, He painted many women of differing social classes and roles; prostitutes, geisha, reputable daughters and widows of merchants, women building fires and wiping dishes, carrying children on their backs in the kitchen, sewing, dressing, in terms of what he saw as feminine traits. In general, what is feminine was not seen in the subject’s
individual characteristics. Most of Utamaro’s beauties shared the same features of full cheeks, straight noses, small mouths—this was the stereotypical face of all beauties. In that sense, he was no different from Harunobu. Utamaro however, was gifted and he expressed femininity with his use of extremely controlled and abbreviated lines.

Gone were the young ‘women flowers’, as diaphanous and light as a rose petal. Utamaro’s fluid and elegant brushwork transformed eroticism into something much franker and more adult. His couples occupy the whole picture space; there is no false shyness, no exhibitionism. The whole erotic charge is conveyed by the grace of the drawing and the subtlety of the colours, very pale yellow backgrounds heightened with gold powder, salmon oranges, and peony pink, etc., and above all the theatricality.

His work was devoted exclusively to the glorification of women. He owed his outstanding popularity with the Edo public to the fact that he created a woman more infatuating than his predecessors and contemporaries. His women, essence of femininity, appealed to the audience more because of her exquisite trappings, patterned dresses, brocaded sashes, fantastic coiffures, elegant movements and studied gestures by which such adornments were displayed. Utamaro has that power, rare among Japanese artists, of breaking through the abstraction, of bringing us into intimacy with his sitters, of giving the illusion of life so that under the brocade we can sense the breathing woman. This is Utamaro’s distinguishing mark—“the beauties of Utamaro are all action, the affair of the moment, however slight, it may be which absorbs all their attention, hold ours too, and though they are less noble and less magnificent, and though the art is less classic, they speak to us more”.

Examples of Ukiyo-e

In response to the taste of the common citizen, particular attention was focused on figure painting, above all of beautiful women especially depiction of ideal female unaccompanied either by architecture or landscape, their activities and engagements, their pleasures and their fads. Thus different types of graceful feminine beauties, vivacious and appealing, dressed in bright costumes and in latest fashions in different poses, parade before us. These pictures showed a world of ephemeral and palpable emotions, a society in all its weaknesses and fantasies. The courtesans and their licensed quarters were important, for the Japanese found in them the only outlets for their desire for romance and adventure.

Entertainment at a House of Pleasure (unknown artist, 17th cent.) (Fig. 7) is a very informative painting. It shows the lavish entertainments at one of the grand houses established for the entertainment of men. At the extreme right, four young women are encouraging a tipsy man to dance. Inside the pavilion men and women smoke and play games.

Entering the Teahouse by Katsukawa Shunshō (Fig. 8) the artist shows the formal procession of a grand courtesan as she comes from a house of pleasure to one of the assignation tea-houses, where the client is waiting with a group of entertainers. The courtesan is accompanied by two apprentices—a girl and a boy attendant, and an elderly couple, who must be the owner and his wife. At the back, the
client is calmly smoking a pipe and gazing at the approaching vision. Two scenes are combined in one composition; it is a complex grouping of parading courtesan and scene inside the tea-house. Shunchō’s women have tenderness and grace that is extremely appealing. He employs a sensitive flowing line and perfect colour harmonies, and achieves effects that make his prints among the most satisfying in the whole history of ukiyo-e.

*Woman Washing Her Face* by Utamaro (Fig. 9)—the lady has washed her face in a shallow copper basin and is about to dry with a cotton towel. Utamaro presents the quiet, intimate moment as she pauses and glances over to her right at a potted morning glory in bloom.
Lovers with Samisen by Harunobu (Fig. 10)—a variety of amusements is indicated—stringed instrument, remains of a sumptuous feast and the young woman who seems to be abandoning her musical performance for more amorous pursuits.

Woman Reading Letter by Utamaro, from the series Female Facial Types of Ten Classes (Fig. 11). From her appearance, it is surmised that she is the wife of a wealthy merchant—typical of a woman of that status she has shaved off her eyebrows, blackened her teeth and her off her kimono such and coiffure are of conservative modes. Judging from the woman’s total absorption in the letter and from the fact that she is exposing as little of it as possible, this letter is of romantic nature and received from an illicit lover. The feelings of the woman in this print, hopelessly caught between desire and despair
are suggested in her slightly open month, narrowed eyes and rapt expression and her tight grip on that letter. This was Utmaro’s ambitious intention of revealing the innermost character of his female subjects through the depiction of pose, gesture and facial expression.

In the picture Beauty Enjoying the Cool by Utamaro, 1753–1806 (Fig. 12), we see Utamaro’s genius at observing and capturing the different moods of the women of the period can be seen in this delightful study of a young beauty almost overwhelmed by the summer heat. A basin of water with some green plant, and the languidly held fan are the only hints at any relief.

Girl Dressing a Companion’s Hair by Utamaro 1795–1800, from a series Twelve Forms of Women’s Handiwork (Fig. 13), we witness the climax of Utamaro’s originality as a print designer – his inventiveness, and resource in seeking out new subjects and fresh technical expedients was never higher; his innovations in the compositions involving half or three quarter length figures are the cause of admiration today. The woman of the prints becomes more alluring, despite a more obvious mannerism in the treatment of her from.

Child Upsetting a Goldfish Bowl by Utamaro,
from The Elegant Set of Darling Children (1800–) (Fig. 14), whilst mother is asleep, leaning on her work box, the little child in a quiet, methodical air is holding down the edge of bowl to allow the water to gush over the floor.

In all these pictures, the mother is invariably the beautifully robed creature, her milieu is the pretty apartment and the scenes are set in atmosphere of urban domesticity. There is a great degree of geniality and good humour in the series.

**Conclusion**

The courtesan of the prints is the aristocrat, the princess of her calling, a personage of the utmost refinement, queenly in bearing wearing her splendid apparel with the assurance of a trained model. Her days were passed in ceremony, or preparations for ceremony. Within the precincts of the Yoshiwara, as we know from so many artists’ pictures, Utamaro’s above all, affairs were ordered with the strict etiquette of an exacting court. Her amusements were those of nobility: the games, the music, the composing of poetry, handwriting and painting competition. It was rare for the courtesans to be shown in any relationship with men that could be called the least but compromising. The intrigues, flirtations are portrayed but never more. As for the women, like the bird reared in a cage—symbol of their own captivity that often accompanies their portraits, in most cases they had never known the freedom of other women enjoyed, and for perhaps that reason accepted their lot uncompromisingly. They had the freedom of choice of their paramours, exercised their domination with jealousy, and within the little world of Yoshiwara were treated as persons of consequence surrounded by the luxury of fine silks, expensive perfumes and all the rich trappings of their calling. But there were those that suffered, something akin to shame, Utamaro has given a look of wistful resignation to his lovely women more eloquent than open rebellion.

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