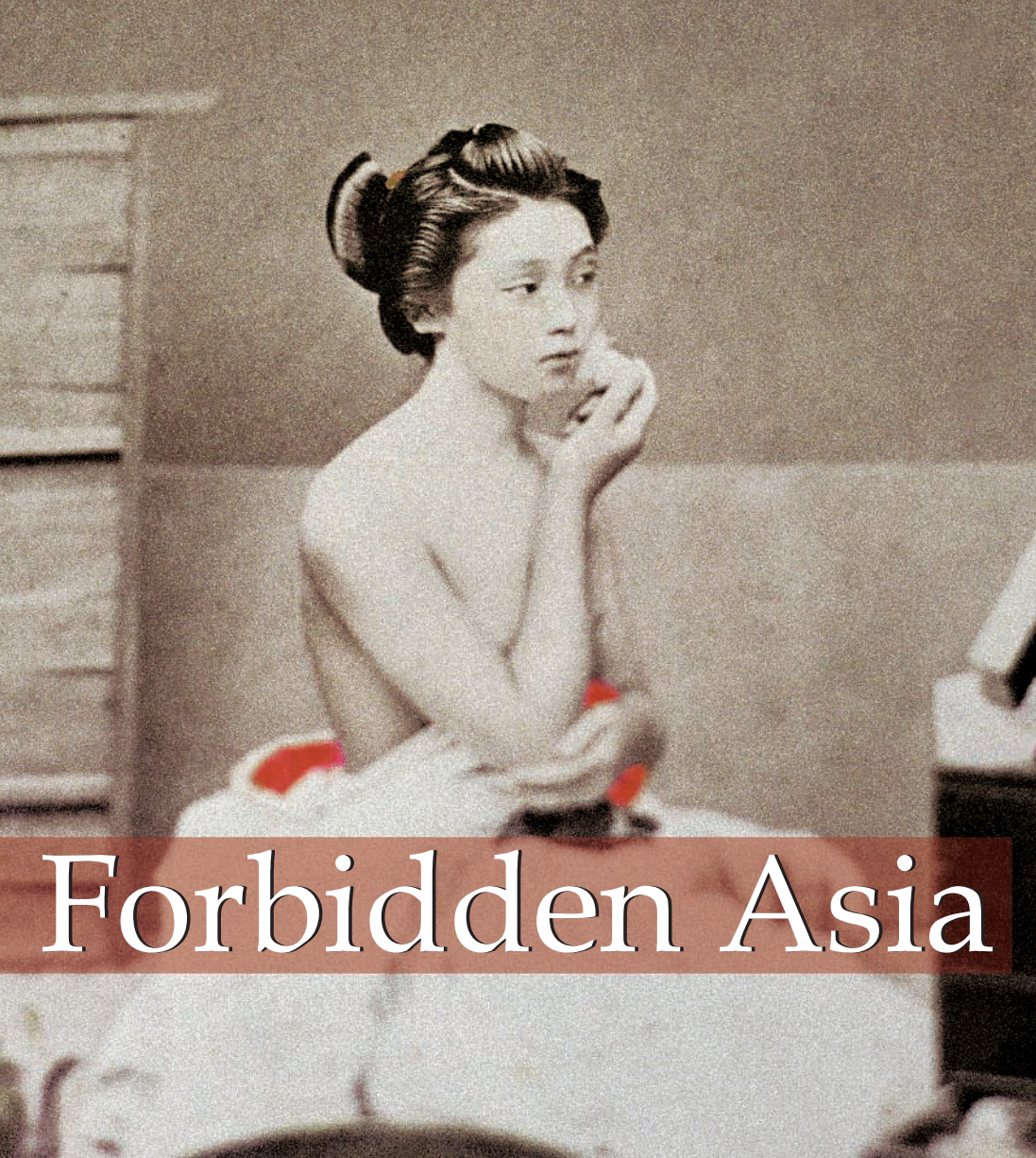

Forbidden Asia

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"She dusts the pillow, perfumes her red hairnet,
Swivels the lamp and slips off her clothes.
Her maids know the night will be long
But no call means they may go home."

— Dai Hao, 6th century

Main Artists

Anonymous Master of the Kangxi Period 11, 15

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BOUND HAPPINESS - CHINESE EROTICISM

The aim of Taoist art and culture was to reach a state of harmony that would lead Man, confronted by a chaotic universe, towards a new serenity. In this spiritual context, love represented for the Chinese a force which was supposed to unite

Illustrations from Qinglou Duoying, published as 'Selected Scenes from Verduous Towers'

Colour woodcuts from an album, late Ming period (first half of the 17th century), 26 x 25 cm
The Muban Foundation Collection
'Verduous Towers' is the veiled Ming term for a brothel

sky and earth in balance and maintain the reproductive cycle of nature. Eroticism thus became an art of living and formed an integral part of religion (to the extent that such western notions can be applied to philosophical thought of this kind).

Taoist religion assumes that pleasure and love are pure. 'In order to gain some

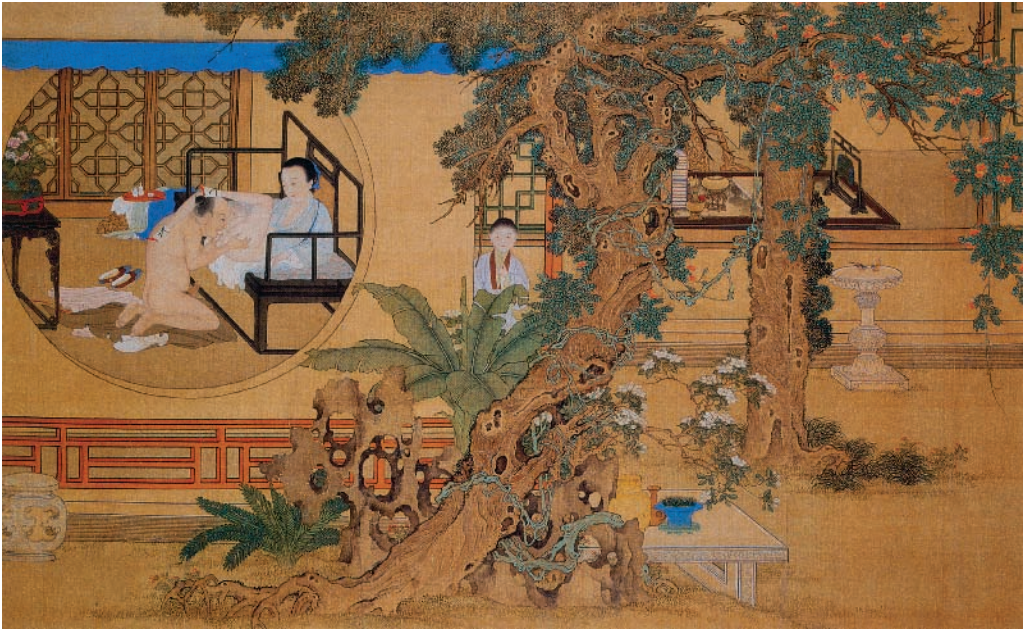
Anonymous Master of the Kangxi period

(1662-1722)
Painting on silk from an 8-page album, 39.5 x 55.5 cm

understanding of Chinese eroticism,' writes Etiemble, a great connoisseur of Chinese art, 'we need to distance ourselves from the notion of sin and the duality between the corrupt body and the holy spirit.' This ideology lies at the very base of Christianity. Erotic Chinese art reflects the extent to which we are 'morally corrupt' and 'full of prejudices'.

Painting on Silk from
an 8-page album, Kangxi period

Xu Mei, (1662-1722)
Silk, 42.5 x 74.5 cm
Courtesy: Collection Guy & Myriam
Ullens Foundation, Switzerland



The Yin-Yang pairing introduces us directly into the world of Chinese eroticism: The 'path of Yin and Yang' signifies nothing less than the sexual act itself. One of the best-known sayings of ancient Chinese philosophy, 'Yi yin yi yang cheh we tao' ('On the one side yin, on the other yang, this is the essence of Tao')

Anonymous Master of the Kangxi period

(1662-1722)
Painting on silk from an 8-page album, 39.5 x 55.5 cm

indicates the fact that sex between a man and a woman expresses the same harmony as the changes between day and night, or summer and winter. Sex symbolises the order of the world, the moral order, while our culture stigmatises it as evil.

In this sense, master Tung-huan wrote in his *Art of Love*, 'Man is the most sublime creature

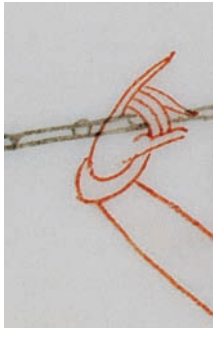
Scene from Rouputuan, 'The Prayer Mat of Flesh'

18th century
Painting on paper, 37.5 x 37.5 cm

under the skies. Nothing which he enjoys can be compared to the act of sexual union. Formulated according to the harmony between the sky and the earth, it rules Yin and dominates Yang. Those who understand the sense of these words can preserve their essence and prolong their life. Those who do

Chinese Wedding Tablet

18th century
Painting on silk and appliqué relief mosaic pictures
made from different coloured jade, mother-of-pearl, and ivory
They serve to instruct newly married couples



not grasp their true significance are heading towards their doom.' The split in the Universe between Yin and Yang is all the more important because these two inseparable principles mutually influence each other.

We know of a great many Chinese manuals whose purpose was to provide an

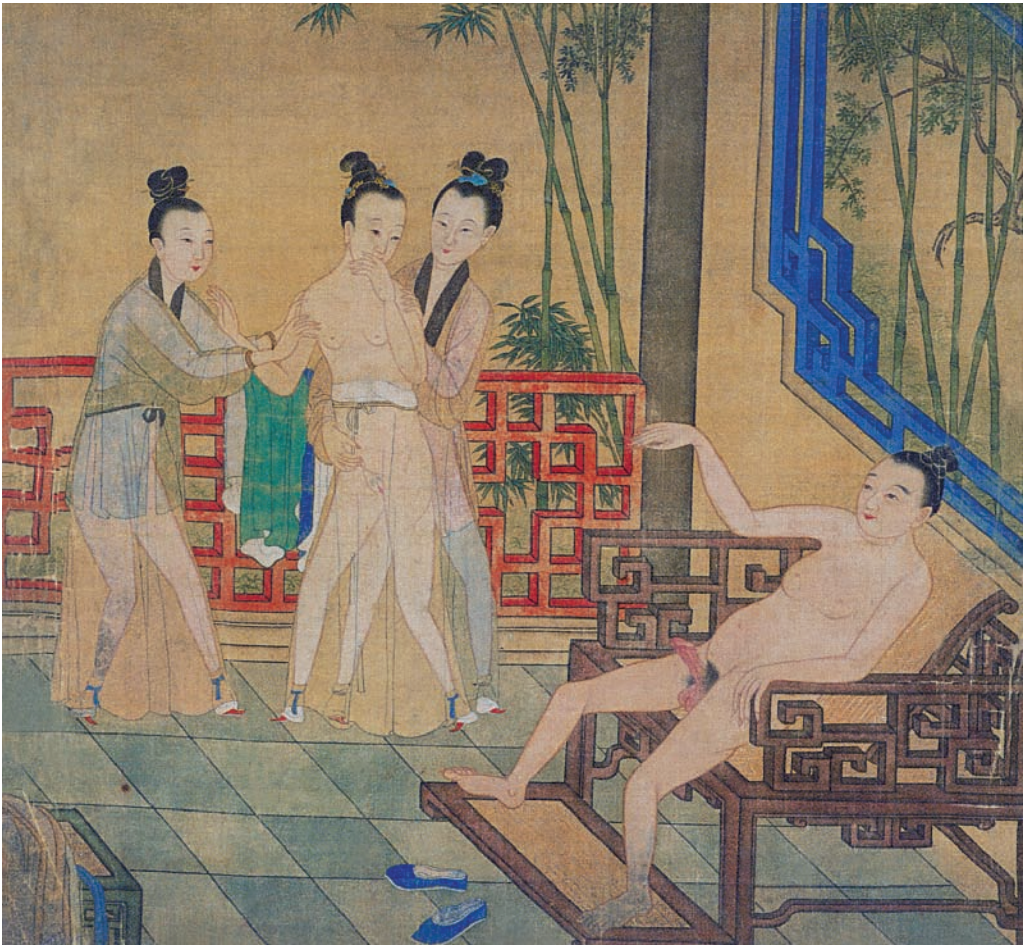
Painting on Porcelain Vase (detail)

18th century, 11.3 x 13 cm

education in the art of love-making for young couples; this education would cover desire, morality, and religion. In these texts, the sexual act is always referred to metaphorically, with terms such as 'the war of flowers', 'lighting the great candle', or 'games of cloud and rain'.

Painting on Silk

18th century, 31.5 x 34 cm



They are also full of images referring to various sexual positions:

- unfurling silk
- the curled-up dragon
- the union of kingfishers
- fluttering butterflies
- bamboo stalks at the altar
- the pair of dancing phoenixes
- the galloping tournament horse
- the leap of the white tiger
- cat and mouse in the same hole

Box Featuring Erotic Images

Painted on glass

In Chinese aesthetics, nothing is ever named directly and without beating about the bush. Instead, things are referred to obliquely, and any transgression of this tradition is considered vulgar. Even the European notion of 'eroticism' would be too direct. They would prefer to substitute the term 'the idea of spring'.

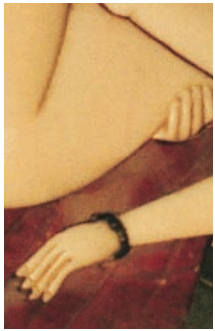
Chinese Porcelain Tile

19th century

Physical love is praised without pretence but also without vulgarity in the verses of a popular Chinese song:

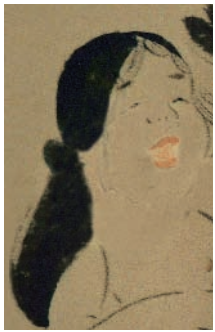
The window open in the light of an autumn moon,
The candle snuffed out, the silk tunic undone,
Her body swims in the scent of the tuberoses.

Mural displayed in sections



In the erotic images of paintings on silk or porcelain, wood engravings or illustrations, sexuality is never shown in its crude state or in a pornographic manner, but always in a context of beauty and harmony. Symbolic, meaningful details enrich these illustrations,

Mural displayed in sections



evoking the tenderness which occupies a favoured place in Chinese iconography. Nevertheless, these details are difficult for Europeans to decipher: the cold and impassive faces of the lovers are a long way from our idea of a blaze of passion.

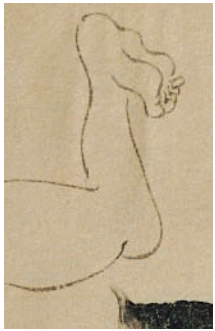
Mural displayed in sections

Thus it is that one of the most fertile and ancient cultures in the world invites us, through its religious practices, to make love. Taoist manuals advocate the technique of holding back from ejaculation, a truly prodigious invention which allows the man to satisfy the woman.

Mural displayed in sections

By doing this, a subtle alchemy is achieved: the man receives Yin from the woman, who obtains from him the pure essence of Yang. For this reason, *coitus reservatus* is considered in Taoism and Tantrism to be the most subtle form of sexual union, because it allows the crossing of the divide between masculine

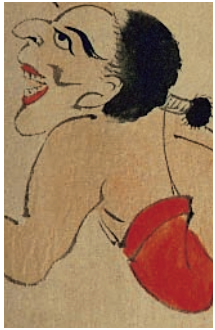
Mural displayed in sections

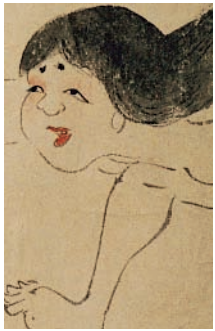


and feminine energy. The creation of a new life is not the principal aim of the sexual act. It is more to do with an identification with cosmic forces than with the forces of life.

The 'theory of juices' holds that sperm passes through the spinal column directly to

Mural displayed in sections





the brain. During the 17th and 18th century, European medicine laboured under the same misapprehension. How painful it must have been to be a young boy masturbating and believing that doing so would lead to a degeneration of the spinal chord and a drying-out of the brain!

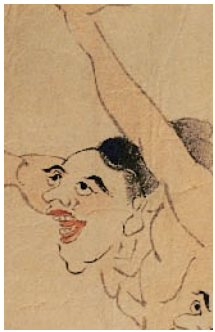
Mural displayed in sections

Whilst ejaculation provides a mere instant of pleasure which is very swiftly lost and finishes in the relaxation of the entire body, a buzzing in the ears, tiredness of the eyes, and a dry throat, *coitus reservatus* or *coitus interruptus* provokes a growth in vitality and an improvement in all the senses.

Mural displayed in sections

Among the best-known manuals are those of Sou Nu King and Sou Nu Fang, which, among other things, recount how the legendary Yellow Emperor, Huang-ti (2697-2599 BCE, according to traditional historical reckoning) used experienced women to teach him about the art of love-making. In *The Treaties of the*

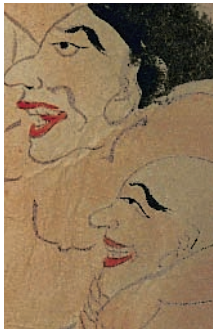
Mural displayed in sections



Bedroom there is a conversation between the Emperor and one of his mistresses, a simple young girl:

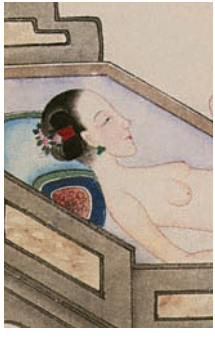
The Yellow Emperor asks the simple young girl, 'My spirit is listless and lacking in substance; I live constantly in fear and my heart is full of sadness. What can I do to cure myself?'

Mural displayed in sections



The young girl replies quite simply, 'All human weaknesses come from an unhappy union of bodies during the sexual act. As water wins in the fight against fire, so woman gains in the fight against man. Those who are skilled in pleasure are like good cooks who know which five spices to add to a soup.

Mural displayed in sections

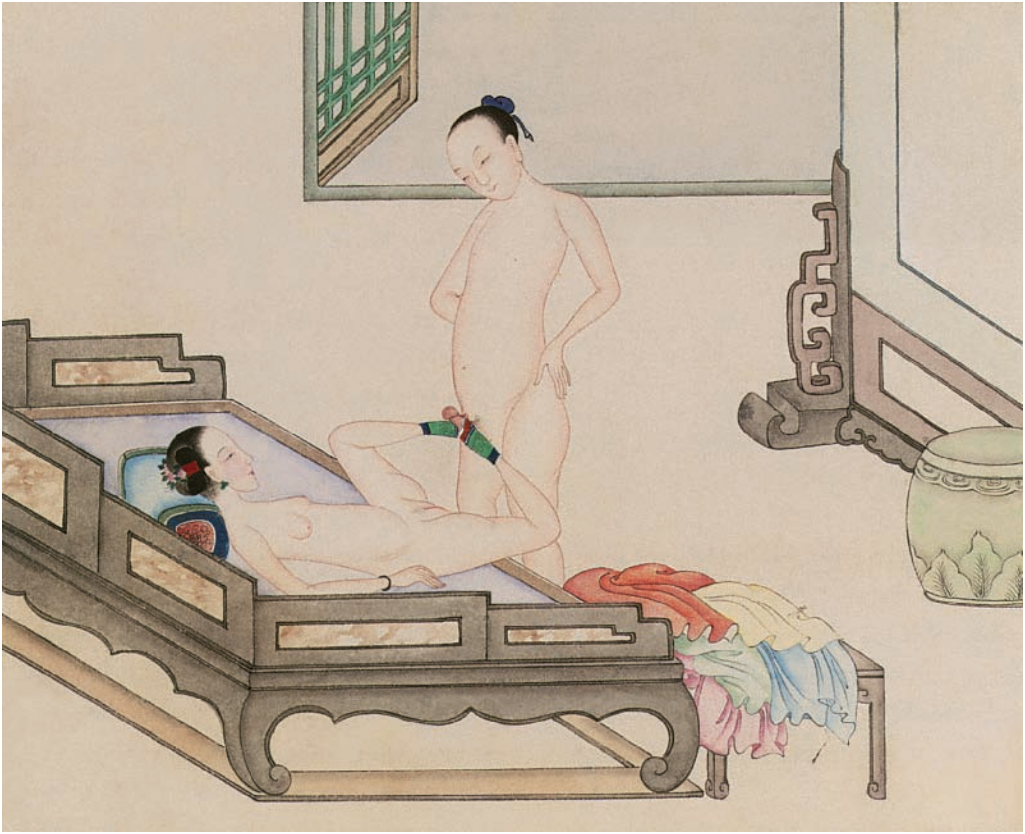


Those who understand the art of Yin and Yang can unite the five modes of pleasure; those who do not know this die before reaching the age of maturity and without having had the slightest pleasure from sex. Should one not forestall this danger?'

And in another lesson in the same work, Huang-ti asked, 'What does one gain from

Painting from a 12-page album

19th century
Paper, 27 x 32 cm

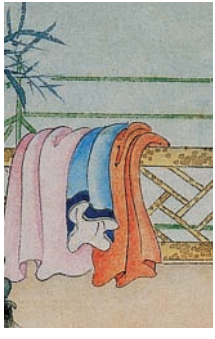


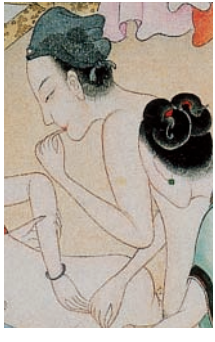
practising sex according to the path of Yin and Yang?'

'For man, sex makes his energies surge – for woman, it serves as protection against sickness. Those who do not know the right path think that the sexual act can be harmful to health. In truth, the sexual act has only one purpose: physical pleasure and joy, but also

Family-Rose Porcelain Tile

Early 19th century
29.5 x 22 cm





peace in the heart and strength of the will. The person feels neither sated nor hungry, he is neither hot nor cold; the body is satisfied and the spirit likewise. Energy ebbs and flows majestically, and no desire troubles this harmony. This is the result of a well-accomplished union. If one follows this rule,

Painting from a 12-page album

19th century
Paper, 26.8 x 32.1 cm

women will achieve full pleasure and men will always remain healthy,' answered Sunu.

All of these manuals advocate making love as often as possible and even at an advanced age, 'Whatever his age, man would not be happy living without a woman. If he is without a woman, his concentration suffers because of it.

Painting from a scroll of 12 designs

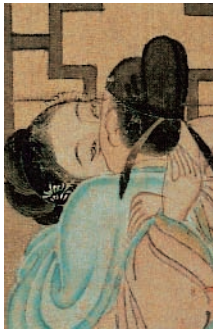
19th century
Paper, 26.6 x 40.6 cm

If his concentration suffers, the forces of his mind grow weaker; if the forces of his mind weaken, the span of his life grows shorter...'

The bibliography of works of the Han era, which is the era directly pre-dating the birth of Christ, includes eight books that are entirely

Reverse Glass Painting

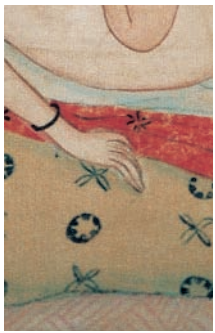
19th century
Diameter: 12 cm



devoted to the art of love-making. During that era the following maxim was adopted: the art of having sexual relations with a woman consists of remaining master of oneself and preventing ejaculation in order to allow the sperm to return to the brain.' From that

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

The "marriage-books" of the 18th and 19th centuries were delicate and expensive volumes illustrating the different basic positions for love-making. Such a book was presented to daughters of the richest Chinese families on the day before their wedding as a means of last-minute sexual education



moment on, every educated Chinese man felt obliged to be familiar with the technique of reinforcing masculine power named 'drinking at the jade fountain': the man had to remain inside the woman while she had her orgasm and only leave her when it was over,

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries

without releasing any sperm in the process. The treatises teach that it was even possible to make love several times in one night with different women if one followed this technique. Taoist wisdom emphasises the positive aspects of this for the man's health:

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries

'Those who are capable of making love several times a day without spilling their sperm will be cured of all illnesses and will reach a ripe old age. If sexual relations are not limited to one woman, the success of this method will only be enhanced. The best option is to make

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries

love with ten women or more during the course of one night.'

Sex, medicine, and religion are thus closely linked in Taoism because of the large number of energy channels that flow through the body. There is a link between the exterior world in

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

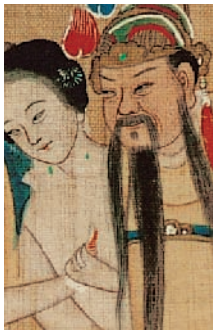
18th and 19th centuries

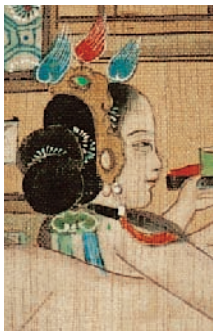
which man lives and the individual interior of every human being. Sexuality is thus called upon to play a central role in everyone's life.

This explains why men thought of satisfying several women sexually as a duty. And the aim was to do it without exhausting all their energy.

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries





So, men were supposed to learn different erotic techniques for giving several women multiple orgasms without, however, experiencing their own.

Taoist education, from the simplest effort right up to the most elevated spiritual heights, was founded on the control of sexual energies.

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

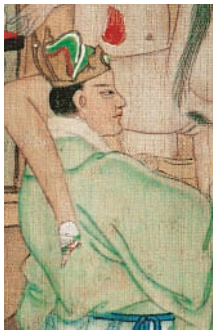
18th and 19th centuries

Tantrism, influenced by Buddhism, was largely similar to Taoism in its teachings and intentions.

The greatest development in erotic art was principally concentrated in the rich commercial cities in the south of China, during the early part of the period that is considered the beginning of the modern era in Asia.

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

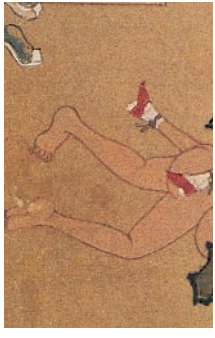
18th and 19th centuries



From the 10th century onwards, cities as famous as Suzhou, Hanzhou, or Quanzhou were among the most flourishing in the entire world. Businessmen frequented luxurious brothels, wine houses, and other places of pleasure such as tea houses or the baths.

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries



They formed a sub-culture which today is largely documented by writings and novels from that period. The culture of courtesans was a part of this.

The golden age of Chinese erotic art dates from around the end of the Ming period (1368-1644), which was characterised by

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

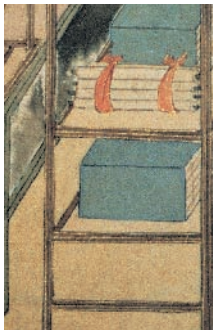
18th and 19th centuries

relatively great amounts of liberty and the flourishing of all kinds of arts and science.

The prudery of Confucianism was the cause of the destruction of a great number of erotic paintings which illustrated the ancient Taoist manuals. Confucianism denied eroticism and advocated the separation of the sexes

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries



as well as the subordination of personal passions to the laws of family and the state.

Later on, Christianity played a negative role in favouring these iconoclastic practices. What had survived all of these eras was finally destroyed during the Maoist Cultural Revolution.

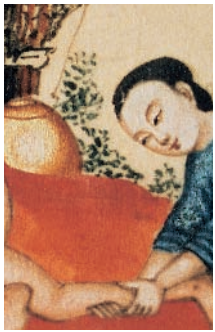
Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries

These philosophical detours can no doubt go some way to explain the delicacy of Chinese eroticism. Like a mantra, these pieces of information are repeated again and again in books about China. And yet, Asian eroticism still remains very enigmatic to western understanding.

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries



As Westerners, we cannot help but wonder how sexual ecstasy can be combined with a technique that is so precisely worked out and that is controlled by such a myriad of instructions and recommendations. Does it not lead to a loss of spontaneity in one's feelings and passions? Is this whole culture of delicacy,

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries

of the small and the pure, perhaps obeying a process of distancing things from reality and idealisation? Is what is actually happening a change in the opposite direction? Does this oh-so-subtle control of natural impulses perhaps indicate repressed anguish, hidden by the official and ideological explanation of love?

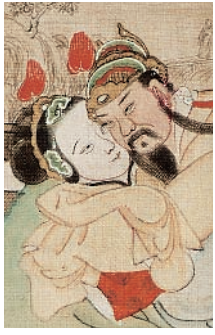
Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries

For a man to avoid having an orgasm is clearly, in this day and age, a very reasonable method of birth control: but when this practice is advocated because of the loss of vital energies, one suspects quite another motivation. Is there not here a fear of orgasm, in the form of a fear of the oneiric dilution of one's self?

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries



Orgasm, indeed, means 'little death', because during an orgasm for a moment the barriers of the individual are broken down. To flee death: would that not mean, in this male-centred sexuality, fleeing union with woman? Does the fear of death really mean a fear of women's power?

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

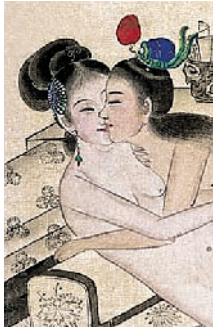
18th and 19th centuries

Chastity can only be dangerous; but seeing the loss of sperm as the loss of the very substance of life is no less so.

If a young man neglects his sexual life, he will be haunted by phantoms which will rear up in his dreams in the form of seductive young women.

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

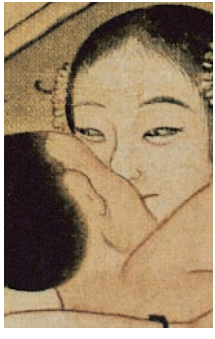
18th and 19th centuries



If he gives in to them, they will suck out his vital energy. It is exactly on this point that Chinese and European traditions meet. In this dream, it is the unconscious which is reclaiming its rights. Thus, regular sexual relations are recommended.

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

18th and 19th centuries



Sharing the human condition as we all do, that is, having all been born from a mother and a father who, in one way or another, have to come to terms with the Oedipus complex, sexuality can only consist, even in China, of a mixture of pleasure and pain. It is exactly these elements that one must seek behind these endless affirmations of eternal harmony.

Wedding Book

19th century

What, for example, is the significance of the fact that, in hundreds and hundreds of depictions of the sexual act, which claim to offer a complete guide to all conceivable sexual positions, I have only found two or three images of cunnilingus? Was this position forbidden? In 1,000 erotic images, only three represent this theme. Isn't that strange?

Painting on Silk from a Marriage-Book

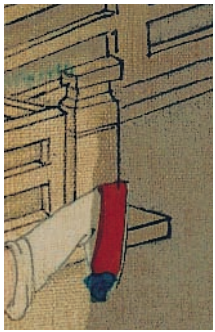
18th and 19th centuries

Likewise, another theme can give us an insight into repressed fears:

In all the images that we have seen, women wear their shoes, even if they are naked. Unshod feet are never shown. For the Chinese, these feet, enclosed in their embroidered shoes, represented the most sublime erotic quality, and small feet exerted a very specific

Wedding Book

19th century



charm over men which we find difficult to understand today. During the Ming period, the custom of foot-binding developed rapidly.

Concubines, courtesans, and also simple, maidenly peasant women had their feet broken in childhood and then had them bound for the rest of their lives. Any refusal of this custom was considered shameful.

Wedding Book

19th century

When, in 1644, an attempt was made to abolish the custom, the women of Manchuria practically revolted. Indeed, this sign of nobility was held particularly dear among the poorest elements of the population. The bound foot represented at the same time the most powerful taboo:

Painting on Paper, from a 12-page album

Mid-19th century
23 x 29.5 cm

if a woman allowed her foot to be touched without resisting too strongly, one could hope for anything from her.

This custom was finally abolished by Mao Tse-tung in 1949.

Some authors have posited the theory that this 'walk of the golden lotuses' tightened the vaginal muscles, but there is no medical proof to sustain the idea.

Painting on Paper, from a 12-page album

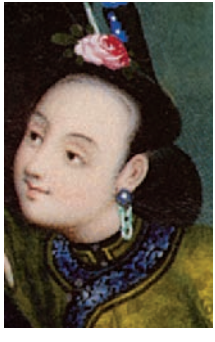
Mid-19th century
23 x 29.5 cm

Etiemble suggests that the bound feet of Chinese women 'has nothing to do with whatwas and still is the essence of Chinese eroticism: the theory of Yin and Yang, the *coitus reservatus*, the respect for the partner's orgasm, and the naturalness of feelings.'

But perhaps we are seeking to separate things that are in fact connected. If one thinks

Pendant Pair of Reverse Glass Paintings

Mid-19th century
39.5 x 30 cm

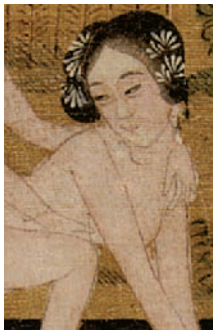


about it – a clubfoot acquired through appalling pain, flattened ankles which sink into stockings filled with painful ulcers: this has nothing to do with Chinese eroticism. Is it not a symbolic castration of woman? A castration which found redress only in the woman's toe, the phallic significance of which was swiftly identified?

Gouache on Pith Paper

Mid-19th century
23.4 x 18 cm

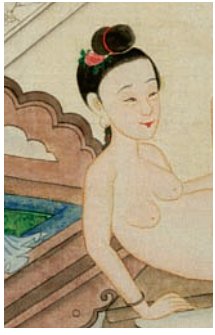
能飛鳳右軍書

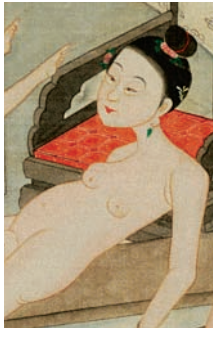


And what about the treatment of the female body during the 19th century? Does trussing women up in wired corsets not have some connection with European eroticism? The female body, sadistically laced up and suffocated by handcuffs and belts: is that not a fundamental indication of man's primal fear of woman?

Painting on Silk, Detail of a Horizontal Scroll

Second half of the 19th century, 17 x 137 cm





It is clear that there persists a kind of ideology which glamourises Chinese sexuality but which is, however, nothing more than a misplaced sense of conscience. As Bougainville wrote in 1771 in his *Voyage around the World*, as well as in other exotic accounts of the 18th century, people often remark that

Painting on Silk

Late 19th century, 51 x 84.5 cm

Chinese sexuality criticises our 'fallen and decadent state' while hiding their own sexual conservatism and outdated morality.

Perhaps I, too, am nothing more than a desperately decadent European who will never be able to find the path to the noble art that is love.

Reverse Glass Painting

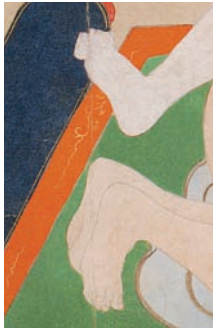
Late 19th century, 34.5 x 23.2 cm

BETWEEN THE SUBLIME AND THE GROTESQUE – JAPANESE EROTIC ENGRAVINGS

In contrast with classical Japanese art, books of *Ukiyo-e* woodcarvings show 'images of a changing, ephemeral and perishable world'. We know them under the name *shunga*, which means 'spring picture'.

Erotic Scene (detail)

c. 1600
Handscroll painting, ink, colour,
gold and silver on paper, height: 27 cm



The term *shunga* originally came from Buddhism and is associated with the idea of the painful vanity of all earthly things. Soon, however, its meaning changed as it gradually came to signify the joyful, carefree delights of

Scene of Love-Making (detail)

Late 17th century
Handscroll painting, ink on paper, 29 x 412 cm

everyday life, and a playful and unconcerned manner of abandoning oneself to the pleasures of the moment, of letting oneself go with the flow 'like a pumpkin in the currents of a river'. Thus, for the most part the *Ukiyo-e*

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

illustrate scenes between courtesans and actors and are set in a world full of pleasure. The *shungas* allow us a glimpse into a universe where the greedy enjoyment of life is paramount and the pleasures of carnal love play an important role.

Shunga, Erotic Print: Lovers Being Observed by a Maid from Behind a Screen

Isoda Koryūsai
Colour woodblock print
Private collection

Japanese woodcarving developed over a period of two centuries, between approximately 1670 and 1870. Utamaro, the undisputed master of colour woodcarving, was active for only three decades of this period, between 1770 and 1800.

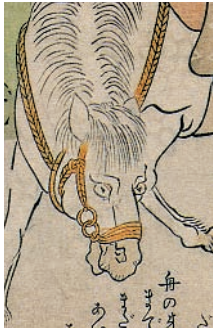
Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

This also happened to be the golden age of the Ukiyo-e. In his book on Utamaro, Edmond de Goncourt explains the fascination of erotic woodcarving, 'It is really worth studying the erotic paintings of the Japanese, if only because of the amazing pleasure to be

Husband Cuckolded During a Thunderstorm

Style of Suzuki Harunobu, 1769-1770
Colour woodblock print, 18.7 x 24.8 cm



had from their drawing, the impetuosity, the natural power of these sexual unions, or because of that uncontrollable desire to make love and push through the paper walls of the next room to do so. What a confusion of

Fashionable Lusty Mane'emon (Fūryū enshoku Mane'mon), nº 9

Suzuki Harunobu, 1770
Colour woodblock print, 20.6 x 28.5 cm

bodies, some entangled, some united, what greedy vigour in the arms which both attract and repulse the partner. Feet with curled toes fly through the air, long, deep embraces are exchanged. Eyes closed, eyelids downcast,

Fashionable Lusty Mane'emon
(Fūryū enshoku Mane'mon), nº 4

Suzuki Harunobu, 1770
Colour woodblock print, 20.6 x 28.5 cm

their faces turned towards the ground, the women look almost as if they have fainted. And finally, look at the force and power with which the man's penis is drawn!'

Often, these books and scrolls would form part of a marriage dowry and were supposed

Lovers Behind a Screen

Attributed to Isoda Koryūsai, 1772-1773
Colour woodblock print, 18.8 x 24.8 cm

to serve as an introduction to the art of love-making. In the form of printed or painted scrolls, the *shungas* thus became family heirlooms. In noble families, they formed part of the sexual education of the young daughter

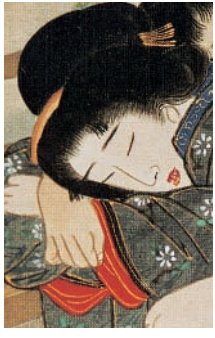
Shunga, Erotic Print: Drawing of a Couple in Love

Katsushika Hokusai, c. 1780
Colour woodblock print, 24.9 x 37.4 cm
Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu

who was destined to become an insatiable lover. They were therefore intended to awaken her sexual imagination but also to bring a particular visual pleasure to the person who contemplated them.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

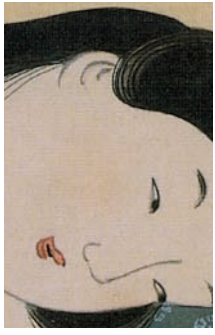
18th and 19th centuries

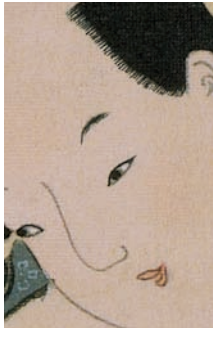


Many of these books were destined for Yoshiwara, the pleasure district in the flourishing city of Edo, in the 17th century. During the Tokugawa period (1600-1853), the rich bourgeois of the big cities who had,

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries





during a long period of peace, managed to enrich themselves still further, were enjoying a period of extraordinarily hedonistic pleasure. Districts full of sleazy hotels grew at an astonishing rate until they became the centre

Scenes of Love-Making (detail)

Hishikawa Morohira, 1788
Handscroll painting, ink, colour and gold on silk
height: 32.6 cm

of community life. Guides to these 'houses of ill repute' were written, describing in minute detail the charms and defects of the most famous courtesans, not omitting to mention the girls' prices, of course.

Lovers in the Private Second-Floor Room
of a Tea-House, from the album
Poem of the Pillow (Utamakura)

1788
Illustrated erotic book, volume one, nishiki-e, 25.5 x 37 cm
Victoria & Albert Museum, London

These 'love guides' also contained information concerning the women's characters: which of the concubines was particularly clever and innovative, who was loyal and who was sincere. Other books gave lists of intimate

Poem of the Pillow (Utamakura)

Kitagawa Utamaro, 1788
Colour woodblock-printed album,
each sheet approximatively 25.5 x 37 cm

details, with advice about how to behave with the women and explaining the sexual practices that were specific to each one. For connoisseurs, there was even information about where one could find rare and unusual pleasures.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

The collector and businessman Hayashi Tadamasa (1851-1906), who was one of the first to bring these precious Japanese woodcarvings to Paris, owned no less than two hundred 'guides to the houses of pleasure', describing the life of the courtesans of Yoshiwara.

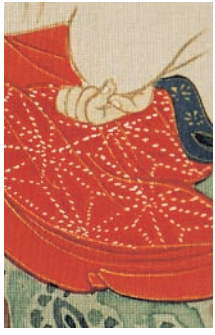
Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

Utamaro (1753-1806), the absolute master of coloured woodcuts, divided his life between his art and the Yoshiwara district. Goncourt, who wrote his biography, wrote that, 'he spent his days with his editor or in his studio and his nights in Yoshiwara.'

Woman Discovering a Letter Hidden in the Robe of her Young Lover, from the album Poem of the Pillow (Utamakura)

1788
Illustrated erotic book, one volume, nishiki-e, 25.5 x 37 cm
Victoria & Albert Museum, London



Since his publisher's office was situated right at the entrance to the infamous district, the path between his studio and the houses of pleasure was undoubtedly a short one. Perhaps we could consider him a Japanese Toulouse-Lautrec?

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

There were 50 houses of ill-repute listed at that time, with nearly 6,000 girls, of whom at least 2,500 were courtesans offering various pleasures. Edo, which is now the city of Tokyo, numbered at the time over a million inhabitants.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

The greatest courtesans of the period owed the brilliance of their existence not only to the wealthy city bourgeoisie, but also, and especially, to the large number of provincial aristocrats who had ended up in the capital.

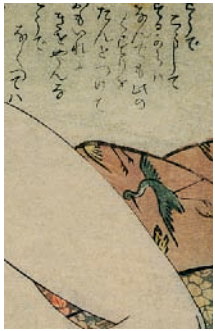
Ten Erotic Scenes (detail)

Katsukawa Shun'ei, 1792-1795
Handcsroll painting, ink and colour on paper, height: 28 cm

These were men with no occupation and nothing to do, and the hours they spent enjoying the pleasures of the Yoshiwara district, made it easy for the police to keep them constantly under surveillance.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries



Just as European absolutism had declined in influence, so Japanese warrior ideology lost an important part of its influence in Japan. Thus love and sexuality came to replace the more bellicose activities of nobility.

Clean Draft of a Letter (Fumi no kiyogaki)

Chōkōsai Eishō, 1793-1801
Colour woodblock-printed album, 25 x 35.9 cm

So when the noblemen moved around the capital with their numerous suites, they travelled regularly by horse to the Yoshiwara district or were carried there by litter. The state police had, therefore, not hesitated in granting

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

a license to the pleasure district; it made their task of surveillance much easier to have this group of individuals all in one place.

Yoshiwara was founded around 1600 on marshy land – then known as 'rush land' – and was situated behind the imperial palace.

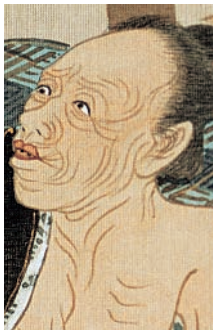
Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

In 1657, after the great city fire, it had to move to the area near the Merciful Temple of Asakusa, but its name remained unchanged. The district was then surrounded by walls and ditches and divided into nine separate areas.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries



Entering this 'town of perpetual daylight which glitters resplendent like a peacock's tail', the first thing one would have encountered was the main street with its 50 tea houses which really did serve tea and nothing more.

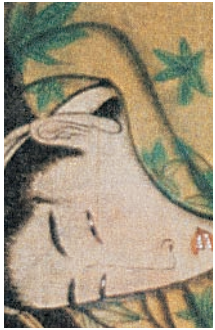
Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

In a way, they acted as the antechambers to the brothels and as places where clients and prostitutes could meet and agree terms. Parties took place there and everything was so incredible and splendid 'one began to doubt whether one was still on earth'.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries



The 'library' of these 'houses of ill-repute' usually consisted of erotic books. As clients waited their turn, they would pass the time drinking tea and flicking through these albums with their risqué pictures and amusing stories.

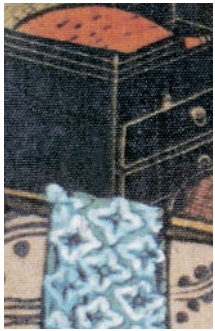
Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

As for the Greeks, physical love also signified an elevated state of being for the Japanese. Like the Greek hetaera, the courtesans of Yoshiwara were proficient in different arts. They wore beautiful and costly garments, just like real princesses.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries



Jippensha Ikku, a friend of Utamaro, once said of the women of Yoshiwara, 'They are educated like princesses. From a very early age they are given a full education. They know how to read and write, they learn all the arts, music,

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

as well as the tea ceremony, *ikebana* or the best way to arrange a bunch of incense.' At the beginning, the courtesans used to use an old-fashioned poetic language, as had been the custom in the imperial palaces over a

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

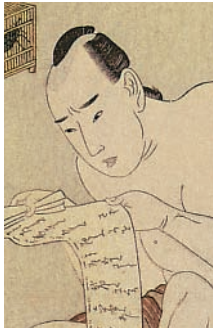
18th and 19th centuries

thousand years earlier, but which no longer bore any resemblance to everyday Japanese.

So, is the geisha a robot-like creature created solely for man's satisfaction? She is, as Theo Lesoualc'h has remarked, the product of

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries



a long transformation wrought by the Japanese to the image of woman: the flawless form in which all elements of 'femininity' can be found condensed. Nothing in a geisha's behaviour is left to chance. In the eyes of man,

Act Seven from Chushingura (Chushingura Shichi-damme), from the series "Chushingura"

1801-1802
Oban, nishiki-e, 36.4 x 25.1 cm
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

心臣藏七段目
喜多麿筆

she is the symbol of perfection, from her refined and artistic hairstyle, or her way of wearing make-up and wooden-soled sandals, right down to the perfectly-judged manner of her behaviour, which clearly dictated how she

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

should position her body, what her conversation should be and how she should express her feelings. The geisha is the archetype of woman. She is the erotic fetish of feminine grace, although codified and reduced,' wrote Lesoualc'h.

Man Seducing a Young Woman (Otoko to musume)

1801-1804
Ink and colour on silk, 70 x 55 cm
Tokushu Paper Mfg. Co., Ltd.

A Westerner looking at *shungas* will first of all notice the cold and detached expressions on the faces of the couples making love. Both sexes consummate the sexual act with a stoic impassivity, as if they were only partially

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

involved in the act. Only their stretched-out and curled toes and the cloth which the woman bites with all her might to contain her excitement betray the extent of their ecstasy. Nothing which could possibly move the

Shunga: Erotic Scene, from the series
Forms of Embracing (tsui no hinagata)

Katsushika Hokusai
Colour woodblock print, 25.1 x 36.6 cm
Musée national des Arts asiatiques – Guimet, Paris

observer is expressed here, following the traditional rules of art.

One might also notice the extremely exaggerated, almost caricature-like dimensions of the male organ. Could it be a fear of impotence that lies behind these over-inflated penises?

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

Or is it the product of a fantasy which itself hides man's fear of woman's untamed nature? Nevertheless, what we also find in these over-sized penises are reflections of the ancient phallic cult of the Shinto religion.

Page from the album
"Collection of Beauties" (Komachi Biki)

1802
Oban, nishiki-e, 28 x 38.5 cm
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

Shintoism, which is the indigenous religion of Japan and a cult entirely devoid of all metaphysical dogmas, is an astonishing mixture of the most varied rituals in honour of over 800 polymorphic gods.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

Thus the phallus quite naturally became a god to whom temples or private altars at home were dedicated. It was even invoked in prayer some evenings in the pleasure districts during the 17th and 18th centuries. Even today, one

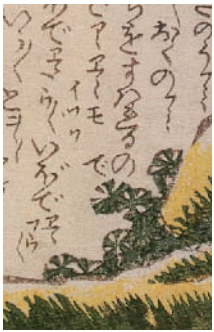
Page from the album
"Collection of Beauties" (Komachi Biki)

1802
Ōban, nishiki-e, 28 x 38.5 cm
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

can still come across ancient phallic steles on the edges of fields, placed there as a symbol of fertility. Festivals in honour of the phallus were a regular event and were the occasion for exuberant processions. An account dating

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

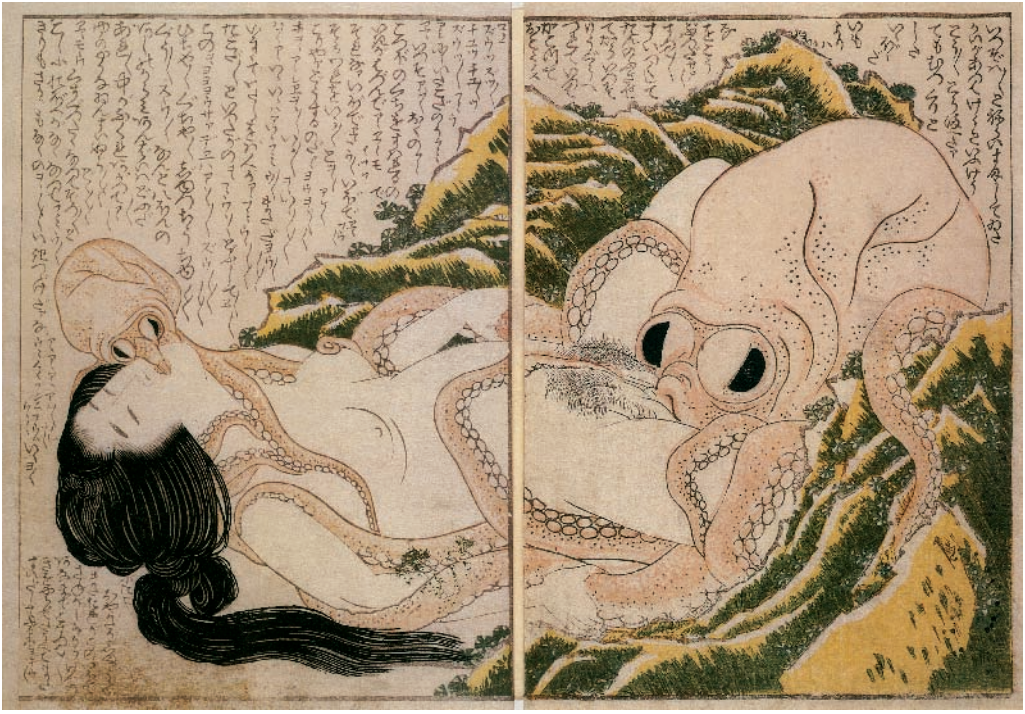
18th and 19th centuries



from the end of the 19th century describes one of these processions in Tokyo, 'A phallus several metres high, all covered in gleaming varnish, was placed on a sort of portable casket and carried by a group of young men

Young Pine Saplings (Kinoe no komatsu)

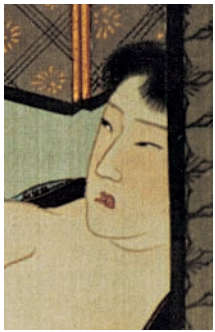
Katsushika Hokusai, 1814
Colour woodblock-printed book, 22 x 15.5 cm (covers)
Ritsumeikan ARC Database



who were shouting or laughing at the tops of their voices. They zig-zagged along the streets and made sudden, unexpected charges in all directions. Real baccanalian rites!' Thus the cult of the phallus was the backbone of the

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries



Shinto religion. In the temples, wooden, porcelain, stone, or metal phallic figures were sold as good-luck charms.

Japan never suppressed sensuality as such; if there were laws and limitations, they were always socially based but never religious.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

To seek physical pleasure was considered a natural desire, even if it consisted of unusual practices. Thus, sodomy figured among the normal pleasures of the body. The word 'sin', it seems, was never uttered. Even when we are

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

shown 'natural love' in its many varied forms in the woodcarvings, they always involve massive priapic fantasies.

Almost all masters of woodcarving produced erotic images, sometimes even in such precious materials as gold, silver, or mother-of-pearl.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

And yet the shunga studios were, for the most part, clandestine. Artists did not sign their work, or else used a pseudonym. The number of copies made was always limited and most often sold on the black market.

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Purity of line became a rule that could not be broken for woodcarving; the artist had to carve out the lines in the wood with extreme care. Parallel perspective was mainly dominant: lines that were parallel in nature

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were also parallel in the wood. Central perspective, which was a European invention, was only introduced in the 19th century. Likewise, the Japanese were not familiar with the effects of shadow and light which are so

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much a part of European art. The initial technique was to print onto paper from one sole block and then to colour them by hand, which considerably restricted the numbers in which they could be produced because of the time involved.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

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For this reason, in the 18th century, they started using several blocks.

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1848) is the last great figure of the *Ukiyo-e*. After him, woodcarving began to decline, giving way to

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

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vulgar copies produced in large numbers and designed to cater to the tastes of the masses. By the second quarter of the 19th century, it had for all intents and purposes become a popular art.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries

For a long time, Europe ignored *Ukiyo-e* on the grounds that its content went beyond the boundaries of good taste. It was not until the Universal Exhibitions in Paris of 1867, 1878, and 1889 that a western audience had

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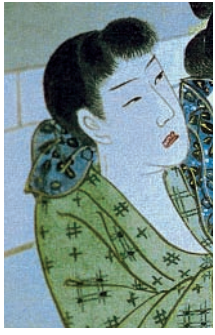
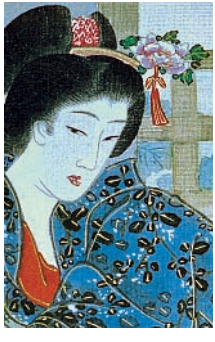
the opportunity to rediscover an art form that had hitherto been despised. After that, none would dare deny the major influence of Japanese woodcarving on the entire Impressionist movement.

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

18th and 19th centuries





The English artist Aubrey Beardsley probably possessed the finest collection of *Ukiyo-e* and *shunga*. His work, which is so characteristic of the late 19th century, is a perfect illustration of the influence of Japanese woodcarving on western art.

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Toulouse-Lautrec also possessed a remarkable collection, a few photographs of which remain. These prints, with their images of cruel and violent ghosts, seem to have particularly affected him,

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

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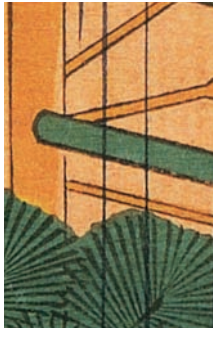

especially the scenes where women are embraced by animals, monkeys, foxes, badgers, or vampires.

By contrast, in Japan throughout the 19th century, these prints were hidden and forbidden.

Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter:
Prospects for the Four Seasons
(Shunka shūtō: Shiki no nagama), vol. 1 (detail)

Utagawa Kunisada, 1827
Colour woodblock-printed book, 25.5 x 18.5 cm (covers)

As the land of the rising sun became more industrialised, it also became more open to western influences and the Ukiyo-e disappeared into people's desk drawers. In effect, from the moment when the

Ōiso Station, from the series
Beauties along the Tōkaidō

Keisai Eisen, 1830-1844
Brocade print, 38 x 25.5 cm

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Meiji emperors seized power in 1868, Japan started flirting with the idea of assimilating with Europe. For this reason, any over-obvious signs of fertility cults or their symbols, especially images of the phallus, were

Japanese Shunga ("Images of Springtime")

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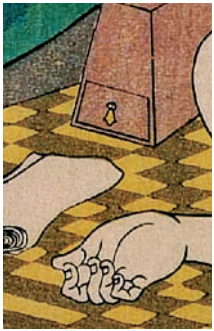


suppressed as they were considered unworthy of a modern nation. The American occupation after the Second World War dealt the final blow to Shintoism. Today, most of the classical *shungas* which are offered for sale

An Album of Fashionable Patterns (Tōsei komonchō)

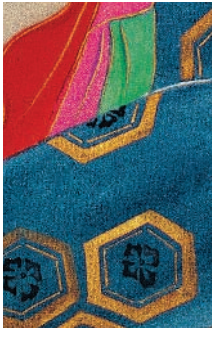
Attributed to the Pupil of Utagawa Kuniyoshi, c. 1885
Colour woodblock-printed book, 23 x 15.8 cm (covers)
Private collection, Ritsumeikan ARC Database

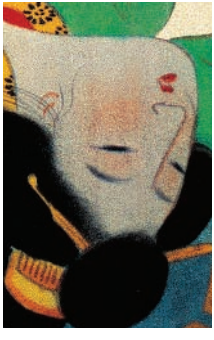
in the West are bought by Japanese collectors who, in this way, are returning them to their home country.

However, it was not until a massive exhibition of Japanese woodcarvings took

Japanese Watercolour

c. 1900

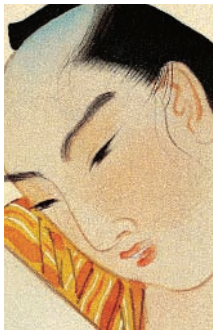




place in 1973 in London, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, that the majority of art lovers were given the opportunity of relearning how to appreciate the true value of these erotic works.

Japanese Watercolour

c. 1900



Perhaps today we need to look at these works with new eyes, forgetting that over almost 150 years ago they served as the languorous representations of our desire for a simple sexuality that rises above all notion of 'sin'.

Japanese Watercolour

c. 1900

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