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**Style and function of female images in prints by Keisai Eisen
(1790-1848) ideals of beauty and gender in the Late Edo Period
consumer society**

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Introduction

The illustration of *bijin-ga* 美人画 or “pictures of beautiful people” was a major genre in *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 (pictures of the floating world) of the Edo period (1603–1868). This study investigates the emergence of a new type of female figure in *ukiyo-e* of the late Edo period in terms of the social category, or type of woman represented as well as the new style of artistic representation, from the early to mid-nineteenth century, particularly as seen in the *bijin-ga* designed by Keisai Eisen 溪斎英泉 (1791–1848).

Although Eisen is not one of the most recognized *ukiyo-e* artists in our contemporary time unlike Kitagawa Utamaro 喜多川歌麿 (ca. 1753- 1806) and Katsushika Hokusai 葛飾北斎(1760-1849), his *bijin-ga* has become widely popular thanks to modern artists such Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), who recreated them in a new medium in his well-known paintings such as this one (Figure 1). This is a portrait of a courtesan painted by van Gogh in 1887 in which he traced the image from a cover page of a monthly journal *Paris Illustré “Le Japon”* (Figure 2) published by Charles Gillot (1853-1903), who was also an editor of *Art Japon* published by Samuel Siegfried Bing (1838-1905), a collector and dealer of Japanese art.¹

The original female image reproduced in the journal cover page is a vertical print of a courtesan designed by Eisen, *Courtesan Wearing Garment with Clouds and Dragon Design*, dated circa 1818-1844 (Figure 3). It is a rather large work (73.1 x 25.8 cm) and the woman’s

¹ Oikawa Shigeru, “Gohho to Eisen saku ‘Unryū uchikake no oiran’, ゴッホと英泉作「雲龍打掛の花魁」 ” in *Keisai Eisen*, ed. Chiba City Museum of Art (Chiba:Chiba City Museum of Art, 2012), 224-227. Samuel Bing was an instrumental figure to introduce *ukiyo-e* and other Japanese art works to the West during the late 19th century.

body makes a s-shaped form with black kimono with sweeping dragons and clouds. Her hair has many large hair pins encompassing the head giving a striking impression of her vivid appearance. Her straight nose and slightly open lips with teeth which are visible between the lips demonstrate a new approach to the depiction of female figure that differs from *bijin-ga* popular in the previous eras exemplified by Utamaro's *bijin-ga* which depict decorous women who appear still and calm, posing nicely for viewers. Altogether, it is a bold and kinetic image. Selection of this image for the journal by Gillot and the painting by van Gogh suggests that they were visually attracted by this specific female image designed by Eisen. *Ukiyo-e* researchers have pointed out that the aesthetic of *bijin-ga* designed by such *ukiyo-e* artists as Eisen changed in the early nineteenth century. Allen Hockley describes 19th century *bijin-ga*: "Their [Eisen, Kikukawa Eizan and several artists of the Utagawa School] women tended to look more worldly; . . . [they] became increasingly more elaborate. When depicted with brighter colorants (see e.g., BERO-AI) . . . *bijin-ga* of the mid to late 19th century have often been criticized for lacking the subtlety of 18th-century prints . . ." ²

² Allen Hockley, "Bijinga," in *The Hotei Encyclopedia of Japanese Woodblock Prints*, vol. 2, ed. Amy Reigle Newland (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2005), 423.

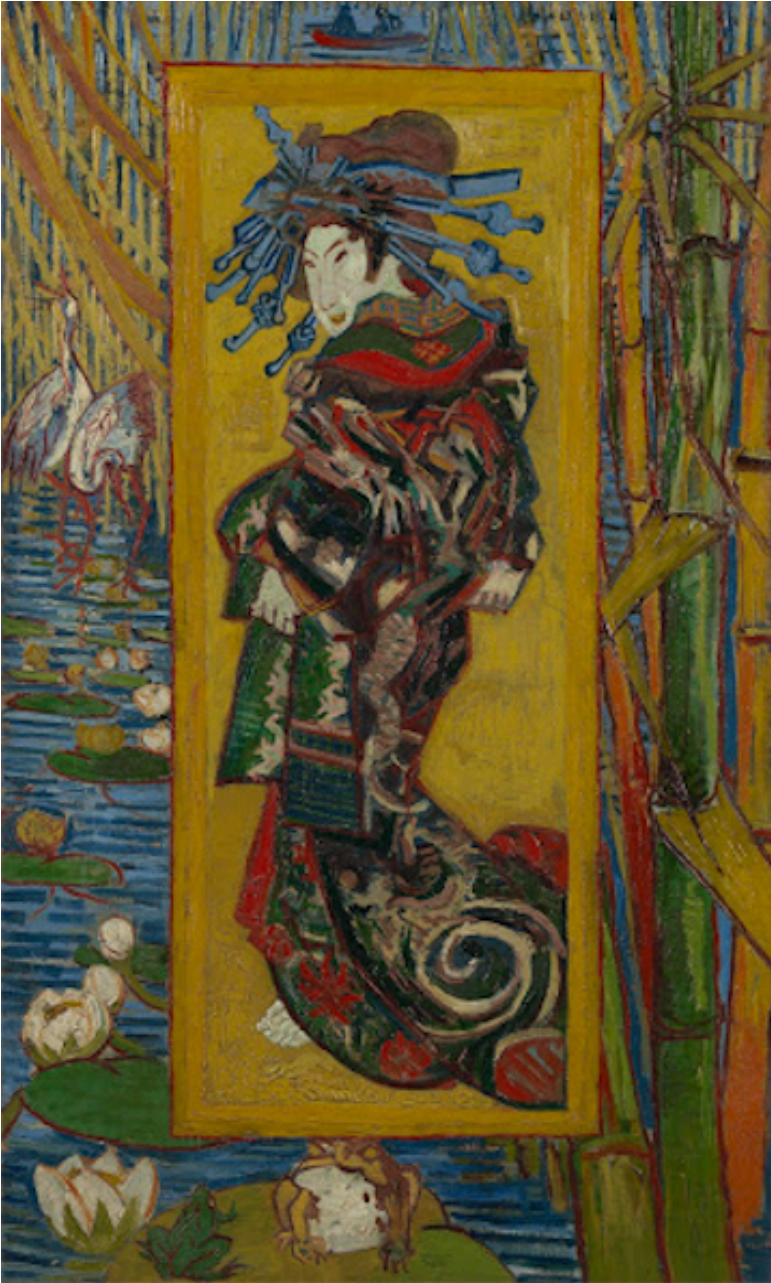


Figure 1
Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890), *Courtesan after Eisen*, 1887. Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam (Vincent Van Gogh Foundation), S0116V1962.



Figure 2

Title page of *Paris Illustré* 'Le Japon' vol. 4, May 1886, no. 45-46. The illustration, after a print by Keisai Eisen. Reproduction taken from an exhibition catalogue, *Keisai Eisen* (2012) compiled by Chiba City Museum of Art, p.223.



Figure 3. Keisai Eisen (1791–1848), *Courtesan Wearing Garment with Clouds and Dragon Designs*, ca.1818-1844. Reproduction taken from an exhibition catalogue, *Keisai Eisen* (2012) compiled by Chiba City Museum of Art, cat.no.291

The female figure depicted by Eisen in the early to mid– 19th century may lack “the subtlety of eighteenth-century prints,” but they were certainly in great demand by *ukiyo-e* consumers in his time, to judge the prodigious numbers of his *bijin-ga* that has survived. In spite of the apparent success Eisen enjoyed as an artist in his time, modern *ukiyo-e* scholars of art and literature in the succeeding twentieth century have been classifying his *bijin-ga* as

belonging to the “decadent school.”³ In this early modern art-historical scheme of things, the “idealistic” beauty of earlier *bijin-ga* by such eighteenth-century artists as Suzuki Harunobu 鈴木春信 (ca. 1725-1770) and Kitagawa Utamaro gave way to a “decadent” (give Japanese term *taihaiteki* 頹廢/退廢的) one in the early nineteenth century *bijin-ga* of Eisen, Utagawa Kunisada 歌川国貞(1786–1865) and Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳(1797–1861). Visually, the type of women depicted in Eisen’s *bijin-ga* do indeed appear to be self-indulgent and vulgar, at times dressed often in novel fashion and wearing too much heavy makeup. Compared to the still and emotionless beauties who populate eighteenth-century *bijin-ga*, the active and expressive females depicted by Eisen do indeed present a “new type” of beauty. This study will investigate the female image within the oeuvre of Keisai Eisen and asks to what extent he was responsible for the creation of this new type of beauty as subject matter as well as the new artistic style of female representation in the genre of ukiyo-e *bijin-ga*. No artist works in a vacuum, so this study will be conducted by placing Eisen’s *bijin-ga* production within the wider economic, social, cultural, and artistic context of the late Edo period in order to understand the social function/meaning of Eisen’s *bijin-ga*.

First of all, it is important to think what kind of women Eisen or other *ukiyo-e* designers depicted for their *bijin-ga*. Women as a dedicated subject in art became more significant after the mid-seventeenth century, as evinced in the paintings of *bijin* 美人 (beautiful women) produced during the Kanbun era 寛文 (1661–1673). By that time, the Tokugawa government had already established official brothel districts, such as the Yoshiwara, in the outskirts of the capital city, Edo. Although the trafficking of women was common before the founding of official brothel quarters in the early seventeenth century, the

³ See Ozaki Kyūya 尾崎久弥, *Ukiyo-e to taihaiha* 浮世絵と頹廢派 (Tokyo: Shunyōdō, 1925), 40, and Oka Isaburō 岡畏三郎 and Suzuki Jūzō 鈴木重三, *Kōki ukiyo-e* 後期浮世絵 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1965), 11.

Tokugawa government was the first to regulate, control, and tax the selling of sex as an officially designated business. Taking advantage of these developments, publishers subsequently began the production of books and single-sheet prints to market the beauty and charm of high-ranking courtesans—women of the *demimonde*. The official sale of sex emerged as a social role, or “job option,” of a certain female demographic. As argued by Kobayashi, this suggests an official commoditization of women,⁴ and an objectification of the female form. I hypothesize that this phenomenon occurred as a vehicle for the advertisement of entertainment and commercial products and services. By late Edo times, *ukiyo-e bijin-ga* had become a nascent form of mass media (advertisement) sponsored by the thriving businesses of brothels, kabuki theatre, popular fiction, and travel to promote their products. As such, I will also explore Eisen’s known connections to these recreational industries to illuminate their role in the creation of the artist’s new style of female imagery. I speculate that a new female ideal in the first half of nineteenth century depicted in those *bijin-ga* was a creation of those various business for more mutual profits. In order to prove that, I selected Eisen as the subject of my study because his high *bijin-ga* output is fairly representative of his time. Matsuda Misako reports that of the 1,734 extant full-color *nishiki-e* (錦絵 "brocade picture") designs by Eisen,⁵ 1,265, or approximately 70 percent, are *bijin-ga*. I believe that an investigation of Eisen’s *bijin-ga* within a social context will demonstrate the relationship between a creation of new ideal gender and various profit-making business.

⁴ Kobayashi Tadashi, “The Kanbun Bijin: Setting the Stage for *Ukiyo-e Bijin-ga*,” in *The Hotei Encyclopedia of Japanese Woodblock Prints*, vol. 1, ed. Amy Riegler Newland (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2005), 86.

⁵ This number includes five erotic prints (*shunga* 春画). Hayashi Yoshikazu reports that Eisen produced drawings for approximately 100 erotic books, which is perhaps the largest numerical production by an artist. See Hayashi Yoshikazu 林美一, *Oei to Eisen: Enpon kenkyū* 阿栄と英泉：艶本研究. (Tokyō: Yūkō Shobō, 1967). 95.

In addition to exploring Eisen's *bijin-ga* production within the socio-historical milieu of the late Edo period to investigate the extent of the business production team's role in the evolution of a new type of woman as subject matter as well as a new style of female representation, I also wish to contextualize and position my investigation into the broader framework of gender studies. In doing so, I hope my research will contribute to the further understanding of the power and function of art/images. Commercial items, including visual media/images such as *ukiyo-e*, are an integral part of gender discourse. Foucault defines that discourse are created through "systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak."⁶ Foucault identifies the function of discourse in the wider social process of legitimating and power, which could construct current truths.⁷ Accordingly, I consider Eisen's *bijin-ga* as visual statements of business people in power together with commoner class consumers about how commoner women should look and act.

Discourse is commonly formulated by powerful males and implemented and disseminated in the society, and it becomes a social norm. I suggest that gender is a result/product of entrepreneurs' profit making and also supported and further promoted by consumers including doers of a gender, both men and women. With that in mind, I will also look into the social function of Eisen's *bijin-ga* for the emerging commoner class audience who were the likely consumers of his prints. Eisen skillfully captured for mass consumption the popular beauties of his time—their coy poses, their stylish fashions, their *au courant* hairdos and accessories. To what extent did contemporaneous *bijin-ga* images play a role in mediating new gender and status roles commoner women in the late Edo period? How did

⁶ Iara Lessa, "Discursive Struggles within Social Welfare: Restaging Teen Motherhood." 283–298.

⁷ Susan Strega. "The View from the Poststructural Margins: Epistemology and Methodology Reconsidered. 199–235

gender roles preferred by more powerful social groups correspond to the reality on the ground during that time? According to gender theorist Judith Butler, gender is established through repetitive performative acts encouraged by social discourse.⁸ Butler does not consider gender as something innate. Rather, she suggests that social discourse or pressure affect people to act in a certain expected way. Bearing this in mind, I will treat Eisen's *bijin-ga* as visual social discourse created by business people, ideas and thoughts about commoner women which help and promote their business profit. But I think that simultaneously buyers/consumers including actual doers of a gender also mutually support these ideas for their own purposes. I hypothesize that Eisen's female images mediated and spread the popular discourse on the commoner-class women of period and that this discourse was constructed and advocated, in part, by *bijin-ga* viewers. A look into the social function of Eisen's *bijin-ga* might provide insights into the role played by *ukiyo-e* images (or art) in Edo-period social, gender and art history. I will investigate various entertainment businesses such as brothels, kabuki theaters, popular media and so on which were associated with *bijin-ga* creation.

Structure and Method of this Study

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter One sketches Eisen's life and professional activities, and takes its starting point his autobiography included/featured in the *Mumei-ō zuihistu* 无名翁随筆 (Miscellaneous Writings from the Old Man with No Name, 1833), also known as *Zoku ukiyo-e ruikō* 続浮世絵類考 (Further Various Thoughts of Ukiyo-e). This short manuscript was written in the third person by Eisen and contains his life

⁸ See Judith Butler, "Gender as Performance," in *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, edited by Peter Osborne (New York: Routledge, 2013), 356–66.

story, his samurai origins and varied artistic background, which includes his training in the Kanō school of paintings under Kikukawa Eizan 菊川英山 (1787-1867) and his self-study of the painting style of Hokusai. It also elucidates his strategies in promoting himself as a member of the cultural elite not only in paintings but also in writing, as well as an expert on the demimonde (he once owned a brothel) and a master of *bijin-ga* to reach his target audience—commoner-class men and women who were the main consumers of mass-produced *ukiyo-e* art. The entry for Eisen in the *Mumei-ō zuihistu* was self-written. The entry is boastful but mostly truthful and not contradicted by the historical record or Eisen's oeuvres which demonstrate artistic influences from other artists of his time including Hokusai as visual evidence except for two bold-faced assertions stated in close proximity toward the end of the text — (1) that his rival in *bijin-ga*, [Utagawa] Kunisada is “imitating Eisen's [my] style of pictures of courtesans” and (2) that he [Eisen] “has not done actor prints.” As will be discussed in the following chapters, these self-serving “white lies” by Eisen is contradicted by my investigation into the visual evidence offered by the *bijin-ga* output of both Eisen and his rival. I have undertaken the translation of Eisen's autographical *Mumei-ō zuihistu* in its entirety into English for the first time here. This manuscript is important to the understanding of the life circumstances and artistic training that lead Eisen to eventually specialize in beautiful women and to formulate a unique *bijin-ga* style based on the progressive trends and values of his time.

Chapter Two analyzes what type of women Eisen actually draw in his *bijin-ga*. Eisen's *bijin-ga* seemingly depict a lower class of women sex workers in the demimonde rather than *bijin-ga* of the previous era. The subject matter of *bijin-ga* apparently change more often depicting a lower class of sex workers in the early nineteenth century rather than an upper class of courtesans (in terms of their training and cost, not their social status) in the eighteenth century. If that is so, I hope to find some causes for this change in the subject

matter of *bijin-ga* by exploring the social position and economic roles of lower-class commoner women, particularly in regard to sex workers who hail from the lower classes of society. I will discuss how the Edo economy, thanks to improvements in agricultural technology and commercial infrastructure, transformed the lives, jobs, and educational prospects of ordinary women and men. In the expanding socio-economic environment, more men from the commoner class acquired the discretionary income to frequent lower cost (i.e., unofficial) brothel areas, prompting an increase in low-class sex workers and free-lance geisha into the demimonde to meet the demand. It is my contention that these independent and spirited sex workers played a pivotal role in inspiring the creation of a new feminine ideal—known at the time as the *iki* 意気 woman. This novel *iki*-type woman from the lower commoner class had, what is known in today’s parlance as “attitude” and lived fairly independent lives on their own dime, so to speak. Stories about *iki* women rose to prominence as subject matter in the popular literature of the time. What degree of influence did these fictional heroines have, in terms of both subject (content) and object (style), on the *ukiyo-e* of the time, particularly with regard to Eisen’s *bijin-ga*? At the same time, however, certain government officials such as city and local magistrates began to regard these increasing numbers of unofficial sex workers, and other financially independent female workers as deviating from social and gender norms required of commoner women. This chapter will also question whether Eisen’s *bijin-ga* mediate the then societal view that low-class sex workers, as personified by the geisha, were considered morally corrupt, in a similarly negative light as modern scholars who describe them as “decadent.”

In Chapter Three, in addition to the mediums of popular literature and *ukiyo-e*, kabuki theatre also seemingly promoted the image of geisha as a sympathetic new female paragon stemming from the commoner class. Hence, another goal of this study is to investigate the ways in which popular literature, *ukiyo-e*, and kabuki romanticized lower class

sex workers into a new female ideal for emulation and profit. This chapter deals specifically with the emergence of the new type of woman in kabuki literature and theatre, its connection to the development of Utagawa-school actor prints, and its influence on Eisen's "new style" of *bijin-ga* starting from around the year 1819. Although Eisen claims the originality of his *bijin-ga* in his autobiography, I question that assertion. This study hopes to find support for the premise that Eisen's new style female images are actually the outcome of various artistic influences, including the Utagawa style that was based on the depicting the likeness of the *onnagata* actor Segawa Kikunojō V 五代目瀬川菊之丞 (1802–1832). The borrowing of styles and ideas among designers and across genres was part of the normal artistic practice of the time, demonstrating the profit-driven nature of *ukiyo-e* production. At the time that Eisen was adapting the Utagawa-style *bijin-ga*, the school was engaged in producing portraits of actors in a more realistic *shajitsu* 写実 style. This *shajitsu* realism was based on the scientific interests and investigation into things and people that came into Japan from Europe in the eighteenth century. As noted by Kobayashi, *shajitsu* realism lead to more realistic and rationalized depiction of objects and people.⁹

There was a general trend toward naturalism and the portrayal of emotions in *ukiyo-e* as a part of the *shajitsu* trend. Eisen's *bijin-ga*, with its focus on romantic tales and the working women of the sex and entertainment industries, did not shy from depicting a full range of human emotions. The expression of human feelings and emotional states in *bijin-ga* was novel, giving a fresh impression to viewers. Unlike the passive and inscrutable beauties in the *bijin-ga* of the previous era, Eisen's beauties are now more life-like, depicted in active poses and displaying feelings and thoughts, giving a totally different impression to viewers. They appear more real and alive unlike "women as still and passive commercial items."

⁹ Kobayashi Tadashi 小林忠, *Edo no kaigashi ron* 江戸の絵画史論. (Tokyo: Ruri shobō 1983), 372.

Chapter Four focuses on popular literature, particularly narrative *gesaku* 戯作 (“playful writings”) and *ninjōbon* 人情本 (“books on feelings and sentiments” or popular romances) and its promotion of the new *iki*-type woman. I will discuss Eisen’s collaboration with the writer-publisher Tamenaga Shunsui 為永春水(1790–1844) and its influence on the artist’s single sheet *bijin-ga* in terms of theme and composition. The production of *ukiyo-e* was an integral part of the publishing industry, and the same publishers often produced popular books and prints in close collaboration with the same set of designers and writers. The publications often shared similar subject matter. Eisen’s *bijin-ga* was created in such an environment. Shunsui’s popular serial romance, the *Shunshoku umegoyomi* 春色梅児誉美 (Spring Love, Plum-Blossom Almanac) will be investigated to show the extent to which he, as publisher, informed the situations and background settings for some of Eisen’s romantically themed *bijin-ga*. The chapter further explores whether Eisen’s depiction of steamy romantic trysts demonstrates a movement toward the expression of free love and sentiment over conventional love and societal obligation among the commoner class in the early nineteenth century. In other words, women in Eisen’s *bijin-ga* are depicted as real, not as objects to be viewed, which is a part of differences and characteristics of Eisen’s depiction of women.

Chapter Five is devoted to investigating Eisen’s *bijin-ga* in depth by focusing exclusively on Eisen’s 1823–1824 *bijin-ga* series *Ukiyo fūzoku mime kurabe* 浮世風俗美女競 (*Customs of the Floating World*) and its connection to the sex, kabuki, and popular book industries as well as Chinese poetry. This print can be considered one of the earliest examples of Eisen’s new style of *bijin-ga* using a facial type in the likeness of Segawa Kikunojō V. In terms of content, some of the prints in the series do demonstrate the existence of free or romantic love based on choice in the face of societal disapproval, as what is depicted is

obviously an illicit tryst between a woman and her unseen lover. In other words, Eisen is among the first in *bijin-ga* art to pioneer the portrayal of women as human subjects in active poses and expressing thoughts, feelings, and desires. As noted, this denotes a departure from the *bijin-ga* of the previous era by an artist like Harunobu and Utamaro where women are mostly portrayed as beautiful, passive objects with little or no expression.

In the context of gender studies, my investigation also hopes explore the social function of Eisen's *bijin-ga*. I undertook this task while taking a few key focuses in consideration. Commercial media such as *ukiyo-e* seemingly contribute to the general discourse on female gender roles in its *bijin-ga* depictions of women. I speculate the role Eisen's *bijin-ga* images of women play in the creation of a new feminine ideal in the late Edo period. Although the formal discourse on women's social status and economic roles was strictly and exclusively formulated by powerful males of the ruling samurai class, it seems that popular literature and art that reflected the voices of ordinary commoners, give opposition. I would also like to explore in what ways was this expressed in the *bijin-ga* of Eisen and his circle of artists, writers, and publishers of the demimonde that formed the vortex of commoner society and culture of the late Edo. There seems in fact as great a disparity, diversity, and fluidity in thought regarding politics and gender,¹⁰ during the late Edo period as there had been early Edo. I hope to think about some of these points and more in the five following chapters.

¹⁰ See Herman Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology: Early Constructs, 1570–1680* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). This study of Tokugawa society reveals that it was not just based on-neo-Confucian doctrines but also on Shintōism and Buddhism. Early Edo society was not as monolithic as thought previously but based from the start on these two older beliefs and ideas. These were carried into the late Edo period and influence the development of the female image and I mention them in passing when relevant.