On Shunga and learning how to feel what when

By William Eaton

Montaigbakhtinian.com

As revised in 2017 for publication in *Art, Sex, Politics* (Serving House Books). *For the "source text" of this essay—an adaptation of an e-mail to a French friend—see* ***Le Shunga et le savoir-sembler-sentir****. This piece also has a companion:* ***Balthus at the MET****.*

The British Museum show *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* offered rooms of paintings and prints that were quite explicit without being particularly erotic. As at most every exhibit, the visitors pass slowly and quietly from one depiction (in this case, of Japanese people screwing) to the next depiction (of Japanese people screwing). The penises were enormous. One of the curators' best interventions was this quotation from a thirteenth century writer: "The old masters . . . depict the size of 'the thing' far too large . . . If it were depicted the actual size there would be nothing of interest. For that reason, don't we say 'art is fantasy.'"

The lighting was dim, presumably to preserve the art works, which were produced in Japan between 1600 and 1900 (and then banned for much of the twentieth century). Visitors to the museum galleries had to concentrate yet more than usual in order to see something. Internally, privately, they may have been struggling, too, to figure out what they were supposed to see—what is essential in this show of representations of Japanese people having sex? The sex organs, the positions, the undergarments, facial expressions, colors, artistic techniques, the curators' descriptions of the works? Viewers' eyes shifted and lingered depending on their artistic and sexual tastes, and on their comfort/discomfort in looking at people having sex and in possibly being seen looking at images of people having sex.

I can see the possibilities for a comic sketch, in which museumgoers, moving slowly, studiously, from fuck to fuck, would be figures of fun. And the sketch, of course, would also have its socially redeeming side: helping us to think about our relation to art more generally—be the subject Balthus's guitar student with her dress around her ribs and her teacher's hand between her legs, or, say, Napoleon on his horse.

After wandering amid the obscurity and explicitness of the Shunga show, I sat down on a bench in the middle of one the rooms. I had the idea that we, the viewers, were what was essential, the part of the show most worth paying attention to. But the twenty-first century museumgoers' faces that I studied were not forthcoming or enlightening, except in their impassivity. I waited in vain to hear a little nervous laughter or a "Come see this!" I would have hardly been against a nice story whispered between fellow museumgoers, a story about the time when, after a nice glass of wine or on vacation in Japan, . . . Someone might have whispered something about what "we" might do that afternoon, back at our hotel. But no one did.

The curators' explications said that, among other uses, satire included, Shunga paintings and prints were given to young Japanese women when they were about to get married. The images were a kind of marriage manual, to show young brides how to behave, or handle themselves, in bed with a man. And without being too shocked by the actual size of their husbands' penises.

Or was it that the young bride was being pushed to see her husband's penis as larger—two or three times larger—than it actually was? Or was she being pushed yet further toward learning that, both in her bed and in her life, the ideal, the fantasy, was supposed to take the place of reality? And this even in her interactions with other women, however intimate or cold these might be. (We are approaching a basic role of art and of museums: the presentation—*voire* imposition or selling—of ideals.)

I am making my way toward an essence, presumably not the only essence, of this show. Clearly the Japanese women of that foreign age, like their young male partners and like youths in our times as well, were anxious to know not only what was going to happen in bed, in sex, but also what positions they were supposed to assume and—above all—what feelings they were supposed to express and to feel as well. A masculine desire to dominate, possess, penetrate? A feminine desire to be desired and "taken" by the male? Ecstasy, turmoil, hunger, aggression, tenderness, love? The fear of the rabbit or the pitiful pleas of a captive, naked before a soldier? The deepening sorrow of the soldier or hunter, knowing that his gun cannot bring him closer to the being so present in his sight? Or is the requirement a series of feelings, felt or feigned and growing in strength or weakness, rising to some heavenly height or seeming increasingly instinctual and uncontrollable?

Such questions came to me after seeing a particular show concerning pre-modern Japan. Pictures, say, of twenty-first century Londoners having sex would generate a somewhat different set of questions. (A joke of the British comedian Michael Flanders: "Always be sincere whether you mean it or not.") In the present piece my interest is less in *what* the possible feelings are than in the fact that they are pre-established (e.g. by art and education of various sorts), and lovemakers young and old are at some pains to know what these

feelings are. What is possible? Necessary? Acceptable? Inacceptable and therefore particularly erotic? Or considered disgusting or unimaginable.

It might not take all that long for any of us, to include a young, seventeenth century Japanese woman, to appreciate that, in making love, we are supposed to seem to feel certain specific things, but this only leads us to the next task: How to show our partners, and by what means, that these requisite feelings are indeed what we are feeling in the midst of this sometimes complex dance, sometimes instinctual animal act? And it's not only our partners who need convincing; we, too, may wish to be convinced that we are feeling the requisite things. For young men how difficult can this be? If at the moment of ecstasy stuff comes out at the tip—success, mission accomplished, correct feelings felt and expressed. But for women, . . . To quote a female singer's pop hit (with the parenthetical asides in the original):

How will I know? (Don't trust your feelings)

How will I know? (Love can be deceiving)

In bed, more or less horizontal, and somehow both coupled and alone, the question may be rather: "Is this it?" Could there or should there be more, or less? Is this the effect he wants to have on me, and is this what it is supposed to, or not supposed, to be like or look like?

I would stress that the preceding paragraph has oversimplified the matter. Young men, for example, certainly have some of these worries that I have put on young women, and both sexes, or genders, are confronted with at times delicious, at times uneasy wondering about whether what "I" am feeling is much like what s/he is feeling? And all this may only appear to be simpler in homosexual couplings. And Freud has helped us recognize the further question: Is what "I" feel like I'm feeling much like what I am "really" feeling? To which a Wittgensteinian can add: What is this "really feeling"? Is it not precisely—nor not precisely at all—the expressions that appear on "my" face or that, seemingly, like a protest, recriminations, flow from the skin of a burned finger to my brain? These feelings, be they expressed to others or within myself, are expressed in language, the structures and customs of which play a larger role in what "I" can express—or feel—than do any occasional impulses and circumstances. And so I might ask again, in vain, what am I really feeling, what was I really feeling when we made love? (And when I burn my finger, why, since such a network of nerves and brain cells are apparently involved in the unpleasant feeling, can I only feel it there—on the tip of my finger?)

The week after seeing "Shunga: sex and pleasure in Japanese art," I went to see Hélène Cixous's play *L'histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, roi du Cambodge*, a play about the man who remained the nominal, symbolic King of Cambodia after Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge took over the country. At one point Cixous's protagonist says plaintively, « Je ne veux plus grimacer des sourires. » I want to stop grimacing smiles. How I (an American) would love to hear an American young woman say such a thing! Admit to such feelings. I take my 13-year-old son to have his photo taken in his soccer uniform—a fund-raising

activity of the soccer league in which he plays and for which I coach. The photographer has my son hold a ball under his right arm, put his right foot on a box and "smile," which is to say: show as much of as many teeth as possible, the upper row in particular. What do the feelings being staged and recorded on this occasion have to do with soccer or my son? What do they have to do with this boy at this moment posing as part of his Dad paying for a photo as a way of contributing money to pay for uniforms, use of field, etc.? In a sense these questions are irrelevant. What is relevant is that Jonah has to smile. Without a smile the photographer may be upbraided and downgraded by his boss. And if Jonah can smile—and in the face of his father's ranting against the system, against forced-feigned emotions—is Jonah, at least, happy?

We may note that for museum visitors, too, there are also required feelings—feelings that it needs to seem like you, the visitor, are feeling. Inside the museum's marble walls, at the Shunga exhibit, it seemed that, above all, the feeling required, of men and women, was impassivity. There may well have been a little intellectual-visual something passing between the erotic drawings behind glass and brain cells in back of viewers' eyes. But as for their own cocks or cunts—why do you feel it necessary to use such words?

Links

Images of the more than 300 shunga works in the British Museum collection were available via the Internet as of 2017.

For a review of the Shunga show, see **British Museum dares to bare with adults-only art display** by Charlotte Higgins, The Guardian, 1 October 2013.

Contemporary readers will be well aware that they can see a raft of reproductions of Shunga work via Google Images and similar sites. The image at the top of this piece is from a version of the **catalogue for the British Museum show**, a book edited by Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle and Aki Ishigami (Brill/Hotei Publishing, 2013). Another recent publication is ***Shunga: Erotic Art in Japan*** by Rosina Buckland (Overlook Hardcover, 2013). The **blog de Siobhan G. Rodriquez**, a young photographer, offers a montage of pictures taken at the show.

Hélène Cixous, ***L'histoire terrible mais inachevee de Norodom Sihanouk, roi du Cambodge***.

The always be sincere line is from Michael Flanders of the Flanders & Swann musical comedy team, from the recording of their song "The Reluctant Cannibal" on their album *At the Drop of a Hat*. Click for **YouTube clip**.

The pop song “How will I know?” became a hit in 2006 with Whitney Houston singing. It was written by George Robert Merrill, Shannon Rubicam and Narada Michael Walden.