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ARS 473
12/11/20

Glimpses of Commoner Life in Japanese Art

Having surviving pieces of Japanese artwork is absolutely critical in understanding the livelihood and culture of Japan throughout its rich history. Dogūs and earthenware from the early Jōmon and Asuka periods reveal the spirits indigenous Japanese people worshipped while numerous sculptures of Buddhas and mandalas demonstrate the establishment of Buddhism in Japan. There's a beauty in the way art historians and/or conservators are able to holistically contextualize what life was like in Asuka, Kamakura, etc., periods from surviving fragments of the past.

What I found most intriguing from learning about Japanese history and the art influenced by its time was their depictions of commoner life, or really their *lack* of depictions of commoner life until around the Kamakura period. Attempts to examine and understand commoners pre-Kamakura period exist, but limited in scope since they are based on assumptions from religious or ceremonial practices, which are subjective in nature and can be interpreted in multitudes of ways depending on the source of the information collected and examined.

The goal of the Glimpses of Commoner Life in Japanese Art exhibition is to spark new connections and conversations about what commoner daily livers were like. As stated several times in Tsuji Nobuo's *History of Art in Japan* a large portion of the pieces that have survived are depictions of life from the point of view of the elite class. Though their perspective is immensely critical, it is not a holistic representation of what life in Japan is like for all intersectionalities– class, gender, etc. The pieces selected for this exhibition is from Kamakura through Meiji periods. They will be presented chronologically since some of the techniques and mediums are evolved from earlier works. I hope to encourage a deeper curiosity about the evolution of Japanese art and its influence on everyday life then and now. I hope it will educate viewers on the origins of Japanese culture and its impacts on other cultures all over the world.

*Note: Some of the images of pieces are pictures taken from the textbook, thus why some may appear to be distorted or cut off.



"The Gambler" from *Tōhoku-in Poetry Contest among Persons of Various Occupations,* first half of 14th century, Tokyo National Museum[1] [pg.224]

Although poetry-contest scrolls were only fictional depictions of poetry writing contests between teams of commoners, they reveal that everyday people also participate in artistic forms of poetry writing even if the records don't survive or the poets aren't recognized for them. Writing poetry appears to be a significant portion of daily life that anyone could participate in, no matter what your professional occupation is. From the specific example of "The Gambler," we see that the subject is depicted very sketch-like, using simple, mostly disconnected lines to portray the man's hunched, bony body. Details like body/facial hair, hat, and the tablet and pencil are depicted with simple shapes. Also the figure appears to be naked (or wearing very little clothing), which may suggest a deliberate emphasis of the class ranking between the illustrator of the scroll, who is probably a higher ranking elite, and the gambler who is a hunched, scrawny commoner.

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[1] Tsuji, Nobuo, Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, and Nobuo Tsuji. *History of Art in Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.



Pictorial Index of the Lives of Japanese Commoners as Depicted in Illustrated Scrolls, scene 3, scroll 7, painted by En'i, 1299, Tokyo National Museum[2] [pg.230]

Pictoral biographies are also great works of art that depict a glimpse into everyday commoner life. They were produced in great numbers during the second half of the Kamakura period "to help propagate the faith [of Pure Land Buddhism]… and increase the renown of key figures in the history of individual sects," (228) but this particular scroll provides a background on understanding the legends about Ippen (229). En'i provides a "sympathetic coverage of life in the country and city" to uphold Ippen's teachings to pay tribute to commoners (229). The pictorial index depicts a *odori nenbutsu*[3] gathering, which attracts people of all classes to chant, sing, and beat drums together. This scroll and the idea of *odori nenbutsu* reveals that there is a level of integration between classes when it comes to carrying out spiritual rituals. O*dori nenbutsu* is believed to have started when Kuya Shonin came to a village and saw the people's ignorance of Buddhism; Kuya spends some time in the village preaching to the people including children. To make it amusing, he agreed to dance for the children if they chanted nenbutsu along with him (Moriarty) and he eventually utilized the dance-ritual to spread his teachings all over Japan.

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[2] Tsuji, Nobuo, Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, and Nobuo Tsuji. *History of Art in Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

[3] Moriarty, Elisabeth. "Nembutsu Odori." *Asian Folklore Studies* 35, no. 1 (1976): 7. https://doi.org/10.2307/1177647.



Tosa Mitsunobu, Beneath the Autumn Leaves (Momiji no Ga), Illustration to Chapter 7 of the Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari), 1509-1510, Album leaf, painting

This piece by Tosa Mitsunobu is an example of fūzoku-ga, a type of genre painting that depicts nature in four seasons with scenes of commoner everyday life.[4] The style emerged during the Muromachi period, a time known as the Warring States period. During this time, regional daimyos fought one another for land and power. The field of fūzoku-ga emerged during this time as a response to the tumultuous nature of the time. It highlights people other than political and religious leaders, like these two young women. The scene depicts two young women caught outside in the rain sharing an umbrella. This could suggest that Mitsunobu is attempting to depict spring, since that's the season when most rain would occur. Spring is also hinted by the tiny blossoms on the tree in the upper left corner and the design of one of the kimonos the young girl is wearing. Though the narrative is very simple, it's a dynamic scene portraying a realistic everyday event, with the rain blowing in one direction, the river flowing nearby, and the two young girls looking in opposite directions suggesting viewers to look at the entirety of the painting. Mitsunobu's prints are a precursor to ukiyo-e, which would eventually be popularized in the Edo period. His subjects are used in artists like Torii Kiyonaga.

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[4] Tsuji, Nobuo, Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, and Nobuo Tsuji. *History of Art in Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.





Zoomed in image of bottom center

Artist unknown, Genre Scenes (Fūzoku byōbu), Six-fold screen—ink, color, gold and silver on paper,1640[5]

Another theme explored with genre paintings was of rakuchū rakugai zu, or "scenes in and around the capital."[6][7] The motif was said to have been popularized by Tosa

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[5] "Genre Scenes (Fūzoku Byōbu)." Accessed December 12, 2020. https://www.artic.edu/artworks/8044/genre-scenes-fuzoku-by%C5%8Dbu.

[6] Tsuji, Nobuo, Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, and Nobuo Tsuji. *History of Art in Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

[7] "Scenes In and Around Kyoto Screens and Genre Paintings." Accessed December 12, 2020. https://www.rekihaku.ac.jp/english/exhibitions/project/old/120327/index.html.

Mitsunobu with his piece *Scenes of Kyoto* in 1506. This theme depicts scenes of life in a town/village. It features a number of the townspeople, from the elite to everyday commoners. The scene is quite a lot to take in with so many figures and details, but if you look closely there's a variety of commoners depicted dancing, watching what appears to be sumo wrestling (bottom left corner), and several gatherings of people conversing in and around the building. Although it might be difficult to distinguish what social class each figure is a member of, we know that festivals like the one depicted in this fūzoku byōbu draws people of all ranks to celebrate. Despite not knowing the artist of this piece, we can assume that they are influenced by the works of other artists that specialize in fūzoku byōbu like Tosa Mitsunobu.



Unknown artist, originally attributed to Iwasa Matabei, Standing Beauty in a Dance Pose, Hanging scroll, painting, 1578-1650

This hanging scroll painting of a beauty is a style that emerged in the Edo period when their styles became more settled. This type of art is known as Genroku, and it's representative of art created by the townspeople. As Tsuji Noubou discussed in the textbook, it was "a time when townspeople took over from the ruling class as the main producers of art."[8] The hanging scroll shown above is assumed to be Iwasa Matabei's work, who was known for his genre paintings of *ko-jōruri*[9], which are seventeenth-century puppet dramas. His other works that were discussed in the textbook show multiple beauties gathered around or conversing. Although this particular piece by the unknown artist only features a single beauty, the lavish pattern of her robes and simple expression of her face is reminiscent of his other works. Another distinguishing feature is the calligraphy included in the piece which isn't seen in his others works, which is probably why this was only originally attributed to Iwasa Matabei. Although beauties were a very specific subject matter, they represent common women that exemplified the beauty standards of the time.

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[8] Tsuji, Nobuo, Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, and Nobuo Tsuji. *History of Art in Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

[9] Kanemitsu, Janice Shizue. Guts and Tears: Kinpira JÅruri and Its Textual Transformations. Accessed December 12, 2020. https://www.colorado.edu/cas/sites/default/files/attached-files/janice_kanemitsu_hr.pdf.



Yoshida Hanbē, Illustration from *Karin kinyōshō* vol. 3, Woodblock printed; ink on paper; paper covers,1695[10]

As Tsuji Nobou reminded us that "we should remember that the ukiyo-e woodblock print grew out of book illustration… and that ukiyo-e artists played a fundamental role in illustrating books through the Edo period."[11] Yoshida Hanbē's illustration found in the *Karin kinyōshō* depicts two separate scenes of an elderly man approaching a woman in her home. From the way she is bowing her head towards him, it appears she recognizes the elderly man as some sort of priest or monk. I'm not sure what the *Karin kinyōshō* is about, but it appears that it is providing a narrative about an elder traveling through a place and offering his prayers and teachings to the townspeople. In the right hand page, it depicts a scene with several individuals also bowing their heads in meditation. This book illustration demonstrates how religious teachings and practices are spread to commoners, revealing an insight to how Buddhism was able to take root in the earlier Asuka and Hakuhō periods.

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[10] "Karin Kinyōshō." Accessed December 12, 2020. http://pulverer.si.edu/node/556/title/3.

[11] Tsuji, Nobuo, Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, and Nobuo Tsuji. *History of Art in Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.



Suzuki Harunobu, *Firefly Hunting*, mid-18th century [pg. 352]

Suzuki Harunobu's *Firefly Hunting* is reminiscent of Tosa Mitsunobu, Beneath the Autumn Leaves which was discussed earlier. Harunobu was active in the "Golden Age" of ukiyo-e, after the death of Hishikawa Moronobu[12]. Harunobu's piece depicts two young girls firefly hunting at night. Like Mitsunobu's piece, their robes display distinct and detailed patterning and both young girls have a simple, focused expression. Additionally, the narrative is straightforward, but the scene is very dynamic. Both girls are depicted in mid-action, their robes indicating small movements to catch the fireflies close to the ground. Additionally, the background is equally as dynamic– the pond behind them are full of ripples and the plants around the water and on the ground lean in various directions, indicating a movement of air. Harunobu's prints, which are normally accompanied by classical poems, demonstrates the "townspeople's appreciation for courtly culture."

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[12] Tsuji, Nobuo, Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, and Nobuo Tsuji. *History of Art in Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.



Katsushika Hokusai, Picture Book of Comic Poems, Mountains Upon Mountains (Ehon kyōka yama mata yama), vol. 3, Woodblock-printed book, 1760-1849[13]

Katsushika Hokusai was famous for more than just "Under the Wave of Kanagawa." He was also known for his numerous books of illustrations of people and nature, things that he observed and encountered in everyday life. This illustration from the Picture Book of Comic Poems depicts a crowd of townspeople gathered at some sort of public market or area. Seven figures are featured– two musicians, one dancer with a dragon costume, and the four conversing in a circle with various foods/supplies in hand. Hokusai was very much interested in the commoners and the lives they lived, hence why much of his illustrated books are of people and things he came across during his travels. Hokusai's documentation of common folk in various towns participating in various celebratory and domestic activities allows us to examine glimpses of what everyday life was like in Japan at that time. The advancements made in woodblock printing and other techniques mobilized more commoners to express and document themselves and their lives, and in turn, we are able to gain a more holistic view into and understanding of the lives of Japanese commoners in this era.

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[13] Harvard. "From the Harvard Art Museums' Collections Picture Book of Comic Poems, Mountains Upon Mountains (Ehon Kyōka Yama Mata Yama), Vol. 3." Accessed December 12, 2020. https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/209547?position=52.

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