

Forms of Femininity: Style and subject choice in
Suzuki Harunobu's pre-*nishiki-e* prints (1760-1764)

Suzuki Harunobu 鈴木春信 (1725?-1770) ranks amongst the most innovative and ambitious *ukiyo-e* artists of mid-18th century Edo, and scholarly publications on his full-colour *nishiki-e* prints are abundant. In a sense, pointing out Harunobu's appropriation of motives by the Kamigata artist Nishikawa Sukenobu 西川祐信 (1671–1750) in his own single-sheet *nishiki-e* has become a sport for several scholars.¹ However, despite Kobayashi Tadashi's statement in 2002 that “Harunobu was also deeply influenced by earlier Edo print masters” and that he “would like to entrust this to others in the near future”² no scholar of *ukiyo-e* has seriously taken up this cue yet and devoted an entire monograph to the stimuli Harunobu received from Edo-based artists during the formative years his career. These artists include Okumura Masanobu 奥村政信 (1686-1764), Ishikawa Toyonobu 石川豊信 (1711-1785), Kitao Shigemasa 北尾重政 (1739-1820), and, most of all, artists of the Torii school 鳥居派. Debuting in 1760 with single-sheet *benizuri-e* actor prints and black-and-white illustrated books (*ehon* and one *kyōgen ezukushi*), Harunobu modelled his early publications strongly on the *shibai-e* (theatre prints) published by Torii Kiyomitsu 鳥居清満 (1735-1785), the third head of the leading Torii school. In fact, it is in Kiyomitsu's portrayals of *onnagata* like Segawa Kikunojō II 二代目瀬川菊之丞 (1741-1773) that the elegant finesse which would later become a trademark of Harunobu's *nishiki-e bijin-ga* (full-colour prints of beautiful persons) emerges.

What is more, Kiyomitsu experimented with full-colour background compositions in horizontal large format *ōban* single-sheet prints already in the early 1760s, thus foreshadowing Harunobu's vertical format *chūban nishiki-e* that became available from 1765 onwards. Beginning with his 1763 *ehon* publications, Harunobu gradually freed himself from the sphere of single-sheet actor prints, and transposed the theme of *onnagata* within a stage-bound plays into idealized narratives of beautiful youths in everyday life surroundings, ultimately emerging as the most creative and productive *bijin-ga* artist of his time.

As the accuracy of written primary sources on Harunobu's biography and on his artistic training have been difficult to establish, research methods for this dissertation root in the formal comparison of compositional traits and stylistic devices applied by Harunobu and contemporary *ukiyo-e* artists in Edo. Possible stimuli from Chinese Suzhou prints will also be taken into consideration. Thus, the dissertation focuses on the changes and development of Harunobu's individual modes of expression alongside his shift from *shibai-e* to *bijin-ga* during the late Hōreki era (1751-1764).

¹ Most prominently Kobayashi Tadashi, David Waterhouse, Roger Keyes, Jack Hillier, Tanabe Masako and Fujisawa Murasaki.

² Kobayashi, Tadashi, ed. *Seishun no ukiyo eshi Suzuki Harunobu: Edo no kararisuto tōjō* (Suzuki Harunobu: Master of Youth). Chiba: Chiba City Museum of Art, 2002, 289.