

NAKAGAWA Tamiko (SOAS)

The Awkward Object of Desire: Representation of Women in 19th Century Japanese Erotic Images

Japanese erotic art from the early modern period (collectively called shunga today) has been described as progressively declining in aesthetic value in the first half of the 19th century, corresponding to the so-called 'twilight' age of the Tokugawa regime. Reflecting this evaluation, 19th century shunga has attracted less scholarly interest than earlier work in this genre.

However, the volume of production and technical standard of woodblock prints reached their peak in 1830s, attesting to an increasing popularity supported by growing numbers of consumers of art and culture. The emergence of these consumers was a result of rapid urbanisation and the increase in per capita income through the 18th century giving rise to new desires and sexual fantasies in visual culture. By investigating the transformations of sexual fantasy and its visual depiction, we can witness how sexuality in early modern Japan was socially constructed, perceived and represented.

In many images from the 19th century, the representations of content with a harmonious ambience give way to more problematic subject matter suggesting a new kind of psychological negotiation. This paper seeks to explore one such signification through a decipherment of the representation of women. Firstly, by looking into the represented female subject in erotic publication, analyzing both textual and visual procedures of othering women who have taken the form of animals, ghosts, or monsters, and secondly by discussing the result of the othering process.