



Japanese Art

by Mark McLelland

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Japanese culture both now and historically has been replete with images that, although not obviously homosexual, can be given queer readings, as well as a wide range of representations that contemporary viewers would understand to be homosexual.

Pre-Historic and Folk Art

Pottery Haniwa figures from Japan's prehistoric period portray male figures with their erect penises clearly displayed as well as pottery phalli. Intriguingly, many of these images display wear marks that suggest they were rubbed over a long period of time, probably in the hope that they would confer fertility or increased sexual stamina, but the homoerotic potential of fondling these images, too, cannot be overlooked.

Japanese folk religion has long been concerned with fertility and even today there are shrines in the countryside that contain ancient stone phalli as well as enormous phalli carved out of single tree trunks. These phalli show great attention to detail and at festival time are paraded around the village by men dressed only in loincloths.

The homoeroticism of these events has not been lost on present-day Japanese gay men, and Japan's main "naked festivals" (*hadaka matsuri*) are advertised and reported upon in Japan's gay press; furthermore, festival scenes and props feature in some contemporary gay video pornography.

Religious Art

Further homoerotic images, this time of beautiful temple acolytes, date from the Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods, when Japan was under pervasive Buddhist influence. At this time, Buddhist monasteries had become renowned as sites for homosexual love in which an older priest (*nenja*) would establish bonds of friendship and love with a child acolyte (*chigo*).

The representation of youthful male figures as repositories of ideal beauty was facilitated by Buddhist and Shinto myths that taught that women, because of their menstrual cycle, were "defiling" and therefore dangerous to male spiritual practitioners.

In religious painting, the beautiful youth became a central figure, and key religious heroes from the Buddhist pantheon were depicted as beautiful boys. These included Kobo Daishi, founder of the Shingon School (in 806), who reputedly introduced boy love from China; and Monjushiri, the *bodhisattva* of wisdom, who later became patron saint of male-male love because of the resemblance of the latter part of his name to the Japanese word for "ass" (*shiri*).

These religious images, in which the youths are depicted with white, powdered moon-like faces, long hair,



Two *shunga* (erotic prints, both ca 1750).
Top: A Samurai (right) with a male actor by Miyagawa Isshō
Above: Detail from a print by Suzuki Harunobu.

and dressed in colorful silk, hint at homoeroticism.

It is not until the fourteenth century that we have images depicting unambiguous homosexual interaction. One famous scroll, dated to 1321, is known as the *Chigo no soshi* or "*Chigo* notebook" and concerns the relationship between an old abbot and his young acolyte.

Because of his advanced age, the abbot was unable to attain a firm erection and consequently could not penetrate his young lover. Such was the acolyte's devotion, however, that he employed a servant to loosen his anus with unguents and a large dildo in preparation for his nightly visits to the abbot's chambers. The servant's own evident arousal as well as the erection of the youth are clearly portrayed in the scroll.

Unfortunately we do not possess any pictorial or narrative evidence from Japanese Buddhist nunneries that might suggest the development of a parallel genre of female homoeroticism.

The Tokugawa Period to World War II

If explicitly homosexual themes first entered Japanese art via Buddhist monasteries, it was in the worldly and sophisticated culture of the towns that these images were most fully elaborated. During the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), castle towns were erected throughout Japan and their samurai occupants, many of whom had been educated in Buddhist monasteries during their youth, carried on the transgenerational homosexual practices characteristic of these establishments.

At this time adult male samurai could establish bonds with young boys of samurai descent who had not yet gone through their coming of age ceremony. Known as *wakashudo* or "the way of youths," these transgenerational homosexual relationships were subject to a strict code of etiquette and celebrated in works of art and fiction, the most famous being Ihara Saikaku's *Great Mirror of Male Love* (1687).

The towns also supported large numbers of kabuki actors who, since women were banned from the stage, played both male and female roles. Both male players of female roles (*onnagata*) and the players of youthful male roles (*wakashu*) were available as passive sexual partners for adult men who could afford their services.

Popular at this time were kabuki guidebooks that contained pictures of the actors and praised their beauty, skill and grace, hinting at the post-performance favors that they also excelled in; some offered not only pictures of the actors' faces but also of their erect penises.

The development of woodblock printing made single sheet posters of these actors available even to men and women (for they were also available for hire to female patrons) of humble means. Saikaku's *Great Mirror* describes an elderly priest's hermitage in which every inch of the walls has been covered by these early versions of pin-up idols.

Most woodblock artists produced erotic prints known as *shunga* ("spring pictures") and many of them depict homosexual relations between both men and women. Sometimes, an adult male is depicted in a sexual tryst with both a youth and a woman and sometimes with an *onnagata* or man dressed as a woman, but the adult male is always depicted as the penetrative partner.

Women are sometimes depicted pleasuring themselves with a dildo or pleasuring both themselves and their female partner with a double-headed dildo. But, since the large majority of woodblock artists were male and their anticipated audience was also largely male, it is difficult to read these images as expressions of lesbian desire. There do not seem to be any representations dating from this time that depict women as partners for women outside this economy of male desire.

During the Meiji period (1868-1912) Japan turned towards the west in an effort to modernize. This meant

that aspects of Japanese culture deemed "uncivilized" by the censorious Victorian gaze had to be disposed of. Sexually explicit art in general and homosexual representations in particular went underground. Even the phallic stones that had guarded shrine entrances for generations were hidden away or, in many cases, destroyed.

However, this prudish period in Japanese history, which lasted until Japan's defeat in World War II, encouraged a number of artists to address sexual topics in a more self-consciously political manner. These included the artists of the MAVO group who, in the 1920s, played with gender identity in both their art and their lives, sometimes appearing cross-dressed.

Cross-dressing as a shock tactic has also been taken up by the contemporary artist Yasumasa Morimura who often plays with cross-dressed images of himself in his work.

Post World War II Art

It is not until after World War II that art that might be understood as "gay" in the Western sense developed. At this time, a boom in publishing took place and a number of erotic titles became available. Known as *hentai zasshi* (or "perverse magazines") they featured lurid tales and illustrations of a wide range of "paraphilias" including bestiality, pedophilia, bondage and both male and female homosexuality.

One such magazine, *Fuzoku kitan* ("Strange Stories of the Sex World"), featured the work of Go Mishima (1921-1989), who drew pictures of naked, sexually aroused men in a variety of bondage/discipline sadomasochistic situations and whose work has been exhibited in New York and published in the American S/M magazine *Drummer*.

Mishima (not to be confused with the author Yukio Mishima) went on to have a long career drawing for Japan's gay magazines, the first of which, *Barazoku* ("Rose Clan"), was published in 1971. Mishima drew images of men entirely unlike the feminine beautiful boys of the earlier tradition, instead focusing upon rough macho types with short hair and tattoos.

This macho style reached its full development in the work of gay artist Gengoroh Tagame (b. 1964) whose sadomasochistic manga (or illustrated novels) have been serialized in a number of Japan's gay magazines, most recently *G-Men*. There is now an extensive genre of gay manga art created by self-identified gay men in Japan.

However, the most prolific illustrators of male homosexual love scenes are not men but women, and they appear not in the gay press but in manga aimed at a young female audience. It is women manga illustrators and not gay men who have inherited the tradition of depicting "beautiful boys" in homosexual situations.

Beginning in the early 1970s with artists such as Moto Hagio, the genre known as "boy love" (*shonen'ai*) soon established itself as a favorite with Japanese women and remains popular today.

A much less extensive and far less graphic genre of "girls' love" (*shojo ai*) has also developed, although the creators of these manga, like those of the boy love genre, do not engage in identity politics and would not consider their illustrations to be of "lesbian sex," which in Japan still invokes images of women-women scenes in mainstream male pornography.

The long tradition of depicting homosexual and, from a Western perspective, gender non-normative acts and figures, is still alive and well today in Japanese culture. The less politicized nature of sexuality, particularly homosexuality, in Japan has meant that these representations are less segregated than in the West and are enjoyed by a broader audience.

However, there have been complaints from Japan's growing number of gay rights activists that images of

homosexuality in the media serve only to parody and distort real gay life.

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