ART AND OCCUPATION

Kitigawa Utamaro

Woman Weaving (or Weaving on a loom)
c1797/1798

An elegant young woman (bijin) sits at a loom (jibata) weaving a length of cotton, her right leg stretched out below the wooden frame and her left tucked beneath the seat [1]. Her toes peek out from under her black kimono, which is decorated with tiny dots arranged in large motifs and tied round her waist with a patterned sash (obi) [2]. Her sleek black hair is wrapped in a tenugui, while her anonymous pale white face is knowingly demure. The gentle tilt of her head, her slender arms and sinuous elongated pose create a sense of effortless graceful movement as her left hand delicately threads a boat-shaped wooden shuttle (hi) through the warp’s vertical threads, which are held tight in a thin bamboo frame (osa) by her right hand. The picture’s title runs down the right, the artist’s signature, Utamaro hisu (brush of Utamaro), down the left and the Kiwame censorship seal (signifying its approval by the authorities) at the bottom [3].

This brilliant polychrome image is an ukiyo-e or ‘painting of the floating world’ (a term derived from the Buddhist interpretation of man’s transitory life on earth) [4] in which artists portrayed the ever-changing world of the Japanese bourgeoisie [5]. Woman Weaving comes from a series of five prints, entitled Fujin tewaza ayatsuri kagami (Women’s Handicrafts: models of dexterity), in which Utamaro depicts ‘with a poise and understated eroticism’ the daily lives of the wives and daughters of Edo’s affluent merchant-class [6]. The ukiyo-e production process involved a highly skilled team (painter, block cutter, paper maker, printer and publisher) [7] and the use of seasoned cherry woodblocks to press successively up to a dozen differently coloured inks onto the same proof [8]. Over time ukiyo-e developed into complex creations of wit and social commentary, increasingly at odds with the ruling Tokugawa Shoguns, who after the unification of Japan in 1603 established Edo (now Tokyo) as their military and administrative headquarters (the Emperor and his Imperial Court stayed in Kyoto >200 miles away) [9]. During the ‘Edo period’ (1600–1868), the Tokugawa ruled with strict military discipline bringing peace and stability to Japan but isolation from the rest of the world, and Edo became transformed from a swampy village into one of the world’s largest and wealthiest cities with a population of a million people [10] earning it the title ‘Paris of the East’ [11].

Utamaro was one of the leading figures in the ukiyo-e movement but little is known about his birth or upbringing. His earliest works (c.1775) included illustrations for theatre playbills, collections of poems and book covers [12]. In 1788, he created the exquisite Picture Book of Selected Insects but during the next decade, he concentrated on the female form producing >2000 exotic and at times erotic (shunga) prints, which took their subjects from Edo’s large, government-licensed pleasure quarter (Yoshiwara). In 1804, Utamaro was sentenced to 50 days in handcuffs for violating the Shogun censorship laws. He died 2 years later [13] and was interred at Senkoji Temple (since relocated to Karasuyama after the Great Canto earthquake of 1923) [14]. The downfall of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1868) led to the recommencement of
world trade, enhanced by the opening of the Suez Canal and Japanese art flowed into Europe with considerable impact on the French artistic community particularly Monet, Degas, Lautrec and van Gogh [15]. The Japanese word for ‘work’ hataraku (a condition in which a human being can move) implies creative action [16], a concept embraced by Japanese quality programmes, which empowered the continuous improvement in European and US industry during the latter part of the 20th century provoking a ‘step change’ in behaviour for occupational health professionals in manufacturing and engineering [17]. This challenge now confronts their colleagues in the public sector [18]. Will they be prepared to unleash Shigeo Shingo’s (Japanese quality guru 1909–1990) ‘relentless barrage of “whys”’ and ‘pierce the clouded veil of thinking caused by the status quo’? [19]

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References