

connotation of being ‘twisted’, ‘out of kilter’ or ‘outlandish’. Among the definitions for *kabuki* in the *Vocabulario* of 1603, we find: ‘when weighing something, to carefully observe which way the scales tilt’, which is the root of the modern usage, namely ‘to tilt’ or ‘to incline’. Another early definition is ‘to go beyond accepted bounds, to be rash’. In all its uses the term denoted rebellion against conventional social and artistic attitudes, with a strong suggestion of a clash with norms of sexual behaviour comparable to that carried today by words such as ‘gay’ or ‘queer’.⁴ The *kabuki* impact on the art of the period is seen in distortion of shapes or poses, flamboyant decoration, and erotic suggestiveness. This set of aesthetic priorities is diametrically opposed to the kinds of art favoured for displays in reception rooms of the Ashikaga shoguns, in which Chinese calligraphy and monochrome paintings of sober taste were most highly prized, and frequently displayed with bronzes, ceramics, and lacquerware representing technical perfection, symmetry of form, and conservative patterning.

A new set of priorities in styles of *kazari*, or ‘decoration’, emerged in the painting and luxury objects commissioned by samurai patrons. Within a few years of the fall of Osaka Castle in 1615, which marked the end of the power of the family and followers of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98) and the grandiose architectural and artistic creations of the Momoyama period (1573–1615), heads of various painting workshops, including the main Kano branch, followed their Tokugawa patrons east to the new castle city, Edo. Kano artists in both Kyoto and Edo updated their repertory of themes to meet the demands of the new daimyo elite.

The so-called *Hikone Screeners*, long in the possession of a daimyo family, illustrates the new attitudes towards art among Kano atelier artists under samurai patronage.⁵ In the left of the screen a meticulous landscape in Chinese style characteristic of Kano academic painting contrasts with pleasure-seekers in a bordello, anticipating the figural painting that would dominate art in the Edo period. A remarkable feature of art of the Kan’ei era (1624–44) is that it so often shows men of the sword as picnickers, philanderers, and posers. The image of the young man of the *Hikone Screeners*, for instance, perfectly captures the *kabuki* aesthetic. As he turns to ogle an approaching courtesan the entire weight of his body is borne by a long curved sword, held by his left arm, which is twisted back to grasp the hilt. Balanced on one foot, he thrusts his hips out suggestively, casually resting one foot on the opposite calf. His right hand dangles a closed fan. The elegant contortions of the body are so precarious that his balance depends on a tensile sword and pendulous fan: opposing accoutrements of a man of action and leisure. If the sword slips, so does the posur. It is the ultimate *kabuki* posture, taken to preposterous, erotic swaggering.

Such representations of warriors coincidentally call to mind the ‘swagger portrait’ style of British painting in which aristocrats appear in pretentious, insolent, or boastful poses.⁶ Portraits created in the time of Charles I (r. 1625–49) by continental painters working in England such as Daniel Mytens (c. 1590–1647) or Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) are a reaction to conservative Protestant attitudes against

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

‘Twisted’ Poses: The *Kabuki* Aesthetic in Early Edo Genre Painting

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The new military elite in the seventeenth century ruled according to a Neo-Confucian ideology that advocated, in the interests of civic order, a class-based hierarchy of warriors at the top and merchants at the bottom. During the transition years of the early seventeenth century, a displaced generation of defeated warriors and their families had no place in the reconfigured political order. This marginalised population included gangs of street ruffians (*kabuki mono*) – in many cases masterless samurai (*yōmei*) – who carried out random acts of protest, pilferage, and violence. The *Vocabulario da Lingoa Japam*, a Japanese–Portuguese dictionary published by the Jesuit Mission Press in 1603, defined *kabuki mono* as ‘people who are highly eccentric, or who take license in their behaviour beyond normal bounds or who respond in an impulsive, furious manner’.¹ An image of *kabuki mono* fighting one another with halberds and long swords appears in *Uneme kabuki zōshi* (*Illustrated Tale of the Kabuki Dancer Uneme*), a pair of scrolls which otherwise portrays audiences enjoying elegantly costumed female dancers performing on outdoor stages.² The rowdies wear brightly coloured robes (unlike proper samurai), they grimace in anger and they twist their bodies in poses that signal their anti-establishment attitude. They strike macho poses, shoulders or chests bared to show off muscular bodies, resembling in some ways medieval sculptures of Buddhist guardian figures. Tightly coiled energy – the result of frustrated ambition or sexual tension – abounds in much of the art of this period when the social roles of samurai were being redefined.

Rebellion also expressed itself in what can be described as a *kabuki* aesthetic.³ The verb *kabuku* – from which the term *kabuki mono* derives – carried the pejorative

the vanity of portraiture. Painted at about the same time as the *Hikone Screen*, Mytens' 1629 portrait of the first Duke of Hamilton, a loyalist to Charles I, portrays an elegant young man with long tresses in a pale silk fitted waistcoat and trousers. He leans right arm akimbo on an ivory walking stick, wears a long sheathed sabre at his hip, dangles a tasselled hat from a white-gloved hand and has spurs on his white leather boots. Despite these emblems of a man of action, the portrait conveys the impression of an effete soldier manque.⁷ Analogously, in Kan'ei-era genre painting, portraying warriors in a mode unbecoming to their status represented a challenge to didactic Confucian attitudes about propriety in art.

Although the *kabuki* aesthetic can be applied to works in every media, as I further explain in the introduction to Section Two, pp. 114–15, this essay confines itself to its manifestation in paintings commissioned by the warrior elite that recorded Kabuki dances and scenes of samurai enjoying leisurely imported pursuits such as smoking tobacco and playing cards, which enjoyed widespread popularity at this time.

FROM KABUKI TO KABUKI

Kabuki as we know it today – a highly respectable 'traditional' theatre with male actors playing established roles in dramas with complex plots – did not emerge until the late seventeenth century. In its earliest manifestation, it was a dance theatre with female performers, whose dances and skits appealed to the warrior elite and commoner alike. The word for Kabuki drama is now properly written with three Chinese characters, 'song', 'dance', and 'skill', but it has a less flattering etymology related to *kabuku*. Kabuki often served as a front for prostitution, with spectators of both sexes and all ages enjoying the performances. Kabuki's founder, Izumo no Okuni, who claimed to be a priestess from Izumo Shrine, created quite a stir when she began dancing on the banks of the Kamo River in Kyoto. Audiences in the capital were long accustomed to the variety of religious and folk dances that she performed, but had never seen them interpreted in such a provocative, sexual manner. Okuni also began to improvise *kabuki odori*, 'twisted' or 'outlandish' dances, using movements and costumes associated with popular dances known as *haryū odori* ('floating with the wind' dancing).

Okuni's first recorded appearances in 1603 coincided with the appointment of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) as shogun and the beginning of the Tokugawa *bakufu* (military government) based in Edo. In a highly regulated social system, the conformist social agenda of the *bakufu* provoked the rule-breaking behaviour of Kabuki, and their histories inversely paralleled one another. As Donald Shively has documented, the confrontation between *bakufu* and Kabuki attitudes would continue until the last gasp of the shogunate in the mid-nineteenth century.⁸ Official curiosity about Okuni's activities even led to her being invited to give a public performance at Edo Castle in 1607.⁹ Women's Kabuki quickly found favour at all levels of society.

Within a few years of Okuni's debut, bordello owners set up or hired stages along the riverside in the Shijo district of Kyoto, and other prostitute-performers began to offer dance-skits in a similar style. After their conquest of the capital these prostitute-dancers entertained throughout Japan, even reaching the European trading outposts in Kyushu.

Richard Cocks, head of the English factory on Hirado Island in north-western Kyushu, recorded numerous occasions when he or other members of the company hired the services of *cabokues* or *cabokis*, as he referred to Kabuki dancers. He records on 15 December 1616 that William Adams (the inspiration for the Englishman in James Clavel's *Shogun*) invited the entire British delegation in Hirado to a banquet with entertainment provided by Kabuki dancers.¹⁰ A few weeks later, on the day after Christmas, they invited 'cabokis after supper ashore, who played and danced till after midnight, and then went away, being 8 women and 6 or 7 men.'¹¹ Even during the early stages of so-called 'women's Kabuki', young men were members of troupes, often performing in the guise of women to add to the tantalising transvestism of performances.

Gender ambiguity was a characteristic of the highly eroticised *kabuki* fashion, represented by the transvestite dress and gestures of Kabuki and by *shirabyōshi* – female performer-prostitutes who dressed in archaic male courtier costume. The Confucian scholar Hayashi Razan (1583–1657) assailed trends he observed in performances of the day: 'The men wear women's clothing, the women wear men's clothing, cut their hair and wear it in a man's topknot, have swords at their sides and carry purses. They sing base songs and dance vulgar dances; their lewd voices are clamorous, like the buzzing of flies and the crying of cicadas. The men and women sing and dance together.'¹² The final scene in the *Illustrated Tale of the Kabuki Dancer Uneme* shows a performer-prostitute identified in the text as Uneme performing a skit of the kind that had brought notoriety to Izumo no Okuni before her. Like the fop of the *Hikone Screen* she postures suggestively as she leans on a long sword. Once again, the *kabuki* pose incorporates a complex array of fashion signifiers. A short sword is tucked into her sash from which dangle showy pouches and lacquer *iwō*. The rosary hanging from her neck is not a sign of piety but a daring fashion statement. Christianity, tolerated and sometimes even promoted by the authorities during the sixteenth century, had been officially banned from 1614, when foreign missionaries were ordered to leave the country. Sword and cross, emblems of unbending authority, are mocked by a Kabuki dancer-prostitute.

Young women's Kabuki was outlawed by the authorities in 1629 because its link to prostitution was considered bad for public morals, and samurai were provoking unseemly fights over favourite performers. Though officially banned, evidence from surviving paintings and other documentary evidence suggest that the same variety of woman's Kabuki persisted through the early 1640s.¹³ The young women of the earliest period of Kabuki were initially replaced by teenage boys known as *wakashū*,

who also sold their sexual services to male clients to make a living.¹⁴ An official announcement reflects the state of affairs: 'To call Kabuki plays "Sarugaku" [No-style dances], and for the men to play as women and act voluptuously, is prohibited.'¹⁵ Eventually the authorities clamped down on young men's Kabuki as well. By the 1660s, adult male performers had to rely on their acting skills rather than sexual innuendo to captivate their audiences. As Gregory Pflugfelder has noted: 'Bakufu efforts to regulate gender onstage thus succeeded less in the suppression of eroticism than in its stylisation.'¹⁶ After women and teenage boys were banned from appearing onstage, the use of adult male actors to play female roles (*oyama* or *omagata*) led to the maturation of Kabuki as it is known today – a highly eroticised form of theatre art, but disassociated from the blatant proffering of sexual services.

AMUSEMENTS IN A MANSION

During the 1630s to 1650s, even when young men's Kabuki with its attendant prostitution was at its peak, most paintings of bordello scenes focused on women, gorgeously attired, as they entertained samurai patrons. There are, however, genre paintings of the Kan'ei era that suggest that there was also a new demand for paintings of male youths. Works such as *Amusements in a Mansion*, one of more than a score of similar screens surviving from the period, illustrates the daimyos' infatuation with youths (cat. 22). Screens of this type depict samurai clients with young male and female companions in an imaginary mansion. This particular pair of screens focuses on young men, to the almost complete exclusion of women.

It is not a coincidence that such paintings of dream dwellings – half brothel, half properly appointed residence – began to appear from about 1636 when the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu (r. 1623–51), reissued a more elaborate version of *Buke sho hattō* (*Regulations for Samurai Households*), a guide to samurai conduct, which regulated more stringently the management of daimyo residences. Iemitsu made it compulsory for daimyo, or feudal chieftains, (over 250 of them) to have at least two residences, one in their home province and another in Edo, which they would occupy according to a system of 'alternate attendance' (*sankin kōtai*). Wives and household staffs were to remain in the Edo residence while the men would travel back and forth (often in grand processions) between residences. Although intended to prevent provincial military rulers from building power bases that might undermine the shogunal hegemony, the regulations also changed the status of samurai mansions, which became locales of temporary power and transient occupancy. The unsettling loss of status is reflected in the topsy-turvy *kabuku* vision of *Amusements in a Mansion* in which the young have intimate access to senior members of the military elite and engage in activities that contravene policies established for society as a whole.

There were regulations specifically aimed at preventing young male Kabuki actor-prostitutes from accepting invitations to the residences of daimyo or wealthy

merchants. One official record of 1655 noted: 'Laws have been issued time after time that even if Kabuki actors are invited to feudal lords' residences, they must not go. Of course they must not wear sumptuous costumes . . . Minstrels, if invited to residences, must not do imitations of Kabuki, nor imitate the Shimabara style.'¹⁷ Knowledge of these sumptuary and behavioural prohibitions throws new light on artistic depictions of imaginary daimyo residences devoted to pleasure. Perhaps they are subversive and transgressive reactions to the new regulations. The garments of the young men and women have the bold, colourful, and elaborately embroidered patterns in which seventeenth-century fashion delighted. Several of the activities depicted – prostitution, card-playing, smoking tobacco – are ones that the shogunate was vainly trying to regulate. They record life according to a *kabuku* code of conduct: a life of flamboyance, flirtation, and fun, all expressed in forms of *kazari*.

A common feature of Kan'ei-era genre painting is the depiction of samurai and their companions enjoying board games or playing cards. By the early seventeenth century the use of the theme of the Four Accomplishments (music, board games, painting and calligraphy) had become completely assimilated into Japanese pictorial rhetoric at all levels. Frequently, however, scenes of men testing their skill at a game of go or plucking a *koto* were replaced by people of both sexes enjoying *suigoroku* (backgammon) and *shamisen* (a three-stringed musical instrument), as seen in the *Hikone Screen*. Imported card games became a new painting theme as well, as seen in a detail from *Amusements in a Mansion*.

Western-style playing cards – called *karuta*, derived from the Portuguese *carta* – had been introduced into Japan by Portuguese traders in the mid-sixteenth century. Before long they were produced locally, and came to be known as *Tenshō karuta* since they were first widely produced in the Tenshō era (1573–92).¹⁸ The types of cards depicted in these paintings are a later variety called *unsui karuta*, a term derived from the Portuguese words indicating the range of card values: *un* and *summo* – 'one' to the 'highest'. *Unsui karuta* were produced in larger decks, with seventy-five rather than forty-eight cards, and became popular during the Kan'ei era, approximately the same time that these paintings were created. The cards had an array of colourfully painted (later printed) figures and abstract patterns as seen in a selection from an early-seventeenth-century example of *unsui* cards (cat. 32). Some cards feature European aristocrats in fanciful court costume, on horseback and holding clubs; others, specifically *unsui* cards, depict subjects borrowed from East Asian mythology such as dragons, the Zen patriarch Bodhidharma, and four of the Seven Lucky Gods. The flamboyant costumes, the ambiguous gender of certain figures (moustached queens), and flattened representation of the costumes and bodily shapes coincidentally call to mind the depiction of figures in *Amusements in a Mansion*.

Card games, furthermore, unlike the traditional Japanese shell-matching games they partly replaced, had a more notorious *kabuku* aspect since, as in Europe, they were closely associated with gambling. Card games were often the targets of ordinances, but it was futile to try to regulate a pastime whose accessories are so portable and

easily concealed. Furthermore, like Kabuki, card-playing had insinuated itself into the innermost sanctums of power. In 1640 François Caron, director of the Dutch factory in Dejima from 1629 to 1641, noted in his journal, 'We were unable to acquire the Portuguese *carta* that the prime minister wanted to present to the King's wet-nurse, at her request. So instead we presented them with two packs of Dutch cards.'¹⁹ The 'King' in this case refers to the shogun Iemitsu, and his wet-nurse was Kasuga no Tsubone (1579-1643), who eventually gained control of the entire women's quarters (*ōoku*) of Edo Castle. A year before, trade with Portugal had been discontinued, so Iberian cards were no longer available. A few years later, in 1646, the *bakufu* banned card-playing completely, citing its harmful influence but, as in the past, the ban was completely ineffectual.

Other common signifiers of the pleasure quarters were pipes and smoking kits that included tobacco holders, ashtrays, and lighting implements. Like cards, tobacco entered Japan in the sixteenth century along with missionaries and traders from the West. In 1615, Cocks wrote an entry in his journal concerning a visit by an official of the Matsura fiefdom, under whose jurisdiction Hirado belonged:

Gonosco-dono [the *goni no sake*, or provisional commander] came to the English House, and amongst other talk told me that the King [the shogun Hiderada] had sent him word to burn all the tobacco, and to suffer none to be drunk in his government, it being the Emperor's pleasure it should be so; and the like order given throughout all Japan . . . It is strange to see how these Japanese, men, women, and children, are besotted in drinking that herb; and not ten years since it was in use first.²⁰

Tobacco, at first only available as a luxury import, was beginning to be produced locally by 1605. Cocks's comments convey how widespread 'drinking' tobacco had become within a decade of the first domestic cultivation in around 1605, and how quickly it invited official disapproval.

As with Kabuki and cards, there were many attempts to restrict tobacco, but it was hard to control something so addictive. There had been an attempt to ban pipes (*kiseru*) as early as 1610, after incidents of *kabuki mono* miscreants using the long-stemmed pipes as weapons. In their more common use as smoking implements, long-stemmed pipes became the perfect emblems of leisure in paintings of brothel scenes. Pipes of the early seventeenth century, known as 'candock-shaped pipes' (*kobane-gata kiseru*), had exaggerated curved metal fittings attached to the bowl – yet another manifestation of the *kabuki* aesthetic. A tiered lacquer box decorated with designs of pipes records this shape of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (cat. 33). As the seventeenth century progressed, pipe stems progressively lost their conspicuous curved shapes and by the late Edo period they had changed to a rounded bowl attached to a perfectly straight stem (cats 104, 105, 121).²¹ Just in front of the card-playing scene in *Amusements in a Mansion*, a young attendant carries a tray and a pipe with curved stem, and an example of the special variety

of pipe designed for outdoor excursions that featured an extra-long stem is seen in *Picnic under Cherry Blossoms* (cat. 23). The use of such pipes was in part affectionate: if someone really wanted to enjoy the taste of tobacco, they would not puff on a *kiseru* with a two- or three-foot long stem. As Lord Henry quips in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 'A cigarette [unlike a cigar] is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?'²² The expectation of pleasure is more exquisite than its consummation – one of the basic premises of brothel decorum.

In both *Picnic under Cherry Blossoms* and *Amusements in a Mansion* people enjoy the popular dances, a less rebellious form of the *fūryū odori*, which had a generation before given rise to the more notorious Kabuki dances. In the former scene, a woman with a stupendous mound of hair dances on a red wool carpet and, judging by the expression on her patron's face, must also be serenading him with a scandalous song. To her right another performer strums a *shamisen* with her neck crooked sideways in yet another variation of a 'twisted' *kabuki* pose. The left screen of *Amusements in a Mansion* includes a frenetic scene of group dancing. Most participants are young men, each with one or two swords tucked into his sash. A woman with a fancy looped coiffure is dancing in the centre. To convey the sensation of animated dance, artists created a convention by which the twisting of the body, the motion of the bent knee and upper torso and the fluttering of sleeves are signified by abstracted forms reduced to an interacting geometry of parallel *s-curves*, a flattened matrix of curved shapes. A man with a hand-drum jigs along with the rest and two women strum long-necked *shamisen*, a musical instrument which by this time was closely associated with Kabuki and the pleasure quarters.²³ The women sit on stools with curved feet, draped with exotic tiger and leopard skins, signifiers of a special realm of pleasure and escape where normal rules of decorum are breached.

Ultimately such paintings present realms concerned entirely with surfaces of costume, make-up, and hedonistic emotions. Like painted figures on playing cards the inhabitants are regally dressed, in artificially contorted poses, and perfectly flat. Indeed, playing cards are the perfect metaphor for the world of the utopian mansion of pleasure: a house of cards, which may collapse without a moment's warning. In the real world of daimyo politics, the transitional turmoil of early seventeenth-century politics and art was being displaced by a new social and political order, accompanied by a new paradigm of *kazari*. The 'twisted' depictions of Kabuki dancers gave way to a more refined and subtler eroticism inherent, for example, in the depictions of Kanbun beauties, whose dance poses are characterised by a gentle contrapposto (cat. 57). By the end of the seventeenth century, genre screens would no longer present activities set in fictive residences of daimyo: the locales of merriment would shift to real bordellos. As the *pax Tokugawa* lent stability to an incipient nation state, the rebellious *kabuki* aesthetic, so prominent in early genre painting, gave way to one of less conspicuous resistance.

NOTES

Source: Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere (ed.), *Kazari: Decoration and Display in Japan 15th–19th Centuries* (British Museum Press, 2002), 42–49.

1. Under the entry for *cabuqimono* [*kabuki mono*] in Rodrigues 1960. I am indebted to Janice Katz for providing a reproduction of the relevant page from an edition of the *Vocabulario* in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
2. For reproductions and a detailed description of the set of scrolls, see *Kabuki zukan* 1964. See my commentary in Hickman 1996, no. 33.
3. The word *kabuku* is used in a similar fashion in Tokugawa Art Museum 1997.
4. It has been suggested that in one of its meanings, 'to bend forward', the verb *kabuku* has specific connotations of male-male sex. See Jackson 1989.
5. Before being transferred to the Hikone Castle Museum the screen had long been in possession of the Ii daimyo clan, who were head of the Hikone fiefdom (the source of the screen's popular name). The screen is described in detail in Okudaira 1996. See also my comments in Carpenter 1998, pp. 378–81 and cat. no. 233.
6. For a discussion of this style of portraiture, see Wilton 1992.
7. In another portrait Van Dyck even depicts the Duke posed in full armour; see Wheelock *et al.* 1991, pp. 323–4, no. 87.
8. Shively 1968.
9. See Elisonas 1994, p. 263.
10. Thompson 1883, p. 220. I thank my colleague Tim Screech for bringing these and other references to my attention. See also Shively 1978, p. 55, n. 9.
11. Thompson 1883, p. 223 (I have transcribed the entry using modern English spelling).
12. Shively 1968, p. 232.
13. Elisonas 1994, p. 266.
14. For a discussion of *wakashu*, see Pflugfelder 1999, pp. 26–34.
15. Translation adapted from Shively 1968, p. 237, n. 18.
16. Pflugfelder 1999, p. 116.
17. Shively 1968, p. 246.
18. For a history of playing cards in Japan, see Murai 1984.
19. *Diaries of the Heads of the Dutch Factory in Japan*, 8 September 1640; cited and discussed in Murai 1984, pp. 210–11.
20. Thompson 1883, pp. 34–5 (7 August 1615). Since drops of coagulated nicotine formed at the mouthpiece and were ingested along with smoke, the verb to 'drink' (*nomu*, in Japanese) was often used instead of 'smoking'.
21. The evolution of the shapes of *kiseru* is comprehensively documented through illustrations of hundreds of surviving examples in *Nihon no kitsuen dōgu* 1966, pp. 3–85.
22. Wilde 1985, p. 89. I thank Seamus Curran for reminding this ex-smoker of this little nugget of *kabuku* wisdom.
23. For a detailed history of the *shamisen* and its music, see Malm 1959, pp. 185–212.

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