



NUANCES OF BEAUTY – YOSHITOSHI’S CONCEPT OF WOMEN AS A REFLECTION OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY¹

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with the personality and art of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), one of the last ukiyo-e masters in Japan. Educated before Japan opened to the world, Yoshitoshi absorbed the best of his country’s traditions as well as inspirations from the West. Developing his career in the decades of rapid change in Japanese culture and society, Yoshitoshi also mastered new trends and brought stunning originality into the field of woodblock printing. This article mainly concentrates on Yoshitoshi’s treatment of the motive of women on the background of contemporary political and social atmosphere of post-reformation Japan.

KEY WORDS: Tsukioka Yoshitoshi – ukiyo-e – Japanese woodblock printing – women in ukiyo-e – Western influences – Meiji newspaper illustration – Dutch graphics – role of women.

Tsukioka Yoshitoshi³ (1839–1892) represents an artist on the verge of two eras. Born into the late Edo period and educated in a classical way in the studio of Kuniyoshi⁴, he started his professional artistic career very shortly before the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Yoshitoshi’s artistic taste has been thus formed both by the pre-reformation studio of Kuniyoshi, as well as by the dynamic and politically turbulent years of the Meiji reforms. As a disciple of Kuniyoshi, Yoshitoshi was educated in the style of the famous Utagawa School, famous for its production of various types of woodblock prints, including portrayal of beauties, actors and natural sceneries. Kuniyoshi himself

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³ A very convenient and easily accessible overview of the large oeuvre of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi is available in the on-line *catalogue raisonné*: URL <<http://www.yoshitoshi.net/>> [cit.2013-02-19].

⁴ The complex oeuvre of Utagawa Kuniyoshi is well summarized in the on-line *catalogue raisonné*: URL <<http://www.kuniyoshiproject.com/>> [cit.2013-02-19].

was a very inventive artist who formed a brand new category of prints, *musha-e*, depicting fighters and warriors (Segi 1985: 26). This new type was enormously influential for the young Yoshitoshi who at first joined his master in drawing famous fighters in legendary combats with great sense of dynamism and attention to the realism of depiction of violence. Thanks to Kuniyoshi's inventiveness and openness to various sorts of inspiration, it was mainly his studio that produced the most important descendants, while the students of other Utagawa artists, like Hiroshige or Kunisada, did not really manage to overshadow their teachers.

After spending his apprentice years in Kuniyoshi's studio in the 1850s, Yoshitoshi started his own professional career around 1860. Five years later he had already produced two major successful series and was listed among the 10 most popular artists in Edo. Especially in the beginning, the artist drew much inspiration from his master's studio. Kuniyoshi was known as an admirer of caricature as well as a collector of Western prints, especially Dutch graphics. He would allow his students access to this collection as well as he emphasized the importance of drawing from life models. Kuniyoshi's approach was thus truly modern in comparison to other schools where life drawing was hardly ever practiced (Van Den Ing, Schaap 1992: 20). The combination of Western inspiration (mainly perspective and shading techniques) enabled the young Yoshitoshi to formulate an artistic language of his own, leading from dynamic fighting scenes of his beginnings to a gradually smoother and more refined approach to the narration of his images.

In 1868 Yoshitoshi witnessed the bloody Battle of Ueno (Keyes, Kuwayama 1980: 20). This experience led to a growing amount of realistic details in his work and eventually it opened the phase of his brutal prints. For many, Yoshitoshi's name is associated mainly with this kind of art. His warriors and ghosts with splashes of blood and cruelty in its most drastic form are often considered his trademark. In reality, the brutal phase was most probably a reaction to the enormous changes in the political and social life of the period. The closing years of Edo period brought much insecurity and economical depression which led to the increase of explicit violence in arts (woodcut prints as well as the theatre). On top of that, Yoshitoshi's work for newspaper forced him to concentrate often on primarily violent motives, as we shall see later in more detail. However, the artist was not simply interested in violence *per se*, but rather concentrated on the psychological level of it. The fully mature compositions he produced towards the end of his life reflect a deeper kind of understanding of human emotions. Yoshitoshi's brutality-phase has thus been transformed into a rather sophisticated liking of the mysterious and the occult. Edo and even Meiji Japan was very much obsessed with occultism, ghosts were a popular theme and it was generally believed they not only exist but often interfere with the world of the living. Even Yoshitoshi described several meetings with ghosts, one of them being during a sketching trip in the countryside around Shinagawa. Spending the night in a low-class hotel together with his friend the artist Kobayashi Eitaku, Yoshitoshi saw a ghost of a skinny young girl. The next morning he learned that a girl has committed a suicide in that very room (Van Den Ing, Schaap 1992: 14). Therefore, as we shall see later, there is no wonder Yoshitoshi was so convincing when portraying ghosts not only in his individual works, but also in his newspaper prints. Various encounters with ghosts were considered a perfectly normal part of everyday reality of the time.

Yoshitoshi's career has been interrupted twice by serious nervous breakdowns. The first of them took place in 1872–73, it was most probably caused by a combination of malnutrition and overwork. It is most probable that Yoshitoshi has been a man of great inner sensibility although he certainly wasn't an easy person to deal with. When going through his work it is evident he was smart, educated and sensitive. His inner psychological inclinations have probably played a significant role in his two breakdowns, but at the same time enabled the artist to gain a deeper insight into the stories he depicted. His heroes are the result of the capability of a deeper introspection and a considerable psychological insight.

When recovered, Yoshitoshi celebrated by changing his first name to Taiso, literally meaning the Great Resurrection. Shortly after, the artist concentrated on newspaper illustration which was a major success. He was very well paid and his collaboration with the newspaper enabled him to lead a decent life, own a house and run teaching lessons his own studio (Segi 1985:48,49). His biggest competitor in newspaper illustration was the artist Yoshiiku who worked for Tōkyō Nichinichi Shinbun. In the beginning of his newspaper career with Yūbin Hōchi Shinbun, Yoshitoshi had to portray current events which were often murders or acts of violence. Later he worked for Yamato Shinbun where he produced a series of exclusive prints depicting great personalities of modern times which led to the constitution of what was later to become his mature style.

During the 1880s Yoshitoshi enjoyed the reputation of one of the most popular artists of his days. This decade is characterised by his full artistic maturity resulting in the creation of the artist's most precious series: Newly Selected Brocade Pictures – *Shinsen azuma nishiki-e* (1885), Lives of Modern People – *Kinsei jimbutsu shi* (1886), New Forms of Thirty-six Ghosts – *Shingata sanjūrokkaisen* (1887) and finally One Hundred Aspects of the Moon – *Tsuki hyakushi* (1885–92). He was well off enough to enjoy the freedom to choose topics he found attractive. Among them the traditional Kabuki and Noh theatre played a key role. Yoshitoshi created billboards, lantern illustrations and stage sets for Kabuki plays, also exclusive portraits of actors, who were often his close friends. His One Hundred Aspects of the Moon series and a set of vertical diptychs, among others, often deal with stories of Noh or Kabuki plays (Keyes, Kuwayama 1980: 14). Yoshitoshi even took classes in *utai*, the recitation of the Noh theatre, and often turned the texts of *utai* into main themes of his prints. Although the portrayal of actors has been typical for the Utagawa School for many generations, what Yoshitoshi did opened a whole new dimension. He did not restrict his creativity to portraiture of Kabuki actors, as it used to be practiced by others, but rather devoted himself to the study of the sophisticated Noh theatre. The choice of stories Yoshitoshi portrayed shows how deep his interest in the theatre was. Yoshitoshi's comprehension and interpretation of Noh demonstrate clearly that he was extremely gifted not only artistically but also intellectually.

Unlike many other artists of the *ukiyo-e* tradition, Yoshitoshi discovered a way of presenting his heroes as true individuals with specific psychological features reflecting the depth of their experience. Probably thanks to his own encounter with psychological disorder, Yoshitoshi was extremely good in portraying emotional distress of various kinds. Hence his early prints of explicit violence have later been overshadowed by the refined depictions of his mature series. Inspired by Noh, Yoshitoshi mastered the use of symbols and allusions to achieve the right atmosphere of *yūgen*, fittingly described by Kuwayama as “a sense of mystery, passive in its tranquillity and detachment” (Keyes,

Kuwayama 1980: 14). Yoshitoshi's oeuvre therefore reflects not only the technological advances of printmaking and of combining Japanese and Western artistic approach, but most importantly the artist skilfully uncovers the inner spiritual and philosophical journey of the modern Japanese soul.

The concept of Women

Yoshitoshi himself was a very turbulent character. Most of his relationships with women ended up as a catastrophe. Some say he was actually a homosexual having various liaisons with his male students. Many also suggest he required cruelty as part of his sexual life. No matter which version is more likely, his work ensure us Yoshitoshi must have been not only complicated, but primarily a perceptive and thoughtful person.

The role of women in his work is not easy to summarize. The following text will attempt at demonstrating several of the roles that women played in Yoshitoshi's prints.

Women as victims

In his series called Twenty-Eight Famous Murders with Accompanying Verse – *Eimei nijūhasshūku* (1866–67), Yoshitoshi worked in his early style, which was yet very violent, emphasizing the primary level of physical cruelty (Segi 1985: 128, 129). The whole of the 1860s period is typical for Yoshitoshi's interest in depicting explicit violence. In many series from this time women play the passive role of victims. Yoshitoshi shows primarily strong and powerful men and accents their vigor and might, while women are violated by them in the most vivid way. On some images of these brutal murders we can see the long hair of the women symbolizing their femininity and beauty, while the men are equipped with swords and are dominating the women with their force. Of course we may also interpret these scenes as sexual references, probably not far from Yoshitoshi's own intimate liking. Yoshitoshi will return to this explicit depiction of violence on women several more times during his career, as we will see later when talking about his newspaper prints. The vividness of these early prints also has a strong connection to the Kabuki theatre. In the Twenty-Eight Murders series, for example, most of the stories come from the Kabuki stage. Unlike the contemplative Noh, Kabuki is a theater full of life, color and action. Kabuki plays were written to charm the spectator with their moving yet dynamic stories, while at the same time their staging was made as stunning as possible in order to truly entertain the viewers. Many of the Kabuki special effects were meant to basically take the spectator's breath away. Yoshitoshi managed to translate these effects in to the visual language of the prints. When looking at his early series, we may be shocked by the explicitness of his depiction, but in fact this explicitness captures perfectly the popular and scandalously vivid sensibility of that sort of Kabuki plays.

Probably one of the most famous prints from the Twenty-Eight Murders series is the picture called *Inada Kayūzō Shinsuke Murders the Kitchen Maid* from 1867. Here we watch the merciless murderer as he stabs his victim, who is already all covered in blood. The victim is a partly naked woman, being tightened up in a kind of *bondage* and hung upside down from the ceiling. Here the artist has used all means to demonstrate the overpowering strength of the man over the completely paralyzed woman. Her long hair and naked breasts add to the sexual ambiguity of the image. The vivid streams of blood however ensure the viewer that what is happening in the picture is not a mere sexual game but a serious act of a heartless murder.

In 1885 Yoshitoshi returned to the motive of the hanging woman in his vertical print *The Lonely House on Adachi Moor – Adachigahara hitotsuya no zu*. Here again we encounter the motive of a beautiful young woman hanging upside down. Here, however, no blood is shown. In the 1880s the artist has already passed from his early violent depictions towards his mature phase, therefore he did not need the explicit portrayal of blood and opened wounds. Instead, he shows us what precedes the violence itself. The story of the Adachi Moor comes from a tale called *The hag of Adachigahara*, which describes a cannibalistic old woman who used to kill and devour travelers, especially pregnant women (Segi 1985: 144, pl. 49; Keyes, Kuwayaya 1980: 29; Van der Ing, Schaap 1992: 40). Indeed, what Yoshitoshi shows is a pregnant woman, with her large belly and breasts naked. Below her sits the old hag sharpening a huge knife with which she plans to kill her victim. Most interestingly the cruel murderer here is a woman, with her breasts uncovered as well. Her looks are however rather repulsive therefore we cannot say this print has a sexual connotation in connection to the fact that two women with their breasts and bellies naked are depicted here. Although this picture has a frightening macabre quality to it, it shows clearly the shift Yoshitoshi made from the superficial interest in blood to a more in-depth analysis of the atmosphere of crime as well as a closer psychological observance of the depicted characters.

Women as warriors and leaders

However, Yoshitoshi did not only portray women as weak victims. When depicting famous female historical or legendary figures, he employed all his skill to show women as victorious leaders. An example of this comes from 1865, from a series called *Famous Fights Between Brave Men – Eimei kumiuchi zoroi*. Here the female warrior Tomoe Gozen sets up a victorious fight against her love's enemy. Tomoe is completely dressed in armor, we see nothing feminine at all in the way she is dressed. Therefore here it's again the hair that plays the key role. The long hair sweeping in the air identifies Tomoe as a female and adds a kind of elegance to her movement. The hair also gives an elegant diagonal accent to the composition. Strength and beauty work together in perfect unison. There are several literary versions to the character of Tomoe Gozen. The most reliable source is probably *Heike Monogatari* (Kodansha III. 1983: 124), the famous 13th century military romance, which describes Tomoe's love affair with Minamoto no Yoshinaka, whom she even accompanied to battles. An interesting moment comes towards the end of his life when Yoshinaka fled Kyōto in 1184, taking Tomoe with him. However, when he was in danger of being captured, Yoshinaka urged Tomoe to leave him as he would feel embarrassed if discovered with a woman. According to *Heike Monogatari*, Tomoe agreed to leave, yet she at least demonstrated her anger and her power one last time by decapitating a trespassing enemy, thus showing her vigor was as effective as a man's would be. (Kodansha VIII. 1983: 73)

A much later series *Mirror of Famous Generals of Japan – Dai nippon meisho kagami* (1876 – 1882) shows another strong female character, the legendary empress Jingū who was probably most famous for her conquest of Korea (Kodansha IV. 1983: 59). Yoshitoshi shows her here on her way to Korea in a determined pose. Dressed in feminine clothes and with her hair beautifully arranged, Jingū holds a sword and demonstrates her position of power. Yoshitoshi has portrayed Jingū several times during his prolific career. However, basically all the depictions of her keep the same honorific approach, showing the empress as a young and beautiful lady adorned with charming dignity.

Another depiction of a woman of power is the legendary Oiko from the 1875 series *Mirror of Beauties Past and Present – Kokon hime kagami*. Here a gentler style of Yoshitoshi is shown, one that he developed in the later years of this career. Oiko, a village girl famous for her physical strength, is depicted with elegance as she wins over the man who tried to challenge her. Her uncovered bosom accents her feminine beauty. Even the way she holds the hand of her enemy is very elegant and somehow charming. The expression of Oiko's face makes us feel as if winning over a strong man was the easiest and most natural thing for her to do. From the artistic point of view, we should also notice the depiction of hair on the man's hand, and the wrinkle on his forehead. The hair and the wrinkle are portrayed in a very lively way, as if Yoshitoshi was drawing grass or the branches of a tree. This way of drawing is typical for Yoshitoshi's mature style, where his depiction of hair, skin and fabrics resembles strongly vegetative shapes of nature.

Women and politics in newspaper illustration

Between the years 1875–76, Yoshitoshi worked for *Yūbin hōchi shinbun* as an illustrator of contemporary events (Keyes, Kuwayama 1980: 11). The series of prints he created is usually referred to simply as *Shinbun Nishiki-e*, colored-prints newspaper illustrations. These prints were added as supplements, or *furoku*, for subscribers. This series features a broad variety of topics like political themes, crime, public interest, and even ghost stories. Therefore the depiction of women within the newspaper series also ranges from very calm to strongly violent. We encounter women in a rather positive social role, like the geisha who pleads her young customer to leave her and return to his studies in order not to ruin himself financially. But we also see a depiction of aggressive unlicensed prostitutes fighting against a policeman who came to stop their business. Women, especially in the company of policemen, are here mostly portrayed either as saved victims (a girl being saved from her brothers, who attempted to drown her; a young woman being saved from a rape-attempt at a local cemetery) or furious aggressors (mainly various police raids on prostitutes). Among the most interesting topics would certainly be the depiction of the widow Fuku giving birth to a child on her way to the courthouse with five others for arraignment for theft. Yoshitoshi's stunning depiction of the woman in birth-giving pain opens a wide social topic. In his depiction the viewer is given an overview of the situation with its full ambiguity. We see the woman in pain and we cannot but feel with her. The policeman, the symbol of the state's power over the woman's destiny, bends over to her as if trying to help. His kindly gesture is nevertheless dominated by a rather dreadful image of the string he holds, attached to the woman, degrading her to the position of a dog on a leash. The facial expression of the accomplice women in the back is full of helplessness. There's probably nothing much they can do to help neither themselves, nor the mother-to-be. As if this woman's situation symbolised the birth-pains of the whole society in the first decade after the Meiji Restoration.

The extremes of vulnerability versus power are well shown on another two prints from the series. First of them shows two women of Nojiri, who were set upon while travelling, robbed, tied to trees, and finally eaten by wolves. Their depiction is one of the most violent ones in the whole series, and in the whole of Yoshitoshi's oeuvre. The absolute extremity of this image shows the two women as the most terribly tortured creatures imaginable with their limbs being torn to pieces as they are eaten alive by wolves. With such cruelty, it is even hard to imagine that such a picture would have

been welcomed by the newspaper subscribers as a bonus. However, a similar kind of violence can be seen on another print showing two amateur prostitutes fighting over a client in Honjo. Here it is not the cruelty of animals, but the violence of the women themselves that strikes us. The two prostitutes don't hesitate to bite their customer and assault his face aggressively while couple of dogs watch the scene from afar. Strikingly enough, the dogs represent no danger at all in comparison to the women.

The artistic style of Yoshitoshi's newspaper illustration is somewhat cruder and less refined than his later mature print series. However, while working on them Yoshitoshi has developed several compositions that he later re-discovered and used for his more sophisticated prints. One of the newspaper prints shows Arai Tokichi as he hurls a rock at his lover Ohana in a fit of jealousy and strikes her in the groin. The composition dominated by the falling body of the lady can be compared to a print called Moon of the Asano River (1885) from Yoshitoshi's most famous series One Hundred Aspects of the Moon – *Tsuki Hyakushi* (Album sheet no. 75).



Fig. 1: Album sheet 75 – Moon of pure snow at Asano river, series One Hundred Aspects of the Moon (Tsuki Hyakushi), 1885, 35.4 x 24.2 cm.

Another newspaper print shows the wife of Sangoro, the owner of a noodle shop in Kawaguchi, as she scalds her husband's face with boiling water. A similar composition with the accent on the act of throwing a dish of liquid can be seen on a print showing Matsunaga Hisahide before committing *seppuku* (the ritual suicide) from the 1883 series Yoshitoshi's Brave Warriors – *Yoshitoshi musha burui* (inv. no. 36226). Therefore we may say that Yoshitoshi's newspaper prints were not only important as a source of information about contemporary society, but they also influenced Yoshitoshi aesthetically and enabled him to develop an artistic approach that would later lead to some of his most astonishing works.

Women as mediators of pleasure and desire

In his series of 1877, called Collection of Desires – *Mitate tai zukushi*, Yoshitoshi presents ladies as mediators of desires – not necessarily only in the intimate sense (Van den Ing, Schaap 1992: 25,26). This series features young women, each one expressing a certain desire. Among these desires we find physical ones, like: "I want to sleep", "I want to get a massage", "I want to wash my hands", but also more symbolic ones: "I want the tree to bloom early", "I want to see it in my dreams" or "I want to go abroad". Beautiful women are shown as semi-figures; they all wear colorful clothes with richly decorated details. Yoshitoshi shows a great deal of invention in the way he portrays each desire. "I want to sleep", for example, shows a lady reclining on her side and looking at her own reflection (Keyes, Kuwayama 1980: 13,15, fig. 5). This composition allows us to see her *en face* as well as from the back. So we can admire the beauty of her face and at the same time the elegance of her complicated hair-design, seen from the back. Most interestingly, a similar composition was used by the Belgian artist Alfred Stevens's painting on 1872–75 called *La Parisienne Japonaise*⁵. Here we encounter a European beauty dressed in kimono and facing the mirror in a way that we can see her face and the back of her head in the same way as in Yoshitoshi's print. Although these two artists could never meet, the aesthetic approach they chose is alike. Here we are therefore not dealing with any possible direct influence, rather what we are looking at is a similar artistic approach, a likewise sensibility, demonstrated equally by two artists of a very different cultural background. We shall now examine further the theme of reflection which plays an important role in Yoshitoshi's work as well as in the Western tradition.

Mirroring reflections

The motif of the reflection is a highly symbolic motif. In Europe the motif has very old history, dating at least back to the Greek myth of Narcissus who fell in love with his own reflection that he saw in the water. Not aware of the fact that what he sees is just a reflection of himself, and unable to leave this beautiful sight, he finally died. The myth of Narcissus and its numerous variations were then exceedingly popular throughout the Renaissance and Baroque. The mirror and the power of one's reflection was finally recognised as a number one theme in the second half of the 19th century. In this era, it was not primarily the moral aspect of this motif that made it so attractive. It was rather its psychological depth as the late 19th century society was reshaping itself, redefining its meaning. New attention was given to the individual and his own relation

⁵ The painting is part of the collections of Musée d'art moderne et d'art contemporain, Liège, Belgium.

to himself. The reflection of Narcissus was not only perceived as a reflection of physical beauty. Rather it was now a symbol of truly reflecting oneself, of deeper introspection.

To remind us of the European tradition of depicting reflection, there are several paintings we may look at. Peter Paul Rubens painted his famous “Toilet of Venus” in c.1613⁶. Here, just like on the Yoshitoshi print “I want to sleep”, we see Venus primarily from the back. Her face looks at us only from the reflective surface of the mirror. The “toilet of Venus” of Diego Velazquez (c.1650) employs very much the same compositional principle⁷.

Later in the 19th century, the psychological depth of reflection has been employed by various artists among whom we may choose Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) as an example. His numerous versions of the drawing called „Avec Grégoire le Roy, mon coeur pleure d’autrefois“ of 1889 (contemporary with Yoshitoshi’s work) show precisely the kind of a typical symbolist treatment of the topic. Here a girl’s face is seen in profile as her lips gently kiss the girl’s own reflection in a round mirror⁸. In the mirror’s background we see a bridge over a calm river. Gradually, the river’s surface waves transform into the outline of the mirror itself. The drawing’s atmosphere is that of strong melancholy and quiet introspection.

Another enigmatic work of the period, also contemporary with Yoshitoshi, is Eduard Manet’s “Un bar aux Folies-Bergere”, 1882⁹. Here the waitress Suzon, who was a real person, is seen from the front, but we see her back side fully reflecting in a large mirror in the background. Thanks to the mirror, we see not only her backside, but we are also exposed to what she sees. We are enabled to look at the world with her eyes. Her truth, as she sees it, is revealed to us.

We may now have a look on some examples of Yoshitoshi’s treatment of the reflection motif. We shall concentrate on the story of Taira Koremochi who bravely vanquished the demon of Mount Togakushi. The legendary story depicted was meant to take place in the eleventh century, when Taira no Koremochi, the Heike clan warrior, hunted deer during autumn in the Shinano mountains. Suddenly he saw a beautiful maiden surrounded by her maidservants who joyfully invited him to join them in merry celebrations. All of a sudden Koremochi was struck by a strong fatigue and fell asleep to dream of Hachiman, the god of war. In his dream a messenger from Hachiman appeared to tell Koremochi that the lady was actually an evil demon intending to kill and devour the warrior. The messenger Takeuchi gave Koremochi an enchanted sword which would help him to get rid of the demon. This story was also dramatized for the Noh theatre in a play called Momijigari, and Yoshitoshi’s friend Ichikawa Danjūrō IX starred in an adaptation of the play for Kabuki.

Yoshitoshi portrayed the Momijigari story in his New Forms of Thirty-Six Ghosts – *Shingata sanjūrokkaisen* series of 1889–92. Here he used a composition taken almost

⁶ The painting is part of the permanent exposition of the Liechtenstein Museum, Vienna, Austria. URL <<http://www.palaisliechtenstein.com/en/home.html>> [cit. 2013-02-12]

⁷ The painting is part of the permanent exposition of the National Gallery, London, UK. URL <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/diego-velazquez-the-toilet-of-venus-the-rokeby-venus*/x/-1032/y/-754/z/5> [cit.2013-02-23]

⁸ Some of the versions of the motive and the history of their exhibiting can be seen at: URL <http://www.eclairment.com/spip.php?page=imprimer&id_article=1618> [cit. 2013-02-23]; URL <<http://www.boongallery.be/PrintObjectPDF.aspx?objectid=445380&dealerid=617>> [cit. 2013-02-23]

⁹ Since 1934 the painting is exhibited in Courtauld Gallery, London. URL <<http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/gallery/collections/paintings/imppostimp/manet.shtml>> [cit. 2013-02-15]

exactly from his teacher Kuniyoshi¹⁰. The composition itself is very calm, almost meditative, as Koremochi gazes into the bowl of water to see the reflection of the demon. As it was believed in Japan, as well as in China, a mirror has the power to display the true soul of whoever looks in it; therefore foxes and demons appearing in human form can be uncovered by finding their reflection in a mirror or, as in case of Yoshitoshi, in a mirroring surface of the water. The reflection therefore plays a crucial role here. It is only the reflecting power of the mirror that uncovers the true identity of the maiden demon. Here, like in the case of Suzon, the truth is hidden in the mirror. The outer character we see – a beautiful maiden, a nice looking waitress – is nothing but pretend, an illusion. The truth lies behind this image. In case of Koremochi's maiden, the truth is her demon-like nature. In case of Suzon, the truth is her "inner self", her psychological inside, the world seen "through her eyes", which we can only understand thanks to the reflection.

Another print of Yoshitoshi's depicting the same topic of Momijigari comes from 1887 (inv. no. 36371 in the Náprstek Museum).

This print comes from a series of vertical prints (consisting of 2 connected ōban sheets) which belong among the very best of Yoshitoshi's works. Here the scene is much more dynamic. We see the maiden with her many layers of rich fabrics which flutter wildly in the wind. Koremochi is bent towards the river in which he sees the demonic image. His hands have already clutched his sword. The prints is dominated by branches of maple trees, the leaves fall elegantly and inevitably into the water, strengthening the autumn atmosphere of the print, and accenting the connection to its theatre inspirations.

The fascinating motive of the water reflection also appears in the classic story and Kabuki play of the samurai Ōmori Hikoshichi. Yoshitoshi depicted this story in the above mentioned Thirty Six Ghosts series (*Shingata sanjurokkaisen*)¹¹. Ōmori is said to have carried a beautiful princess across the river and suddenly noticed a pair of horns on her reflection in the water. The reflection warned him about the princess being turned into a demon. The princess, called Chihaya, was the daughter of Ōmori Hikoshichi's old enemy Kusunoki Masashige whom he defeated and killed earlier. The princess intended to transform into a demon and revenge her father's death. Ōmori Hikoshichi however won over her and as she explained who she really was, he was kind enough to spare her life. More than that, Ōmori was kind enough to invent a little trick which enabled him to give the princess a precious sword belonging originally to her father. The Ōmori Hikoshichi story has therefore a different atmosphere to it than Momijigari. In Momijigari the demon has only bad intentions and is killed in the end. The beauty of the Momijigari maiden is only a disguise for her thirst for blood. In Ōmori Hikoshichi it is the other way around: the demon's look is only a disguise for the princess's honourable intentions and love for her deceased father. No matter the differences in the two stories, the the actual moments that Yoshitoshi chose from the two tales are very much alike.

In 1887, the very same year as Yoshitoshi's Momijigari, the English Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones used the mirroring effect of water in his famous Perseus

¹⁰ URL <<http://www.museumsyndicate.com/item.php?item=29613>> [cit.2013-02-23]; Kuniyoshi's online *catalogue raisonné* URL <<http://www.kuniyoshiproject.com/>> [cit. 2013-02-23]

¹¹ Los Angeles County Museum of Art's online catalogue: URL <<http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=104439;type=101>> [cit. 2013-01/15]



Fig. 2: 36371 – Taira no Koremochi vanquishes the demon maiden of Mt. Togakushi, 1887
74 x 25 cm, Joe Hloucha's collection.

cycle¹². A painting called “The Baleful Head” shows Perseus holding the head of Medusa, showing it to Andromeda. According to the legend, the head of Medusa had such power, that it would kill anyone who would look at it directly. Therefore Perseus has to use the reflection to soften this danger. If seen in the reflection only, the Medusa becomes harmless. In Burne-Jones, the narrative of the painting keeps a close connection to the mythological story behind it. If we look at the Khnopff drawing mentioned earlier (Avec Gregoire...), we see the modern symbolic of the reflection fully. In the case of Perseus, it was the Medusa that was scary. The main heroes themselves, Perseus and Andromeda, remain ideal. It’s only the external element of the Medusa that brings fear and danger into their lives. In the case of Khnopff, however, we no longer encounter an ideal hero. There is only one character here, the young lady, looking at her own image. Just like princess Chihaya, the lady here may face her own dark side, her inner self. She might turn into a demon, like Chihaya. If she is lucky, the demon in her will not harm her, like the reflection of the Medusa could not harm Perseus and Andromeda. By unveiling the female inner dark side, the idea of “femme fatale” was born. Using this comparison based on the symbol of water-reflection, we may as well say that Yoshitoshi’s princess Chihaya and the maiden of Momijigari are Japanese counterparts for the European concept of late 19th century “femme fatale”.

Taking a closer look on the way Yoshitoshi depicted women on the backdrop of contemporary political and social events provides us with a deeper insight not only into the art of Yoshitoshi but also into the state of the Japanese society on the verge of two époques. Yoshitoshi’s work proves to be fascinating for multiple reasons. We may see in him a representative of the traditional Utagawa School of *ukiyo-e*, but at the same time we encounter a modern artist equipped with the knowledge of Western art. However, as we have seen above, it is not always the direct influences between Japanese and Occidental artists that are of interest. In some cases, we may feel astonished by a similar artistic treatment of some topics as they occurred in the same period in Yoshitoshi as well as in various Western artists, reflecting something more general and profoundly human, crossing successfully all borders of different cultural backgrounds. The way Yoshitoshi’s work was attuned to the symbolic artistic language of his European contemporaries remains among the most fascinating features of his oeuvre.

Photographs by Jiří Vaněk

¹² The paintings are part of the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Germany. URL <<http://digikat.staatsgalerie.de/detail.jsp?id=559435474AED9111A34EC9B777AA30B&img=1>>; < http://www.staatsgalerie.de/digitalerkatalog_e/> [cit. 2013-02-23]

芳年武者无類
彈正忠松永久秀



大藏
秀

彈正忠松



Fig. 4: Album sheet 59 – The ghost of Yūgao, prince Genji's lover, 1886, series One Hundred Aspects of the Moon (Tsuki Hyakushi), 35.4 x 24.2 cm

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Fig. 5: Album sheet 13 - Lunacy / Unrolling letters, series One Hundred Aspects of the Moon (Tsuki Hyakushi), 1889, 35.4 x 24.2 cm.