

# The Night of Longing: Love and desire in Japanese prints

1 October 2013 - 12 January 2014 | Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge  
Shiba Gallery

Beautiful Japanese prints depicting lovers from literature and life will feature this autumn at the Fitzwilliam Museum in an exhibition of woodcuts and books of the Edo and Meiji periods.

The displays explore how love and desire were presented and accepted in Japanese art during these eras, circa 1600 – 1900, looking at a selection of 40 prints and books by some of the most famous artists of the time including Harunobu, Utamaro, Hokusai, Hiroshige, Kunisada, Kuniyoshi and Yoshitoshi.

The prints range from chaste expressions of longing, such as a lover writing a poem or letter, through to prints of lovers during their most intimate moments.

In one print we see a courtesan writing the words ‘a night of longing’ on a scroll as she awaits her lover. Her poetic imagery suggests a more complex yearning that embraces love and the consequences of love, rather than simply desire and its gratification. It is this complex world of emotion, touched by poetic sentiment and shared across centuries, which provides the subject for *The Night of Longing*.

Erotic pictures and books were appreciated for their artistry and most of the major print artists produced erotic designs, which were often among their best work. These erotic prints were afforded some of the most lavish production techniques in the whole of printmaking history (some of them even have moving parts). They also had a role in sex education, and erotic pictures were often part of a bride’s wedding trousseau. They were used by both men and women from many walks of life as a source of escapism and stimulation, often enjoyed in the company of a lover.

In Edo period Japan sex was considered to be a natural part of human experience to be explored and celebrated for the pleasure it gave and for its positive association with fertility. There was no sense of shame or sin, or any governing moral code based simply on the involvement of sex. The propriety of behaviour was judged by whether the people involved were from appropriate strata of society.



Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892),  
Lovers fleeing in the moonlight from the  
novel Rural Genji (Inaka genji), 1885  
© The Fitzwilliam Museum



Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806),  
(Michiyuki) Koi no futozao On the road  
Love songs for the thick-necked  
shamisen  
© The Fitzwilliam Museum

Split into different themes, exploring the subtle nuances of love, desire and sex including 'Love stories', 'Pillow books', 'Love letters' and 'Sex for sale', *The Night of Longing* is designed to complement the exhibition at the British Museum *Shunga: Sex and pleasure in Japanese Art* (3 October 2013 - 5 January 2014), which focuses more specifically on the erotic.

Complementing the displays in the Fitzwilliam Museum, a larger version of *The Night of Longing* with extended texts and additional exhibits will be available online, providing a permanent archive on the topic of love and desire in Japanese prints.

The exhibition is curated by Craig Hartley, who comments: "This exhibition gives people the chance to appreciate the full range of expression that printmakers of the Floating World brought to matters of the heart. Utamaro's fabulous portraits of courtesans and Kunisada's dazzling images of Kabuki lovers have long been famous. But there is also extraordinary beauty and finesse in many of the erotic works by the same artists, which have rarely been seen in public. In recent years a more open attitude towards them in Japan has brought a greater quantity onto the market, and they have been more seriously studied. This has enabled us to acquire some rare and amazing examples with fascinating links to the rest of our collection. Rather than making a special case for the more explicit images, our exhibition places them within the wider world of human relationships so subtly explored in Japanese prints."

#### **Further information on the sections of the exhibition:**

'**Love stories**' includes scenes from classic literature, such as the famous Heian period novel, *The Tale of Genji*. But the exhibition also includes prints of populist love tales; including the action-packed illustrated version of *Genji*, called *Imitation Murasaki - Rustic Genji*, which was published in serial form to runaway success in the 1820s to 40s. The popular serial was written with the extrovert plot-twists of Kabuki theatre, so that the hero—Mitsuuji—was not only a drop-dead gorgeous heart-throb with a string of lovers, but he used his philandering reputation as a cover for his investigation into the theft of precious heirlooms. He became a cross between *Genji* and James Bond, sometimes using love affairs as a cynical means to get closer to thwarting his political enemies.

Mitsuuji's exploits appeared in special erotic versions, which showed in beautifully designed compositions and lavishly printed effects the sex scenes that were just hinted at in the original - a newly acquired and very rare copy of one of these books is a highlight of the exhibition.

'**Love stories**' also includes scenes directly illustrating Kabuki theatre, covering popular plotlines: jealous lovers, love triangles, suicide pacts, madness and grief at the loss of a partner. The vivid dramatisation of the Kabuki stage is echoed in the startlingly expressive effects of prints that usually advertised or commemorated specific productions.

'Pillow pictures' (*makura-e*) and 'Pillow books' (*makurabon*) show the intimacy of lovers before, during and after making love. These names given to erotic pictures and books in the Edo period derive from the associations of the phrase 'placing the pillows together', implying sexual intercourse. Another term was 'laughing pictures' (*warai-e*), with 'laughter' being a euphemism for sexual activity, and humour was often a strong component of the images and accompanying text.

'Love letters' includes images of courtesans composing, receiving, opening and reading love letters and poems. Although courtesans by profession were paid for sex, it was often their unpaid relationship with their true-love that featured in prints. This was an idealised view of the life of a courtesan aimed at a largely male audience - this was particularly true of the images of high-class prostitutes in the official Yoshiwara pleasure district on the outskirts of Edo.

'Sex for sale' gives a glimpse of how clients engaged prostitutes, and their route to the pleasure quarter, where—if the artists are to be believed—a world awaited with the promise of much more than sex.

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**For further information and images contact the Marketing and Press Office:**  
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**Notes to editors:**

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

**FREE ADMISSION**

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00  
Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00  
CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December and 1 January

## The Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge, with collections exploring world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and outstanding collections of applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian arts.

Welcoming over 400,000 visitors a year, the Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

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