

## **A Comparative Study of Artistic Aesthetics of Chinese Meticulous Lady**

### **Painting in the Tang Dynasty and Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture**

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*Abstract: Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting and Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture were female-themed paintings in China and Japan in the period of Tang Dynasty. Meticulous Lady Painting and Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture are famous for their distinctive national characteristics, conveying their unique styles and showing the world two different oriental aesthetics. This article compares the style and aesthetics of the two art forms from historical origin, subject matter, character image, composition, line, coloring and influence on the later generations, and analyzes the reasons for their formation and interaction.*

*Keywords: Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting, Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture, the Tang Dynasty, Painting Style.*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The differences in historical origins, themes, compositions, lines and colors between the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting and Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture in Tang Dynasty showed the aesthetic characteristics of different nationalities and their own connotations. The development of Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture was greatly influenced by the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting. Our comparative study suggests that the same female painting theme in the different social backgrounds and national characteristics bloomed different types of luster. Although with the same historical origins, they never lost their own developing personality. The artistic aesthetic spirits and the influences on the art affected the later generations.

## **2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS OF CHINESE METICULOUS LADY PAINTING AND THE JAPANESE UKIYO-E BEAUTY PICTURE IN THE TANG DYNASTY**

### **2.1 Social factors**

In China, the figure painting that expresses the boudoir woman and the upper society aristocratic woman is called "Lady Painting". As one of the subjects of traditional Chinese painting, Lady Painting has a long history. It originated in the Warring States period, boomed

in the Tang Dynasty and declined in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The Tang Dynasty was the heyday of the development of Chinese feudal society and art developed quickly in this period because of the economic prosperity, frequent cultural exchanges and close relations between nationalities. Meticulous painting of the theme converted from the traditional heroine and the filial daughter to the image of the upper aristocratic women. The painting of the lady was liberated from the traditional subject of feudal ethics and the women of this period were depicted with the attitude of entering into the social society. The ladies painting was divorced from the traditional moral norms and appreciated by people. Not only was the scope of the theme of Lady Painting expanded, but the style was closer to the Tang Dynasty's aesthetic sense as well. Painting style turned to be strong and gorgeous. The figures became more plump and elegant as opposed to the lean and spare image of the Wei and Jin Dynasties and periods. Performance techniques changed from partially decorative into more realistic.

Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture is a painting genre depicting the image of a musical geisha in the Edo Period of Japan (from the beginning of the 17th to the middle of 19th century). Floating World (Ukiyo) refers to a flourishing, dissolute and void life. Another synonym of Ukiyo is the Buddhist term "sorrow", meaning worrying about the times or the world. The Japanese concept of "floating the world" and "worrying about the world" reflected their impermanence and instant gratification. The development of the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture is inextricably linked to the social state of this era. Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture can be divided into printed wood prints and hand-drawn forms and mainly depicts kabuki, beauties, street girls and brothel love affairs, etc. The characters are gorgeously flashy and slightly exaggerated with a strong fantasy. The painter took the real-life woman image as the inspiration, resulting in the work to be more beautiful and closer to the ideal image via painting techniques, especially the artistic exaggeration technique rather than merely the simple imitation of the realistic object. This difference between the characters in painting and those in the real situation becomes an artistic style, which is not only the aesthetic demand of people at that time but also the commercial demand of social economic development.

## **2.2 Factor of exchange and communication**

The history of art exchange and communication between China and Japan indicates that Japanese art was constantly influenced by Chinese culture and art in the course of its development from absorbing Chinese artistic and cultural characteristics to blending and developing its own art. The monochrome ink rubbing technology brought back by the Japanese envoy from China was the first influence of Chinese culture on the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture. In the period of Sui Dynasty (A.D. 618). In Nara Era, Japan sent messengers to China learning Chinese culture and bringing Chinese paintings back to Japan. Although around in the 10th century the local national "Yamato Painting" appeared in Japan, the "Tang Painting" was still popular. In the Tang Dynasty, as the politics and economy developed rapidly and the cultural exchange was open, the communication between China and Japan was more frequent. Thus, the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture was greatly influenced by the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting. Although the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture is the art with the most distinctive Japanese national

characteristics, some Chinese painting elements could be found in the early Ukiyo-e Beauty Pictures, especially in character modeling and style such as the method of hook line, color, the charm of the characters in the painting, etc. Therefore, in some sense the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture came from the Chinese Lady Painting. Till the Edo Era the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture arts were further developed, forming a unique Japanese national art form.

In a word, the Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture was greatly influenced by the Chinese paintings in the early years and gradually became a unique art form due to the social environment change, aesthetic demand and the development of economy in the Edo Era period.

### **3. THE STYLE FEATURES OF THE CHINESE METICULOUS LADY PAINTING AND THE JAPANESE UKIYO-E BEAUTY PICTURE IN THE TANG DYNASTY**

#### **3.1 Comparison of theme**

Lady Painting in China has a history of 1000 years. The women in the paintings conformed to the mainstream aesthetic value at that time. The Lady Paintings in the early days mostly depicted famous heroines, filial daughters, and virtuous women or fairies, by which to publicize high ethical concepts. The continuous development of politics and economy in the Tang Dynasty made the painting art constantly develop, too. The painters began to be interested in depicting the upper class aristocratic women and expanded the selection of the theme of Lady painting from promoting morality to the portrayal of the women's daily life. For example, Zhang Xuan's "Practicing and Working" ( Fig. 1 ) depicts the aristocratic women in the sewing work scene, Zhou Fang's "Ladies with head-pinned flowers" (Fig . 2) shows aristocratic women and maids enjoying flowers and frolicking, and Zhou Fang's "Lady with a fan" (Fig. 3) describes the palace concubines and the maid in the summer. The scene of contemplation and repose depicts the real life of the woman at that time.



Fig 1. "Practicing and Working" by Zhang Xuan (China)



Fig 2. "Ladies with head-pinned flowers" by Zhou Fang (China)



Fig 3. “Lady with a fan” by Zhou Fang (China)

The traditional art of Japan is a noble art built with the ruling class as its center. The main characters of the art usually were nobles, samurai or monks. Such art images were hardly appreciated by ordinary people. In the Edo Era period of Japan national unity and social stability as well as the rapid development of economy made the secular culture and civilian art develop quickly. In order to meet the people's aesthetic needs, the floating painters created many beauty paintings, the objects usually being geishas, dancers, street girls and others. The image of beauty was graceful, elegant and charmingly dressed in the gorgeous kimono with a kind of indulgence, reflecting the lower class yearning for freedom and their pursuit of happy life, and forming a unique Japanese national custom.

Thus it can be seen that Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting in Tang Dynasty depicts the real world, while the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture has the theme of fantasyland hedonism.

In traditional Chinese painting, the organization of a picture is called “composing”, and the “management of position” is an important step for the author to determine the subject and layout, and create the artistic conception. In the Chinese Tang Dynasty Lady Painting mainly uses the scatter point perspective method, with the personage well arranged in a proper density. The painting “Ladies with head-pinned flowers” (Fig. 2) is a typical example. The whole picture in the form of a long scroll straightforwardly shows six characters using the method of scatter point perspective, bringing about an effect of "looking while walking". The figures in the picture are seemingly isolated but all in a whole composition, some looking at the flowers, some tracing butterflies; some dancing with fans, and some teasing dogs. Each image is very complete, but the size of the figure could help distinguish between the primary and secondary roles. The background of the painting is very simple, using monochrome or simple white to treat the rest area. But the puppy, crane, and the maid with fan in the background still can make the viewer clearly understand the environment of characters and their status. The “Practicing and Working” (Fig. 1) is also another example. The whole view can be divided into three parts, the practice of ramming, weaving line and ironing successively with 12 characters in a scroll. The layout appears to be set properly with flexible degree. It can be noted that the painter paid much attention to the layout and position of characters. Except for the main characters there is rare decoration to the blank surroundings in order to focus on the description of the mood. This composition greatly exerts the role of blank-leaving. Viewers can understand the artist's intentions from the characters' look, clothing and body gesture and feel a much impressive sense by adding their own imagination.

The Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture has similarity in the composition to the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting in the process of primary and secondary characters by the size of the image in the screen according to their identity, while in other respects it has its own characteristics. Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture appears to have a more visual impact with complex background and full of Japanese-style architecture, courtyard and scenery, and so on. The screen is very full, different from the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting's blank-leaving and scroll background form. As a decorative art form, Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture usually is not large but grasps characters' dynamic feature and the scene, combined with Japanese culture and the national flavor of the display scenery, giving a dramatic emotion and strong visual effect. In addition, the character in the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture usually was cut or half sheltered instead of being fully drawn, thus breaking the tedious balance of the picture. For example, the woman in the painting of Kitagawa Utamaro (Fig. 4) showed only a little half of the body with a screen split. The relationship of characters is fully emphasized and the sense of space is highlighted in the picture. In a picture of Suzuki Harunobu (Fig. 5), the woman on the right stretching forward only half of the body from behind the door while talking with the outsider makes a scene of the inner and outside of the house connected but does not make viewers feel incomplete. The viewers' thought can be drawn to the outside of screen, causing more space for the imagination of viewers.



Fig 4. By Kitagawa Utamaro (Japan)



Fig 5. By Suzuki Harunobu (Japan)

### 3.2 Comparison of image

The woman image in Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting in the Tang Dynasty is very representative. The traditional value of beauty at that time was "feminine", which to a large extent laid the temperament of woman in the painting. The Tang Dynasty was also so open and tolerant that makeup and luxury costumes were very popular in the upper class. Therefore, the development of Meticulous Lady Painting peaked in the Tang Dynasty in China. The representative painters were Zhang Xuan and Zhou Fang. Zhang's "Lady Guoguo on a spring outing" (Fig. 6) depicts the outing scene of Emperor Xuanzong's love Princess Lady Guoguo and the family. On the screen are the royal and imperial maid and other upper class ladies.

Being a relative of the emperor, Lady Guoguo lived a luxury and sumptuous life. The painter carefully depicted her skirt, scarf, and the fine silver silk embroidery woven on the riding saddle. The plump and smooth face and the graceful posture in the painting are the true images of the noblewoman in the Tang Dynasty. Zhou's "Ladies with head-pinned flowers" (Fig. 2) also depicts the image of aristocratic women. They walk and enjoy flowers in the palace garden or tease the dog to pass time. The figure is buxom in luxurious costumes with high bun inserted with the flowers or jade jewelry. Their posture is graceful but with a lonely mood in the face, displaying the rich, comfortable and idle life of the aristocratic women. The characters in the painting are heavily colored, with slender eyes, plump cheek and small mouth, and eyebrows are the then popular "Emei" style, with the face and neck thickly covered with white powder, which all make the appearance very fair. The light and thin clothing compared to the heavy color and thick powder creates a striking contrast between thick and thin, fully demonstrating the clothing texture.



Fig 6. "Lady Guoguo on a spring outing" by Zhang Xuan (China)

In short, the figures in the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting of the Tang Dynasty have a rich and luxurious appearance. Their postures are elegant with a faint loneliness in facial expression. They have no strong emotions or movements but show their unique spiritual world. In-depth reading will help find the unique charm of the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting.

Japan has a unique aesthetic taste, regarding grief as a beauty. The paintings of Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture show their ideal aesthetics, simultaneously in line with the senses and experiences of the audience in society at that time. The female characters in the paintings are all dressed in gorgeous kimono, using the hook line to highlight the eyebrows and cheeks. Unlike the Chinese Meticulous lady Painting, the figure in the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture is more "dynamic, e.g. the "Rainy Night" by Suzuki Harunobu (Fig. 7), where a beauty in kimono walks in the rain, twisting the waist charmingly. Kiyonaga Torii's "See-Off in July Night" (Fig. 8), depicts a singer seeing a visitor out after dinner. Movements of the women in the painting are all lively but different from each other. The Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture shows a strong dynamic sense with some imbalance in the different movements of the body, but facial characterization is formulized – heavy eyebrows, cherry mouth, long neck and high bun, with much exaggeration regardless of the real character image.

The female archetypes in the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture are mostly geishas, dancers, street girls and so on, as in the above-mentioned Kiyonaga Torii's "See-Off in July Night" (Fig. 8). Although depicting the scene of a singer seeing off her friend, the work is not vulgar, still with a taste of elegance. These works fully show the hedonism of Ukiyo and restless feeling, forming a unique Japanese aesthetic taste.



Fig 7. "Rainy Night" by Suzuki Harunobu (Japan)



Fig 8. "See-Off in July Night" by Kiyonaga Torii (Japan)

#### **4. COMPARISON OF PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES OF THE CHINESE METICULOUS LADY PAINTING AND THE JAPANESE UKIYO-E BEAUTY PICTURE IN THE TANG DYNASTY**

##### **4.1 Comparison of line**

Line is an important art language form in the Chinese painting. In the Tang Dynasty, the painter used lines to express the face skin texture of the character and the thin and transparent texture of the clothing material. The clothing lines of underwear and outerwear were slightly different according to different materials. Lines of face, hands and hair were very thin. In Zhou's "Palace ladies with silk fans", the cloths of 13 characters were painted by gossamer stroke,

iron-wire stroke and other methods to depict costumes. Some of these drawing techniques were mellow and smooth; others were straight and angular, so as to create the feeling that the clothing was as thin as the wing of cicada, elegant and flowing. The outline of characters' face and hand were drawn with very fine lines in light ink to emphasize the soft texture of the skin. Hair and eyebrows were also very vivid and without the appearance of disconnection. On the whole, the Tang Dynasty lady painting was drawn with smooth square or circle lines and organized very regularly, especially in the expression of arm movements and the cloth twist with denser but more orderly lines.

The lines of Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture were bold and vigorous and influenced by Chinese calligraphy, diversified in length, varied in density, as well as heavy and light in tone. The painters used freehand brushwork to depict concise outline of the character shape. The clothing lines were flexible and smooth, perfectly expressing the soft and heavy texture of the kimono. The contour lines of the characters were heavy but the detail lines very slim. Kitagawa Utamaro's work "Makeup" (Fig. 9) depicted the scene of a beauty in the mirror dressing mascara. The face was drawn mostly with thin lines but the eyebrows were relatively coarse. The processing of hair had some effect of woodcut printing, exquisite and neat. Ink color was much like that of Chinese Meticulous lady Painting using different shades to show skin and clothing texture. Overall, there are some similarities in line use between the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting and the Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture, for example the performance in the face sketching, skin texture, and so on. Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture was painted with a more flexible freehand style.



Fig 9. "Makeup" by Kitagawa Utamaro (Japan)

#### 4.2 Comparison of coloring

The Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting in the Tang Dynasty and Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture are different in coloring. For the aristocratic women of the upper class the color was warmer in the Chinese Tang Dynasty paintings. Facial coloring usually took the Three-White method by which the forehead, nose, chin were stained in white powder, leading the skin to

appear fair and exquisite. Besides, the ink was rarely used in the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting except for the dyeing of hair, facial features and hands. Bun was dyed in thick ink while other places were lightly done. At that time, the representatives of the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting were all painted with bright color which looked brilliant but without any boorish. For example, the colors used in Zhang Xuan's "Lady Guoguo on a spring outing" (Fig. 6) were Third Cyan, Third Green, beige, vermilion, and so on. Combined with the heavy and light changes and the use of gold outline, the whole picture appeared to be colorful and luxurious. The painting "Ladies with head-pinned flowers" (Fig. 2) used bright colors to depict the women living in the luxury palace; a variety of bright colors were embodied in the costumes, forming a sharp contrast to their creamy-like skin. The composition of the picture took no consideration of the influence of the environment color, but did its utmost to focus on the object itself. The Differential-staining and the Over-dyeing and other dyeing techniques were used to make the picture hierarchy and rich in a three-dimensional sense.

The Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Pictures were painted with a very bright color. The three-primary colors and bright colors instead of the halo-dyed methods were used in painting and usually a flat coating method was used to paint. Although the direct flat coating was not conducive to reveal the spatiality of picture, the elegant color collocation and large area of ink produced a great visual impact similar to that of wood blocks. Take Kiyonaga Torii's "See Off in July Night" mentioned above for example. As the story occurred in the night, the background was directly brushed with the black ink and the character's color was much light. Yellow and red were used to paint the kimono as usual. The colors in the whole picture were in strong contrast but still gave warm feeling. Japanese painter attached great importance to the kimono in the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture. The kimono in the painting was always colorful and an exquisitely fine way was applied to depict its pattern and texture. Kitagawa Utamaro's serial paintings "Twelve Hours in Brothel" portrayed the life of street girls, twelve hookers in the paintings. Take, for example, the three paintings "Chou" (Fig. 10), "Yin" (Fig.11) and "Wei" (Fig. 12), including, six characters in them, all dressed in exquisite kimono. The painter used ink to neutralize excessively bright colors, even causing the rendering effect in a certain place. This technique was not seen in the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting in the Tang Dynasty. As Yashiro Yukio wrote in the book "Color of Japanese Art", the gray tones could be seen in the colors everywhere and there is indescribable bitterness under the gorgeous appearance. In those strong or bright colors there can also be seen interspersed with white and other bright colors, so that the overall tone become more balanced.

Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting in the Tang Dynasty and Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture had different preferences in color, reflecting different artistic styles and aesthetic characteristics of the two nationalities.



Fig 10. "Chou" by



Fig 11. "Yin" by



Fig 12. "Wei" by Kitagawa Utamaro (Japan) Kitagawa Utamaro (Japan) Kitagawa Utamaro (Japan)

## 5. THE EFFECT OF CHINESE METICULOUS LADY PAINTING IN THE TANG DYNASTY AND JAPANESE UKIYO-E BEAUTY PICTURE ON LATER GENERATIONS

### 5.1 The spirits conveyed by the two styles of painting

Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting developed in the prosperous Tang Dynasty, when the whole nation entered a mature and vigorous period. The character images were different from those in other periods. Less subject to effect of the traditional feudal ethical shackles, the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting expressed the feeling of buxomness, gorgeousness and enthusiasm. It shows the confidence and boldness of women in the Tang Dynasty. The makeup and clothing also embodies the pursuit of beauty. The women's dress was rarely limited because of the open sino-foreign exchange in the Tang Dynasty unfolding the openness and tolerance at that time. It was in such circumstance that the Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting was born. Her bright color is still graceful and elegant today, reflecting national spirit and cultural accumulation.

Although Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Pictures is influenced by traditional Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting, the two kinds of paintings give people a very different feeling. The social, political and economic differences between the Tang Dynasty and the Edo Period in Japan led to the difference in aesthetic consciousness. Unlike the aristocrat character of Chinese Meticulous Lady Painting the Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture is a kind of civilian art. It represents the ordinary people's aesthetic interest and embodies the idea of hedonism. Ukiyo-e Beauty Picture absorbs traditional Chinese art, reveals the real situation of the Japanese society at that time, and finally forms the unique national art. Thus, the artistic conception conveyed by the Ukiyo-e Beauty Pictures is very Japanese and brings to full display the spiritual world of the Japanese people.

### **5.2 The influence of two painting styles on later generations**

As a traditional painting in China, Lady Painting in the Tang Dynasty has a unique style and has exerted great influence on the later generations. Many works of modern fine brushwork painters have borrowed from the experience and techniques of the Tang Dynasty in the aspects of modeling, line, composition, coloring and ink-wash dyeing and have made innovation on this basis. Today, many fine brushwork paintings with the theme of women reveal not only use of ancient painting methods, but also integration of the essence of Western painting, and combination with the characteristics of the popular elements to create a contemporary aesthetic needs of the society. Since ancient times, the Tang Dynasty Lady Painting has played a huge role, and both its form of works and drawing methods give people great enlightenment.

The Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Pictures embody the aesthetics of the civilian class; it is a straightforward depiction, understanding of which does not need too much artistic basis. As a symbol of Japanese painting, it has become one of the most acceptable art forms in the world. From 19th century onwards the charm of the Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Pictures in Europe and America continued for more than 150 years. Today, the Art of Ukiyo-e Beauty Pictures, once criticized as "worthless" and "vulgar" in China, was again used by modern artists, giving a new meaning to the iconic Japanese pattern. Murakami Takashi, Tanaka Ikko and other artists all have drawn the essence from the artistic elements of the Ukiyo-e Beauty Pictures for recreation and to reinterpret the beauty of the civilian arts. Today, the Japanese Ukiyo-e Beauty Pictures have become a fashionable and elegant art form and will go on forever.

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