

# Decadent Yet Ideal: Style and Function of Female Images in Prints by Keisai Eisen (1790–1848)



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Nineteenth-century pictures of beautiful women, generally categorized as *bijin-ga*, have been labeled as “decadent” (*taihaiteki*) by a number of modern *ukiyo-e* scholars. As the images were generally looked down upon, there was limited interest in these prints commercially and academically. This presentation considers why these images now appear “decadent” to the eyes of these modern scholars in contrast to how the prints were possibly viewed at the time of their production.

As a case study, I will analyze a print series called *Ukiyo fuzoku mime kurabe* (Customs of the Floating World) dated 1823–24 (Bunsei 6–7) by Keisai Eisen, 1790–1848. I investigate this in the context of changing perceptions towards the lower-ordinary class sex workers frequently depicted in *ukiyo-e* of the time. Elite society’s apparent shift towards considering such workers to be morally corrupt seems reflected in late Edo-period *bijin-ga*. Paradoxically however, those lower-ranked prostitutes including geisha were also romanticized and reshaped as a paragon of ideal womanhood through various media including *bijin-ga* and popular fiction such as *ninjobon* (books of romance), largely targeted at a female audience.

Although the nineteenth-century *bijin-ga* have been largely disregarded and judged as “decadent” until recently, the individuals, images, and styles of commoditized but financially independent women like the fashionable geisha seem to have been sought after both by men and women in the lower-middle social stratum at the time. Thus, through newly emerging printing technology and the publishing market, *bijin-ga* partly functioned to educate women in how they should look and behave in order to be favored by the male dominant society. In other words, *bijin-ga* appear to have helped shape gender roles for lower-middle class women in Japan of the time.

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