

**Representing the Body in Edo Japan:
The Human Body in Illustrated Books of the Edo Period,
1615-1868**

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‘Figures, even though painted without eyes, should seem to look; without ears, must seem to listen.... Eliminate details to achieve the most natural expression ...’

I take these exhortations from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* as the starting point for an exploration of the representation of the human body in woodblock printed illustrated books of the Edo period. Unlike traditional Western practice, drawing the human body did not form the foundation for the training of Japanese artists.

Anatomical exactitude was not in the forefront of their concerns. ‘The nude’ as a subject did not exist for them. How, then, did Edo artists treat the human body? I will explore the means they employed to represent the essence of the human form through images of the undressed body encountered in illustrated books.

A rich source for this study is the printed erotica of Ukiyo-e artists. They rendered the body through outline alone without any attempt to suggest nuances of flesh through shading or shadows. None the less, Ukiyo-e artists were able to imbue their flat figures with a powerful erotic charge. The means they employed to achieve this will be considered.

Artists of other schools — in particular the Kyoto-based Maruyama-Shijō school — also limited themselves to rendering the human body through outline drawing but their intention was quite different. They presented animated bodies in quite ordinary, non-

erotic contexts. Despite the disinterest of Maruyama-Shijô artists in the underlying skeletal and muscular structures, they drew from nature in a way that Ukiyo-e artists did not and succeeded in imbuing their representations of the human body with a striking degree of life, movement and energy.

Western understanding of the body had been transmitted to Japan through anatomy books imported by the Dutch and distributed more widely within the country through Japanese woodblock editions of those books. None the less, this very different approach to representing the human body had no appreciable impact on the rendering of the body by Japanese artists in the Edo period.