

美人 / *Bijin* / Beauty

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Bijin wa iwanedo kakure nashi, miyako no jōge katsu shitte

It is no secret: everyone knows what a *bijin* is.

(Japanese proverb)¹

1.

The term *bijin* is defined by the *Dictionary of the Japanese Language* (Nihon kokugo daijiten) as: “A beautiful person. A beautiful person, superior in appearance to others. [...] A woman, beautiful in appearance. *Bijo* (a female beauty). *Kajin* (a beauty). [...] A man, beautiful in appearance. *Bidanshi* (a beautiful man).”² Although the term *bijin* existed well before the Meiji period (1868-1912) and would have been understood to refer to both women and men during the Edo period (1600-1868), in the modern era it came to refer exclusively to women. What accounts for the popularization of the term *bijin* and why did *bijin* become a gender-specific term in the Meiji period? Why was *bijin* with the character “*bi*” (美)—rather than, for instance, “*kajin*” (佳人 • a beauty) or *reijin* (麗人 • a beauty)³—the term that popularly came to be used to specify beautiful Japanese

¹ *Koji Zokushin Kotowaza Daijiten*, ed. Shōgaku Tosho, Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1982.

² *Nihon kokkugo daijiten dainiban*, vol. 11, Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2001, 279.

³ The *Nihon kokugo daijiten* specifies that the *kajin* is someone with a beautiful face (627). Chō Kyō explains that in China the attribution of beauty was often a veiled way of making a distinction between the upper and lower classes. Chō says, “The term ‘*kajin*’ [in Chinese] does not simply mean a beautiful woman. The woman must be from a literati family” (26). (Chō Kyō, *Bijo to wa nanika: Nitchū bijin no bunkashi* [Tokyo: Shōbunsha, 2001]). In Meiji Japan the word “*kajin*” was applied to women writers such as Higuchi Ichiyō and maintained this inflection of designating a beautiful, educated woman. Because of this

women? The term began to appear with increasing frequency in literature and art from the Meiji 20s (1887-96) onward, surfacing in many forms: on the one hand, as a linguistic representation in novels, short stories, aesthetic debates, poetry, and proverbs; and on the other hand, as a graphic representation in paintings, sculptures, illustrations, posters, postcards, and photographs. The *bijin* later emerged as the subject of the *Nihonga* genre *bijinga* (paintings of beauties in the Japanese-style) around the time of the first Ministry of Education Art Exhibition (Bunten) in Meiji 40/1907. So seamlessly was the term *bijin* accepted into the cultural discourse of the Meiji period that few have thought to question why or at what juncture its modern usage came into being.

Part of what makes the analysis of the term *bijin* so difficult is that the term slides through different registers, arising where a number of cultural and epistemological disciplines merge. Not only does the term defy the boundaries of a consistent conceptual framework, it is nearly impossible to explore the term *bijin* without conflating it with its representation, for it was through literary and artistic representation that the term solidified in meaning. In addition, the difficulty in defining the term is further compounded by the fact that the aesthetic concept of beauty, or *bi*, on which the identity of the *bijin* relies, belongs to a discourse that is generally accepted as defying explanation. In *Japanese Beauties* (Nihon no bijin, 1913), Aoyagi Yumi, for instance, notes how the general structure of relativism under which beauty operates ensures that the question of the *bijin* remains at the core of aesthetic abstraction.

Not only does the opinion about what constitutes beauty or ugliness in men and women differ in each part of the world according to race, it also

nance, the term “*kajin*” would not have been appropriate as a generic, inclusive term for the Meiji beauty, who transcended class divisions. In the Taishō and Shōwa periods there was a gradual shift away from the word *bijin* in favor of “*reijin*” (beauty), “*onna*” (woman), and eventually “*moga*” (modern girl).

differs according to period and education. However, variations in race, period, and education only produce small changes in the form of beauty or ugliness; as for the principle of human beauty, throughout time from East to West, there has been barely any change of which to note. For example, in algebra the unknown quantities x and y change, but the ratio between x and y always remains constant. A is forever A , and B is forever B ; it is the same logic with beauty.⁴

“The x and y ’[s],” or examples that illustrate the principle of beauty, may change, depending on the time, place, or culture in which the question of beauty arises, but the measure of beauty, the equation to which the question of beauty must be deflected, “ x is as beautiful as y ,” remains, in all instances, the same. That is to say, beauty is an absolute ideal that can only be qualified through a never-ending chain of comparisons. Thus, any definition of beauty, or human beauty, presents a challenge, for the more one tries to define it, the more the figure eludes definition. The very definition of feminine beauty is contingent, as Francette Pacteau, the author of *The Symptom of Beauty*, explains: “Behind the woman there is, always, the image to which the question of her beauty must be referred. *As beautiful as...*”⁵ The question of beauty is perpetually deferred, and as a result the notion of the beautiful woman, or, in the case of Japan, the incarnation of the beautiful woman as the *bijin* does not denote something fixed, but always manifests something that is ultimately indeterminate. As Roland Barthes puts it: “The discourse [of beauty], then, can do no more than assert the perfection of each detail and refer ‘the remainder’ to the code underlying all beauty: Art.”⁶ The study of the *bijin* and the endless replication of beauty that it provokes and embodies therein—*as beautiful as*—leads us

⁴ Aoyagi Yumi, *Nihon no bijin*, Tokyo: Meiji Shuppan, 1913, 176-77.

⁵ Francette Pacteau, *The Symptom of Beauty*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, 31. For a related study on the role of gender in the ideology of the aesthetic see Kathy Alexis Psomaides, *Beauty’s Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1974, 33-34.

back to the broader terrain of Art.

This essay on the word *bijin* or the beautiful Japanese woman, proposes that the modern Japanese use of the term originates from the aesthetic discourse prior to the final decade of Meiji and that during the Meiji period the *bijin* came to figure as the body of Meiji aesthetics; that is, by serving as an embodiment of the abstract notion of “*bi*” (beauty), the *bijin* became what one might call the *being* of modern Japanese aesthetics. The term *bijin* was brought forth repeatedly as a concrete example of beauty (*bi*) at a time when defining “beauty” became all the more urgent as part of a national project in which Japan had to rethink its notion of aesthetic beauty in relation to that of the West and elsewhere in Asia. When the questions “What is beauty?” and “What is modern Japanese beauty?” were being raised in the visual and literary arts, the figure of the *bijin* ceased to be merely one figure among others, but rather, came to characterize modern Japanese aesthetics. Significantly, the transformation of the term *bijin* and the interest in the figure of the *bijin* coincided with the formative period of the genealogy of modern Japanese aesthetics (*bigaku* · 美学) and art (*bijutsu* · 美術), terms with which the *bijin* (美人) shares the character “*bi*” (美).”

The encounter with Western art changed the very notion of the artistic in Meiji Japan, during which time the modern discourse on art and aesthetics was established. This encounter became the occasion for Japan to rethink the terms of its discourse on art and its system of art as they had existed until then. The aesthetic concept of “*bi*” (beauty), indeed, the entire field of aesthetics as a system (*bigaku*), was imported from the West in the 1870s, introduced via Nakae Chōmin’s *Ishi bigaku* (1883-84), a translation of Eugène Véron’s *L’Esthétique* (Aesthetics; 1878). 1857 has been cited as the date when “*bi*” was

first used as a translation of “*beauté*,” “beauty,” and “*Schönheit*.”⁷ The Japanese term for aesthetics was standardized as “*bigaku*” (“*bimyōgaku*” had alternately been used) at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō) with the course “Aesthetics in the History of Art” (*Bigaku no bijutsushi*) in Meiji 22/1889.⁸ (The terms “*biishiki*” [aesthetic sense] and “*bikan*” [sense of beauty] also appeared in late Meiji.)⁹ The word “*bi*” was chosen as a translation of “beauty” over pre-existing native Japanese terms such as “*iki*” or “*shibushi*.” As the literary scholar Saeki Junko explains, rather than use these traditional expressions, the introduction of the term “*bi*” allowed for the possibility of a new aesthetic consciousness in which artistic acts were conceived of as part of a unified artistic process for the first time.¹⁰ Just as the concept of a Japanese-style art (*Nihonga*) as such did not exist until artists started creating in the Western or non-traditional Japanese-style (*yōga*), there was no totalizing concept of the artistic process until the modern encounter with Western aesthetics.¹¹

Following the introduction of Western aesthetics as *bigaku*, words such as “*bijutsu*” (fine art), “*kaiga*” (painting), and “*chōkoku*” (sculpture) were created as new compounds or, as in the case of “*kōgei*” (applied arts), reinvented as new terms. The coined term “*bijutsu*” was created during the Vienna World Exposition in Meiji 6/1873. It served alternately as a translation for “*Kunstgewerbe*” (applied arts/arts and crafts),

⁷ Saeki Junko, “Longing for ‘Beauty,’” in *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, trans. and ed. Michael F. Marra, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001, 37.

⁸ *Meiji no kotoba jiten*, ed. Sōgō Masaaki, Tokyo: Tōkyōdō Shuppan, 1986, 474. Four years later in Meiji 26/1893, “*shinbigaku*,” which was studied within the Western philosophy curriculum of Tokyo Imperial University, became an independent class known as “*bigaku*” (Isoda Kōichi, “Yakugo ‘bungaku’ no tanjō—nishi to higashi no kōten,” in *Rokumeikan no keifu: kindai Nihon bungei shi* [Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1983], 36).

⁹ *Meiji no kotoba jiten*, 476.

¹⁰ Saeki, 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31, 40-41. On the discovery of beauty as the mark of the modern period both in Japan and Europe see Takashin Shūji, “‘Utsukushisa no hakken’ ni tsuite,” in *Nihon kindai no biishiki*, Tokyo: Seidosha, 1986, 288-303.

“*bildende Kunst*” (plastic arts), and “*schöne Kunst*” (the polite arts), before signifying what in English was called the “fine arts,” which included the plastic arts, music, and literature.¹² The art historian Satō Doshin, in speculating on the reason the term *bijutsu* was chosen as the translation for “fine arts” has written that “‘*Geijutsu*’ indicated academic disciplines, martial arts, and a wide range of technical arts. The term “*bijutsu*” was probably created with the intent to exclude martial arts and divination and limit itself only to those arts relating to beauty [*bi*].”¹³ By mid-Meiji, *bijutsu*, which originally included music, poetry, and the literary arts, had narrowed in meaning and primarily denoted the plastic or visual arts. The art historian Kitazawa Noriaki writes: “The conversion of this term [*bijutsu*] must have been accepted at large definitively when the Ministry of Education Art Exhibition (Bunten) was established in Meiji 40/1907 and included only painting and sculpture.”¹⁴ The birth of the genre *bijinga* (paintings of beauties) coincides with the first Ministry of Education Art Exhibition, the government-sponsored forum for exhibiting artworks independent of industry that marked the formal separation of the fine arts (*bijutsu*) from the applied arts (*kōgei*). It is against this backdrop, in which the hierarchical system of fine art (*bijutsu*) was being constituted and the questioning of beauty (*bi*) was being conducted systematically within the nascent field of modern Japanese aesthetics (*bigaku*), that the figure of the *bijin* emerged.

¹² Meiji 22/1889 is typically cited as the date “*bijutsu*” was officially implemented, the year the Tokyo Imperial Museum chose *bijutsu* over *geijutsu* as the generic term to designate the arts. The ideology of *bijutsu* was further inscribed by art journalism (*bijutsu jânarizumu*) and the government’s role in founding museums (*bijutsukan*), sponsoring art exhibits (*bijutsu tenrankai*), and creating art schools (*bijutsu gakkō*).

¹³ Satō Dōshin, “*Bijutsu no bunpō*,” in <*Nihon bijutsu*> *tanjō*, 39. The word “*gei*,” says Satō, used to indicate accomplishments that included music, mathematics, and divination, specially developed talents and skills. See Satō’s “‘*Bijutsu*’ to ‘*geijutsu*’ ‘*gigei*’” in “*Bijutsu to kaisō—kinsei no kaisōsei to ‘bijutsu’ no keisei*,” in *Meiji kokka to kindai bijutsu*, 55.

¹⁴ Kitazawa Noriaki, “*Pandora no hako: kūkyō to iu na no kibō*,” in *Me no shinden*, “*bijutsu*” *juyō shi nōto*, Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1989, 299.

2.

The term *bijin*, which evolved as a personification of the highly contested idea of beauty (*bi*) in the development of the new field of aesthetics, allowed for a broader segment of society to participate in the debate as to what constituted modern Japanese aesthetic beauty. In an installment of “The Ministry of Education Exhibition and Art” (Bunten to geijutsu, 1912), a review series published in the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*, the most highly regarded novelist of the Meiji period Natsume Sōseki writes:

Of all of our tastes, the one that is most developed regardless of who the person might be, is probably our judgment of beauty or ugliness in the opposite sex. [...] When the topic is a woman’s appearance, absolutely everyone has his likes and dislikes. On this point we are all positively natural critics who don’t doubt ourselves one bit. [...] That is why when it comes to evaluating beauty and ugliness in the opposite sex there has been no need to distinguish between amateurs and professionals. All one has to do is be decisive according to one’s own standards. One’s qualifications are never suspect. I myself came here [to report on these *bijinga*] without any self-doubt.¹⁵

Thus, whether or not someone possessed the proper “qualifications,” discussions about beautiful women—what made for the ideal beauty—gave any number of people the opportunity to engage in a critique of modern Japanese culture. For amateurs and professionals alike, the *bijin*—both the real-life *bijin* and its literary and artistic representation—became a public centerpiece for visualizing and inscribing the new idea of modern Japanese aesthetic beauty.

Part of what seems to have fueled the debate about what attributes constituted the figure of the *bijin* was the interest the Japanese woman stimulated in the West, beginning

¹⁵ Natsume Sōseki, “Bunten to geijutsu,” in *Sōseki zenshū*, vol. 16, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995, 520-21. For an overview of the place of this essay within Sōseki’s oeuvre, see Haga Tōru, “Bunten to geijutsu—Sōseki to bijutsu hihyō,” in *Kaiga no ryōbun—kindai Nihon hikaku bunkashi kenkyū*, Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1984, 410-20.

with the period of Japonisme. An example of the importance that the *bijin* held for those who were concerned about the image that Japan projected abroad can be seen in the attempt to describe the ideal of Japanese feminine beauty by the English-language scholar Okakura Yoshisaburo (brother of the prominent art critic and historian Okakura Tenshin, who later served as the curator of Asian art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) in *The Japanese Spirit*, a compilation of lectures he delivered at the University of London in 1905. Okakura includes feminine beauty as “among the factors [...] to be considered as the bases of modern Japan.” He writes:

[A]s a whole, there is only one ideal throughout the Empire. So let me try to enumerate all the qualities usually considered necessary to make a beautiful woman. She is to possess a body not much exceeding five feet in height, with comparatively fair skin and proportionally well-developed limbs; a head covered with long, thick, and jet-black hair; an oval face with a straight nose, high and narrow; rather large eyes, with large deep-brown pupils and thick eyelashes, a small mouth, hiding behind its red, but not thin, lips, even rows of small white teeth; ears not altogether small; and long and thick eyebrows forming two horizontal but slightly curved lines, with a space left between them and the eyes. Of the four ways in which hair can grow around the upper edge of the forehead, viz. horned, square, round, and Fuji-shaped, one of the last two is preferred, a very high as well as a very low forehead being considered not attractive.

[...] It must also be understood that in Japan no such variety of types of beauty is to be met with as is noticed here in Europe. Blue eyes and blond hair, the charms of which we first learn to feel after a protracted stay among you, are regarded in a Japanese as something extraordinary in no favourable sense of the term! A girl with even a slight tendency to grey eyes or frizzly hair is looked upon as an unwelcome deviation from the national type.¹⁶

Okakura draws a detailed picture of the attributes of modern Japanese beauty, of which, he says, there is but “one ideal throughout the Empire.” The figure he describes is his

¹⁶ Okakura Yoshisaburo, *The Japanese Spirit*, London: Archibald Constable and Company, Ltd., 1905, 29-31.

attempt to represent a real-life national type, an “imperial” standard for modern feminine beauty.

However, as Okakura’s description reveals, because the “trait” of beauty is, in the end, subjective, defining the real-life *bijin* was a challenge. Writings in the latter-half of the Meiji period on real-life *bijin* repeatedly focused on what attributes made for a “standard” (*hyōjun*) *bijin*. Voluminous pages on the *bijin* in illustrated journals such as *Bijin Graphic* (*Bijin gahō*, 1910-11), for example, were dedicated to the topic of what constituted a “standard” *bijin*, but without reaching a consensus. Asked what a *bijin* is, the Naturalist writer Tokuda Shūsei says, “In short, one can say that a *bijin* is such-and-such a woman, but it is quite difficult to set a fixed standard. [...] To give the *bijin* a standard is virtually impossible.”¹⁷ Therefore, the question that we might ask, “What constitutes a Meiji *bijin*?” might better be restated as, “What was being sought in defining the *bijin*?” The search for the “standard” *bijin* was not so much about defining a standard for *bijin*—the definition of which was always out of reach—as it was about interrogating the cultural standard. As Hasegawa Shigure, the author of the well known *Biographies of Modern Beauties* (*Kindai bijinden*; 1918-38) proposed: “The beauty of present-day women can be said to indicate the standard direction of present-day beauty. It can also be seen as an incisive expression of the kind of lifestyle that people generally desire.”¹⁸ As these examples show, the critique of real-life *bijin* allowed for the cultural standard of beauty (*bi*) on which the definition of the term *bijin* was based to be more clearly fathomed.

¹⁷ Tokuda Shūsei, “Shōsetsugan ni utsushitaru gendai no bijin,” *Bijin gahō*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1911).

¹⁸ Hasegawa Shigure, “Meiji bijinden,” in *Kindai bijinden*, vol. 1, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1985, 13.

The study of the *bijin* as a literary and artistic representation is further complicated by the fact that the figure of the *bijin* can be thought of as existing between two competing systems, literary and artistic: it exists in language, but is at the same time inaccessible through language. That is to say, as a linguistic concept, the *bijin* can be represented through literary idealization, for example, “she is the most beautiful girl in the world.” Yet when represented visually, or artistically, this idealization can only be destroyed—for no visual representation, in the end, can fully sustain the demands of the absolute. At the same time, one must take into account the paradox that when the artistic representation of a *bijin* is seen (that is, within the culture and the era to which it belongs), it is understood or apprehended immediately. For instance, the ukiyo-e by Chōkōsai Eishō, *Hanaōgi of the Ōgiya, Contest of Beauties of the Pleasure Quarters* (Kakuchū *bijin* kurabe: Ōgiya no uchi Hanaōgi, c. 1795), would have been immediately accepted by viewers as a representation of a *bijin* (figure 1). (The word *bijin* even appears in the title.) As the writer and critic Satō Haruo notes in his short story *Bijin* (1923), “While an explanation of beauty can be tedious and incomprehensible, when beauty is seen, it is understood right away.”¹⁹ The beauty or the *bijin*, when viewed, *is* somehow *believed* to be “understood right away,” while the concept on which it is based, in contrast, cannot be described, and remains “incomprehensible.” Thus, the notion of the *bijin* at once bridges and underscores the difference between linguistic and visual representation.

3.

Yet in fact, contrary to Satō Haruo’s declaration that seeing beauty simplifies the process of understanding beauty, in the Meiji period artistic representations of beauty were not

¹⁹ Satō Haruo, *bijin* in *Satō Haruo zenshū*, vol. 6, Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1967, 356.

always immediately comprehended. This was true especially in the early years of Meiji when the popularization of *yōga*, or Western-style painting, was still relatively novel and new methods for depicting Japanese women were being explored. *Yōga* artists' representations of beautiful women were not necessarily accepted as *bijin*. Here, I give as an example Takahashi Yuichi's *Portrait of a Courtesan* (Oiranzu; 1872), a rendition in the *yōga* medium of Koine, a courtesan renowned for her beauty.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

Commissioned by a patron who lamented the *hyōgomage* hairstyle falling out of fashion,²⁰ the painting ranks as a core piece within the treasury of early Meiji *yōga* (Western-style painting) and is designated an important cultural property (*jūyō bunkazai*). Although at one time the painting was listed with the title *bijin* in the inventory ledger of the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, the collection to which *Portrait of*

²⁰ Among the oldest of hairstyles thought to be popularized by a courtesan of the *Hyōgoya*.

a Courtesan belongs,²¹ this designation did not adhere. Alluring as Koine's portrait may be, it is of note that Koine is never referred to by critics as a *bijin*. Why isn't Koine considered a *bijin* as she is depicted in this portrait by Yuichi? A brief analysis of this painting serves as an example of how the artistic representation of the term *bijin* is firmly tied to Nihonga and Japanese-style depictions of Japanese women, rather than *yōga*. While many *yōga* paintings depict beautiful Japanese women, these women are not generally considered *bijin* in the proper sense of the word.²²

The waxen figure of Koine in *Portrait of a Courtesan* exudes a corrosive and feral quality from her coarsely textured kimono to the varnished halo of her ornamental headdress. Haga Tōru, a scholar of modern Japanese literature and art, describes the painting as “exotic,” “grotesque,” and exemplifying “what [the artist] Kishida Ryūsei later termed a ‘decadent beauty.’”²³ The art historian Takashina Shūji concurs, finding the painting to have a “strange sensibility,” “cold and intense, one could even say eerie.”²⁴ Although Yuichi's works are often compared to that of Ryūsei, Kitazawa Noriaki argues, “The works of Ryūsei, which also have a particularly strong Japanese sensibility, [...] are, in the end, developed within the realm of fine art (*bijutsu*) and demand beauty (*bi*) as their unifying point. In contrast, one could say that Yuichi's *Portrait of a Courtesan* is pre-beauty (*bi*), pre-fine art (*bijutsu*), and gives the sense of a bare-faced, barbarous

²¹ Kinoshita Naoyuki, *Shashingaron: shashin to kaiga no kekkon*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996, 67.

²² For instance, the titles of *yōga* works that depict women refer to the women as “*onna*” (woman) “*shōjo*” (maiden) or “*fujin*” (a wife).

²³ Haga Tōru, *Kaiga no ryōbun: kindai Nihon hikaku bunkashi kenkyū*, Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1984, 22. See also Haga's “The Formation of Realism in Meiji Painting: The Artistic Career of Takahashi Yuichi,” in *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, ed. Donald H. Shively, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, 221-56.

²⁴ Takashina Shūji, “Takahashi Yuichi,” in *Nihon kindai bijutsu shi ron*, Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1990, 10, 7, and 10.

force.”²⁵ Kitazawa suspects that the *yōga* pioneer Yuichi would not have been conscious of the concept of beauty (*bi*) guiding his work, or of *yōga* as a medium with which he could create “unique beauty” (*koyū no bi*).²⁶ Noting that the term “*bijutsu*” first appeared in 1872, the year that *Portrait of a Courtesan* was painted, he says, “Whether Yuichi would have even thought of the painting *Portrait of a Courtesan* as *bijutsu* is also a question.”²⁷ Yuichi’s objective lay not in creating a work of fine art, but in portraying his subject as realistically as possible to provide an accurate record of the changing *fūzoku* (cultural manners) of the courtesan, in this case Koine’s hairstyle.

The concept of realism (*shajitsu*) was not yet established as an artistic method when Yuichi began painting, according to Satō Dōshin, which accounts for the criticism of Yuichi’s works at the time as “vulgar.”²⁸ Haga proclaims bluntly of *yōga* at this juncture, “one did not study it to learn how to draw beautiful women.”²⁹ *Yōga* was, after all, first embraced as a method for reproducing what lay before the artist’s eyes and was actual or real (*jitsu*); it was not immediately accepted as a medium for expressing beauty (*bi*).³⁰ The art historian Kinoshita Naoyuki explains: “Along with portraits of actors, the media that circulated [the image of the courtesan] to the world had, for a long time, been *nishiki-e* [colored wood-block prints]. It was in *nishiki-e* that the standard for beauty had

²⁵ Kitazawa Noriaki, *Me no shinden: “Bijutsu” juyō shi nōto*, Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1989, 71.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 74. The word “*bijutsu*” first appeared in 1872 in preparatory documents for Japan’s participation in the Vienna World Exposition, which was held in 1873.

²⁸ Satō Dōshin, *Meiji kokka to kindai bijutsu: bi no seijigaku*, Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kō Bunkan, 1999, 221.

²⁹ Haga, 20.

³⁰ Tanaka Jun describes the works of Yuichi and other *yōga* pioneers thus: “Early Meiji *yōga* artists had pictorial composition and the play of light on their minds. Furthermore, they were intent on delving into their subject, that is, the reality that lay before their eyes. As a result, what their canvases depicted was neither unified space nor a singular expression of the world, but just a fragment of reality or an assemblage of fragments.” “Meiji shoki *yōga*,” in *Shajitsu no keifu 1: yōga hyōgen no dōnyū*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan, Tokyo: Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan, 1985, 202.

been established.”³¹ As the reactions to this painting reveal, an element of beauty integral to the construction of the *bijin* does not adequately pass from traditional *nishiki-e* into Yuichi’s *yōga* rendering. Something seems to have been lost in the translation of Koine from ukiyo-e to *yōga*, imbuing *Portrait of a Courtesan* and the embalmed, inanimate figure of Koine—a still life of sorts—with a moribund air. Something disappears in the translation of the woman from ukiyo-e to *yōga*, preventing Koine from being conceived of as a *bijin*. Koine’s reaction on seeing her portrait was to “weep angrily, ‘This is not my face.’”³² She cannot identify herself in Yuichi’s *yōga* rendering. As a *yōga*, she is not a *bijin* (a beauty); in fact, not only is she not a *bijin*, she barely looks like a woman. The literary scholar Edwin McClellan, noting the coarseness of Koine’s features, has remarked, “The face could easily be taken for that of a man. No wonder Koine cried.”³³ In the shift to realism, Koine as a *yōga* representation loses not only her beauty, but whatever it is that marks her as feminine.

What makes for the special quality of *Portrait of a Courtesan*, claims Haga, is its “thick ‘Japanese scent,’” an effect of “appearing as if it was a translation of *Nihonga* into an oil painting.”³⁴ Takashina concurs, commenting that the painting projects a “sensitivity—of something essentially different—which seems to stem from the impression that this painting had jumped on the bandwagon of oil painting, even though it was fundamentally unsuited to the medium. At the very least, the question that *Portrait of a Courtesan* raises, is not the extent to which Yuichi had mastered the technique of

³¹ Kinoshita, 66.

³² Cited in Kinoshita, 67.

³³ From a conversation.

³⁴ Haga, 21. Takashina talks about the carry-over into *Oiran* of the Edo-period aesthetic in terms of its ukiyo-e print colors. See “Takahashi Yuichi,” in *Nihon kindai bijutsu shi ron*, 26.

Western oil painting, but what happens when two different sensibilities collide.”³⁵ What makes *Portrait of a Courtesan* “fundamentally unsuited” to the medium of oil painting, or *yōga*, is that not only is it a *yōga* painting conceived of as a *fūzokuga* (genre painting), a genre particular to *Nihonga* (Japanese-style painting), but that the subject of the portrait is the *bijin*. The figure of the *bijin* in Yuichi’s rendition is incapable of absorbing colliding sensibilities; it is the intangible beauty of the *bijin* that is missing from Yuichi’s rendition that gives the impression of “something essentially different.” In *Portrait of a Courtesan*, the transmutation of beauty and the difference in the Japanese and Western sensibility is marked by the cadaverous figure of the courtesan Koine, in whom the designation of *bijin* has met its death. The *bijin* Koine cannot be translated from ukiyo-e/*Nihonga* to the realistic medium of *yōga* without losing the essence of what makes her a *bijin*. This early *yōga* work illustrates what remained an expectation of the artistic representation of the *bijin* throughout the modern period. The designation *bijin* necessitates that the woman be depicted in a medium in keeping with the traditional Japanese artistic lineage.

4.

Fortunately, as the popularity of ukiyo-e declined, the subsequent birth of the modern *Nihonga* genre *bijinga* (paintings of beauties) circumvented what might have been the untimely death of the artistic representation of the *bijin*. The *Nihonga* genre *bijinga* is generally thought to appear with the Ministry of Education Art Exhibition (Bunten) in 1907, peak in 1915 when a special room for *bijinga* paintings was established, and wane in 1918 when the Bunten was reorganized as the Exhibition of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts (Teiten). If a genre is determined by its capacity to rely on a certain trait that

³⁵ Takashina, 10.

sets it apart from other genres, then the rise of *bijinga* confirms that by the Taishō period a consensus on what constituted modern Japanese beauty—as well as a consensus on the definition of the term *bijin*—capable of sustaining an entire genre, had been achieved. In opposition to the naturalistic realism of the *yōga* nude, the *bijin* in *Nihonga* was constructed as a form of nature found only within art. Seen through artistic representations of the nude, Japan envisioned the Western woman as natural; through images of Madonna and Venus the Western woman was also construed as mythic, nostalgic, and eternal. If, to the Japanese eye, the Western woman seemed to be a negation of the particular, the *bijin*, by contrast, was material and contingent, a formation of the stylized and fragmented particular. The Western woman was presumed to exist outside of time, the *bijin* denoted the times. Adorned with the latest fashions, accessories, and prevailing trends in hairstyles and cosmetics, *Nihonga bijin* were fully outfitted with the visual signs of the “cultural manners” (*fūzoku*) of Meiji Japan.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

The figure of the *bijin* presented to the Japanese public in the *Nihonga* medium was meant to be read, examined, and deciphered. Each representation of the *bijin* contains a precise description of the seasons, textures, and nuances of the beautiful. In the details of the *bijin* was the very essence of beauty. “A *bijin* is that which changes with the dress she wears and the space she inhabits,” writes the Meiji-period fiction writer Izumi Kyōka.³⁶ Take, for instance, *Nihonga* artist Kaburaki Kiyokata’s *Akashi Neighborhood of the Tsukiji District* (Tsukiji Akashi-chō; 1927) (figure 3). Koike Mitsue, a specialist of Meiji *fūzoku*, notes how viewers need to analyze elements of the painting such as the details of the woman’s dress, for instance, if the painting is to be fully enjoyed.

How many contemporary viewers are aware that the grayish blue, finely-patterned kimono that the woman in Kaburaki Kiyokata’s *Akashi Neighborhood of the Tsukiji District* is wearing is an unlined kimono (*hitoe*) of silk crepe (*chirimen*)? They may surmise that the material is silk crepe or be able to deduce the general season that the painting depicts from the morning glories that are in bloom, entwined around the painted trellis in the background.

But is it possible for us viewers today to take in more precisely that the morning glories have passed their prime and the flowers are smaller; that the lower leaves have withered and the seeds, now large, have become conspicuous; that the painting depicts a very brief time of year, a time between the seasons when it feels slightly chilly, enough so for one to wear a lined half-coat (*haori*)? Do we see that this subtle sense of season is beautifully depicted in the woman’s unlined half-coat of silk crepe?³⁷

The *fūzoku*, in this case the attire, of the *bijin* is not merely ornamental and demands to be interpreted rather than viewed purely as an ornate and decorative surface. Moreover, as Kiyokata the artist himself explains of the women’s hairstyle, “There is no other hairstyle that better represents the Meiji period than the *yakai-musubi* style, also known as the

³⁶ Izumi Kyōka, “Onna no hogoshoku—bijin to inshō,” in *Kyōka zenshū*, vol. 28, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1976, 752-56.

³⁷ Koike Mitsue, *Fukushoku no hyōjō*, Tokyo: Keisō Shobō, 1991, 220.

Igirisu-maki (English-roll).”³⁸ The woman’s hairstyle reflects the Meiji surroundings of the Akashi district, the foreigner’s quarters by Tokyo Bay, to which Kiyokata says, “I am always drawn. Numerous Western-style sailing vessels with two masts, which I heard were bound for Bōshū, were moored here by hotels, gaslights, and flowers that bloomed in the gardens of the foreigners’ mansions.”³⁹ In opposition to the idealism of the Western nude, the artistic and social construction of the *bijin* constituted a subject across which changing Meiji fashion, trends (*ryūkō*), and *fūzoku* were consolidated and evaluated.

Prior to the Meiji period the Japanese beauty had, as Satō Haruo claims, been “understood right away,” that is, within the framework of a cultural discourse with which everyone would have been familiar. However, in the Meiji period, understanding beauty became a much more complex endeavor. It was no longer possible, as Sōseki says, “to be decisive according to one’s own standards,” that is, as a Japanese. The Japanese standard now had to be measured against standards outside Japan. In the past the reputed beauty of the Japanese empress marked a limit against which all that was pleasurable to the Japanese eye was measured—until then the empress served as the supreme example of feminine beauty. But in 1872 the widespread circulation of the Meiji Empress’s photograph destroyed this idealization (figure 4). All the attributes of beauty could not be conferred on one person alone, and the viewing public had to contend with the destruction of the former ideal of feminine Japanese beauty. (Interestingly, the name that the Meiji Empress took on her ascension in 1868, Haruko, was written 美子, and one can speculate that her name might have further inspired the popularity of the *bijin*.) There was also the additional demand of conceiving of beauty, or as Okakura says, “imperial

³⁸ Kaburaki Kiyokata, “*Akashichō wo kaita koro*,” in *Kaburaki Kiyokata bunshū*, vol. 1, Tokyo: Hakuōsha, 1979, 209.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

beauty,” in relation to the notion of “universal beauty” (*zessei no bijin*), a term that appears frequently in writings on the *bijin*. Yet this notion of the *zessei bijin* was also being contested, as one Meiji-period writer declares: “Rumor has it that the deceased Queen of Austria was a beauty and that the Queen of England is a beauty, but if one searches, there are any number of beautiful women equal to them.”⁴⁰

The term *bijin* and its artistic rendering offers a glimpse into the formation of modern Japanese aesthetics as a politically-charged and gendered dynamic and tracks how aesthetic appreciation was conceived and developed in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. This essay on the *bijin* has attempted to address the crisis that the concept of the *bijin* presented in Meiji Japan, as people struggled to define modern Japanese beauty. The definition of beauty, or *bi*, on which the term *bijin* is based is conditional—as beautiful as—and depends on a never-ending string of semantic codes. The ability to define aesthetic beauty, which is integral to understanding the *bijin*, is always beyond our reach. This fundamental ambiguity inherent in the term *bijin* compounds the difficulty in understanding the ideology behind it and makes it virtually impossible to offer a simple definition of the term. In the Meiji period *bijin* became the site or the object of projections, definitions, experiences, desires, and meanings in the exploration of modern Japanese beauty (*bi*). So thoroughly was the metaphor “Beauty is a *bijin*” absorbed during the Meiji period that the figurative phrase turned metonymic: the *bijin* emerged as a substitute for beauty in the investigation of Japanese modern aesthetics. The distance implied by all metaphors was reduced in the case of the *bijin* and the Japanese woman, or the *bijin*, ceased to be a figure for beauty, but rather became the thing in itself: *bi* (beauty) and *bijutsu* (fine art). No longer an approximation, beauty was

⁴⁰ Miyake Setsurei, “Zessei no bijin,” *Shumi*, vol. 1, no. 6 (November 1906): 6.

a woman, the *bijin* an essence of beauty. In the Meiji period the *bijin* comes to assume mythical proportions in excess of a normal rhetorical figure—the *bijin* is more than a figure, a meta-figure or an icon. The popular term *bijin* bears the imprint of the project of modernity as Japan sought to secure its modern artistic identity, at once Japanese, imperial, and universal.