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Utamaro and His Five Women (Utamaro O Meguru Gonin No Onna). New Yorker Films.

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Japan After WWII: Kenji Mizojuchi on Changing Values

Reminiscent of the extended dolly shot which opens Kenji Mizoguchi's exceptional Sisters of Gion (1936), Utamaro and His Five Women begins with a moving camera gracefully sliding down a gauntlet of kimono clad women and men. A Mizoguchi trademark, the long take reiterates the director's command of his medium: themes are revealed visually and the viewer is instantly transported back in Japanese history to the Ginza in feudal Edo. This is the late eighteenth century–near the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate–where women are treated as objects and one's identity is defined through group association rather than individualism. In addition, "good" painting must adhere to the strict codes of the rigorous Kano School of Art. <p> Utamaro is, however, different from other jidai-geki films like Mizoguchi's own Ugestu (1953), or Akira Kurosawa's The Seven Samurai (1954). The film transcends its genre by questioning the place of art, women, and the individual simultaneously in both Utamaro and Mizoguchi's historical contexts. The artist Kitagawa Utamaro lived shortly before the Tokugawa period gave way to the Meiji Restoration; Mizoguchi made his film in 1945-46, just after the Japanese Empire had succumbed to the American Occupation forces. Thus, Mizoguchi's own historical situation and the circumstances surrounding the film's production are critical for understanding and evaluating Utamaro. The director's portrayal of this ukioye-e painter and his time reveals not only the changing values of the late Tokugawa era but anticipates the inevitable erosion of the traditional social structure in Mizoguchi's own post-World War II Japan. <p> According to Dudley and Paul Andrew, after the war, Mizoguchi courted the favor of the occupying forces by turning out several films explicitly lobbying for the democratic treatment of women. The only piece he was allowed in this era, Utamaro and His Five Women, likewise preached a message of suffrage and equality, though in a far more oblique way. <p> The oblique way should not be confused with what has been termed the convoluted narrative of Utamaro but rather indicative of the complex themes Mizoguchi investigates. Though a period piece, the film text mirrors contemporary issues the Japanese people faced during the time it was made: How does one function as an individual outside of the traditional group, particularly the closely knit Japanese family? In the newly formed western-style democracy, how does one secure equal status with others regardless of gender, political views, or economic position? Where does one find the instantaneous knowledge necessary to personally deal with such chaotic social change in a country which had previously looked to the Tokugawa period as the model for traditional societal roles? Mizoguchi goes back to Utamaro's Edo, for, as Japanese historian Mikiso Hane has written, "Modern Japan cannot be understood without an awareness of the Tokugawa background." This was the era where tradition was revered, social divisions were accepted, and Japan had effectively isolated itself from the international community. For almost three hundred years, the Tokugawa social structure defined Japan. This is what makes the historical figure Kitagawa Utamaro worth reexamining through Mizoguchi's film (and conversely). The maverick painter's life and art, as presented by Mizoguchi, foreshadows the end of the Shogunate. The director, restrained creatively by the allied plan, realized that the very fabric of Japanese society was transforming drastically before him. <p> The imposed western values of equal social status–especially for women–and democratic self-determination were unfamiliar concepts to the occupied Japanese. Implicit in Mizoguchi's film is the problem of self-individualization, the issue of gender equality, and the theme of the artist as the person impervious to societal constraints or cultural imperialism. Utamaro defines himself through his nonconformist art and the women–both metaphorical and actual–he encounters. There are the women he paints and the women he affects through his paintings and his life philosophy. They are not, however, his women in the possessive sexual or social sense.

For instance, the portly courtesan, Oshin, who buys out her contract and gains her freedom, is motivated by the free-spirited Utamaro who disdains the upper class by painting the commoners and living among them as well. The fact that Utamaro was himself a rebel and one who could function outside of the collective–effectively portrayed in the film when he "duels" the Kano art student via a painting contest in which he embellishes his opponent's lifeless drawing–is analogous to a major dilemma which challenged the Japanese people immediately after World War II. Overcoming one's attachment to a group as a means of self-actualization is addressed through the fictionalized life of the defiant artist who becomes the forerunner of one possible solution to the fundamental problem of the Japanese people understanding and coping with their suddenly modern existence–an existence previously based on three centuries of tradition. <p> The American occupation of Japan set off a wave of self-questioning by the post-war generation of Japanese artists. New filmmakers like Nagisa Oshima, Masahiro Shinoda, and Shohei Imamura explored the problems their generation faced: identity crises, gender/sexual equality, political empowerment, and most importantly, the role and function of tradition amidst the sweeping tide of western modernization. Though their film form differed radically from the established directors like Mizoguchi, Kurosawa, and Yasujiro Ozu, the 1960s filmmakers should be viewed as responding to the very issues that Mizoguchi raised in Utamaro. His film form was certainly more conventional but he, too was equally as concerned with the metamorphosing Japan of the post-war period as would be his progeny. <p> With its videocassette release, Utamaro and His Five Women has been granted a deserved second life almost fifty years after its theatrical debut. The film merits reevaluation not by ranking it within Mizoguchi's canon or comparing its form with that of the new Japanese filmmakers of the 1960s, but through examining the intersection of art, culture, and identity within the film text and their parallels to the historical context surrounding its production. Mizoguchi's eloquent period drama–made under the watchful eye of the American military censors–sublimely scrutinizes his own situation, his own moment in Japanese history.

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