The Anti-Bijin: A new approach towards the female image in Meiji and Taisho Japan

Clark Homburg, Luisa

The Anti-*Bijin*:

A new approach towards the female image in Meiji and Taisho Japan

Name: Luisa Clark Homburg

Student Number: s2266520

Supervisor: Doreen Müller

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Foreword

Before you lies the thesis 'The Anti-*Bijin*: a new approach towards the female image' that I have written as partial fulfillment for my degree in Asian Studies: History, Art and Culture of Asia at the University of Leiden, written over the course of four months from March 2022 until June 2022.

I have written this thesis because of my interest in Japanese art and the portrayal of the female image. I like to challenge the status-quo by taking on a slightly different approach and to pose the question if the current state of academic literature fits with the changes that are happening within our society.

This thesis would not have been what it is right now without the help of my supervisor Doreen Müller. Not only did she introduce me to the topic of these so-called anti-*bijin*, but she has also extensively supported me in forming my research question and arguments. Therefore, I would like to thank her for (once again) being such a supportive supervisor.

Besides that, I would like to thank my father who was willing to elaborately discuss my thesis with me several times and helping me with getting new insights.

I hope you enjoy reading.

Luisa Clark Homburg
Amsterdam, June 30, 2022

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Introduction

When Japan was forced to open its borders in 1853, after almost 250 years of being closed, a rapid modernization flooded the country. This modernization took over almost any facet in Japan, from the school-system to jurisdiction, as well as the art scene. During this time Western influences entered the Japanese art world, enabling artists to experiment with new materials and subjects.

Before the Meiji period, women were typically portrayed as idolized beauties, fitting within the contemporary beauty ideals. However, due to the new influences coming from the West after the opening of the borders, artists started to challenge this standard *bijin* mode of representing women. Artists such as Kajiwara Hisako, Tadaoto Kainoshō and Chigusa Sōn created paintings depicting women in a whole new manner compared to former periods. While previously women were often shown as the epitome of beauty and sophistication, now there was room for representations of women who weren't perfect nor appealed to the society's beauty standards. Paintings would feature women whose wrinkles and age were visible, who were ill or those who were overpowered by emotions. Other works would depict women in an exaggerated manner, as a means to challenge the *bijin* way of portraying women. These paintings can be considered as anti-*bijin*, since they tried to contest what regular *bijin* images advocated for.

There hasn't been written a lot about these so-called anti-*bijin*, a handful of academic texts have focused on the emergence of a trend of this change in portraying women. The anti-bijin images are often referred to as "grotesque", "uncanny" and even "ugly". In this thesis I would firstly like to explore in what way and to what extent these pictures defy the traditional *bijin* image. Besides that, I want to figure out what the driving force was behind the creation of these works. Why did painters suddenly decide to challenge the *bijin* image? I propose that a portion of the anti-*bijin* depict women in a more humane way, taking away the objectifying and voyeuristic aspect that prevails in pre-Meiji *bijinga*. Moreover, I believe that these works challenge the beauty ideals in several ways. In addition, I would like to explore and nuance the idea that these anti-*bijin* images are "ugly" or "grotesque", as they are often referred to.

I will answer these questions by firstly, in Chapter 1, offering an overview of the *bijin* in the Edo and Meiji period. In Chapter 2 I will analyze the changes in the Meiji and Taisho societies that led to the emergence of paintings challenging the *bijin* mode of depicting women. Chapter 3 will go over three female painters who created anti-*bijin*, while Chapter 4 deals with the male perspective. Chapter 4 will also delve deeper into the question what the incentives

could have been for *nihonga* painters to paint women in a new manner. Lastly, Chapter 5 will contest the use of words such as 'grotesque' in the description of these works.

Chapter 1.

Bijinga of Edo and Meiji Japan: the idealized portrayal of women

1.1 The Edo Period (1603-1868)

For decades the idealized *bijin* image was prevalent in Japanese art. Women in paintings and prints were depicted as idolized beauties adorned with lavish hairstyles and garments. These images of beautiful women were not meant to be a realistic reflection of reality, hence why none of them were portrayed as their own individuals with personal characters. Rather, they represented a beauty ideal. In these works, the looks were the main concern; meaning that the emphasis was put on the garments, hairstyles and faces.

"Beauty Beneath a Willow Tree" by Isoda Koryūsai (1735-1790) is a prime example of an Edo period *bijin* painting (figure 1). The painting depicts a beauty walking beneath a willow tree, while she holds a fan in her hand. Her face doesn't show any emotional expression as was the custom for most *bijinga*. Covertly expressing emotions stems from the Heian period, a time when a lot of art and literature was produced at the Japanese court. Keeping decorum was a central aspect and traces of this are still visible in Japanese cultural production of the later periods, such as this painting.

Most of the *bijin* were depicted in pictures of the floating world, or *ukiyo-e*. These pictures, as the name already entails, served as an escape from the real world. As this floating world was closely tied to the pleasure quarters, especially those in Edo, women working and living in those quarters were most often the main subject. It could even be said that the image of a beautiful woman was a synonym for a picture of a courtesan.[1] Just as in *bijinga* of women who did not have a connection with the Yoshiwara, the garments around the women's bodies and hairstyles were accentuated. However, in the case of courtesans not only the physical body made a beautiful woman. Performance skills such as calligraphy writing, but also the handling of customers were important aspects in the appeal and beauty of a courtesan. *Bijinga* of courtesans thus not solely were about their appearances since sophisticated skills were just as important. In addition, the women were often depicted in a private moment. This heightened the appeal of an *ukiyo-e* as one could experience a woman in a way, they would never be able

[1] Cho Kyo, "Edo Culture as a Filter", in *The Search for the Beautiful Woman: A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty* (Plymouth, England: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers inc., 2012.), 191.

to in real life. This peeping tom motif, or *kaimami*, was deeply engrained in Japanese society, and just as covertly expressing emotions, it has been present as early as the Heian period.[2]

Figure 1 Isoda Koryūsai, Beauty Beneath a Willow Tree, Hanging scroll; ink on silk, 1775-1785, Art Institute Chicago, Chicago.

The painting "a Courtesan Reading a Letter" by Chōbunsai Eishi (1756-1829) is an example of a typical *bijinga* of a courtesan. Eishi was known for his works of beautiful and elegant women (figure 2). The painting features a popular subject of the Edo period: a courtesan. She is portrayed on a hanging scroll with a blank background. Leaving out details in the background was also commonly done in *bijinga*, this was to make sure that the complete focus was on the beauty of the subject portrayed.[3]

Probably inspired by his contemporary Torii Kiyonaga, Eishi painted a woman with an elongated and tall body. These distorted figures offered artists the opportunity to put more

[2] Doris Croissant, "Visions of the Third Princess: Gendering Spaces in the Tale of Genji Illustrations", *Art Asiatiques* 60 (2005): 105.
[3] Fujisawa Murasaki, ""Nihon Bijutsu ni Okeru 'Bijinga' no Tenkai", *Kokugakuin Zatsushi* 116, no.3 (2015): 5.

emphasis on the garments around the subject's body.[4] The courtesan's leg peeps out of her kimono; this way of showing skin was a common motive in paintings (and prints) portraying women of the pleasure quarters. Her multiple layers of kimono are elaborately decorated, the outer kimono is blue, with a green collar and adorned with flowers. Beneath her blue kimono she wears a red kimono, also decorated. Her outer kimono has slipped of her shoulder, a motif that is not uncommon in the depiction of women, especially courtesans. It would insinuate to the viewer that the woman is accessible and at the same time heighten the sensual feeling of such works.

The courtesan is reading a letter, it is not stated who it comes from, but it could be from one of her admirers. The reading of a letter alludes to the fact that she probably has a moment by herself and got some time to spare to read the letter, which plays into the *kaimami* trope. In this way the viewer of the painting, perhaps a wealthy patron, could imagine what it would look like if his favorite courtesan would read his letter of admiration. Just as in the painting by Koryūsai, her face shows minimal emotion and fits within the beauty ideal of the days.

1.2. The Meiji Period (1868-1912)

Images of beautiful women became so popular that the Tokugawa government opted for a ban on *bijinga*, specifically those works depicting courtesans. This was done during the Tempō reforms of 1842, which the shogunate tried to implement during a time of economic hardships. This entailed that production of *bijinga* ceased to exist until the fall of the shogunate just two decades later.

The inauguration of the Meiji period entailed the lifting of all censorship imposed by the shogunal government, causing for images of *bijin* to flood the art world again. During this time *bijinga* was officially established as a genre at the first Bunten exhibition that took place in 1907.[5] *Bijinga* were presented as a special genre of *nihonga* that represented "Japanese concepts of beauty" and at the same time was supposed to "redefine Japanese identity".[6]

[4] David Waterhouse, "The Birth of the Full-colour Print: Suzuki Harunobu and His Age, Early 1740s to Early 1780s", in *The Hotei Encyclopedia of Japanese Woodblock Prints. Volume I.",* ed. Chris Uhlenbeck and Amy Newland (Amsterdam, Hotei Publishing, 2005): 92.
[5] Michiyo Morioka, "Changing images of women: Taisho period paintings by Uemura Shōen, Itō Shōha, and Kajiwara Hisako" (PhD diss., University of Washington 1990): 40.
[6] Kendall H. Brown, *Dangerous Beauties and Dutiful Wives: popular portraits of women in Japan, 1905*-1925 (Mineola, NY.: Dover Publications, 2011): vii, quoted in Maureen de Vries, "*bijinga* and the *bijin hanga*", in Elegance and Excellence: modern women of shin hanga (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Nihon no Hanga, 2022): 4.

The Bunten was organized annually by the Japanese Ministry of Education and was modeled after European exhibition salons.[7] At the time, paintings were usually closely connected with the Bunten and therefore also closely linked with the Japanese elite as they would usually be the ones commissioning works.[8] Moreover, a selected jury judged the works that were exhibited at the Bunten and presented awards to those they considered worthy enough of a prize. Because many artists wanted to impress the judges in the hopes to win an award, they started to imitate works by past Bunten winners.[9] This caused for artists seeking out individuality and innovation to gather in art societies that spoke out against the Bunten and began organizing their own exhibitions. These new art societies functioned as a fertile ground for the development of anti-*bijin*, as will be explained further in Chapter 2.

1.2.1 Meiji Period: The creation of nihonga and yōga

As mentioned in the introduction, the opening of Japan after more than two centuries brought along an enormous change in the country. The increasing Westernization caused a lot of discussion around what Japanese culture entailed. These discussions also sparked questions within the art scene: what was Japanese art and how could this be defined? There was an increasing need to differentiate between Japanese and Western art. This led to the distinction within the Japanese art scene between *yōga* (Western style painting) and *nihonga* (Japanese style painting). The defining differentiating factor that made *nihonga* 'Japanese' and *yōga* 'Western', was the use of materials; while *nihonga* painters worked with water-based pigments on silk, *yōga* painters made use of oil paint. Besides that, the difference in subject matter also served as a differentiating aspect between the two until the end of the Taisho period. However, *nihonga* was not entirely resistant against the influences from the West, as Western art elements ended up being incorporated in *nihonga* works. Especially during the Taisho period the lines between *yōga* and *nihonga* became increasingly blurred. As will be explained more elaborately in **1.3**.

[7] Szostak, "Art Is Something Born: The Rise and Fall of the Kokuga Society (1918–28) and the Emergence of the Kokuten Style", *Asia critique* Vol. 21, No.2 (Spring 2013): 271.
[8] De Vries, "*bijinga* and the *bijin hanga*", 5.
[9] Annie van Assche, "Changing Perceptions of Ideal Beauty in Early Twentieth Century japan: Kyoto School Bijinga" (PhD Diss., University of Hawai'i, 1996): 25.

Figure 2 Chōbunsai Eishi, A Courtesan Reading a Letter, Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 1815-1830, Art Institute Chicago, Chicago.

The Anti-*Bijin*: a new approach towards the female image

John Clark has described the *nihonga* genre as neo-traditional; the use of traditional in this case is tied to an ideological conviction. The neo-traditional reflects what a certain social group considers to be important within a set of structures. This essentially means it actually has more to do with what a group people likes, than what is actually traditional.[10] What is seen as traditional is thus a selection of things from the past what that group believed to be important.[11] In the case of Nihonga this encompassed values such as "love of nature, respect for tradition, and fine craftsmanship".[12] Consequently, with the birth of Nihonga around the 1880s parts of the Japanese (art historical) past had been renounced, while at the same time very distinct schools and genres suddenly were merged under one common denominator.[13] In this way, *Nihonga* exemplifies what traditionalists considered to be the most important elements of the pre-Meiji Japanese culture.

Nihonga was also closely related to nationalistic sentiments. This is not very surprising as the neo-traditional often makes use of nationalism as an effective tool for its legitimization. Such nationalistic ideas mainly took form in the rejection of Western art,[14] especially during the early Meiji period. *Nihonga* was meant as a tool to preserve Japanese culture in a time where a lot of Western influences imbued the country. By the end of the Meiji period and during the Taisho period this started to change, and we see artists moving away from a strict anti-Western stance. However, this quickly shifted again during the 1930s, when fascism started to advance in Japan. At that time one of the main fundaments of *nihonga* became "an intense (even narcissistic) preoccupation with national identity".[15]

Nihonga painters had to work within strict boundaries and adhere to many rules concerning materials, iconography, and composition. Depicting realities was often avoided within the *nihonga* genre, as it filtered "away the unpleasantness of the real world".[16] Consequently, any form of criticism and violence were often not openly addressed in these artworks. As covert expression of emotions has always been an important characteristic of Japanese art prior to the Meiji period, *nihonga* as well would usually express emotions in a codified manner. The works preferred communicating emotions through nature-based elements

[10] John Clark, "Formation of the Neotraditional", in *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998): 73.
[11] Ibid, 71.
[12] John M. Rosenfield, "Nihonga and Its Resistance to 'the Scorching Drought of Modern Vulgarity.", in *Births and Rebirths in Japanese Art*, ed. Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2001): 164.
[13] Clark, "Formation of the Neotraditional", 78.
[14] Ibid, 75.
[15] Rosenfield, "Nihonga", 166.
[16] Ibid, 182.

such as flowers, birds, and the passing of the seasons.[17] These elements would each allude to specific emotions and feelings, that the contemporary audience was able to decipher.

1.2.1 Meiji Period: bijinga and nihonga

Initially *nihonga* painters mainly stuck to the traditional iconography such as birds and flowers and did not feature many women in their works. However, more and more *nihonga* painters started to paint images of women as well, with images of women of the provinces as the earliest examples. Mainly women of the village of Ohara (*ohara-ne*), female abalone divers (*ama*) and women of the islands (*shima no onna*) were selected as subjects for these works.[18] This led to the development of the *bijinga* genre, paintings of women embodying an idealistic and artificial beauty.[19] Lippit even argues that at one point the "*bijinga* genre was *nihonga* par excellence."[20]

Figure 3 Uemura Shōen, Firefly, Color on Silk, 1913, Yamatane Museum of Art, Tokyo.

[17] Rosenfield, "Nihonga", 181.
[18] Annie van Assche, "Changing Perceptions", 61.
[19] Miya Elise Mizuta Lippit, "Bijinga. The *Nihonga* Genre and the Fashioning of Material Beauty.", in *Aesthetic Life: Beauty and Art in Modern Japan* (Leiden, Netherlands: BRILL, 2019): 208.
[20] Ibid, 202.

At the start of the twentieth century the *bijin* image had firmly gained in popularity and "came to characterize Japanese aesthetics itself"[21]. At this point *bijinga* had evolved into the image of a beautiful woman, usually adorned in a traditional kimono.[22] The women in the paintings radiated a softness, partly due to the innocent looks on their faces. They would never make direct eye-contact with the viewer, instead they tended to look away in a different direction.[23] Not only did this heighten the voyeuristic relationship between the viewer and the subject, but it was also meant to represent "romantic introspection" which "expressed melancholy or world weariness."[24]

The women were mostly depicted doing simple activities or in some cases the focus would solely be on the looks of the subject. Often the works featured seasonal elements, which has been an important aspect in Japanese art for centuries. The type of beauty *bijin* paintings focused on were of an artificial and idealistic kind, and thus weren't meant to be a reflection of a natural or realistic beauty.[25] In this respect the *bijinga* of the Meiji and Taisho eras were quite similar to those of the Edo period. Moreover, depicting the naked body was frowned upon within the *nihonga* genre, as the naked body, unlike in Western art, was not linked with beauty.[26] Rather, the female nude at the time was still closely associated with the pornographic *shunga* prints of the Edo period.[27]

An example of a typical *bijinga* in the *nihonga* style is 'Firefly' (蛍) by Uemura Shōen (figure 3). This painting portrays a woman dressed in a blue kimono decorated with lilies. Her face looks neutral, and her skin is a pale white with red lips. Her hair is styled in a typical Japanese manner, adorned with golden and green hairpins. She is in the process of hanging up a mosquito net, a motif that was also common in *ukiyo-e*. However, in contrast to the sexually tinted *ukiyo-e*, Shōen gave her painting an innocent touch. In line with most *bijinga* this painting has a plain background, directing the focus on the subject.

As *nihonga* had a strong nationalistic element, the women depicted in paintings often doubled as a role model of the nation's customs and manners (*fūzoku*) at that time.[28] Because of this, *bijinga* were often closely related to *fūzokuga* (a picture of manner and customs) and in

[21] Miya Elise Mizuta Lippit, "Introduction. On First Becoming a Painting.", in *Aesthetic Life : Beauty and Art in Modern Japan* (Leiden, Netherlands: BRILL, 2019): 7.
[22] Ibid, 211.
[23] Brown, "Dangerous Beauties", ix, quoted in De Vries, "*Bijinga* and the *Bijin Hanga*", 8.
[24] De Vries, "*bijinga* and the *bijin hanga*", 8.
[25] Lippit, "Bijinga", 206.
[26] Ibid, 208.
[27] Van Assche, "Changing Perceptions", 64.
[28] Ibid, 211.

some cases it can be quite complicated to distinguish between the two genres.[29] Besides that, the women in *bijinga* were a reflection of the "taste of the times" and "trends".[30] They embodied what women were expected to be at that time, which mostly entailed being a good wife and a wise mother, which will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3.[31] A good example of this, is a painting by Itō Shōha called 'Seed Leaves' (figure 4).

Figure 4 Itō Shōha, Seed Leaves, Color on Silk, 1918, Mie Prefectural Art Museum, Tsu.

'Seed Leaves' depicts a mother potting morning glory seedlings together with her young daughter. Her daughter playfully holds one of the sprouts and shows it to her mother. The seedlings could at the same time be a metaphor for the child, as the mother hopes for the growth of both the little seedlings as well as her child.[32]

[29] Van Assche, "Chaging Perceptions", 211.
[30] Wakakuwa Midori, "Bijinga no Seiritsu", quoted in Lippit, "Bijinga", 211.
[31] Koyama Shizuko and Gabriel A. Sylvain, "The "Good Wife and Wise Mother" Ideology in Post—World War I Japan", *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, No. 7 (1994): 31-32
[32] "Itō Shōha. Futaba. 1918.", Mie Prefectural Art Museum, accessed June 28, 2022, https://www.bunka.pref.mie.lg.jp/art-museum/61986039415.htm.

In the back a wall of a house or shed is visible with a broom leaning against the house. The broom could be a reference towards the role of the woman as the housewife, which included tasks such as cleaning and taking care of the house. Moreover, the painting underpins the role of a woman as a good mother. While carrying out tasks such as potting the plants with her daughter, the mother at the same time teaches her daughter how to be a wise mother and good wife in the future.

While the Edo period, as well as the Meiji and Taisho periods *bijinga* mostly depicted women in the latest fashion and make-up, the *bijinga* created pre-Meiji differed from their successors. The image of a *bijin* in the Meiji and Taisho periods went further than just a neatly rendered image of a beautiful woman and focused less on the eroticized image of courtesans. These *bijinga* were closely tied to nationalistic sentiments and therefore represented women who were considered as the ideal Japanese woman by the contemporary society, not only in terms of looks and fashion, but also in terms of the nation's ideologies.

Chapter 2.
The creation of the Anti-*Bijin* in Meiji and Taisho Japan

2.1 The anti-*bijin* of *nihonga*

The image of the idealized beauty became the norm during the Meiji and Taisho eras. However, Japanese society was changing rapidly, encouraging some *nihonga* artists to choose a different path. They started creating artworks that were not considered *bijinga*. These works depicted women that that did not follow the *bijin* mode of depicting women, meaning that women weren't portrayed as an idealized beauty, representing customs and manners with minimal emotional expression. Rather, they portrayed their subjects in a more realistic or grotesque manner, while at the same time dealing with new topics.

These types of paintings that go against the *bijin* portrayal have been coined "anti-*bijin*" by John Szostak.[33] He defines two different types of anti-*bijin*: those that express an "aesthetic critique" and those that express "social critique".[34] Both categories deal with the depiction of women in a new manner, but both do this in very different ways.

One of the categories defined by Szostak, expresses critique or commentary on the contemporary society these paintings were created in. This took form in paintings depicting the quotidian woman, for instance those working day jobs in shops. In addition to this, people of lower classes in society and those with health problems were also selected as painting subjects. Painters who created these types of works were often involved with the *jinseiha* ('humanist school'), a term coined by Nakai Sōtarō (1879-1966) in 1913. Their main goal was to show the negative consequences of the rapid Westernization.[35] Within this category the strict lines between *nihonga* and *yōga* became blurred, causing some kind of a paradox: on the one hand these *nihonga* works deny the Westernization of Japan, while at the same time making use of realism inspired by Western style painting to express this critique. For instance, some artists created paintings in which they depicted the trachoma sufferers from the cities and the disfigurement this disease brought along.[36] In this way, painters exposed the harsh realities of

[33] John D. Szostak, "Fair is Foul, and Foul is Fair: Kyoto Nihonga, Anti-Bijin Portraiture and the Psychology of the Grotesque.", *Rethinking Japanese Modernism*, ed. Roy Starrs (Leiden: BRILL, 2012): 363.
[34] Ibid, 364.
[35] Ibid, 372-373.
[36] Szostak, "Fair is Foul", 377.

the poor population in Japan, which went straight against the *nihonga* stipulation of not showing any disturbing realities.

The other category, according to Szostak, is mainly about challenging the idealized beauty image. He describes how these paintings depicted overtly grotesque and even ugly women as a way to go against the status-quo. Many painters did this by painting women with heavy make-up under bright illumination, to accentuate the artificiality of cosmetics.[37]

I do indeed agree with Szostak and his argument that these paintings were meant to challenge the notion of ideal beauty. However, I would like to perhaps nuance some of his words on the works he discusses. For instance, in his discussion of Inagaki Chusei's 'Tayu' he mentions a satirical passage by Tanizaki Junichirō, who describes that a Japanese woman with heavy make-up should hide in the dark. In his analysis, Szostak considers the viewers of these paintings as heterosexual males who could be repulsed by the sight of the works, which could indeed have been the intention of the male painters while creating the works. However, women most likely also got to see these paintings and could have looked at them in a different way. Perhaps female viewers could somehow relate to the unattainable strive of perfection that these paintings represented.

Moreover, Szostak mentions the following about the category that expresses critique on society:

> "How can such grotesque portraits be interpreted as sympathetic gestures? The portraits (…) serve as advocates for the alienated subjects they depict, who are both part of and yet apart from the realm of normal, everyday human existence."[38]

However, when looking at this argument, one could wonder if the same can't be said about the paintings that fall under the first category of challenging the beauty ideal. Mainly the paintings portraying *geisha* and courtesans show that these women as well were part of "the realm of normal, everyday human existence". It demonstrates that the viewer should not look at these women through the idealized and glorified *bijinga* lens. In a way, this could also be considered as a critique on society, albeit in a different manner. These works contest the way society deals with the female image and beauty, and as Szostak suggests, both confirm and deny "the viewer's yearning for a life of pleasure.[39] These paintings show that indeed, these women were

[37] Szostak, "Fair is Foul", 370-371.
[38] Ibid, 381.
[39] Ibid, 371.

not the picture-perfect idols that *bijinga* pretended they were. It shows that these women, especially courtesans and geishas, are first and foremost humans and probably were even suffering practicing this lifestyle. These paintings perhaps intended to show the viewer how putting on all these layers of makeup for the sake of the male gaze is a bit preposterous as it creates an unnatural look rather than making the woman more beautiful. These paintings could support the argument that these beauty ideals have been taken too far. It might even implicitly convey the message that the men enchanted by the *bijinga* should stray away from this fantasy, as it's not actually real.

The fact that some of these artists dared to deviate from the status quo was something very new and not taken lightly. In fact, it was quite revolutionary, especially when taking into account how *nihonga* works were limited to strict stipulations and differing from those was frowned upon. These anti-*bijin* therefore could sometimes even shock the contemporary audience and elicit critique. It was the circumstances during the Taisho period that made it possible for anti-*bijin* paintings to emerge. During this period *Nihonga* became less restrictive, in terms that it departed from the traditional Japanese painting principles. These principles might have limited the artists in their artistic expression but with the softening of the boundaries more room was left for them to explore their own creativity.[40]

2.2 The Kokuga Society and Shirakaba Magazine

Many of the anti-*bijin* have been influenced by changes going on within Japanese society, such as the changing position of women (which will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3). At the same time, changes were taking place within the art world, among those were the establishment of Shirakab*a* magazine and the founding of the *Kokuga Sōsaku Kyōkai* (Society of the Creation of Japanese painting). Both these institutions stimulated artists in Japan to experiment and choose for new subjects, a phenomenon that also influenced the emergence of the anti-*bijin*.

2.2.1 Shirakaba magazine

The Japanese art magazine 'Shirakaba' was first published in April of 1910 by the Shirakaba group, a "literary and artistic coterie".[41] The magazine focused both on Western art and

[40] John Clark. "Modernity in Japanese Painting." *Art History* 9, no.2 (1986): 213-214.
[41] Erin Schoneveld. "Introduction", in *Shirakaba and Japanese Modernism: Art Magazines, Artistic Collectives, and the Early Avant-Garde* (Leiden, Netherlands: BRILL, 2019): 1.

Japanese art, and often articles would be based on European sources and would often feature reproductions of great Western artists. Shirakaba had a great influence on the art world in Japan, and elicited a reexamination of the debate on modern Japanese art.[42]

Since the contents were mainly focused on Western art and the interaction between Western and Japanese art, Shirakaba became predominantly a magazine for those who were interested in *yōga*. The Shirakaba group advocated for individuality, they viewed art as a reflection of the personal characters of the creators. However, it turned out that this ideology not influenced *yōga* artists, but also those working within the *nihonga* genre. *Nihonga* artists started to think about their position within the art world, especially relating to Western influences and their aim to hold on to 'traditional' Japanese art practices.[43] This influence is for example visible in Tsuchida Bakusen's (1887-1936) stance towards the Bunten exhibition, as will be explained in more detail in **2.2.3**.

2.2.3 Kokuga Society

The Kokuga was an anti-establishment society founded in January 1918, under the lead of the painter Tsuchida Bakusen (1887-1936), as a voice against the National Bunten exhibition. Bakusen already spoke critically about the Bunten in 1913, when referring to the works at the annual Bunten exhibition he expressed: "the paintings are so boring, they are dead! I need no more to look at such boring exhibitions."[44] He then also hinted at his desire to organize his own exhibition: "(…) we have no other choice but to create another exhibition venue against the Bunten."[45]

The Kokuga's main objective was to enable artists to practice creative freedom in their art, as they believed that the works exhibited at the Bunten were "myopic and uninspiring".[46] The Kokuga society was specifically focused on *nihonga* but took on a new attitude towards the strict boundaries between *yōga* and *nihonga*. The organizers of the Kokuga believed that artists could take inspiration from western style painting while at the same time respecting the heritage of pre-Meiji painting.[47] It's therefore not surprising that the works exhibited at the first Kokuten Exhibition (as the Kokuga society's exhibition was called) blended *nihonga* with

[42] Erin Schoneveld. "Introduction", 1.
[43] Erin Schoneveld. "The Legacy of Shirakaba", in *Shirakaba and Japanese Modernism: Art Magazines, Artistic Collectives, and the Early Avant-Garde* (Leiden, Netherlands: BRILL, 2019): 206.
[44] Van Assche, "Changing Perceptions", 25.
[45] Ibid, 25.
[46] Szostak, "Introduction", 1.
[47] Ibid, 2.

elements taken from western style painting. Artists such as Kainoshō Tadaoto and Okamoto Shinsō, who will be discussed in Chapter 4, exhibited their works at the Kokuten and had a considerable impact on the public and artists at the time.

2.3 Why *yōga* paintings aren't considered anti-*bijin*

At the start of the Meiji period *yōga* artists were mainly the ones creating images of beautiful women. Their main inspiration while creating these works was art created by French impressionists. Paintings of beautiful women by *yōga* painters were not part of the *bijinga* genre, because these works represented a more realistic or "true" type of beauty as opposed to the idealized beauty of *nihonga*.[48] Artists working within the *yōga* genre already experimented with new subject matters at the start of the Meiji period and were able to do this as they weren't tied to the neo-traditional stipulations of *nihonga*. Besides that, *yōga* painters made use of different materials which enabled them to work in a different way than *nihonga* painters.

It wasn't possible for *yōga* painters to create anti-*bijin*, because there was no such thing as a clearly marked out frame for what was considered a *bijin* within the *yōga* genre. The idea of a *bijin* was a phenomenon exclusive to the *nihonga* genre.

[48] Miya Elise Mizuta Lippit, "Notes", in *Aesthetic Life: Beauty and Art in Modern Japan* (Leiden, Netherlands: BRILL, 2019): 270.

Chapter 3.
Anti-*bijin* by Female Painters

The change in the Japanese society also lead to a change in the lives of women. Starting from the 1900s opportunities for women increased. For instance, many more women were able to enjoy secondary education. These educated women were also the instigators for women's journalism, through which a lot of new ideas on women's rights could be disseminated.[49] Moreover, women were offered more opportunities within the professional field, enabling them to find jobs and venture outside of the household.[50]

By the end of the Meiji period, the idea of the 'good wife, wise mother' was slowly making place for the new woman (*atarashii onna*).[51] The new woman really started to gain attention after the launch of a special issue from Seitō magazine dedicated to the topic.[52] This brought along changes during the Taisho period (1912-1926), causing a lot of women to advocate for a different position within society and more rights.[53] During this time the feminist movement pressed for an increasing "participation for women in politics, education, and labor.[54] These women argued against the role of women as a wife and mother, and called for a more individualistic approach.

This changing awareness around the position of the Japanese woman was also reflected in the works female artists produced at the time. Even though female artists were still very much in the minority, they still took the chance to get their voice out there. These female artists have created works that broke away from the ideal *bijin* portrayal and opted for more realistic and humanized images.[55]

[49] Shizuko & Sylvain, "Good Wife and Wise Mother", 34.
[50] Morioka, "Changing Images", 16.
[51] Richard Reitan, "Claiming Personality: Reassessing the Dangers of the "New Woman" in Early Taisho Japan", *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 84; Jan Bardsley. "The New Woman of Japan and the Intimate Bonds of Translation", *Translation in Modern Japan,* ed. Indra Levy (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2010): 213.
[52] Bardsley, "The New Woman", 214.
[53] Morioka, "Changing Images", 19.
[54] Reitan, "Claiming Personality", 89.
[55] Patricia Fister, "Feminine Perceptions in Japanese Art of the Kinsei Era.", *Japan Review* no. 8 (1997): 3, 12.

3.1 Kajiwara Hisako: Giving the lower-class women a voice

An important figure within this new anti-*bijin* portrayal of women was Kajiwara Hisako (1896-1988). She was greatly influenced by her art teacher, Chigusa Sōn, who told her that it would be meaningless to just paint pictures of women looking pretty. He would only help her in her

Figure 5 Kajiwara Hisako, Secondhand Clothing Market, Color on Silk, 1920, KYOCERA Museum of Art, Kyoto.

training if she would be "capable of painting women who look like they could bleed when cut."[56] In other words, Sōn encouraged her to stray away from painting idealized beauties and rather seek out more realistic depictions. This is clearly reflected in her works, as she wholeheartedly rejected the *bijin* ideal.[57] An example of this is her painting of a woman selling secondhand clothing (figure 5). While describing this painting Hisako mentioned "I had no intention of painting a pretty woman in the traditional style, which was precisely what I wanted to break away from."[58] She adds how she mainly was interested in the "sorrow and sadness" [59] of women like the one in this painting. At the time, secondhand clothing was seen as something

[56] Morioka, "Changing Images", 117.
[57] Szostak, "Fair is Foul", 376.
[58] Ibid, 375.
[59] Ibid, 375.

dirty in Japan. People who had to buy and sell these clothes were therefore part of the poorest classes of society.[60]

Hisako painted a woman who clearly looks tired, testified by the dark circles around her eyes. Her hair looks slightly messy, and her kimono is not neatly done. The anguish that she must have been feeling has been captured in her facial expression: her eyes stare absently to the side and her mouth slightly opened as if she is letting out a big sigh.

Figure 6 Kajiwara Hisako, Aged Geisha, Framed, Color on Silk, 1922, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.

In Hisako's painting "Aged Geisha" we see an old geisha kneeling in front of her cosmetics box preparing to put on or her make-up (figure 6). The woman, dressed in a blue kimono and with bare feet, looks at her tired and aged face in the mirror. Dark colors have been used to create the painting, forging a somber atmosphere. This is not very surprising as Hisako herself wrote about her work "(…) I only face the real world… I want to depict those women who only bloom in darkness."[61] While geisha usually are associated with beautiful, young-looking women, who are sophisticated and put together, Hisako managed to portray a different kind of

[60] Morioka, "Changing Images", 266.
[61] Ibid, 266.

image. She aptly captures the fatigue of the lady, showing us what goes on behind the scenes. In this painting the geisha is humanized, instead of portrayed as a prototype of the well-behaved, sophisticated woman.

On the wall in the back hangs a print by Sharaku. Coincidentally, Szostak mentions Tōshūsai Sharaku (dates unknown) as the main source of inspiration for the emergence of the anti-*bijin*. The painting "Woman" (*onna*) by Furukuwa Shōko, which unfortunately does not exist anymore, was probably the first anti-*bijin* image to have been created. Shōko probably was inspired by Sharaku's work, who created actor portraits in his very own distinguished style, portraying the individual physiognomy of each actor.[62]

It could be that the geisha that Hisako depicted indeed had a copy of this print on her wall. However, perhaps Hisako referenced Sharaku in her painting as a subtle hint. Sharaku was one of the few *ukiyo-e* artists who opted for a more realistic depiction and was able to capture the essence of a specific person in his prints. Maybe Hisako wanted to let her viewer know that she was hoping to do the same as Sharaku and capture the unfiltered essence of a human being.

During her career, Hisako's father went bankrupt, causing for her to carry the responsibility to provide for her family through her art. At this time her subject matter shifted to the more traditional *bijin*.[63] The fact that Hisako had to create *bijinga* to make money, proves that the public, and art buyers, at the time still preferred images of the idealized beauty rather than a scene from real life.

3.2 Uemura Shōen: painting the good wife and wise mother

It is especially interesting to compare Hisako's work to her contemporary Uemura Shōen (1875-1949), as her paintings were much more conservative and traditional in comparison to those by Hisako. Shōen was a female *nihonga* painter and known for her paintings of beautiful women. Her main subject matter were charming women enjoying simple pleasures, while showing little to no emotion[64], as was expected within the *nihonga* genre. A prime example of this is her painting "The Flowers of Life" from 1899 (figure 7).

[62] Szostak, "Fair is Foul", 368-369.
[63] "Kajiwara, Hisako", Ronin Gallery, accessed June 28, 2022, https://www.roningallery.com/artists/kajiwara-hisako
[64] Nanako Yamada and Helen Merritt, "Uemura Shōen: Her Paintings of Beautiful Women.", *Woman's Art Journal* 13, no. 2 (1993): 13.

The painting depicts a young bride and her mother, both dressed in a wedding kimono. With the creation of a work where a bride is escorted by her mother, Shōen clearly conveyed her support for the 'good wife, wise mother' ideology that prevailed in the Meiji period. The 'good wife, wise mother' motto, emerged during the period of the *Meiji* restauration. This idea was promoted in the context of building a new modern nation, characterized by a sexual division of labor, where men were the breadwinners and women took care of the house and children. Because this ideology was vital within the building of a new modern Japan, the 'good wife, wise mother' was also closely tied to nationalistic sentiments.[65] Shōen herself expressed how her works depict *yamato nadeshiko*, or "women who have a truly 'Japanese' spirit".[66] Moreover, her paintings were praised for capturing the "traditional aesthetics of the Japanese race".[67]

Figure 7 Uemura Shōen, The Flowers of Life, Hanging scroll, Pigment on silk, 1899, KYOCERA Museum of Art, Kyoto.

[65] Shizuko & Sylvain, "Good Wife and Wise Mother", 31-32.
[66] Asato Ikeda, "Uemura Shōen's Bijinga", *The Politics of Painting: Fascism and Japanese Art During the Second World War* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 67.
[67] Ibid, 67.

Shōen was also a great believer in the traditional role of women within society, something that heavily influenced her artworks.[68] Perhaps Shōen advocated for this traditional ideology, as she herself could not fulfill this role. As a single mother, she had to raise her son by herself and was the one providing for her family by creating and selling her art. Through her works she was perhaps able to romanticize the life as a 'good wife and wise mother' that she couldn't live.

While Shōen was indeed more conservative and traditional compared to Hisako in terms of their portrayal of women, Shōen as well aimed for a different type of depiction of women; she rejected the depiction of women in the *ukiyo-e* tradition that dominated during the Edo period, which was more focused on the male gaze with an erotic undertone. For example, she mentions about her painting of a geisha that she wanted to "represent a woman with a will of her own and a sense of pride rather than simply pretty and bewitching."[69] While she did indeed try to take a different stance regarding the depiction of woman not as merely sexual objects, she still adhered fiercely to the traditional Japanese ideals.

At the start of her career Shōen's work, which advocated for good wives and wise mothers, fit right in with the times. However, Shōen kept holding on to the same message, while society, especially during the Taisho period kept on progressing. This led to her work being criticized as conservative and too focused on physical beauty.[70] This critique shows how the general awareness in Japan changed and the audience actually started appreciating works that strayed away from female beauty ideals.

Even though most of Shōen's paintings were more toned down when it came to emotions and reality, her painting 'Flame' is one of the few that stands out from her standard oeuvre (figure 8). The painting depicts Lady Rokujo, a character from the famous Tale of Genji, who is going crazy from jealousy.[71] Lady Rokujo was in love with Genji, who was known for his many concubines. However, Genji rejected her and Rokujo had to repress her feelings of jealousy. She ended up turning into a demon because she wasn't able to openly express her true feelings. The motif of the painting deals with the Tale of Genji but at the same time also has an autobiographical connotation. Shōen studied painting under Suzuki Shōnen and ended up having an affair with him, during which she fell pregnant with his child. However,

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[68] Michiyo Morioka. "Uemura Shōen", in *Nihonga. Transcending the Past: Japanese-style Painting, 1868-1968,* ed. Ellen P. Conant (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis Art Museum, 1995): 328.
[69] Morioka, "Changing Images", 67-68.
[70] Morioka, "Uemura Shōen", 328.
[71] ColBase (National Museum of Tokyo), "*Honō*" 焔, accessed June 21, 2022, https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_items/tnm/A-11098?locale=ja.

Figure 8 Uemura Shōen, Flame, Hanging scroll, Color on silk, 1918, National Museum, Tokyo.

Shōnen was not willing to leave his wife and children for Shōen, which left her heartbroken and jealous.

Shōen processed her emotions in this painting of a ghostly woman dressed in an *uchikake* (bridal robe) printed with blooming wisterias. The flowers are intertwined with spider webs, indicating that something is off. The bottom of her kimono and hair seem to fade, meaning that she is already in the process of becoming a demon. She bites on a strand of her long black hair and bares her black teeth, perhaps to stop herself from screaming. With 'Flame' Shōen created a heavily emotional and personal painting with a super-natural touch, and certainly did not fit within the *bijinga* frame.

3.3 Shima Seien's daring self-portrait

Shima Seien (1892-1970) was a *nihonga* painter who was mostly active during the Taisho and Showa eras in Japan. She studied under her contemporaries Kitano Tsunetomi (1880-1947) and Noda Kyūho (1879-1971), of whom mainly the former exerted an influence on her works.[72] With her paintings Seien rebelled against the idealized and typified *bijinga* that characterized the *nihonga* style at the end of the Meiji- and throughout the Taisho period.[73]

Figure 9 Shima Seien, "Untitled", Color on Silk, 1918, Museum of Fine Arts, Osaka.

[72] Tamaki Itō, "Shima Seien no Jigazō ni Tsuite", *Gei Kusamura: Tsukubadaigaku Geijutsugaku Kenkyūshi* 19 (2003): 2.
[73] Ibid, 2.

Seien created the work 'Untitled' in 1918, which has been left unfinished (figure 9). She probably took inspiration from her teacher Kitano Tsunetomi whom usually opted for more "child-like beauties" [74]. In contrast to Kitano's *bijinga*, Seien's painting can be considered as anti-*bijin*.

'Untitled' has some resemblances with the composition of Tsunetomi's work 'A Warm Day' from 1915 (figure 10).[75] Both works depict a female seated on the floor in front of a folding screen, who gazes straight at the viewer. The direct eye contact of the subject with the viewer was something that wasn't common within the *bijinga* genre at that time and was thus a bold move from the painter. This created a form of power and presence in the painting [76], as well as giving the subject more agency. This was very different from the soft and idealized women who gazed down or away in typical *bijinga*. In Japan, looking straight at the viewer used to be associated with the image of a sexy woman, entailing that mostly in images of courtesans the subject would direct their gaze at the viewer. But with the influence of Western portraiture starting from around 1915, these ideas started to change, and artists began to paint non-sexualized women making eye contact with their viewers.[77]

Kitano's work deals with a warm day and therefore is much brighter, which is traceable in the use of the color red for the kimono of the girl. Moreover, her face shows an innocent and soft expression. Seien's painting, however, bares a much darker atmosphere compared to "A Warm Day". The woman in the painting is dressed in a black kimono with red details and her hair looks disheveled. As a matter of fact, Seien based the image of the woman in "Untitled" on herself and is therefore a self-portrait. The fact that Seien created a self-portrait within the *bijinga* genre, was something unheard of at that time. The painting represents Seien's struggle as a female painter and the hardships she had to face in a male dominated world. The woman's facial expression looks shaken-up and maybe even a bit worried. Under her eye a faint blue bruise is visible, as if she has been struck in the face. This bruise under eye could be a metaphor for the abuse Seien had to endure as a female painter, but also for the violence and struggles women in general had to endure from men.[78] In this way Seien gave a personal touch to her painting, just as her contemporary Shōen did with Flame.

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[74] Doris Croissant, "From Madonna to Femme Fatale: Gender Play in Japanese National Painting.", *Performing "Nation": Gender Politics in Literature, Theater, and the Visual Arts of China and Japan, 1880-1940* (Leiden: BRILL, 2008): 294.
[75] Itō, "Shima Seien ni tsuite", 8.
[76] Ibid, 8.
[77] Doris Croissant, "From Madonna to Femme Fatale", 290.
[78] Alice Gordenker, "Bewitching, beguiling and downright disturbing".

Figure 10 Kitano Tsunetomi, "A Warm Day", Color on Silk, 1915, The Museum of Modern Art, Shiga.

3.4 Women painting women

The Taisho period brought along a new awareness of the changing position of women in society; more and more women were able to receive education, find jobs and take on new roles that went beyond that of a homemaker. Feminist movements started to emerge and the *atarashii onna* entered the stage. All these changes not only reshaped Japanese society, but the art world as well. Moreover, for a long time throughout Japanese history female painters were very scarce, entailing that most female images were created by men. The fact that (albeit still a small group) women now also were able to take on painting gradually led to a new type of depiction of women.

The female painters discussed in this chapter were able to make use of the changes in society for their works. These women had a clear goal with their anti-*bijin*: to depict real women and the hardships they had to endure. The fact that they did this was extraordinary for two reasons. Firstly, the role of the woman was still mostly associated within the domestic scene, the public therefore expected that female painters would mostly focus their paintings on images

of families, children, and other domestic situations.[79] In addition, with their depictions, the female painters discussed in this chapter moved away from the idealized and often sexualized image of women. Hisako, Shōen and Seien were able to convey a female image from the female perspective and therefore could shed light on different aspects of the female experience. Kajiwara Hisako opted for painting women of the lower classes of society, a subject matter that was unheard of just a few years before. Uemura Shōen and Shima Seien were able to incorporate parts of their own personal stories in their painting through autobiographical elements. Making a painting so personal, especially in the case of Seien and her self-portrait, was a very new phenomenon. With these paintings the ground was set for future generations of female painters and a more honest depiction of the female image.

[79] Morioka, "Changing Images", 251-252.

Chapter 4.

The Anti-*Bijin* from a Male Perspective

Straying away from the *bijin* mode of depicting women was not something exclusively limited to female painters. Especially during the Taisho period male painters started to create paintings that can be categorized as anti-*bijin*. However, most of the male painters had a different approach towards the subject matter as will be explained in this chapter.

Figure 11 Chigusa Sōn, Maiden of the Thread-and-Yarn Shop, Hanging Scroll, Ink and Color on Paper, 1911, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.

4.1 Chigusa Sōn: a humanist approach

Chigusa Sōn (1873-1944) was one of the painters who was considered a member of the *jinseiha*, or Humanist School. He taught art at a *jogakko* ('girls' school') and was a trained *nihonga* painter.[80] There is not a lot known about Sōn's life or work. However, as he encouraged his pupil Hisako to paint 'real women' and was considered part of the *jinseiha*, it can be concluded that he also preferred to depict women in a more realistic manner.

In Sōn's work "Maiden of the Thread-and-Yarn Shop" a lady working in a shop has been portrayed (figure 11). She is standing inside the shop, but her gaze is directed to the outside. On her face a slightly sad or bored expression can be detected. It almost creates the feeling as if she is stuck inside the shop as she is standing behind the wooden bars and leaning against them with her hands. It evokes the thought as if she is not entirely content with where she is and that she might be dreaming of a different life.

4.2 Kainoshō Tadaoto's "A Comb in the Side Hair"

Figure 12 Kainoshō Tadaoto modeling in onnagata in front of one of his paintings, 1924.

[80] Michiyo Morioka, "Changing Images", 116.

The Anti-*Bijin*: a new approach towards the female image

Kainoshō Tadaoto (1894-1978) was a *nihonga* painter mainly active during the Taisho era, after the second world war he digressed from painting and mainly worked on costumes and started acting. Many of Tadaoto's works have an eerie feel to them, with depictions of almost demon-like women. He did not simply achieve this by taking sketches of his models, he drew inspiration from plays and took pictures of his models. [81] He would also often dress up himself in women's clothing (*onnagata*) and take pictures of it, which also served as a great source of inspiration for his works (figure 12).[82] Many of his paintings were characterized by women with heavy make-up under bright illumination, creating the uncanny atmosphere that was often felt in his paintings.[83]

Tadaoto painted the work 'A Comb in the Side Hair' in 1916, since then the painting has undergone some alterations. Tadaoto got the inspiration for creating this painting after visiting the kabuki play Scarface Otomi (*Kirare Otomi*) with his brother and his sister-in-law.[84] The title of the painting, *Yokogushi,* is a direct reference to the main character of this kabuki play: Yokogushi Otomi.

The original version of 'A Comb in the Side Hair' (figure 13) is supposedly modeled after Tadaoto's sister-in-law Hisako.[85] The work could have been a memorial for Hisako as she passed away the previous year[86], which can serve as an explanation for the uncanny atmosphere of the painting. The woman in the painting has slipped of her outer kimono, which is purple and printed with flowers. Her under kimono is also revealed and decorated with a devil and flames, while the collar features two celestial nymphs.[87] Her face sports a pair of eyes with very dark circles around them and her skin is extremely pale, adding to the ghostly feel of the painting. There is also a clear influence of western style painting, as the smile and gaze of the woman faintly resembles the one from the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci.[88]

In 1918 Tadaoto exhibited "A Comb in the Side Hair" at the inaugural exhibition of the Kokuga society.[89] However, the painting he exhibited there was slightly disparate compared to the 1916 version. While the 1918 version retained the Mona Lisa-like gaze and faint smile, the

[81] Uesono Shirō, "Sakuhin Kaisetsu: Yokogushi", in *Kainoshō Tadaoto Ten : Taishō Nihonga no Isai, Ikizuku Jōnen* (Tokyo, Japan: Nihon Keizai Shinbunsha, 1997): 128.
[82] Uesono, "Sakuhin Kaisetsu", 128; Croissant, "Madonna to Femme Fatale", 289-290.
[83] Szostak, "Fair is Foul", 371.
[84] Uesono, "Sakuhin Kaisetsu*"*, 128; Doris Croissant, "From Madonna to Femme Fatale", 289.
[85] Ibid, 128; Szostak, Fair is Foul, 146.
[86] Ibid, 128.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid; Croissant, "From Madonna to Femme Fatale", 287.
[89] John D. Szostak. "The Inaugural Kokuten Exhibition of 1918: Content and Contexts.", in Painting Circles: Tsuchida Bakusen and Nihonga Collectives in Early Twentieth Century Japan (Leiden: BRILL, 2013): 144.

Figure 13 Tadaoto Kainoshō, A Comb in the Side Hair, c.1916. Framed, Color on Silk, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.

eyes and make-up have changed. The lack of darkness around the eyes makes them look more alive. Nonetheless, at the time this painting was exhibited it was still considered as eerie and "unusual".[90]

Tadaoto created another version of *yokogushi* in 1918, this version does not exist as a painting anymore but only in the form of a postcard (figure 14, left).[91] In this version of the painting Tadaoto incorporated multiple Kabuki references. Firstly, on the screen behind the woman, that was only decorated with flowers in 1916, now also featured portrait of a kabuki actor in *onnagata* as Otomi.[92] Moreover, the woman in the painting stands on a piece of fabric that is red and white patterned, referencing Ichikawa Danjūro.[93] Instead of a lion, heavenly nymphs and flames, the kimono in the 1918 version is printed with faces of kabuki actors. Morioka points out how the contrast between the woman's face and the stylized faces of the kabuki actors on the woman's kimono emphasize the realism in her face even more.[94]

'A Comb in the Side Hair' ended up being painted over by Tadaoto and is the version that is known nowadays (figure 14, right). The first time the work was painted over was when the painting was bought by someone after it was exhibited at the Kokuten exhibition. However, the buyer requested Tadaoto to make some alterations to the painting.[95] The fact that Tadaoto had to repaint the work probably indicated that the buyer, and perhaps the general audience at the time, still had a preference for the image of a softer looking woman. The version of this work as we know it today, has been reworked in such a way that it depicts an "alluring"[96] woman. Szostak even describes how painting over the original work resulted in a "wholesome and bright" painting instead of "eerie and unusual". When comparing the different versions, it can be ascertained that indeed the woman in the current version looks more open and less mysterious. Even the faint Mona Lisa has been modified into a softer, more welcoming smile.

This work has been analyzed in several studies and all differ slightly in interpretation. Most studies tend to agree that the painting is a portrayal of Otomi, as the title also overtly references her. However, Morioka suggest that this painting represents "a real human being offered for sale"[97]. To this argument she adds that Tadaoto perhaps, albeit unintentional, tried to take a stance against the exploitation of women. She based this interpretation on the fact that

[90] Szostak, "Inaugural Kokuten", 146.
[91] Croissant, "Madonna to Femme Fatale", 287.
[92] Szostak, "Inaugural Kokuten", 146.
[93] Croissant, "Madonna to Femme Fatale", 289.
[94] Morioka, "Changing images", 263.
[95] Szostak, "Inaugural Kokuten Exhibition", 146.
[96] Croissant, "From Madonna to femme fatale", 287.
[97] Morioka, "Changing Images", 262

Figure 14 Left: Tadaoto Kainoshō, A Comb in the Side Hair, c.1918. Framed; color on Silk.; Right: Tadaoto Kainoshō, A Comb in the Side Hair, c.?. Framed, Color on silk.

the woman looks directly at the viewer, which was unusual at that time. By looking directly at the viewer, the voyeuristic relationship got disrupted.[98]

Croissant proposes that the painting has more of male dominance, suggesting a superiority to the male desire,[99] this also ties in with what Morioka argued about 'A Comb in the Side Hair' breaking away from voyeurism. However, Croissant wonders if the woman in the painting could be Tadaoto himself in *onnagata*,[100] as he himself would often model in

[98] Morioka, "Changing Images", 262-263.
[99] Ibid, 294.
[100] Doris Croissant, "From Madonna to Femme Fatale", 282-294.

onnagata as a source of inspiration for his paintings. This caused the female representations in Tadaoto's work to be rooted in a more mysterious androgenous look.[101]

Whomever the woman in the painting Tadaoto intended to represent, she is clearly an anti-*bijin*. With her gaze straight at the viewer, which we've also seen in Shima Seien's "Untitled", she asserts her dominance and power over the male gaze. Once again, gazing at the viewer was not often done yet during these days. The painting challenges the beauty ideals, as well as what was expected of women at the time. Moreover, the eerie feel of the work before it got painted over was also an aspect that was unknown within the *bijinga* genre.

4.4 Okamoto Shinsō's "Lip Rouge"

Okamoto Shinsō (1894-1933), just as his contemporary Tadaoto, aimed to create paintings of women that were meant to stray away from the idealized depiction of women. His best-known work is 'Lip Rouge'. The painting was exhibited as his graduation work in 1918 together with Tadaoto's 'A Comb in the Side Hair'. Both works took on a new approach in depicting women, which inspired other artists in Kyoto's painting circles.[102] This caused for Tadaoto and Shinsō to be referred to as the "the new heroes of *bijinga*".[103]

'Lip Rouge' features a *maiko*, or apprentice geisha, painting her lips in the candlelight. She's dressed in a heavily adorned kimono (figure 15). The outside of her kimono is black, decorated with golden flowers, checkers, and stripes. The inside of her kimono is a red colored silk, while the collar is golden and patterned with flowers. Her *obi*, tied at the back, creates the illusion of a hunchback.[104] She dons an elaborate coiffure with golden details and flowers, just like her kimono. Her face is very pale but with a reddish tinge, which is also reflected in her kimono and her red lips.

In their exhibition catalogue on Okamoto Shinsō, the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto describes 'Lip Rouge' as a sensual painting. The combination of the composition of the painting, a woman doing her make-up under candlelight, with her arms protruding from her kimono and the use of mainly red and gold come together to create a sensuous atmosphere.[105] In addition, the use of red throughout the work is a reference towards the "sexuality of the

[101] Uesono, "Kainosho Kaiga no Tenkanki", in *Kainoshō Tadaoto Ten : Taishō Nihonga no Isai, Ikizuku Jōnen* (Tokyo, Japan: Nihon Keizai Shinbunsha, 1997): 126.
[102]Ogura Jitsuko, "*Kuchi Kurenai*", in *The Age of Okamoto Shins*ō (Kyoto, Japan: Kyōto Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan): 163.
[103] Szostak, "Inaugural Kokuten Exhibition", 144.
[104] Van Assche, "Changing Perceptions", 79.
[105] Ogura Jitsuko, "*Kuchi Kurenai*", 163.

woman".[106] Szostak, on the contrary, interprets this painting in a very different way. He describes the *maiko* in the painting as "insect-like" due to the way her arms poke out of the kimono. Moreover, he describes how her body is bend in such an in such an unnatural position that "the prospect of her unclothed form is an unnerving one".[107] He rather sees her as artificial.

However, Szostak himself argues that there was a so-called "*ukiyo-e* boom" around 1910 in Kyoto. *Nihonga* painters at that time were looking at *ukiyo-e* from the Edo era for inspiration. This resulted in many graduation works from the 1910s displaying *ukiyo-e* influences.[108] If this would be the case, Shinsō might have been inspired by the 'twisted poses' that were often featured in *ukiyo-e*. These twisted poses were taken over from *kabuki* plays, that became popular during the Edo period. Kabuki most likely came from the word *kabuku*, which translated to "to lean" or "to bend". Depicting people in these unnaturally twisted positions added to the eroticism and expression of a painting.

In addition, in December of 1918 art historian Fujikake Shizuya (1888-1958) wrote about Lip Rouge how he found the painting expressive and well-crafted. Moreover, he points out how the slightly opened mouth creates the liveliness of the painting, while at the same time adding a sensual feeling.[109]

Concludingly, Shinsō most likely aimed for a more sensual painting than a repulsive or artificial one and broke away from the *bijinga* of the late Meiji and Taisho periods. Rather, he seems to be giving his own spin on the visual language of *ukiyo-e* from the Edo period, as this painting represents a sensual being instead of one embodying the customs and manners. In this manner, he created an innovative painting with its own unique visual language.

[106] Van Assche, "Changing Perceptions", 79.
[107] Szostak, "Fair is Foul", 371.
[108] Ibid, 364-365.
[109] Uesono Shirō, "Okamoto Shinsō no Yume to Utsutsu", in *Okamoto Shinsō no Jidai Ten*: 161.

Figure 15 Okamoto Shinsō, Lip Rouge, Two-panel folding screen: ink, color, gold, silver on silk, 1918, City University of the Arts, Kyoto.

4.5 Shinsō's Three Maiko

The painting in Figure 16 by Shinsō depicts three *maiko* playing *kitsuneken*, a game similar to rock-paper-scissors. When playing, one can choose between three hand gestures which are all depicted in the painting by the *maiko*'s hands: hunter (left), fox (middle) and village headman (right). *Kitsuneken* was a common motif in *ukiyo-e*, these *ukiyo* works would often capture the lively atmosphere that surrounded playing this game. However, in contrast with the *ukiyo-e*, Okamoto created a more static work, and the fun atmosphere that comes with the game seems

to be missing.[110] Rather, Shinsō tried to capture the mysteriousness that surrounds the beauty of these heavily adorned women, as he believed there was a certain spiritual feeling to it.

An exhibition catalogue on Okamoto Shinsō notes how the work creates the feel as if the three maiko resemble statues of important characters, that can be encountered in Buddhist temples and shrines.[111] This is not surprising as Shinsō's composition resembles Buddhist iconography, such as the way the three women are posited next to each other.[112] In addition, Van Assche points out how the dark shadows behind the *maiko* creates the illusion of a dark aura surrounding them, adding a "ominous, brooding, and dark sentiment."[113] By adding this dark atmosphere to this work depicting three *maiko* Shinsō in a way denounced the beauty ideals at that time.

Figure 16 Okamoto Shinsō, Study for Three Maiko Playing Ken, Framed, Color painting on Silk, 1920, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.

4.6 The female nude making its entrance in *Nihonga*

In 1897 Kuroda Seiki's (1866-1924) *yōga* painting Morning Toilette caused the so-called *raitaigaronsou*, or the nude picture controversy.[114] While this dispute originally was limited to

[110] Ogura Jitsuko, "*Ken wo Uteru San Nin no Maiko no Shuusaku*", in *The Age of Okamoto Shinsō* (Kyoto, Japan: Kyōto Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan): 163.
[111] Ibid, 163.
[112] Van Assche, "Changing Perceptions", 80.
[113] Ibid, 81.
[114] Uesono, "Kainoshō Tadaoto", 132.

the field of *yōga*, it also moved into the realm of *nihonga* when the nude made its entrance in the genre.[115]

Women in *bijinga* were most often dressed in a kimono and would not be shown naked. 'Posing for the First Time' by Takeuchi Seihō (1864-1942) is a good example to illustrate this notion. In this painting Seihō potrayed a woman who is clearly embarrassed as she is holding her hand in front of her face, while looking away. The obi on the floor implies that she had taken of her kimono, but she's now holding her kimono in front of her to cover her body.

Initially the (female) nude was disproved within *nihonga* but slowly but surely *nihonga* artists dared to paint the naked female body. Apparently, Chigusa Sōn was one of the first *nihonga* artists to do so with his painting of Abalone Divers (*ama*) from 1908. In this painting he depicted a group of female abalone divers with bare chests, hanging out at the beach. His painting received a negative review in which the critic was critical about the gender ambiguity and indirectly criticized Sōn's non-traditional depiction of women.[116] Okamoto Shinsō also created a view works with a bare-chested woman as the subject, such as in his painting *'Arai Kami'* (freshly washed hair) of 1926. This work portrays a woman kneeling and bending over while combing her wet hair.

Tadaoto, however, took it a step further with the three nude portraits he created in in 1925 and 1926, all three titled 'nude woman' (*rafu*). These three nudes are the earliest examples of the many nudes Tadaoto was going to paint throughout his career. Of the three paintings two depict a woman completely naked, while the other portrays a woman in the nude holding a piece of fabric. Tadaoto did not intend to create a painting of an allegorical nude or an idealized beauty, neither did the nude serve as a thematical or figurative motif in painting,, which at the time were the only legitimate reason to portray a woman in the nude, as it made sense in specific situations for a woman to be naked. [117] However, in the case of Tadaoto's nudes, the paintings simply represented a female in the nude and therefore had no other function, making these paintings unique for their time. Another uncommon aspect about these works was the fact that the models in the painting took up the whole painting, something that was rarely done in Japanese art works.

In 1926 Tadaoto also created a different type of nude, a painting depicting a bare-chested woman with a balloon. This work was slammed by his contemporary Tsuchida Bakusen for being '*kitanai'* (dirty, messy). On the contrary, the nude painting of a woman with a blue piece

[115] Lippit, "Bijinga", 209.
[116] Van Assche, "Changing Perceptions", 64-65.
[117] De Vries, "Bijinga and Bijin Hanga", 10.

of fabric, created in the same year, got selected for the 5th Kokuga Society Exhibition (figure 17). Interesting is the fact that this painting did not receive any criticism, showing how thirty years after the initial controversy around the nude the attitudes had been shifting, but not everyone was ready to accept it yet.[118]

Figure 17 Kainoshō Tadaoto, 'Nude', Framed, Color on Silk, 1926, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto

4.7 Why paint *anti-bijin*?

Compared to the (scarce amount of) female contemporaries, the male painters in this chapter created predominantly a different type of anti-*bijin*. Women made use of the changing society to portray the stories of real women and in some cases sought to reveal the hardships women had to face. On the contrary, male painters were more concerned with creating paintings that resembled ghost-like figures. These works were more about capturing a mysteriousness or uncanny atmosphere.

[118] Uesono, "Sakuhin Kaisetsu: Rafu", in *Kainoshō Tadaoto* (Tokyo, Japan: Nihon Keizai Shinbunsha, 1997): 132.

The Anti-*Bijin*: a new approach towards the female image

Tadaoto's 'A Comb in the Side Hair' and Shinsō's 'Lip Rouge' were actually especially welcomed by the younger generation who were waiting for new painting styles to emerge.[119] At the time that these paintings were created, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki published his book "Devils in Daylight", which dealt with topics such as voyeurism, the femme fatale, demons and mysteries.[120] Young students at the time noticed the resemblance between Tanizaki and the uncanny paintings by Shinsō and Tadaoto, which turned the two artists into stars among the youth. Moreover, years later, Shinsō remarked how postcards with works by himself and Tadaoto sold much better compared to those with artworks by their seniors.[121] This shows how a part of the public might have preferred to see artworks that were new and different, just like the developments taking place during the Taisho period.

Moreover, the works often seem to express a form of critique towards the beauty ideal in painting at the time. Just as some of the public, artists were most likely fed up with the repetitiveness within the *nihonga* genre and were seeking out new subjects. Besides this, works such as the ones by Tadaoto and Shinsō were often talked about due to their uniqueness. Paintings depicting women that did not fit in with the *bijinga* ideal shocked some of the audience and generated discussion, which at the same time attract more attention to these painters. This might have been an extra incentive for the painters to create artworks that strayed away from the idealistic female image.

[119] Nishimoto, "Tanizaki Junnichiro", 175.
[120] Clémence Leleu, "Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's Demonic Delights", pen ペン, November 18, 2020, https://pen-online.com/culture/junichiro-tanizakis-demonic-delights/
[121] Nishimoto, "Tanizaki Junnichiro", 175.

Chapter 5

Anti-*Bijin*: decadent and grotesque?

An interesting point to note about these anti-*bijin* works is the discourse that surrounds them. The works are often collectively referred to as 'grotesque' or 'decadent'. These are adjectives with a predominantly negative connotation:

"Grotesque: A painting or other artistic work with an image of a person that is ugly or unpleasant as its subject"[122]

"Grotesque: deformed, misshapen, hideous, ugly, monstruous, unnatural, gruesome, freakish, macabre, gothic, strange, bizarre"[123]

"Decadent: A decadent person or group has low moral standards"[124]

An example of this is the exhibition "Ayashii: Decadent and Grotesque Images of Beauty in Modern Japanese Art" that was held at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo and the Osaka Museum of History in Osaka in 2021. The exhibition focused on works such as the ones that have been discussed in this thesis and referred to the works as *ayashii*. *Ayashii* is a word that doesn't have a one-on-one translation in English but could be referred to with words such as 'suspicous' or 'dodgy'.[125]

In the exhibition catalogue many different adjectives have been used to describe the paintings that were on display: "*kikai* (機会 bizarre), yōen (妖艶 bewitching), taihaiteki (退廃的 decadent), seisan (生産 horrific), erochikku (エロチック erotic) and gurotesuku (グロテスク grotesque)".[126] But also in academic texts these types of words are used, for instance,

[122] "Grotesque", Cambridge Dictionary, Accessed June 23, 2022 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/grotesque .
[123] William D. Lutz, "grotesque", in The Cambridge Thesaurus of American English (Cambrigde, England: Cambrigde University press, 1994): 199.
[124] "Decadent", Cambridge Dictionary, Accessed June 23, 2022, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/decadent.
[125] Alice Gordenker, "Bewitching, beguiling and downright disturbing: Unconventional views of beauty in Japanese art", The Japan Times, March 19, 2021, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2021/03/19/arts/unconventional-beauty-japanese-art/ .
[126] Alice Gordenker, "Bewitching, beguiling and downright disturbing".

Szostak refers to many of the works as 'grotesque' and 'ugly'[127], as well as Van Assche who uses 'grotesque' and 'decadent'[128].

The case that these anti-*bijin* paintings are often referred to with these adjectives seems to stem from the reactions these works used to elicit back when they were firstly created in the late Meiji and Taisho eras. Back when these paintings were firstly created and exhibited, they mostly received negative responses due to their differing subject matter. The audience back then was used to images of women embodying a certain kind of softness and beauty. The sudden emergence of paintings depicting familiar motifs in a whole different way must have been shocking to some of the viewers.

It is interesting however, that almost one hundred years later, these paintings are often still discussed in the same manner as they used to a century ago. Naturally, it is important to take into account the context in which these works emerged and how this broke away from these neo-traditional ideas within *nihonga*.

The judging of innovative works has been a universal phenomenon. Take for instance the works by Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), who was active approximately the same time as the painters that created anti-*bijinga*. Nowadays, Mondrian is considered as a great artist and his works are appreciated by many art critics. Yet, when Mondrian first started exhibiting his paintings, characterized by geometrical shapes and primary colors, he received a lot of critique. In fact, an art critic described his works as "(…) pure cases of decadence (…)".[129]

Besides Mondrian, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) would also receive negative responses to his work. For example, his famous work Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907) was judged by many art critiques and fellow artists for the portrayal of women in an absolutely unconventional way. This shows that, whether in Europe or Japan, new subject matters and styles would elicit a critique and were judged as 'decadent'. As the MoMA notes, artists that were "working ahead of their time" would only receive praise later on, when the audience moved on with the times.[130]

Therefore, wouldn't it do the anti-*bijin* justice to approach them from the perspective of a contemporary viewer rather than that of the Japanese viewer from the early 20th century? Instead of referring to the anti-*bijin* as one group of 'grotesque' artworks, it would perhaps be favorable if they were judged as self-contained works, instead of merely paintings that depicted 'ugly' or 'grotesque' women. Most of the anti-*bijin* tried to challenge (unrealistic) beauty ideals

[127] Szostak, Fair is Foul, 364, 370, 381, 382.
[128] Van Assche, "Changing Perceptions", 78, 81, 91.
[129] Saskia Bak, "Visies op Mondriaan", *Ons Erfdeel* 37 no.1, (1997): 65.
[130] "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon", MoMA, accessed June 30, 2022, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/pablo-picasso-les-demoiselles-davignon-paris-june-july-1907/

that had ruled the female image in the Japanese arts. These paintings tried to prove that the (traditional) beauty ideals were outdated and that the time was ripe for a new type of female image. Therefore, it would be interesting to go beyond these negative labels such as 'decadent' and 'grotesque'. Maybe, these works could be referred to as 'innovative', 'revolutionary' or even 'mysterious', words that aren't used that frequently in the description of these works but perhaps aptly capture what the artists' intentions were when creating these paintings.

Conclusion

For a long time, the *bijin* image reigned the Japanese arts. During the Edo period this unfolded in the enormous production of images, mainly of courtesans, with a sexual connotation. These images got so popular that they got banned by the Tokugawa government during the Tempō reforms of 1841-1843. But after the fall of the shogunate and the start of a rapid Westernization, artists started creating *bijinga* once again and quickly gained in popularity.

At the start of the 20th century most *bijinga* paintings within the *nihonga* genre dealt with soft and innocent women, dressed in kimono and functioning as a role model for Japanese customs and manners at the time. At the end of the Taisho period this strict image was making place for a new way of depicting women, which could be considered anti-*bijin*. This meant that in just thirty years' time, the rigid stipulations for the creation of images of a beautiful woman to a certain extent had been overturned. Paintings now could show realities, as well as exposing the artificiality of the beauty ideals. Moreover, the female nude also become more and more accepted.

This shift within the *nihonga* school was sparked by the changes that were taking place in the Taisho period. Movements such as the *jinseiha* and the *atarashii onna* started to gain influence on Japanese society and the artists. This sparked a new flow within the art scene and a need to portray women in a new way. Moreover, the founding of institutions such as *Shirakaba* magazine and the *Kokuga* society also were an incentive for artists to experiment with new subject matters.

The artists discussed in chapters 3 and 4 employed different tactics to break with the restrictions posed in the *bijinga* genre. One of the most obvious tactics was the unfiltered portrayal of harsh realities, by doing this, painters brought along a change within the *nihonga* genre, that mostly intentionally avoided depicting any form of hardships. Painters also gave their works an autobiographical touch or in some cases even used themselves as a model. This was for example done by Shima Seien, and allegedly by Kainoshō Tadaoto, who often modeled in *onnagata* as inspiration. Another tactic that emerged during the late Meiji and Taisho was the portrayal of subjects that gazed straight at the viewer. Making eye-contact with the viewer instilled the subject with more agency and disturbed the voyeuristic relationship.

Some artists opted for taking away the fantasy of the artificial and idealistic beauty by creating works of women that exposed this artificiality. In other cases, artists added a super-natural or eerie atmosphere to their paintings. In addition, halfway through the Taisho period a

gradual entrance of the female nude in *nihonga* can be observed, which increasingly became more accepted.

There seem to be several reasons as to why these artists took on this different approach in painting women. The female painters most likely opted for this because they could offer a female representation from a female perspective that did not concern a domestic setting. As women they wanted to expose the hardships women had to endure, especially Kajiwara Hisako was a pioneer in this. Of the male painters discussed in this thesis, Chigusa Sōn was the only one who also selected women of the lower classes of society as his subjects.

Both male and female painters wanted to challenge the voyeuristic and idealized aspects of *bijinga*, as we could see in 'Untitled' by Seien and 'A Comb in the Side Hair' by Tadaoto. At the same time, these painters often challenged the beauty ideals through their artworks.

Male painters probably had other reasons to paint anti-*bijin*. In the first place they might have chosen for these depictions because they wanted to create something new that could generate a talk and shock. It seems that a large portion of the artists active during the Taisho period got fed up with the repetitiveness and tediousness of the works exhibited at the Bunten and therefore created these anti-*bijin* as a form of protest.

All in all, painting these works was an insurgent movement and something that was unprecedented in Japanese art history. *Nihonga* artists aptly combined elements from Western style painting with (neo-)traditional Japanese techniques. Moreover, these works served as a reflection of all the changes taking place during these times. In this way these artists created unique artworks with new subject matters and motives, that heavily influenced the public and the art world. Hopefully, it has been shown that these works go way beyond the label of 'grotesque' and 'decadent' and that they were innovative and special.

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