

Press Release

SHUNGA: Erotic Art from Japan

Press Conference	Tuesday, 11 October 2016, 10:30 a.m.
Opening	Tuesday, 11 October 2016, 6:30 p.m.
Exhibition Venue	MAK DESIGN LAB
	MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna
Exhibition Dates	12 October 2016 – 5 March 2017
Opening Hours	Tue 10 a.m.–10 p.m., Wed–Sun 10 a.m.–6 p.m. Free admission on Tuesdays from 6–10 p.m.

With its apparently carefree attitude to nakedness and sexuality East Asian shunga (“spring pictures”) convey a much freer attitude to sexual morals than has been instilled in us in Europe. The MAK exhibition *SHUNGA: Erotic Art from Japan* focuses on the artistic quality of the explicitly erotic color woodblock prints, which despite long prohibition by the Japanese government advanced to become a mass phenomenon. Individual sheets, albums, and books by renowned masters such as Suzuki Harunobu, Katsushika Hokusai and Kitagawa Utamaro—mostly loans from the Leopold private collection—offer a representative and in-depth view in the MAK of this frequently tabooed facet of Japanese art history. Contemporary nude photographs by Nobuyoshi Araki act as a connecting link to the present day.

With around 4 200 sheets, the MAK collection of Japanese color woodcut prints is one of the foremost ukiyo-e collections in Europe. Ukiyo-e (“pictures of the floating world”), to which the shunga may be classified, illustrate urban entertainments and bourgeois everyday phenomena associated with the theatre and pleasure quarters of Edo, now Tokyo. For a long time the explicit depiction of sexuality in the shunga blocked access for the erotic prints into European collections. This applies as well to the MAK collection, which houses solely one picture scroll by an anonymous master from the second half of the seventeenth century—the earliest item shown in the MAK collection.

The aesthetic treatment of naked bodies and the in part complex arrangements of kimono folds and drapery clearly distinguish shunga from naturalistic renderings of love play. They are characterized by their anatomical precision, sometimes extreme bodily positions, and over-dimensional genitals. Shunga frequently show humorous scenes as well, such as a little girl who eavesdrops on a pair of lovers and calls: “I’m going to tell Mummy!”

The chronologically structured exhibition in the MAK DESIGN LAB starts off with early shunga series from the seventeenth century, which keep to the twelve-month cycle and—with a title sheet—constitute thirteen related prints. Suzuki Harunobu (ca. 1725–1770), one of the foremost shunga artists, elaborated the initially black-and-white woodcuts into polychrome prints; his parables between Chinese poetry and Japanese eroticism appealed especially to the rich and educated middle class in Edo.

Nearly all well-known ukiyo-e artists also designed erotic color woodcut prints, accounting for the artistic quality of shunga. Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806) transformed Harunobu's originally dream-like erotic scenes into more explicit portrayals. He makes them more matter-of-fact and also shows semi-erotic domestic scenes like the Beauty (*bijin*) at her toilette. Utamaro's albums—today extremely scarce on the art market—are among the most sought-after works of Japanese art. His series *Negai no itoguchi* [*The Prelude to Desire*] (1799) can be seen in its entirety in the MAK.

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)—famous not only for his series *36 Views of Mount Fuji*—blends erotic fantasies with the world of mythology and ghosts. During the Meiji period (1868–1912) the quality of the shunga tended to vary. The beautiful woman (*bijin*) is no longer the central subject, they focus far more on erotic motifs like the young student or the self-assertive woman. The new technical potential offered by photography since the last quarter of the nineteenth century caused the color woodcut print to lose much of its significance as a mass medium. The artist Hashiguchi Goyō (1880–1921) was one of the first to revive the ukiyo-e in “new prints” (*shin hanga*), creating a modern, self-confident image of women reminiscent of Utamaro's sheets.

The MAK exhibition closes with selected photographs by the Japanese artist Nobuyoshi Araki (b. 1940), who has produced several nude photography series alluding to shunga from the Edo period.

The major part of the works shown in *SHUNGA: Erotic Art from Japan* comes from Rudolf Leopold's (1925–2010) superlative ukiyo-e collection, now owned by his son Diethard Leopold, who continually enlarges the collection. The depiction of sex without taboos in the color woodcut prints made a great impression in Europe and was first methodically interpreted in similarly direct form by Egon Schiele in whole series of sheets. The woodcuts are a constitutive part of the Rudolf Leopold Collection; the art patron compiled an all-embracing retrospective dealing with Vienna around 1900 with Schiele as its nucleus. A part of the comprehensive shunga collection was on show in the exhibition *Japan – Fragility of Existence* in the Leopold Museum in 2012/2013. While shunga was probably deemed to be pornography at the start, today the focus is on its art-historical significance. Erotic color woodcut prints have hitherto

to hardly played a part on the exhibition scene, since the borderline between erotic art and pornography is frequently blurred. The British Museum was a forerunner in showcasing them in Europe with the large-scale exhibition *Shunga: sex and pleasure in Japanese art* in 2013. In Japan itself the first major shunga exhibition followed in 2015 in the Eisei Bunko Museum in Tokyo.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog of the same name, published by the MAK, with texts by Susanne Klien, Diethard Leopold, and Sepp Linhart, approx. 200 pages, 80 illustrations. Available at the MAK Design Shop for € 18.

This exhibition contains explicitly erotic depictions which might offend the moral sensibility of persons under sixteen years of age.

Press photos on the exhibition are available for download at MAK.at/press.

SUPPORTING PROGRAM

Curator-guided tours with Johannes Wieninger

Thu, 13 Oct 2016, 5 p.m.

Tue, 8 Nov 2016, 6 p.m.

Regular guided tours

15 Oct – 11 Dec 2016

Sat, 2 p.m.

Sun, 3 p.m.

18 Dec 2016 – 29 Jan 2017

Sat, 3 p.m.

Every Tuesday up to and including 28 February 2017:

6 p.m.

Tour through the MAK and guided tour *SHUNGA: Erotic Art from Japan*

MAK SENIORS

Wed, 19 Oct 2016, 3 p.m.

Guided tour through the exhibition, followed by further discussion at the restaurant Salonplafond in the MAK

Total price € 15

Information and registration: T +43 1 711 36-298, education@MAK.at

SHUNGA Evening

Short lectures and guided tours of *SHUNGA: Erotic Art from Japan*

Tue, 24 January 2017, 6–9 p.m.

Print On Demand

Top quality art prints: during the exhibition many of the sheets are available as print on demand. More information: repro@MAK.at

Press Data Sheet

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Guest Curator	Diethard Leopold
Curator	Johannes Wieninger, Curator, MAK Asia Collection
Academic Consultation	Sepp Linhart
Publication	The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog of the same name, published by the MAK, with texts by Susanne Klien, Diethard Leopold, and Sepp Linhart, approx. 200 pages, 80 illustrations. Available at the MAK Design Shop for € 18.
MAK Admission	€ 9.90 / Reduced € 7.50 / Family Ticket € 13 Free admission for children and teens under 19
MAK Press and PR	Judith Anna Schwarz-Jungmann (Head) Sandra Hell-Ghignone Veronika Träger Lara Steinhäußer T +43 1 711 36-233, -229, -212 presse@MAK.at www.MAK.at
	Vienna, 20 December 2016