

What Was the Visual Appeal of Kabuki?

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Abstract: By using several woodblock-printed pictures to explore the visual appeal of kabuki in the Edo period. (1) Focus on the construction of kabuki theatre and the props on stage, considering prevailing examples to interpret how the kabuki theatre acted as an adequate arena for the exercise of actors' talents, thus entrancing the audiences. (2) Discuss the costumes, make-up and wigs of classic characters to directly capture the visual experiences of the Edo people in kabuki theatres. (3) The representative dancing and acting will be considered to analyse their visual characteristics.

Keywords: kabuki, Japan, art history

1. Introduction

In the Edo period, if we compare kabuki with nō, another traditional Japanese drama, we can find how different theatre practices could coexist in one country. Nō was dignified and sacred, and created an orthodox atmosphere for the elite classes; while kabuki was the energetic drama of common people in which audiences wildly shouted and called the actors' names. The only thing the two had in common was that the audiences of both were ruled by the Tokugawa government. The four hereditary classes—aristocracies or samurai, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants or chōnin—were given separate identity statuses, including social behaviour, obligations, dressing and living conditions. In this situation, kabuki theatres were regularly inspected by authorities to prevent audiences from breaking barriers of this segregation, which would be seen as the destruction of moral principle. As a result, the form of kabuki changed several times, from the onna kabuki (women's kabuki), to the wakashū kabuki (youth's kabuki), finally the yarō kabuki (young men's kabuki). The construction of theatres, the performance of plays and the dressing of actors were also developed. However, the attraction of kabuki and the enthusiasm of the Edo public were sustainedly growing regardless of these changes. Accompanied by this popularity, the many artists produced plenty of works that were inspired by kabuki.

By using several woodblock-printed pictures, I hope to explore the visual appeal of kabuki in the Edo period. Firstly, I will focus on the construction of kabuki theatre and the props on stage, considering prevailing examples to interpret how the kabuki theatre acted as an adequate arena for the exercise of actors' talents, thus entrancing the audiences. Secondly I will discuss the costumes, make-up and wigs of classic characters to directly capture the visual experiences of the Edo people in kabuki theatres. Finally, the representative dancing and acting will be considered to analyse their visual characteristics.

2. The construction of kabuki theatre and the props

The earliest structure of kabuki stages were temporary wooden platforms, arranged in the open air of riverbeds where the 'women's kabuki' actors performed dances imitated from those of Okuni. The painting dated from the 1620s shows spectators of kabuki enclosed by uncovered bamboo palings, enjoying the pleasure although in a unfavourable circumstance (Figure 1). After the permanent theatres in Kyoto were licensed in the year 1617, the appearance of the stages evolved and were modelled upon the nō theatre. *Perspective view of the interior of Edo's Nakamura-za in the middle of eighteenth century* (Figure 2) by Okumura Masanobu depicts a mature representation of a kabuki stage. The actor Ichikawa Danjūrō II plays Gongorō in the lower-left corner, standing on the raised walkway (*hanamichi*) attached to the main stage where another two roles in the play 'Wait a Moment!' (*Shibaraku*) are depicted. The audience is dispersed in various seats according to their socioeconomic states: (1) The foreground is a central floor (*doma*) divided into cubicles with hundreds of people; (2) the two-tier seats on the two sides are cloaked with bamboo blinds, called "boxes", and would have higher prices than the central floor. These private seats were usually for the rich merchant and samurai upper-class; (3) the cheapest unpartitioned section, which would be on the right-hand side of the raised walkway's end, doesn't appear in this painting. However, the discrimination of classes disappear when they are infatuated with the performance.



Figure 1. Anonymous, Bird's-eye view of an early kabuki theatre in the dry Kamo riverbed in Kyoto (Late 1620s; Courtesy of the Seikado Foundation, Tokyo)

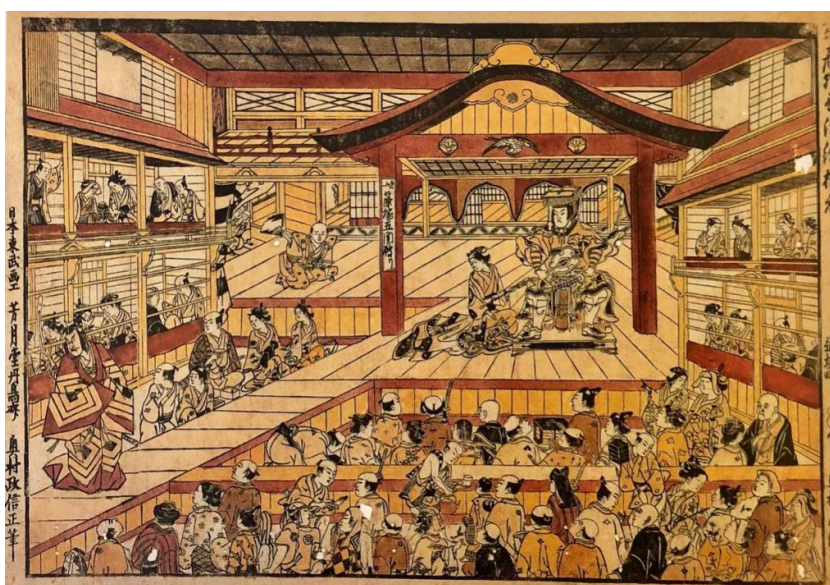


Figure 2. Okumura Masanobu, Perspective view of the interior of Edo's Nakamura (Hand-coloured, large perspective print; Published in 1743 by Okumuraya Genroku)

It seems like, despite their disapproval, the authorities were unable to prevent the design of kabuki theatres that developed from the seventeenth century to eighteenth century to meet the requirements of the gradually elaborated performances and to promote the quality of audiences' experiences. For example, the roof of the theatre developed from a light wooden construction into a permanent tier construction so that performances could still take place in adverse weather. In this situation, ingeniously using torches or candlelight in the night scenes could create a mysterious aura (Figure 3). In addition, there were many technical innovations on the stages: a painting by Utagawa Kunisada II shows Nikki Danjō rising from the haramichi by a trap-lift in the play *Nikki Danjō and the Disputed Succession*, which produced scenery that magically appeared and disappeared (Figure 4). The attraction of the performances, no less appreciated even behind the actors, is shown by the large number of townsman crowded in the more cheap seats named *rakandai* in the painting by Utagawa Kunisada (Figure 5). And also thanks to the *hanamichi*, the stage and audience could be brought together on the same level, and the actors could respond to every audience member's jubilation, allowing them to participate in the performances in a way.



Figure 3. Adachi Ginkō, Nishiki-e
(Published in 1897 by Hasegawa Toshimitsu)



Figure 4. Utagawa Kunisada II, Nishiki-e
(Published in 8/1860 by Shimizu Tsunajirō)



Figure 5. Utagawa Kunisada, Nishiki-e triptych, with interchangeable middle sheets (Published in 6/1859 by Nōshūya Yasubei)

Obviously, in order to fascinate the clients, theatre managers exerted all energies not only tailoring the construction of their theatre, but also developing the props under the capricious Tokugawa government prohibitions. One example of the regulations on props was the prohibition of realistic swords, even wooden counterfeits covered in silver foil or paper. However, small hand props still used commonly, including fans, hats, umbrellas, swords and so on. All of them were realistic enough to confuse with their real-life counterparts. In order to create an authentic ambience sometimes they moved the real items on the stage, such as the true water in the play *The Summer Festival* (*Natsu matsuiri Naniwa kagami*). In this play, Danshichi draws real water from a well to clean the blood and cool his temper after he killed his father-in-law. This mud scene was a quite realistic spectacle and required many efforts into the stage sets and props. Consequently, the evolution of stages and props definitely gave the kabuki performances a more human breath.

3. Costumes, make-up and wigs

A key factor of kabuki's glamour was definitely the elaborate and various costumes on the stages. During the Edo period, in order to perfectly represent the characteristics of different roles, the design and style of kabuki costumes was still advanced under the strict control from bankufu. For example, the prohibition of luxury clothes in kabuki performances failed to restrain actors from performing roles as samurai or nobleman with opulent dressings in historical plays (*jidaimono*). Expensive fans and real swords also were used secretly. Certainly, many costumes in daily-life could be found on the characters, but mostly they were more exaggerated than that of true-life. In the play 'Wait a Moment!', the hero Gongorō was standardly dressed in a complicated reddish-brown coloured kimono (Figure 6); the sleeves with white-square Danjurō family crests were king-sized and long trailing pants hid high wooden clogs. When the hero moved on the hanamichi, the sleeves had to be spread by bamboo sticks with the help of stage assistants behind actor's back (Figure 7). It can be imagined how breathtaking this scene would have been with the tall and big Gongorō reinforced by dramatic outfits and enclosed by the repeated shouts of 'Shibaraku!'. These costumes endowed each kabuki role with vividness and distinctiveness, which came from realism but also dramatised realism.



Figure 6. Utagawa Kunisada, Nishiki-e diptych (Published in 10/1864 by Daikokuya Kinsaburō)



Figure 7. Utagawa Kunisada, Nishiki-e triptych (Published in 7/1858 by Nōshūya Yasubei)

The facial make-up of kabuki actors magnified the visual effects even for performances in the dimly light conditions of theatres. Audiences were credibly informed of the identities of each role through specific facial make-up: the faces covered in red-coloured oily cream usually identified actors as foot soldiers, envoys and crooks. Whole white colour was applied to the faces of some lowlife or handsome characters, but in most cases, the upper-class characters' faces were also made up with white powder to suggest these titled people, like flowers in a greenhouse, rarely saw sunlight, such as the evil daimyō Takehira in the play 'Wait a Moment!' (Figure 6). At the same time, some distinct patterns were applied surprisingly: the Gongorō at the left has his face decorated with red stripes, called *kumadori* or 'shadow painting', to emphasise the facial muscles which were created by Ichikawa Danjūrō who probably mustered the inspiration from Chinese opera. These different colours of stripes involved synaesthetic emotions; normally, the red-colour stripes coincided with power and virtue, its blue counterpart was fear and evil. For female roles, the *onnagata* actors skilfully covered their real eyebrows and mouth, painting on higher and slimmer new *onen* to create more feminine features. Ultimately, the facial make-up enhanced the expressiveness of the kabuki actors and thus the attractiveness of the characters.

Evidently, the sophisticated wigs were another indispensable part of the visual attraction on kabuki stages. When Gongoro comes down the *hanamichi*, the spectacular hairstyle imparts a dignified appearance to this superhero (Figure 8). The wig is decorated with 'five-spoked-wheel sidelocks' and a divided 'pine tree' form fringe, with a white-coloured square fabric that forms two wings on the edge of a black samurai cap. This is an excellent example of a kabuki wig, individually designed in accordance with the sex, age and social statues of each character. When the women and young boys' kabuki was forbidden, for the grown-men impersonators of female (*onnagata*), it was common to use a purple silk cap (*murasaki bōshi*) to cover their shaven foreheads so they could wear impressive wigs to play certain female characters. One graphic example is a top-ranking courtesan character in the play *Sukeroku, the Flower of Edo*: Miuraya Agemaki adorned with great loops of hair, combs and ornamental hairpins (Figure 9). In addition, some plays evoked the characters' emotion by changing their coiffure. Narukami's change of mind in the play *Priest Narukami and the Rain Dragon* was reflected in his hairstyle: from tidy and sleek to a massive mess of hair neglected for 100 days (Figure 10 & Figure 11).



Figure 8. Shunpa, painting on paper (Dated 1930s)



Figure 9. Utagawa Kunisada, Nishiki-e (Published in 11/1856 by Aimoya tōkichi)

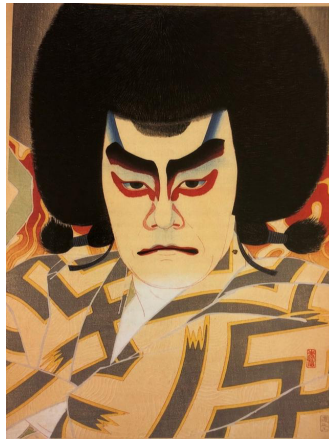


Figure 10. Natori Shunsen, Deluxe nishiki-e (Published in 1926 by Watanade Shōzaburō)



Figure 11. Ishikawa Toyonobu, Nishiki-e (Published in 1751 by Urokogaraya Magobei)

To return to the originals and models of kabuki costumes, make-up and wigs, it is reliable to say that most of them were based on reality. This is evidenced by the following: actors' costumes reflected the style of the Edo period or even earlier periods in historical plays. Even if the function of the dramatic make-up *kumadori* was “merely to emphasise the human character of a role, be it good or bad.” In the Edo period, after the shogunate banned the name of a contemporary person to appear in plays, an unusual aspect of kabuki formed so that the characters and chronology in many plays were very different from the historical events they were based on, and the features of historical characters were also contemporary to those of the Edo. In this case, the Edo audiences were attracted by these samurai and aristocratic roles from former periods. However, the Edo-styled features of the characters created a modern background, wherein the Edo people could actually be immersed in the delusion of a contemporary story regardless of the historical setting. This must be a very particular visual experience through the contemporary transformation of historical characters, and also the reason why kabuki grew in popularity widely and rapidly in the Edo period.

4. Acting and dancing

Traditionally, the acting of kabuki in the Edo period were sorted as two main styles: the bombastic rough style (*aragoto*) derived from capital Edo and the more realistic, gentle style (*wagoto*) which came from the commercial and cultural centres, Osaka and Kyoto. The play ‘Wait a moment!’ is a paragon example of the *aragoto* style, in which actors performed in exaggerated manners with blustering dialogues and dramatic costumes. To the contrary, the *wagoto* style was generally used

by the young lovers characters, featuring elegance and effeminate delicacy, such as Sawamura Sojūrō V who played the role of Soga jūrō *Sukenari* in ‘The Soga Brothers’ Revenge’ (Figure 12). Besides these two dominated acting styles, the puppet style (*maruhon*) and the silent style (*danmari*) were glamorous as well. The narrator played an unparalleled role in the puppet style kabuki compared to other styles, and after they informed audiences of the contents of each scene, characters moved in a puppet-like acting style as an opportunity to show their consummate skills. The silent style acting often appeared in the night time outdoor settings, wherein actors made every effort to demonstrate roles in complete silence with slow motions. These acting styles, which involved various dances and postures, should be highlighted as the essence of kabuki performances.



Figure 12. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Nishiki-e* (Published in 1845 by Iseya Ichibei)

Literally, the Japanese word ‘kabuki’ means ‘bent’ and flamboyant sensual dance in the early seventeenth century. Therefore, dances ought to have been the epitome of kabuki’s attraction during the Edo period. Unlike the buoyant classic western dances or stately *nō* dances, kabuki dancers professionally jumped and pulsated rapidly, moving up and down. The noise of dances were furthermore enhanced at the hollow-plank form platform, which created an atmosphere of jollification. With the different types of music, dancing varied from the Nagauta style, such as the beauty *Hanako* did in ‘The maiden at the Dōjō Temple.’; to the *Jōruri* style in narrative music. Nevertheless, as when women were banned on the kabuki stage, dances might have been a privilege of *onnagata*. The grown-men players of women’s roles were not able to pleasure clients merely by exquisite dressing and make-up. As a result, graceful and sweet dancing was their trump card to represent the delicate features of females. Interestingly, after the Meiji Restoration, the female actors were attempting to return to the kabuki stage, but unfortunately the excellent feminine-dances of *onnagata* threw these actresses into the shade and thus they failed. Perhaps compared to the excessively natured actresses, a male actor struggled in female roles, showing a distinctive flavour and continues to be the spacial appeal of kabuki today.

In the nineteenth century, in order to portray the roles more accurately, the forms of kabuki dance were gradually advanced to be more sophisticated and captivating. The ‘travel’ dance (*michiyuki*), was a sentimental dance which always shaped the tragic lovers in heart-wrenching scenes such as a lover’s suicide. The ‘transformation’ dance (*hengemono*) was also the representative dance in this maturation period. Usually the *hengemono* dance was composed of several different styles of dance, up to twelve short pieces determined by the contents of the play. In most cases, following the colourful changes of dresses and make-up, this content-rich dance produced a dramatic spectacle. It should be noticed that every performance had a standardised model originated from traditional pattern of acting (*kata*). This meant kabuki actors did not carry over as much personal emotions and spirit as their western counterparts did. Such a unique form of performance was a result of the no-script and impromptu traditions of kabuki; actors learned through careful observation and imitation with their fathers or predecessors in succession to the technical skills. For seasoned kabuki fans, *kata* was a standard to estimate the abilities and talents of actors compared to previous generations’ performances.

When the wonderful acting culminated in the aura of kabuki performance, certain male characters would freeze their

dramatic pose to simulate statues for a few seconds, which known as mie. These interesting moments were widely depicted in woodblock-printed paintings, such as Figure 13 depicts Ichikawa Ebizō V in the play ‘Priest Narukami and the Rain Dragon’ as performing a classic ‘pillar-wrapping pose’, grasping a pillar as an angry demon after a splendid costume transformation. A mie pose on stage must be like a pictorial scene and thus remain in the minds of the spectators. In addition, when actors entered and exited on the hanamichi or acted out fight scenes, some other stylised choreography could be captured. Some choreographic poses were famous enough to have their own name. For example, Musashi-bō Benkei in the play ‘The subscription list’ (*Kanjichō*) makes his final bounding exit known as the ‘flying in six direction’ (*tōbi-roppō*) stylised to the delight of audiences. Another wonderful stylised choreography called kitsune roppō appeared in ‘Youshitsune and the thousand cherry trees’, Tadanobu dances in a fox-like step and holds his hands like a fox’s paws when Shizuka plays the hand drum (Figure 14).



Figure 13. Shūgansai Shigehirō, Nishiki-e (Published in 1834 by Tenki)

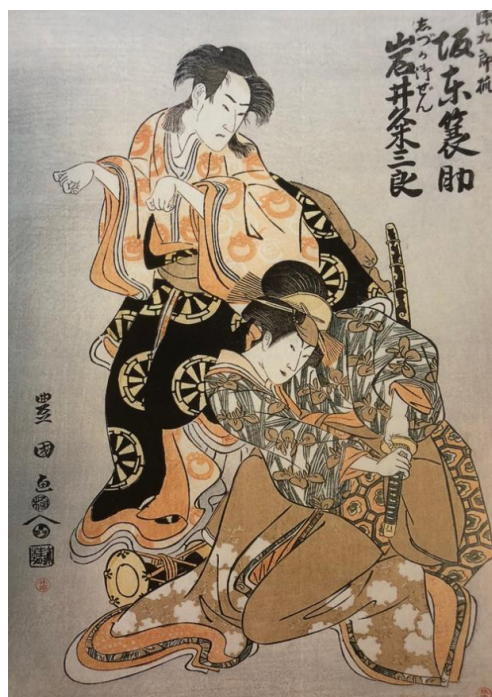


Figure 14. Utagawa Toyokuni I, Nishiki-e (Published in 1798 by Nishimuraya Yohachi)

If only one word is used to describe the characteristics of kabuki acting and dancing, “stylised” should be a candidate. Kawatake Toshio illustrated this in his book:

...this beauty of sight and sound is not the beauty of nature and reality as such, but a beauty given an extra dimension by selecting its elements from nature and reality according to an individual aesthetic sense and then recreating it by restricting, exceeding, or accentuating particular aspects. We shall call this “stylised beauty” and the process of re-creation “stylisation”.

The ways and the extent of stylisation are flexible, as is exemplified by the different styles and types of kabuki acting, which infused kabuki plays with real depth and breadth. They furthermore seized the nature of human personality. thus kabuki could be interpreted as human dramas in the Edo period.

5. Conclusion

The visual appeal of kabuki showed a transition from unreal to real, and could be described as “unreality without being unreal and reality without being real.” The kabuki plays’ relied on historical frameworks, but did not represent the “past”. Instead, it used the past to suit present needs. Those intelligent theatre managers and actors tailored the visual parts of kabuki drama to involve current events despite the oppression from the prohibitions of the Tokugawa government. As the unique cultural practice in which every Edo person was drawn into equally regardless of their social economic levels, it created the real beauty of the Edo society in theatre and illustrated what the Edo people wanted their world to be.

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