



# Reproduction of: Portrait of Aburaya Osome (Aburaya Osome no sō)

After Kitagawa Utamaro

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## Not on display

**Title/Description:** Reproduction of: Portrait of Aburaya Osome (Aburaya Osome no sō)

**Artist/Maker:** After Kitagawa Utamaro (Artist)

**Object Type:** Graphics

**Materials:** Ink, Paper

**Technique:** Woodcut

**Measurements:** Support and image h. 397 x w. 261 mm

**Inscription:** Artist's signature

**Accession Number:** 41458

**Historic Period:** 20th century

**Production Place:** Asia, East Asia, Japan

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Kitagawa Utamaro (c. active: 1753-1806) was a celebrated artist of 'pictures of beauties' (J. *bijinga*). The design in the Sainsbury Centre Collection is a reproduction of Utamaro's print titled 'Physiognomy of Osome of the Aburaya' (*Aburaya Osomo no sō*). Although the reproduction print is 20<sup>th</sup>-century, Utamaro's original design was first published by Maruya Jinpachi circa 1799.

The stylized portrait of the wealthy merchant's daughter, Osome is set against a highly reflective, mica ground that lifts the pallid complexion of the beauty's skin and creates a striking contrast with her jet-black hair. Osome holds a folded love letter between her fingers, possibly intended for the shop apprentice, Hisamatsu.

Traditional Japanese theatre dramatizes the conflict between human feeling (J. *ninjō*) and duty (J. *giri*), and took inspiration from the tragic tale of Osome and Hisamatsu. Hisamatsu held a low position working for Osome's father at the pawnshop, the Aburaya. Although Osome and Hisamatsu secretly loved each other, they were mismatched socially and economically, and could not marry.

The drama of Osome and Hisamatsu was based on a real-life double suicide that occurred in Osaka

in 1708. This story was dramatized as the kabuki play 'Love Suicides at the Devil's Gate' (*Shinjū kimon no kado*) in 1710. [1] The celebrated dramatist Chikamatsu Hanji created the play, 'The New Ballad' (*Shinpan Utazaimon*) in 1780 [2], and a play titled 'Osome and Hisamatsu: Their Scandal as Spread by Broadsheets' (*Osome Hisamatsu ukina no yomiuri*) was staged in 1813. [3]

Utamaro made numerous Osome designs and was possibly inspired by theatrical adaptations of the tale and the public's enduring interest in this sad love story. For example, a portrait of Osome and Hisamatsu is included in the series 'Models of Love-talk: Clouds Form over the Moon' (*Chiwa kagami tsuki no murakumo*), from 1798-1800. [4] The two lovers, Osome and Hisamatsu, appear on a pillar print (J. *hashira-e*), designed by Utamaro around 1800 [5], and in a print from the series 'True Feelings Compared: The Founts of Love' (*Jitsu kurabe iro no minakami*) from the same period. [6]

Utamaro issued several series that explored the pseudo-science of physiognomy (J. *ninsō/sōgaku*), which claimed that a person's disposition and fate could be determined from close examination of their external, physical characteristics. These related series were titled 'Ten Classes of Women's Physiognomy' (*Fujo ninsō juppin*) and 'Ten Types in the Physiognomic Studies of Women' (*Fujin sōgaku jittai*) published in the early 1790s. A set of new designs was published with the recycled title 'Ten Types in the Physiognomic Studies of Women' (*Fujin sōgaku jittai*) circa 1801-1804.

The brightly coloured inks of the woodblock print in the Sainsbury Centre Collection indicate that this object is a later reproduction. The inks are synthetic aniline dyes, and not the light-sensitive organic dyes found in late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup>-century prints. The reflective, mica grounds of two-hundred-year old prints are usually abraded and scratched. The round publisher's seal of Maruya Jinpachi, usually found to the left of the signature, is absent from this edition. Instead, the name of the publisher of this later edition appears at the bottom-right edge of the print.

Vanessa Tothill, May 2020

[1] James R. Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter (eds), *Kabuki Plays on Stage: Darkness and Desire, 1804-1864*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), p. 108.

[2] Angela Kimi Coaldrake, *Women's Gidayū and the Japanese Theatre Tradition* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 235.

[3] Samuel L. Leiter, *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre*, 2nd edn (Lanham; Boulder; New York; London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), pp. 429-30; Brandon, pp. 64-89.

[4] British Museum, object number: 1924,0115,0.24.

[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A\\_1924-0115-0-24](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1924-0115-0-24) [accessed 26 May 2020]

[5] Harvard Art Museums, object number: 1933.4.1250.

<https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/208132?position=2> [accessed 26 May 2020]

[6] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, object number: 11.14288.

<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/206458> [accessed 26 May 2020]

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## **Further Reading**

James R. Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter (eds.), *Kabuki Plays on Stage: Darkness and Desire, 1804-1864* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002)

Angela Kimi Coaldrake, *Women's Gidayū and the Japanese Theatre Tradition* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997)

Samuel L. Leiter, *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre, Second Edition* (Lanham, Boulder, New York; London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014)

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