When Japan Had a Third Gender
By SUSAN CHIRA  MARCH 10, 2017


A figure in a translucent kimono coyly holds a fan. Another arranges an iris in a vase. Are they men or women?

As a mind-bending exhibition that opened Friday at the Japan Society illustrates, they are what scholars call a third gender — adolescent males seen as the height of beauty in early modern Japan who were sexually available to both men and women. Known as wakashu, they are one of several examples in the show that reveal how elastic the ideas of gender were before Japan adopted Western sexual mores in the late 1800s.
The show, “A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Prints,” arrives at a time of ferment about gender roles in the United States and abroad. Bathroom rights for transgender people have become a cultural flash point. The notion of “gender fluidity” — that it’s not necessary to identify as either male or female, that gender can be expressed as a continuum — is roiling traditional definitions.

“This brings us back to history to think about the present and the future,” said Asato Ikeda, an assistant professor of art history at Fordham University and the guest curator of the exhibition, which covers the Edo period from 1603 to 1868.

She said that like other societies in the past and present — the hijra in India; the “two-spirit people” in some American indigenous cultures — the diversity in gender definitions and sexual practices in Edo Japan
challenges modern notions that male and female are clear either-or identities.

The art on display shows how many permutations were acceptable in Edo society: men or women in liaisons with the adolescent wakashu; female geisha dressing like wakashu and engaging in rough sex; male prostitutes cross-dressing as women; men impersonating women on the Kabuki stage, a tradition that lasts to this day; and even a male Kabuki actor impersonating a woman who pretends at one point to be a man.

That suggests, Professor Ikeda said, that some blurring of gender identity was deliberate, playful and often arousing, since the prints were relatively inexpensive and widely circulated, some as erotica.

The wakashu are a case in point. The term describes the time a male
reaches puberty and his head is partly shaved, with a triangle-shaped cut above the forelocks that is a telltale way to identify wakashu. During this stage of life only, before full-fledged adulthood, it was socially permissible to have sex with either men or women.

In the prints, the wakashu are presented as beautiful and desirable, sometimes practicing what were seen at the time as feminine arts like flower-arranging or playing the samisen. Like unmarried women, wakashu who belonged to the samurai class could wear the long-sleeved kimono known as furisode. In several prints, you have to look closely to find the shaved triangle in the hair, or spot a sword tucked in a samurai wakashu’s sash (or, in the erotic woodblocks, to see the genitals on display), to differentiate between the wakashu and the women pictured near them.
In some cases, there are sly literary allusions that deliberately transpose gender. These prints depict episodes from classical literature, or Buddhist and Confucian traditions, but flip the genders of the main characters, or recast the men as wakashu.


The art in the exhibition ranges from lively snapshots of daily life to uninhibited portrayals of desire. A screen shows several wakashu surrounding a Buddhist monk, teasingly holding down his hands, plying him with alcohol and tickling his feet, suggesting foreplay before male-male sex. A young woman passes a love note to her wakashu lover behind the back of an older artist who is signing his name to a painting. A wakashu dreams of sex with a famous prostitute, while another woman tenderly covers him with a jacket.

Several prints reflect Edo society’s strict hierarchy of class and age, one
reason the curators caution it is misleading to compare gender norms directly to the present day. The Edo period was one of relative peace in Japan, following many years of war between competing samurai. It was also marked by nearly complete isolation from the West. That is one reason it may have offered space for sexual experimentation, but only within certain bounds.

“Dancing in a Kabuki Performance” (1800s), by Kaian (Megata Morimichi). Royal Ontario Museum; Photo: Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Any hint of adult male-male sex was confined to outcast groups such as Kabuki actors, said Michael Chagnon, the curator of exhibit interpretation at the Japan Society, although homosexuality was practiced among samurai for centuries and commercialized during the Edo period. Men are usually in charge, both in pursuit of sexual partners and in sexual positions, except for experienced women who pursue younger wakashu. There is virtually no depiction of lesbianism, since women were not granted the sexual freedoms men were. The only print showing two naked
women is ambiguous, with art historians uncertain whether it suggests mutual desire. Older men have sex with younger wakashu.

The exhibition raises and confronts questions of pederasty or exploitation, given that wakashu were sexually available after puberty, younger than would now be considered the age of consent. The curators consulted social workers and lawyers during the original exhibit, held at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, to make sure the work was not considered child pornography.

Mr. Chagnon said marriages and sexual liaisons took place at an earlier age than the present day, partly because people died so much younger, often by their late 30s. The notion of age of consent did not exist in Edo Japan, he said, and was imported later.
The Edo period ended after Japan was humiliated by demands from a militarily superior West – the black ships of Commodore Perry wrested concessions from a country that had once confined Western traders to offshore islands. And it was then in the late 1860s, as Japan rushed to adopt Western technology and forms of government, that it also imported more rigid Western notions of gender and permissible sexual expression. The tradition of wakashu ended. Homosexuality was outlawed for a time.

Same-sex marriage is not legal in Japan today, although it was debated in the legislature in 2015 and some cities have allowed partnership certificates for same-sex couples. A gay subculture flourishes, with many artists playfully shifting and layering identities, mainly through the internet. But gay men are generally expected to marry women and produce children, fulfilling social expectations while conducting their sexual lives discreetly.

In an uncanny echo of the past, some Japanese men today, known as “genderless danshi,” are once again blurring lines, dressing androgynously, using makeup or wearing clothes typically seen as feminine.

“Even though we have this rich tradition of gender, prints like these are not found in our textbooks,” said Professor Ikeda, who grew up in Japan. “We don’t do these kinds of exhibitions in Japan.”

It is one of the many reflections on contemporary society that this provocative exhibition raises. Walking through it is a reckoning with categories, definitions and how they resonate in societies still uncertain about whether lines between genders should be bent or blurred.