

## **Clare Pollard - Watanabe Nangaku, Bijin**

CLARE POLLARD: I'm Clare Pollard. I'm the Curator of Japanese Art at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. And we're here in one of the study rooms of the Eastern Art Department, where we keep our paintings and prints.

So today I'm going to talk to you about one of our Japanese paintings. It's a hanging scroll painting by the artist Watanabe Nangaku, who was born in Kyoto in 1767, and died in 1813. And we think this painting was made in the early 1800s. And it shows a courtesan looking down at a skull.

Watanabe Nangaku was a very versatile painter. He painted a number of subjects. But he was particularly known for his paintings of fish and also his paintings of beautiful women. He worked most of the time in Kyoto and was said to be one of the ten best students of the famous painter Maruyama Okyo, who set up a new school of naturalistic painting in the 18th century.

The painting's painted in ink and coloured pigments on silk. The pigments are mostly vegetable- and mineral-derived. Watanabe Nangaku was very skilful in the way he used the pigments. For instance, if you look at the bottom of the kimono that the courtesan is wearing, there's a lovely gradation of colour as you go down.

The details on the woman's kimono are picked out in different colours. There are dragons in gold, for example. And then you can see on her under-ropes, there are white butterflies and cherry blossoms that are made from a pigment called gofun, which is made from powdered clam shells.

If you look closely at the woman's hair, you can see that some strands of her hair are shining. And this is a deliberate effect, where glue has been added into the ink to make it look shiny and lacquer-like. All of these meticulous details contrast quite strongly with the bold brushstrokes in the painting. What's interesting is that the pattern on the kimono is depicted across the folds. It's as if the artist is reminding us that this is just a painting, a two-dimensional painting.

The painting itself is on silk, which has been mounted onto a silk background. The silk support's then mounted onto paper backing. Around the painting are silk mounts that have been carefully chosen to complement the painting. For example, there are two bands of tie-dyed fabric at the top and the bottom of the scroll painting that have been carefully chosen, because they're like the little glimpses of under-kimono that you can see in the painting.

The silk support is then mounted onto a paper backing that's attached to a rod at the top and a roller at the bottom. So when it's not being hung, it's rolled up and stored in a wooden box. The wooden storage box is quite interesting in itself. Quite often, artists didn't just sign their paintings, they also signed the box. The box we have wasn't actually signed by Nangaku. But it's signed by another painter, a slightly later painter called Kunii Ōyō, who collected paintings by Nangaku and some of his contemporaries. And he's inscribed the box with an authentication saying that this is a painting by the master Nangaku.

The painting shows a standing figure of a woman against a neutral background. The artist Nangaku hasn't tried to put her in a realistic natural setting at all. And her robes, her rather beautiful robes, stand out in contrast to this light, plain background.

The woman's body creates an elegant, willowy S-shape starting with where the bottom of her robe is cropped on the right of the painting, up through her arched back, through her neck, and then back out again with her hairstyle.

So the artist has painted his signature underneath the bow of her obi sash in vertical characters coming down. So he has his name, Nangaku. And underneath that, there are two red seals, which are two different art names.

I should point out that Japanese paintings are designed to be looked at from right to left, in the same way that Japanese script is designed to be right to left. So this artist name is one of the first things you would look at when you were viewing this scroll.

The last element I'd like to point out in the painting are the lines of rather elegant calligraphic text on the top left-hand corner of the painting. This is a poem. Poems have long been combined with paintings, with images, in Japanese art, right back to the 8th century. And in fact, calligraphy was viewed as an art form in itself.

Here, it's very decorative. It's a very elegant hand that the poem is written in, possibly Nangaku's own hand. But it also gives a context to the subject of the painting.

The woman in the painting's actually a courtesan. It's not immediately obvious at first sight. She looks very elegant. She's wearing very beautiful robes, but they're not particularly flashy. They're quite refined. But there are a few clues that tell us that she's actually a courtesan.

Usually, courtesans wore their sashes tied in a bow at the front, which she doesn't have here. She has long pins in her hair, very elaborate pins in a typical courtesan's hairstyle. And she has her kimono hitched up rather seductively at the front, with her bare toes peeping out at the bottom.

So in complete contrast to the elegant courtesan, is the rather gruesome-looking skull at her feet. This strikes a rather mysterious note. You think, why would Nangaku include a skull in his painting? But it's the poem that really gives the clue to why this skull is here.

The poem can be translated as, 'the courtesan no longer holds the mirror in her hand from morning till night, because she has seen her true reflection'. The poem expresses a Buddhist idea about the transience of life. However beautiful the courtesan may be, underneath she is nothing more than bones. It's likely that Nangaku was referring to one specific courtesan in this painting, a courtesan known as the Hell Courtesan.

This is a legendary figure whose tale, sad tale, was told in many versions over the centuries. But a popular version had been published in 1809, at around the time that we think this painting would have been made. So people looking at the painting would have been aware that this was what Nangaku was referring to.

The Hell Courtesan was said to have been the beautiful daughter of a samurai, who was kidnapped by bandits and then sold into prostitution. She became a very successful and well-known courtesan, and one day, met an eccentric Buddhist monk called Ikkyu, who was able to convert her to the religious life. According to one version of the story, she achieved enlightenment when she met the King of Hell, who showed her a mirror in which she saw herself as a hideous skeleton.

So when Nangaku painted this image, Japan was enjoying a long period of peace and prosperity under samurai rule. Although the merchants and artisans who lived in the cities were at the bottom of the social hierarchy at the time, in fact, they were becoming increasingly wealthy, with time and money to spend on buying and commissioning art.

So a lively popular culture developed in the entertainment quarters of the major cities like Kyoto, which focused on entertainment such as the kabuki theatre, the tea houses, the brothels of the pleasure districts. The carefree environment of the pleasure quarters was known as the floating world, or 'ukiyo' in Japanese, because of the floating, fleeting nature of the pleasures there. And the townspeople eagerly bought and commissioned images of the stars of the floating world, the courtesans and the kabuki actors.

So paintings like this were often painted to be sold to patrons of the pleasure quarters, either people who had visited the courtesans themselves, or as a behind-the-scenes glimpse for people who couldn't afford to go themselves.

And for people who couldn't even afford a painting, wood block prints of courtesans were available, mass-produced commercial prints. And these were enjoyed actually not just by men, but also by women, who enjoyed them for the beautiful fashions depicted in them. The leading courtesans were very much the fashion leaders of the day, and were enjoyed really as you might enjoy a fashion magazine today.

In Japanese painting, feminine beauty wasn't traditionally portrayed through realistic depiction, but through gesture and pose, through depiction of beautiful kimono or hairstyles. Artists like Nangaku weren't trying to create a portrait of any particular woman. They were just trying to create an ideal of feminine beauty.

It's interesting that he, in his work, combines several different styles of paintings. On the one hand, the Maruyama style, which was a Japanese traditional painting style that had incorporated elements of Western realism, for example, in the fairly naturalistic depiction of the skull. And on the other hand, you have the ukiyo-e style, which was much more stylized, that you associate with wood block prints.

Paintings like this were designed to be hung in the tokonoma, which was the display space of a Japanese traditional room. Unlike Western homes, most walls in Japanese houses were kept bare, with just one space for paintings.

Paintings weren't kept hung up permanently, as we might in this country, but were swapped in and out, depending on the mood that the owner wanted to create, or for a particular occasion.

So this painting gives us a really interesting insight into ideas of femininity in Japan, and the status of courtesans in particular in the early 19th century. From the early 17th century, all the major cities had their own licenced pleasure districts, which were seen as very glamorous, fashionable, and desirable places to visit.

The courtesans - certainly, the higher-ranking courtesans like the one portrayed in this painting - would have, in some ways, led fairly glamorous lives. They had beautiful kimonos. They were well educated. They were idealised and feted. But in actual fact, the reality was much more complicated. Many courtesans had been sold into prostitution when they were still children indentured by poor families. And they had to work for a minimum of ten years to pay off their debts, which in actual fact, kept on increasing, because they were expected to pay for their own beautiful clothes, for their own assistants, for their own bedding. So it was really far from glamorous.

Bearing all of this in mind, this is really a very poignant painting. On one level, it shows a beautiful woman with a gorgeous hairstyle, lovely clothes, immaculate make-up. But in fact - and this is reflected in the skull and the poem - there's a much darker reality underneath. And it's interesting that Nangaku, who presumably enjoyed or certainly was aware of the pleasure quarters, may have been reflecting on this darker side of life.