

The Women of the Baths

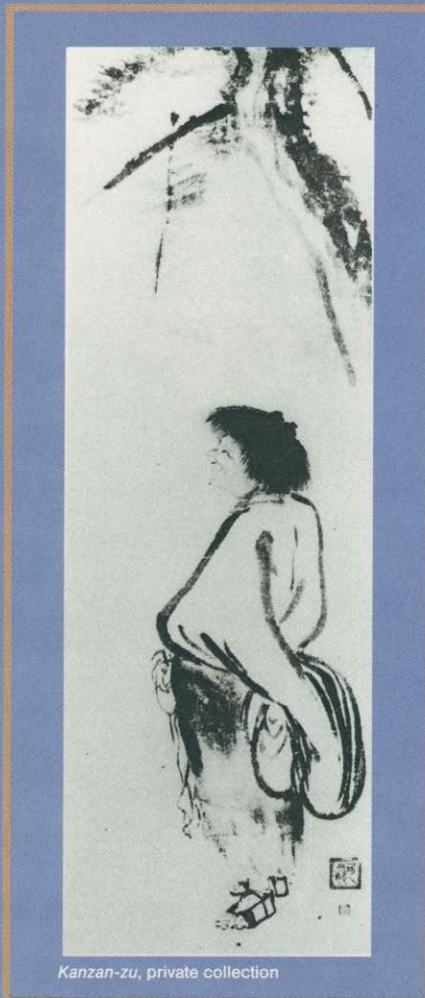
By Nobuo Tsuji



Yuna-zu, collection of the MOA Museum of Art



Given Japan's humid climate, the bath has a special place in Japanese life and has long been a popular subject for Japanese painting. This relatively large (73 × 80cm) genre painting of six women is believed to have been done around 1630. The subjects are *yuna*, the women of the baths. At the time of this painting, steam baths were especially popular among the men of Kyoto and Edo. Every bath had its *yuna* who would scrub backs, wash hair, and, of course, provide more personal services. The *yuna* depended solely on their bodies to get them through life. Coarse and uneducated, they were quite unlike the polished, sophisticated courtesans of the licensed brothel quarters.



Kanzan-zu, private collection

The painter has left a signature that makes it clear that the women depicted in this painting are indeed *yuna*. The character making up the pattern on the kimono worn by the second figure from the left is the kanji *moku*, which means bathing. The unkempt hair, loosely knotted kimono, and teasing sway of the hips vividly convey the *yuna's* devil-may-care spirit.

The group saunters brazenly through the streets. The woman in the middle wearing the kimono with the cherry blossom motif appears to be the leader. She has tucked her arms into the front of her kimono to let her sleeves hang loose, and her chin is lifted slightly in a defiant pose. As one art historian has noted, there is a remarkable similarity to the Chinese eccentric Hanshan as depicted by Kao, a 14th-century Japanese Zen painter-monk. Hanshan was a Tang China figure purported to have lived at Tientaishan. His dress was dirty and disheveled and his hair a rat's nest, yet this famous recluse is said to have been a bodhisattva and was a popular subject of works meant to express Zen enlightenment. Why was the *yuna* made to strike this particular pose? Rather than reflecting the artist's motives, it is more likely that the person who commissioned the painting was probably fairly well-educated and specified the pose.

Three of the *yuna* are looking over their shoulders. I believe that this painting is the left panel of what was originally a two-panel screen and that the right panel probably depicted a group of *kabuki-mono*—errant samurai dandies who dared to live freely in defiance of the stifling codes of conduct they were supposed to adhere to. The *kabuki-mono* must surely have felt a secret envy and admiration for the *yuna*, who, with absolutely nothing to lose, lived by their wits.

The *yuna* have turned their heads in response to the *kabuki-mono's* teasing, but we can feel their disdain. Their fierce independence is a very modern quality shared by the Japanese women of today.

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