

Consumerism, Commodification, and Beauty:

Shiseido and the Rise of Japanese Beauty Culture

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Abstract: This research focuses on the development of advertising in interwar period Japan (between World War I and World War II) and the growing prevalence of the Modern Girl. As women with a certain aesthetic were popularized through advertisement campaigns, this aesthetic was disseminated to a wider audience and incited cultural change. For the purposes of this research, the cosmetics company Shiseido and its advertisements will be used, in order to illustrate the effects of one major Japanese company on the spread of the Modern Girl throughout Japan and the surrounding regions. Advertisements from an MIT database were examined from the period, and are analyzed in the following work. I have attempted to gauge the prominence of the Modern Girl figure, her appearance, and various other visual factors. After conducting this project, I have concluded that Shiseido played an integral role in the rise of Japanese beauty culture and in the spread of the Modern Girl phenomenon.

Background

The term “Modern Girl” refers to the Japanese *moga*, literally Mo(dern) Gi(rl). These women, like American flappers and French *garçonne*s, exhibited Western-style dress by abandoning the traditional Japanese kimono in favor of shorter dresses, donning shorter and less traditional hairstyles, holding preferences for luxurious clothing and cosmetics, and rejecting traditional behaviors and attitudes. These women also proclaimed their revolutionary autonomy by joining the workforce. Traditionally, Japanese women remained at home until they were married, and then resided in the homes of their husbands or their husbands’ families. Therefore, to reside on their own was thus a rebellious, “modern” action and a rejection of traditional Japanese conventions.



The “New Japanese Woman” was the compromise Shiseido created in order to maintain a diverse consumer base and generate widespread appeal within Japan. Given that the *moga* were viewed as excessively Western in their habits, dress, and actions, the restriction of Shesiedo advertising to the image of a “Modern Girl” would have narrowed their consumer base and created more of a niche interest. Shiseido, instead, invoked the image of the “New Japanese Woman” who was somewhat more “modern” and “Western” in her appearance but not to the extent of the *moga*. Tempering modernity with Japanese tradition is reflected in the use of the “mimi-kakushi” hairstyle, which is discussed in greater depth below. This new hairstyle was shorter and typically covered the back of the neck and the ears.

Introduction

Beginning in 1915, the Shiseido Company’s advertisements evolved from black and white pencil sketches featuring simple shapes and text into vibrant female figures and a cosmopolitan aesthetic that appealed to a diverse array of women. These advertisements were meant to appeal to both the traditional and modern women of interwar Japan and to a global consumer base. They suggest that Japanese society was heavily impacted by the advent of the ideal women prototypes, “Modern Girl” and the “New Japanese Woman,” as Shiseido hired women that fit this look as models and spokespeople. As the idea of the “Modern Girl” spread, companies used the concept to sell their products and to associate them with

self-improvement, social mobility, and modernity. Shiseido's adoption of the "Modern Girl" as a spokesperson provided the latter with a wider audience and an international platform both resulting in the commodification of the "Modern Girl." The image was marketed and sold to the masses as an ideal form of beauty. Through focusing on the evolution of Shiseido's advertisements and their implications on consumer bases both in Japan and abroad, it seems that the Shiseido Company began to revolutionize the cosmetics industry in Japan, especially with the introduction of the "Seven Colors Face Powder." Shiseido and its consumers shared a feedback loop relationship wherein the two constantly and simultaneously influenced each other's behaviors.

Mass consumerism contributed to the rise of beauty culture in Japan by reinforcing beauty-centric advertising campaigns; the rise of beauty culture in advertising increased mass consumerism as companies adopted new, more appealing beauty-centric campaigns to sell their products. By 1938, the company had become international and thus had a major impact on the spread of beauty culture across Asia, especially the Modern Girl phenomenon of the early 20th century.

Methods

In this paper, I contextualize the company's official history and examine advertisements used by Shiseido from 1915 to 1938 found at the MIT Visualizing Cultures Archive. From studying these images, a cultural narrative emerged that indicated the relationship between Shiseido and consumers, the commodification of the Modern Girl, and the rise of beauty culture and consumerism. I reviewed articles focusing primarily on the Modern Girl phenomenon, the growth and design of the Shiseido Company, the rise of global beauty culture, and the effect of Shiseido on Japanese and international communities. Through these avenues of research, I constructed my argument focusing

on the importance of Shiseido to the popularization of the Modern Girl in East Asia and the spread of beauty culture and cosmetics on a global scale.

Brief Historical Overview

Arinobu Fukuhara, who founded Shiseido, set up the first pharmaceutical store in 1872. As the first Western-style pharmacy in Japan, Shiseido originated from cosmopolitanism and cultural exchange.¹ As Kazuo Usui, a professor and historian of Japanese marketing methods, notes, "Shiseido's growth was slower in the cosmetics field, although it had started earlier."² This was due to a focus on pharmaceuticals.² By 1888, Shiseido introduced toothpaste to consumers, gaining recognition in Japan for its hygiene products.³ Shiseido began producing and selling cosmetics in 1897 and focused on "lotion, perfume, and hair oil."⁴ In 1915, Shiseido adopted the Camellia or "Hanatsubaki," as the company's trademark.⁵ Two years later, Shiseido released the "Seven Colors Face Powder," the first cosmetic product that allowed for user customization and diversity.⁶ Through different combinations of the seven provided colors, consumers could create their own shades and color palettes. Understandably, this would mean increased international appeal and marketability as racially diverse consumers could purchase "Seven Colors Face Powder" and create their own personalized shades based on preference. In 1924, Arinobu's son, Shinzo Fukuhara, became the first official president of the Shiseido Company.⁷ Educated at Columbia University, he had unofficially taken control in 1915 and shifted the company's focus from pharmaceuticals and hygienic products to cosmetics. He further established a cosmopolitan aesthetic.⁸ Shinzo introduced the chain store distribution system to Shiseido and to Japan, revolutionizing the cosmetics industry.⁹ The Shiseido incarnation of the Western system produced a sales organization meant "to avoid competition, to develop mutual prosperity, and to develop co-existence

among retailers.”¹⁰ As Nobuo Kawabe writes: It first organized retailers, which handled only Shiseido brand cosmetic products. It also went into the operation of beauty salons in order to support retailers by demonstrating its cosmetics. At the wholesale level Shiseido established a dealer contract system. Wholesalers were required to sell products to only “Shiseido Chain Stores” at established prices in order to avoid cut-throat competition, to develop co-existence and mutual prosperity, and to establish an orderly transaction system. In 1927 Shiseido thought it would be good for itself and its retailers to develop wholesale organizations which would handle only Shiseido products, and in this way it integrated its marketing activities. Thus, its wholesalers became sole agents and eventually grew into sales companies located throughout the nation.¹¹

Kawabe’s summary of the Shiseido Company’s innovative distribution system demonstrates the revolutionary methods Shiseido employed to guarantee continued, even if relatively slow; growth throughout the interwar years; the integration of Western-style business and marketing practices into Japanese society; and the production of a more cosmopolitan and thus internationally appealing company. By 1931, Shiseido had exported cosmetics to other Southeast Asian countries and had entered fully into the international business community, creating a multinational platform for Japanese cosmetics and for the “Modern Girl.”¹² Throughout the 1930s, Shiseido would employ other marketing strategies such as the establishment of beauty salons designed to exhibit their products, the creation of a consumer club through which members received significant loyalty incentives such as coupons, the distribution of a free monthly magazine, and invitations to beauty courses.¹³ These initiatives would further ensure the continued growth of the Shiseido Company, enabling it to outlast its competitors through the formation and indoctrination of a loyal consumer base. The company’s official history

noticeably omits the World War II years, as Japan’s industrial economy became focused on the war effort. Therefore, this essay focuses on the years from 1915 to 1938, when the “Modern Girl” and “New Japanese Woman” peaked in popularity.

Advertisements: Evolution through the Interwar Years

As Figures 2, 3, and 4 demonstrate, Shiseido advertisements initially focused on traditional Japanese women, text, shapes, and the brand itself. Figure 2 portrays a Japanese woman drawn in a traditional style reminiscent of Japanese wood-block prints, with long hair, an elaborate kimono, and a fan incorporated into the background.¹⁴ The text surrounding the woman is the main focus of the magazine advertisement, encompassing a greater area in the advertisement; thus the main purpose of the ad is to educate the reader on the product, with the woman provided as association with traditional Japanese visuals and beauty standards. Figure 3 is much simpler, with text central to the poster.¹⁵ The simpler aesthetic, which uses shapes, can be interpreted as an attempt to appeal to a broad audience;

“
by avoiding
associating
the Shiseido brand
with a racial or ethnic
consumer, the company
could potentially possess
international appeal.

Figure 4 is another simple advertisement: though more intricate than Figure 3, it still relies on simple shapes (stripes and triangles in the background) and text in the foreground to elicit appeal and interest.¹⁶ This 1917 advertisement also incorporates the trademark Camellia blossom and Shiseido Japanese logo more prominently than Figure 3, indicating a



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move towards greater brand recognition.

Following Shiseido's advertisements in 1915 and 1917, new marketing and ad campaigns were created for magazines, such as those seen in Figures 5 and 6. Figure 5 depicts the first incarnation of the Shiseido English logo, with a silhouetted Western, stylistically Victorian woman.¹⁷ She holds the trademark Camellia in her left hand, and is proportionally more balanced with the text incorporated into the ad. Figure 6 illustrates a distinct shift towards adopting the "Modern Girl" as the Shiseido mannequin-figure, with a short haircut reminiscent of a modern bob, and an elegantly sleek, relatively low-cut, form-fitting dress.¹⁸ The woman perches upon an upholstered, Western-style stool, casting her eyes downward demurely. She combines the modern styling of Western culture (short hair, Western-style dress and furniture) with traditional Japanese ideals of feminine aesthetics (her demure glance, the simplicity with which she is drawn). This advertisement features a different style for the English Shiseido logo, indicating the Shiseido Company was most likely still experimenting with international appeal and with the construction of a recognizable brand and logo. Figures 7, 8, 9, and 10 depict poster advertisements employed by Shiseido throughout 1925, portraying a variety of women in different poses, color palettes, and with diverse facial expressions. These figures mark a shift to vibrant, colorful poster advertisements, in an attempt to catch the consumer's eye; an additional shift towards more prominent feminine figures and away from text is also apparent, indicating a rising amount of female commodification. Figure 7 shows a pale-skinned, black-haired woman with an upturned face in profile, looking towards the sky as she touches her face.¹⁹ Her expression of elation and bliss may be interpreted as joy at the touch of her skin; as she strokes her cheek she appears to be lost in thought and pleasure. Figure 8, alternatively, depicts a pale-skinned, blonde woman glancing down modestly, her eyes shut and the

trademark Camellia blossom dangling from her mouth.²⁰ Garbed in a sleek, form-fitting gown and shawl, she exudes a discrete sex appeal and sense of modernity. She seems content, and appears to originate from a higher social class. Figure 9 also illustrates a woman, with a shorter hairstyle and donning a sleeveless green dress, who conveys a sense of modernity and sex appeal.²¹ She fixates on the product in front of her, her facial expression one of ravenous desire and happiness. The flowers and bird included in the ad hold no interest for her; she is solely interested in the Shiseido product before her. Although the text is more central in this poster, the woman is more visually appealing due to a vibrant color palette surrounding her. Figure 10 contrasts the other three posters, as it lacks a vibrant palette and, instead, relies on a silhouetted female figure as the central visual.²² This advertisement uses a different strategy; the woman is portrayed gazing into a surface (most likely a mirror), possibly applying makeup to her face. Her figure is prominently featured, with text to the right and bottom of the advertisement. The Camellia trademark is also included in the lower-right corner, demonstrating Shiseido brand recognition.

The introduction of a more prominent cosmopolitan aesthetic is evident in Figures 11 and 12, the poster advertisements pictured below. Figure 11 centers on a woman with red hair in a short hairstyle, wearing a thick, luxurious fur coat.²³ Her skin is pale, her cheeks tinged with blush. Her styling communicates an upper-class status, modernity, and sophistication. Two different Shiseido logos are located on her left and right, conveying global interests. The Camellia is located in the upper-right corner, furthering brand recognition for the Shiseido Company and its trademark. Figure 12 focuses on a blonde, presumably Western-European woman in a blue-patterned, form-fitting dress, with her legs shown.²⁴ She lounges on a couch, expressing relaxation and cosmopolitanism as she rests her hand on her hip and delicately

holds a (trademark) Camellia blossom. The English and Japanese logos are featured, as well as text to the right of the woman depicted.

These two figures represent the quintessential Modern Girl aesthetic: modernity as a means to attain social mobility, luxury, and self-improvement through consumerism.

Figures 13 and 14 originate from magazines in 1932, illustrating the continued prevalence of the Modern Girl and her development into an advertising tool. Figure 13 displays a woman's head and left arm in the center of the advertisement, with the product advertised in the upper-right corner.²⁵ What is visible of her attire is elegant and modern, as is her shorter hairstyle. Her expression is calm as she casts her gaze towards the ground; she evades eye contact with the viewer. The product itself is more central to the advertisement than in previous campaigns, revealing the continued development of consumer culture in Japan. The woman in the advertisement indicates the continued emergence of beauty culture, as she represents the "ideal" modern New Woman (specifically selling the appearance all women should strive to achieve). The Camellia trademark is located in the lower portion of the advertisement. Figure 14 portrays a strikingly similar woman, also accompanied by a Shiseido product.²⁶ The female figure wears the same hairstyle as the previous woman, and also garbs herself in elegant, modern evening dress. Her dress provides a silhouette of her slender body, and her arms are delicately positioned. Also glancing down, she exudes sophistication and grace. Adjacent to her, the product is disproportionately large, shifting the focus from the woman to the advertised merchandise. As such, the woman is reduced,

as the product becomes the central focus of the ad. As the 1930's arrived, the Modern Girl phenomenon expanded further across the globe, marking a departure from conventional conceptions of femininity and the cementation of rapid globalization and cultural exchange. As depicted in the 1933 poster ads in Figures 15, 16, and 17, the Shiseido Company internalized these developments, and expanded its advertising to explicitly include consumers with diverse racial and or ethnic backgrounds. Figure 15 illustrates a dark-complexioned woman wearing pearls, a short hairstyle, a pearl necklace, and a sleeveless gown.²⁷ She holds a Shiseido product, which takes a central position in the advertisement; the dark background emphasizes the cosmetic good, as the vibrant salmon color of the product draws the viewer's attention. Figure 16 features a light-skinned, dark-haired woman in a similar stance.²⁸ This woman also holds a Shiseido product, which is more central to the advertisement and is highlighted by the contrast between its light color and the vibrant pastel background. The woman's cheeks are tinted with rouge, and she wears a similar hairstyle to that of Figure 15. Conversely, this woman appears to wear a traditional Japanese kimono, thus appealing to a more traditional Japanese woman. Figure 17 features two light-skinned women; one blonde, one black-haired.²⁹ Both hold the same Shiseido product in different shades (indicated by the differing lid colors), and stand in the same position. Noticeably, the advertisement spotlights the presumably East Asian woman, positioning her in front of her blonde, Western-European counterpart. The two share tinted cheeks, modern attire (sleeveless dresses), and markers of higher socio-economic standing (earrings, a veil). The Camellia blossom trademark appears in the lower-right corner, and the advertisement only uses the Japanese company logo.

The final advertisements I present for examination are Figures 18 and 19, concluding this study in the year 1938 (prior to the

Sino-Japanese war). These images signify a transition to a more realistic appearance for women, shifting from sketches and drawings portraying cartoonish figures, to an art style based on realistic facial features. This adjustment represents a complete cultural transformation, as beauty culture and a realistic ideal develop, so too do unrealistic expectations for women and the mass consumption of an unattainable aspiration.

No longer is the Modern Girl used to merely sell products and style, she is now used to sell beauty itself, and the “ideal” woman crafted by society. Figure 18 displays a blonde, Western-European woman wearing a fashionable beret and a fur collared-coat.³⁰ This magazine ad marks the first usage of color in this format, and the first incarnation of the Modern Girl that makes eye contact with the viewer. Although the image is of a Western-European, the advertisement uses Japanese characters and text, conveying a cosmopolitan impression. Figure 19 exhibits a Western-European woman in profile, with a calm countenance and accompanied by Japanese text and the Japanese Shiseido logo.³¹ This poster advertisement also is the first to reveal a woman’s ears in the image, marking a significantly shorter hairstyle, and signifying its gaining popularity in mainstream culture. The prevalence of blossoms in the two images may be associated with the variety of colors available in Shiseido cosmetics, or may exist simply to catch the viewer’s attention.

Image Analysis and Conclusions

Through tracing the development and history of advertising and marketing of the Japanese cosmetics company Shiseido, I illustrated the remarkable evolution of a medium over the course of two decades and the concomitant

progression and popularization of the “Modern Girl” phenomenon. As Barbara Sato points out,

[the “Modern Girl”] represented the possibilities for what

all women could become. She also symbolized consumption and mass culture, phenomena identified with women after the Great War.³²

The history of the “Modern Girl” portrayals also reflects the history and origins of consumer culture. Women formed the large portion of consumers due to their traditionally domestic roles which allowed them purchasing power, the freedom of choice that consumerism promised women, and the accompanying promise of upward social mobility. Under these historical conditions, companies such as Shiseido sought to appeal to as many female consumers as possible as the cosmetics industry expanded along with beauty culture. The images discussed above illustrated the manner in which the “Modern Girl” was appropriated by Shiseido and modified for mass consumption. Shiseido popularized a “mimi-kakushi” hairstyle as a compromise between traditional and modern hairstyles which initiated a long history of appealing to a diverse consumer base.³³ Modern women enjoyed the hairstyle as a departure from the strict, traditional Japanese coiffure; traditional women appreciated the hairstyle as a respectable, innovative hairstyle.³⁴ One of the main reasons the hairstyle caught on was the moderate nature of new styling which included covering the ears because uncovered ears were considered radical at the time.³⁵ As such, Shiseido promoted a Western-representative style influenced by Japanese values; a style the company excelled at creating and marketing.

Aside from popularizing the “Modern Girl” concept through moderate interpretations of her

style, Shiseido also commoditized her; she developed into an “ideal archetype” that the company sold to the masses. Through connecting self-improvement to beauty, and by promising their products would aid women in “beautifying” themselves, Shiseido directly contributed to the development of Japanese and international beauty culture. Through claiming to sell exterior “beauty,” and connecting the improved exterior to improved inner “beauty” and effort, Shiseido generated a culture in which cosmetics represented a noble attempt to develop oneself, not vanity or shallowness. Women who purchased cosmetics gained possession of a form of social mobility: if attractive enough, a woman could marry well or prove herself an asset to her family and community through her beauty. In creating this deeper connection, Shiseido gave the “Modern Girl,” as its model, that same social mobility and sense of nobility; with that nobility, Shiseido gave the “Modern Girl” universal appeal and praise. Shiseido, however, also ensured that the “Modern Girl” became an ideal it marketed to the masses, appealing to men’s gazes and women’s desires to appear attractive and praiseworthy by conventional beauty standards. Thus, Shiseido’s appropriation of the “Modern Girl” represents a historical turning point in the development of consumer culture, modernity, and the rise of the beauty industry. Alternatively, the global nature of the “Modern Girl” phenomenon provided a universally understood form of communication Shiseido used to increase its international consumer base and to diversify and expand its business. As such, the two profoundly affected each other’s development and growth. The Japanese “Modern Girl” was linked to consumerism, luxury, refinement, and high social status through Shiseido’s advertisements, and that she, in turn, allowed Shiseido to appeal to a diverse range of people throughout Southeast Asia using the “Modern Girl” image as universal language. The relationship between the two serves as a microcosm of the intrinsic link

between modern consumer culture, beauty culture, marketing, and advertisement campaigns.



NOTES:

¹ "History," *Shiseido Group*, 2015, <http://www.shisheidogroup.com/company/past/history/index.html>.

² Kazuo Usui, *Marketing and Consumption in Modern Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 46-64.

³ Ibid., 46-64.

⁴ Ibid., 46-64.

⁵ "History," *Shiseido Group*, 2015.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Usui, *Marketing and Consumption in Modern Japan*, 46-64.

⁹ Nobuo Kawabe, “The Development of Distribution Systems in Japan Before World War II,” *Business and Economic History* 18 (1989): 33–44.

¹⁰ Ibid., 33-44.

¹¹ Ibid., 33-44.

¹² "History," *Shiseido Group*, 2015.

¹³ Usui, *Marketing and Consumption in Modern Japan*, 46-64.

¹⁴ Gennifer Weisenfeld, "Ads & Posters: 1875-1941" in "Selling Shiseido, III: Image Galleries," MIT Visualizing Cultures (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009).

http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/shiseido_03/sh_gal_01_thumb.html

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Barbara Hamill Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 49.

³³ Usui, *Marketing and Consumption in Modern Japan*, 46-64.

³⁴ Ibid., 46-64.

³⁵ Ibid.

Sato, Barbara Hamill. *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003.

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