Hiroko Johnson Western Influence on Japanese Art: The Akita Ranga Art School and Foreign Books
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Many things can happen when an admirable dissertation is reworked into a book. Sometimes the result is a tour de force of details that may overwhelm the average reader; sometimes it is a piece de résistance of theoretical references and rhetorical devices blinding us to weaknesses in the factual-level scholarship. This volume, by contrast, strives to reach past the limited scope of the original thesis and move into the realm of a broad survey of the topic; unfortunately the title outpaces the contents.

The structure of the volume is fairly straightforward. After an introduction that sets down the underlying premises (and includes the book’s only illustration from before the eighteenth century), Hiroko Johnson gives us five essays on the history of Westernized art in Japan up to around the year 1800. The first chapter outlines the contact of Japanese artists with European painting from the arrival of the first Portuguese visitors in 1543 through the closure of most ports in 1634 to the loosening of restrictions in the 1730s. This chapter closes with a brief account of Hiraga Gennai (1728-1779), a scholar of “Dutch learning” (rangaku) who came to Akita in 1773. Chapter Two recounts the first autopsies in Japan, along with the earliest translation of anatomical texts by Sugita Genpaku (1733-1817) and their illustration by Odano Naotake (1749-1780). Chapter Three, “Three Elements, Signatures, and Seals” analyzes horizon lines, reflections on water, and emphases on the foreground in the work of Naotake and his feudal master, Satake Shozan (1748-1785). The fourth chapter describes Shozan’s sketchbooks and their relationship to Dutch works in the libraries of Gennai and Genpaku. Johnson’s final chapter expounds a theory of the “cultural middle class” consisting of lower-level samurai, wealthy farmers, merchants, and artisans whose interactions resulted in the cultural developments of the middle Edo period, particularly Akita Ranga. A brief “Conclusion” completes the volume, along with translations of three texts by Shozan, notes, bibliography, and an index.

Hiroko Johnson’s basic work and research on Naotake, Shozan, Genpaku, and the beginnings of Europeanization in Japanese painting of the late eighteenth century is quite sound. She is at her best in this volume when analyzing specific works in detail, such as her coverage, in Chapter Two, of the process by which Genpaku translated and Naotake illustrated Kaitai shinsho, Japan’s first anatomy text. Her description in Chapter Three of the stylistic elements that make up Akita Ranga, the “Dutch Painting” developed in Shozan’s fief in northern Japan, is exquisitely dense, leaving readers with no doubt that they will recognize any example of this type of painting we might come across. And her comparative analysis of Shozan’s sketchbooks with paintings by Naotake, Shozan, and such related painters as Shiba Kōkan is clear and complete (if a bit lacking in dramatic tension and hence rather dry).

The volume works less effectively when Johnson tries to raise broader questions. Her opening chapter surveys the influence of the West on Japanese painting up to the time of the book’s main subjects in the mid-eighteenth century. While there are few factual errors in this survey, there is also very little that is new—this ground was covered as early as 1964, in an article by Miki Tanmon in Monumenta Nipponica, and of course by Cal French in the groundbreaking exhibition and catalog Through Closed Doors: Western Influence on Japanese Art (1639-1853). Moreover Johnson trips up on the occasional detail—identifying the province that includes Hirado and Nagasaki as Bugo rather than Bungo (p. 21), or naming an early painter Emosaku rather than Emonsaku (p. 20). She fails to draw much of a distinction, in this early chapter, between Western subjects and Western styles, which is all the more remarkable in light of the distinction accurately drawn in Chapter Three. The later part of Chapter One suffers from overuse of the term “school,” which may be confusing to readers who unaccustomed to this somewhat antiquated term for any group of painters with similar characteristics, whether or not they are linked to a teaching institution that transmits the style from one generation to the next. There are other confusions in her art historical terminology, such as a general conflation of “shadow” and “shading,” the former usually reserved for areas on a depicted object not struck by light from a unified source, the latter referring to any darkening of areas of color in an attempt to cre-
ate three-dimensional rendering even if not accurately depicting projected light (or lack thereof).

Between this introductory chapter and the concluding section come the three chapters mentioned above, which cover their subjects quite nicely. The two scholars of Dutch learning, Hiraga Gennai and Sugita Genpaku, are deeply important for these chapters; unfortunately the standard cataloging information for the volume does not refer to them. Like the first chapter (and the overall title for the volume), the closing argument seems to take on more than it delivers, trying to convince us that the movement toward Western style is a product of the "cultural middle class" even though the prime movers were two elite scholars, a daimyo, and his retainer.

The volume also suffers from a gap in scholarship. Though clearly based on much research, the bibliography does not reference many works published after the completion of Johnson’s dissertation in 1994. Of special significance here is the lack of engagement with the arguments of Timon Screech, particularly his *Lens Within the Heart: The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Later Edo Japan*, published in 1996 with an updated edition in 2002 from the University of Hawai’i Press. Screech brought a new level of theoretical sophistication to Western thinking about Western influence in Japanese painting, prints, and books—precisely the topics Johnson covers here. Her old-school stylistic analysis remains important for the specialist and the aficionado, but for readers less familiar with art historical methods, or less interested in the narrow developmental process of eighteenth century Japanese painting, this volume will probably seem flat in conception and dull in execution.