Art of Edo Japan: the Artist and the City 1615-1868

Making Edo Art Understandable
Patricia J. Graham, University of Kansas

The diversity and high craftsmanship that characterize the art of the Edo period reflect the era's sophistication, political developments, intellectual concerns, and affluence. How to provide an engaging overview of this complex topic, while situating the art within both its social and art historical contexts and presenting the necessary issues in a comprehensible manner, is a formidable challenge that is well met by the author of this volume. Christine Guth manages to make the art understandable to non-specialists, the book's principal intended audience, while simultaneously providing knowledgeable readers with fresh insights about the place of art in Edo society. Her approach is to place the art within the realm of the burgeoning urbanism that is a defining characteristic of the period. She emphasizes art produced in Japan's major urban centers of Kyoto, Edo, Osaka, and Nagasaki, but without ignoring itinerant, rural, and provincial developments. Within this framework, Guth is able to address many of the cultural and political issues that affected patronage and participation in the arts during this time: a prolonged period of peace under the domination of a warrior bureaucracy; a new appreciation for art by the general populace in addition to continued patronage by elites; the growing importance of a commercial market economy and concurrent changing patterns in distribution of wealth; a blurring of class distinctions despite government efforts to the contrary; sharp cultural distinctions and rivalries for cultural supremacy between Kyoto and Edo; increasing access to knowledge of the cultural and scientific achievements of both the West and of China; rising regional cultural distinctions; and conversely, a simultaneous emerging of an integrated national cultural heritage.

The most common means of categorizing and studying this art has been to divide it by media or by studies of various artistic lineages and the lives of particular artists. Writers have also dealt with the art in terms of broad themes such as the tea ceremony, the world of the pleasure quarters, and patronage as represented by collections of notable families such as the Tokugawa. In most cases, these approaches have tended to obscure the social relevance of the arts. As a result, we know more about techniques of production, chronological development of artists' styles, patronage of individual artists, and intellectual concerns of the artists themselves than we do of the relationship of the arts to Edo society. Instead of surveying the art scene of the Edo period by these familiar methods, Guth proposes a different approach, one which "takes as its premise that a strong sense of urban and regional identity is one of the distinguishing features of Edo culture" (p. 19). By examining art in this context, she is able to link developments in the world of art more closely to the society with which it was associated.

The discipline of art history, as developed in the West in the nineteenth century, dictated divisions of art into categories of "fine" and "decorative" (sometimes termed "applied"), with higher status conferred upon the fine arts (painting, sculpture, and architecture). These biases are more relevant to distinctions among various types of Western art, especially that produced since the Renaissance, than to the art of non-Western civilizations such as Japan, where, as Guth points out, no distinctions existed between fine and decorative arts or craftmakers and artists. Still, the way we think about Japanese art is colored by these convictions, which create artificial divisions among the products of artistic creation in Japan. Now appreciated for its intrinsic aesthetic beauty, much of Japanese art originally fulfilled functional roles in daily and ritual life. Calligraphers and painters, for example, sometimes wielded their brushes to decorate lacquers, ceramics, or even clothing. The status of many crafts was enhanced by their necessity in official decor, gift giving, and the tea ceremony. Yet painters and calligraphers were accorded somewhat higher status, as their products were capable of transmitting the "spirit" of both the subject they portrayed and their own inner natures through their brush. This reasoning followed the dictates of Chinese literati thought, a powerful influence among Edo period artists and intellectuals. Although Guth introduces a diverse range of Edo period arts, she nevertheless aims to reach an audience steeped in Western art historical preferences by emphasizing the work of the era's painters and print designers, who "both shaped and mirrored the dominant trends in the vibrant cultural life of the city" (p. 19).

After a lengthy introduction titled "Mapping the Artistic Landscape," in which the major themes and issues outlined above are set forth, Guth makes some general conceptualizations...
about urban culture and the artist's relationship to the urban environment in chapter one, “The Artist and the City.” She offers a succinct profile of urban development in Japan, beginning with the emergence of the castle town, and describes the growing importance of leisure activities and conspicuous consumption as essential components of urban culture. Patronage and practice of the arts had become, by the Edo period, a cultural activity of all members of society, unlike previously, when it had been the private domain of the elite. Guth points out that most urban artists belonged to the shokunin class, and worked as members of established ateliers, determined by hereditary or artistic inclination. However, she does acknowledge that some artists were samurai, aristocrats, and Buddhist or Shinto priests.

Guth's first chapter on the art world of a particular city is chapter two, “Kyoto Artists,” which introduces that city's major artists and painting movements. She notes that Kyoto possessed a venerable artistic heritage associated with the production of high-class luxury goods and artistic patronage by the imperial family. She writes that, in the Edo period, the city became a haven for talented and eccentric artists, as the shogunal presence in the city was minimal (p. 51). Her discussion of Kyoto arts begins with older, well-established Kano and Tosa painting schools patronized by the court and shogunate, then moves on to newly-founded, more creative painting traditions. She first discusses the Rinpa movement, which she ties to the revivals of fine craft production in the seventeenth century and close association with courtly traditions.

Next, she introduces literati painting, commenting on its appeal across class lines, and focusing discussion on its two dominant figures in eighteenth-century Kyoto, Ike Taiga and Yosa Buson, both of whom she considers further in chapter five (as itinerant artists). After their deaths in 1776 and 1783 respectively, Guth notes the lack of strong leadership in this movement until Rai San'yô settled in Kyoto in 1811. She describes San'yô and his followers as more “doctrinaire” in their attempts to emulate faithfully Chinese literati painting, which she ties to their desire to emulate the bohemian, reclusive lifestyle of Chinese scholar-painters (p. 72). In this context, she introduces one artist, Uragami Gyokudô, who exemplifies this model. Yet this discussion seems slightly out of place, for Gyokudô is actually one generation older than San'yô, and, as Guth indicates, his accomplishments are reflective of the generation of literati artists following Taiga and Buson. Introduced next is Aoki Mokubei, both a literati painter and potter who specialized in Chinese-influenced porcelain styles, whose pottery is illustrated by a traditionally Japanese square-shaped tiered food box decorated with Chinese-style designs (fig. 46). However, her caption to this plate erroneously describes the piece as being used in the sencha (steeped tea) ceremony for which Mokubei designed numerous utensils. Both of these inaccuracies in the text point to the difficulty of the author's thematic approach to the subject matter: in order to maintain the clarity of the themes, specific details may sometimes be misplaced or misrepresented.

Guth's section on literati painters closes with mention of the movement's admission of women into the ranks of literati artists, an unusually egalitarian attitude for the times.

Guth follows with a discussion of the Maruyama-Shijô school of painting, whose founder, Maruyama Ôkyo, she describes as the first to recognize the potential for incorporating Western techniques and styles. After discussion of Matsuura Goshun, founder of the Shijô school, Guth concludes her discussion of these artists with a description of Kyoto's first public art exhibition in 1792, at which Maruyama-Shijô artists participated. Organized by Minagawa Kien, a prominent Confucian scholar and literati painter, the public was invited to purchase paintings and calligraphies by well-known artists from all over Japan. Guth asserts that this new means of reaching patrons led to the emergence of individual and eccentric artists who were able to bypass the traditional constraints of the atelier system. While this was indeed a significant development, Guth's subsequent examination of artists she defines as "individualists" (Itô Jakuchû, Soga Shôhaku, and Nagasawa Rosetsu) again seems out of place, as all were active and popular long before Kyoto's 1792 exhibition. The chapter ends with artists of the Yamatoe revival, introduced appropriately in the context of the 1788 rebuilding of the imperial palace, an event that marked a resurgence of interest in antiquarianism glorifying the imperial heritage.

Chapter three is devoted to artists active in Edo, a city dominated but not constrained by the shogunal presence. Agreeing with the view that the creative energies of Edo's inhabitants were most evident in the production of woodblock prints, the author discusses their development at great length, though she first introduces Kano artists and others officially patronized by the samurai class.

Prints are described as inexpensive, about the same price as a bowl of noodles (p. 99), capable...
of being produced quickly, and reflective of latest fashions. They were, however, repeatedly the target of censorship in connection with government crackdowns on conspicuous consumption (their luxurious appearance), censoring of immoral behavior (encouraged by their subject-matter), or unflattering commentary on contemporary politics. Guth associates the rise in landscape, bird-and-flower, and historical subjects in the nineteenth century with responses to government intervention, with the fact that the increasing number of tourists in Edo desired subjects of easy comprehension and familiarity (such as prints depicting famous places in Edo and their home provinces), and with city dwellers' nostalgia for rural life. The growing popularity of prints is described as responsible for the large numbers of printmakers active in the nineteenth century as well as for the new practice of issuing prints in increasingly large series.

Guth devotes the last, short section of the chapter to Edo Rinpa and Bunjinga, which, from her sub-heading, appears to be centered on Sakai Hōitsu (Rinpa) and Tani Bunchō (bunjinga). Though she discusses Bunchō at some length, she does not illustrate or make mention of any of his paintings in this chapter (she does refer, among other things, to his friendship with Kimura Kenkadō of Osaka, whose portrait by Bunchō she illustrates in chapter four). Instead she illustrates and discusses a portrait by his follower, Watanabe Kazan. Both Bunchō and Kazan she describes as characteristic of Edo literati in their artistic eclecticism, their devotion to art as a means of self-expression, as well as their considering art as “part of a rational quest for historical and empirical knowledge that might contribute to a national political and social reform” (p. 125).

Chapter four covers, in lesser depth than the preceding chapters, artists of Osaka and Nagasaki, the two most important artistic centers following Kyoto and Edo. Guth describes the cultural ambiance of Osaka, dominated by merchants, as most concerned with accumulation of luxurious material possessions, but does point out that some residents there, under the influence of the Kaitokudō Confucian academy, sought to create a more intellectual climate. Osaka artists and art movements introduced include painters of diverse stylistic inclinations including literati, Kano, and Maruyama-Shijō schools; a thriving ukiyoe print market, tied to the local Kabuki theater; and a booming publishing industry that rivaled Edo's.

Guth divides artists of Nagasaki, “the window on the world,” into two groups, distinguished by Chinese or Dutch influences. Her section on Chinese-influenced artists begins with emigrant Chinese “Monk-Artists of the Ôbaku Sect,” whose influence Guth sees as strongest in portraiture and calligraphy. One of these monks, Itsunen, is described as an influential painter, and indeed he is considered as one of the founders of the loosely organized “Nagasaki school,” whose adherents emphasized fidelity to Ming and Qing academic painting traditions. However, Guth separately discusses Nagasaki school painting in a section titled “Visiting Chinese Artists and their Pupils,” without mentioning Itsunen. In this case, her organizational framework seems too rigid. Turning to Western-influenced painters, Guth concisely profiles Japanese interest in depictions of foreigners and Western-style painting from the sixteenth century. She then describes the naive woodblock prints of exotic foreigners issued by Nagasaki publishers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before finally turning to the more sophisticated achievements of artists such as Hiraga Gennai, Odano Naotaka, Shiba Kōkan, and Kawahara Keiga.

The book's final chapter, “Itinerant, Provincial, and Rural Artists,” opens with a description of the nationwide network of roads that ensured a steady flow of culture to and from the major cities and of the people who traveled upon them. Turning to a discussion of the art in Japan's far-flung regions, Guth begins with a look at “Itinerant Monk-Artists and Pilgrimage Art.” In this context she introduces three monk-artists, Enkû and Mokujiki, known for their wood sculptures, and Hakuin, an important Zen prelate famous for his powerful Zen-inspired paintings and calligraphies, and closes the section with popular religious art (Ôtsue and mandalas associated with the new national pilgrimage destination at Ise). Next she surveys poet and literati painters, some familiar from previous chapters, and others, such as Tanomura Chikuden, introduced here for the first time. Using the experience of travel as a focus, Guth is able to address two very different types of literati paintings inspired by artists' wanderings--haiga and “true view” pictures--and discuss how these painters supported themselves on the road (by offering instruction in scholarly arts and producing artworks on demand in exchange for food and lodging). In the book's final section, Guth very briefly introduces some of the major crafts--lacquer, textiles, and ceramics—that were successful cash industries in the various provinces.

This well-focused introduction to the art of the Edo period provides a surprising amount of information considering its brevity. It is accurate
in its broad assertions and well written for easy comprehension by the layperson. Yet in places linkages among ideas are not clearly stated or adequately addressed, an inevitable result of the book's broad nature. For example, in various places in her introduction, Guth outlines a number of reasons for the new emphasis on cultural pursuits during the Edo period. Although many of these stemmed directly from the influence of Confucianism on all members of Edo society, she does not mention this unifying ideology until rather late in the chapter. Similarly, although Guth acknowledges Japanese literati artists' indebtedness to Chinese literati ideals, nowhere does she mention Daoist thought as an important aspect of the literati proclivity for self-cultivation, wanderlust, and reclusion. Elsewhere, she describes both literati painters and those of the Maruyama-Shijô school as sharing an interest in the natural sciences (p. 80), although she does not introduce literati artists in this context until later chapters. This type of problem occasionally plagues discussion of other artists and movements also, as their commentary is split between several relevant chapters.

Guth admits that an introductory text such as this cannot adequately address all aspects of the relevant artistic issues of this long era. Yet the clarity and organization of her text prove that the period's artists related to the environment in which they lived, traveled, and worked. Still, as only the most famous artists are represented, and usually by a single artwork, this book does not provide insight into the scope of any individual artist's accomplishments. Most Edo-period artists were famous for their eclecticism. Some, as she mentions, switched styles midway through their careers or to meet the requirements of a particular commission, and many consorted with others of differing aesthetic inclinations. Although Guth occasionally addresses these issues, some of these points may confuse the novice reader, as they lack adequate amplification and illustration. Among such instances are remarks on the "stylistic pluralism" of the Kano and Tosa/Sumiyoshi school painters (p. 58); the discussion of Goshun as Ôkyo's heir even though the illustration of his work is an early literati-style painting under the influence of his first mentor, Buson, as she mentions in the plate caption (p. 79); and evocative descriptions of paintings in styles not illustrated (as in the discussion of Buson on p. 71, Bunchô on p. 124, and Taiga on pp. 160-161). Additionally, while the brevity of the text is an asset for a basic work such as this, I do think that, despite its cogently written introduction and first chapter, more concluding remarks would have been useful at the end of each chapter and at the volume's end.

Still, this book succeeds as a brief and reasonably priced overview of Edo art. Most publications on the subject are far more lavish (and expensive), specialized volumes. Many are exhibition catalogues which, by their nature, are subjective and, with few exceptions, limited in scope. The illustrations here are superb and well selected from a broad range of collections worldwide. Most include extended captions complementing discussions in the body of the text. The concise, well-organized timeline also adds to the book's usability as a textbook in introductory classes on Early Modern art or history, as do the books and articles listed in the bibliography. These are all materials in Western languages, mainly references to art, with a few basic history and literature sources cited, though specialists might question obvious omissions. Despite the criticisms noted above, this easily readable book should serve well as a basic textbook in the college classroom for students not actively involved with the discipline of art history who might otherwise shy away from examination of this important material evidence of Japanese civilization of the Early Modern period. The book should amply meet the needs of collectors or students of Edo art as well, as it provides a solid framework for understanding the place of art in Edo society.

**Book Notice: Archive Science and Modern Society**

Philip C. Brown, Ohio State University

Andô Masahito (安藤正人)『記録史料学と現代—アーカイブズの科学をめざして』
Index and English Abstract, 8 tables, 34 charts. ¥7,600.

At first glance the formal English title provided by this book's author seems to have little to do with the general purposes of *Early Modern Japan*. Our temporal focus is not modern. Our readership is not composed of archivists. Very few early modern scholars outside of East Asia make any use at all of manuscript materials, much less make consistent use of them. Printed collections like *Dai Nihon Shiryô*, collected works, *shiryô hen* from prefectoral or local histories and the like make up the