OBTAINING IMAGES
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ART, PRODUCTION AND DISPLAY IN EDO JAPAN

TIMON SCREECH

REAKTION BOOKS
This book, which is at least partly intended as an educational tool, is dedicated to my teachers

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Art history, as a discipline, often over-confines its energies. Images attract the eye and, it goes without saying, they are often made to. Yet they have other functions and are capable of doing other things too, in tandem or even in opposition to this. Charles Dickens created the fictional character Josiah Bounderby who acquired a painting worth £700; that was £100, he said, for each time he would look at it. At about the same time, the Japanese educationalist Fukuzawa Yūkichi collected paintings, but noted he never intended to look at them at all. Both men – one real, one imagined – may be derided, but over history many have behaved like this. A book that seeks to take the extra-visual aspects of images seriously, as this one does, cannot ignore attitudes simply because they seem to us odd, even ignorant. Bounderby and Fukuzawa were, in fact, both sensible men reacting to art in a way that needs addressing.

This book considers images in their multiplicity of purpose. Viewing is, of course, important, and I aspire to provide an introduction to the themes and styles of Edo-Period art for those who wish to learn them. But that project of learning, fully construed, must investigate also a plethora of other things. If we shun engagement with everything beyond the simple (actually, not so simple) act of beholding images, we will fail to grasp, literally, the whole picture. Images might be mere backgrounds, as stage sets, placed to offset more consequential enactments taking place in front; or they might acquire meaning only as exchange items, seasonal accompaniments, accessories to prayer or play; they might not have been intended to be looked at outside external dictates, and looking might not have been their primary purpose at all. To say this would not deny the limpidity of the work or the desirability of its existence.

It is for these reasons that I call this book obtaining images. Although a trifle obscure, I draw on both dictionary definitions of ‘obtaining’: ‘coming into possession of’, that is, buying and owning, and ‘being valid’, ‘customary’, conveying senses that are accepted and understood. We will investigate how and why people felt it necessary to expend money or effort on obtaining images, and then
how these images obtained for them. We will consider this from both the maker’s and the consumer’s side.

‘Images’ here are understood mostly as paintings and prints. There may be objections that this is a Western imposition. Books on European ‘art’ routinely confine themselves to work in two dimensions, but it is often argued that such a prioritization was alien to Japan. There is a kernel of truth here, though the case has been much overstated, for the truth is that Japan (taking the lead from China and Korea) had a long tradition of thinking about painting alone, and of isolating it as a special category within creative endeavour. And in Japan (unlike China and Korea) there was also a tradition, though of more recent vintage, of some, though not all, recognized painters turning their hands to print. An Edo-Period artist or art user, I contend, would not have felt a book on ‘images’ that focused on painting and prints to be, in and of itself, a misrepresentation of their practices.

The above concedes that I accord scant space to the three-dimensional arts. A longer book would have allowed for wider scope, but there is an intellectual extenuation too: Japan had virtually no tradition of important secular sculpture, albeit there was carving of minor things, like ornamental toggles (netsuke) or architectural transoms (ranma). These might be expensive and fine, but no Edo-Period person would have thought a book on ‘images’ required their inclusion. I hope the modern reader can tolerate their absence too, depleting though they may find it. I also do not address the carving of seals, which was a major artistic endeavour. This leaves non-secular, or religious sculpture, which cannot be neglected without violating the integrity of Buddhist art, and so is incorporated here in the relevant chapter. Beyond carving, there were many excellent applied arts, such as ceramics and armour. An Edo person might treasure such things in their collections, but would have placed them under a different rubric from painting and prints. Excision of these objects in no way implies that I regard craft as unworthy of attention.

More problematic is the omission of calligraphy. This was taken as the partner of painting in the two arts of the brush. I reluctantly exclude calligraphy for reasons of space, but also out of openly admitted ignorance. Being the art of writing, calligraphy cannot be seriously studied without engagement in the meaning of the words, and these may be recondite and intractable (sometimes deliberately so); theorizing on the modalities of the brush-stroke takes considerable familiarization. I leave it to those better placed than me to present this to English-language readers.

Much Japanese painting took the form of handscrolls illustrating literary themes. These are discussed in part below, but again, even if the pictures are treated apart from the calligraphic texts accompanying them, to be understood properly the underlying stories need to be known, and the graphs used to write
them recognized in meaning and in the nuances of their form and shape. Providing that goes beyond the capacity of this, already long, book.

That is rather a lot about what this book is not about. What it is about, primarily, is free-standing paintings and prints, and their wider worlds. I wish to introduce these, but also consider how the people who first made and owned them understood them. It is a dual task: to outline the trajectories of artistic endeavour on the one hand, and on the other to reconstruct, distanced as we are by hundreds of years of time and thousands of miles of space, just how these objects obtained *then*. In the pages that follow, Japanese art is not expounded as if it were Western art just with other people’s names attached. I do not invoke difference for the sake of it, of course, but I allow alternatives to show through.

We will see Edo-Period art, and also its differences, but I hope to explain how those differences make perfect sense as, in fact, Bounderby’s and Fukuzawa’s statements do, if read in the context of the period in which they were made. It is by achieving this fullest sort of understanding that the reader will be able to know, and also enjoy, Edo-Period images in all their aspects. Thus the use of the word ‘art’ in the subtitle of this book accepts that such a concept existed, and it did. Copious period writings, many quoted below, prove this. The notion of ‘art’ is properly conceptualized here and will not, I hope, be contested.

What, though, of ‘production and display’?

East Asian practice has tended to place emphasis on the actions involved in making. Production was not some prior, distanced deed in which the consumer did not need to participate. Studio activity is therefore part of our topic. Viewers sought access not just to paintings, but to the places where paintings were made. Production also entails commissioning, commanding, paying and receiving payment, details too often neglected by art historians.

And then display. Bounderby displayed his painting, and others might have looked at it more than he did. Fukuzawa hid his collection, but people still knew he had it. Even without much looking, owning can be an important fact, and display is a complex of physical and emotional concerns, and comes with its sisters, concealment and, at the most extreme, oblivion. There will be a sliding scale between these poles. Some images can be seen by everybody and some by nobody; most will have access variously controlled. Who is permitted to see a work, and who is not, will be part of the meaning of that image, part of how it *obtained*, and this must be addressed for the image to be understood. Class, gender, family or relational proximity, religious or civil status and honorific standing are among the factors that will codify who sees what, who feels comfortable seeing what, who would be expelled, repelled, or would rather leave the space in which a work was set. Images work differently for all these people and in all these situations.
The need to think carefully about the range of imagistic functioning is especially strong for Japan in its early modern or Edo Period (1603–1868). Its art has been admired worldwide for well over a century, and paintings and prints have received critical admiration since the time of the Impressionists. In a way, we may feel we know Edo-Period art quite well. But the chances are we do not. As an academic subject, art history seldom touches on anthropology or sociology, yet in so distant a culture we need those disciplines as our guides. Existing scholarly studies of Japanese art, meticulous and convincing though they may be, have singularly failed to equip readers with the tools to understand what objects were really about. It is good to train the eye to appreciate worth and segregate the excellent from the mediocre. But incessant searching after ‘masterpieces’ can lead us down a path that runs away from how images obtained. This book will certainly accept notions of excellence and inferiority, genius and failure, but it will only apportion these labels in the context of the time. The question is not what work is good or poor, but how it was judged to be so. How it is judged to be so is not a question I propose to ask. It is a truism that geniuses are detached, so lesser products may detain us more beneficially: they shed valuable light on how images, in general, made sense to most people. Being the author does not give me the right to ventilate my aesthetic priorities (though I may have them). Of course, I do assume that readers will share with me a desire to know about Edo-Period art, and it is my purpose to explain the same. But promoting general or private likes and dislikes, much less striving to inculcate them in others, is quite simply not the point. Understanding how images obtained is.

Once considered in their fullness, Edo art and its social practices become entirely comprehensible, even logical, for all that they might have seemed resistant at first regard. Already 30 years ago, Svetlana Alpers argued in The Art of Describing that our understanding of Dutch art had been hampered by a tendency to view it through the lens of the art of Italy.4 The discipline of art history, after all, began with an analysis of the Italian Renaissance, and that framework was embedded. Yet the tools of conjecture involved in those earlier enquiries may not work for other cultures, nor, indeed, for the same culture at other times. They may even prevent more pertinent questions being asked. The art of Japan cannot survive unblemished from an analysis taken from the standpoint of elsewhere – Italy, the Low Countries, or anywhere outside itself. Another significant scholar, Michael Baxandall, termed the coming together of time and place to create a system of making and viewing the ‘period eye’.5

A third work in the canon of regionally sensitive art history is Nikolaus Pevsner’s The Englishness of English Art.6 Note that I do not claim a ‘Japaneseness’
for Japanese art. Actually, I shudder at the notion. The assertion of ongoing national traits across long periods is highly problematic, even dangerous, and smacks of ethno-mythmaking. This book is strictly limited to the Edo Period, which, at 250 years, is already quite enough. The intellectual systems we will uncover are proper to the art of the Edo Period, but the insights should not be wantonly applied outside. Japan is as dynamic and changing as any other national grouping.

The Edo Period, indeed, saw many changes. Between declaration of the new shogunate in 1603 and its collapse in 1868, the whole of society altered. I would be remiss if I did not alert readers to chronological shift and mutation. But equally, this book is not a march through the decades, tracing the rise and fall of artists and movements in turn. They did rise and fall, as will be seen, but within the Edo Period, or what at the time they called ‘this world’ (tōsei), there was a degree of consistency, recognized as such, that makes a largely synchronic treatment viable, even the optimal one. Our focus will tend to be from the early Edo Period, when the many norms were set up, through the ‘long eighteenth century’, which encompassed the great flowering of the Genroku era (1688–1704) and the dramatic curtailments of cultural expression in the Kansei era (1789–1800), and then the alterations that came with the shogunate’s entry into its third century, in the early 1800s. The late Edo Period will engage us somewhat less, though it will be discussed as appropriate.

Furthermore, Japan is enormous. The archipelago is some 2,000 km in length, the equivalent of London to Volgograd, or New York to the Grand Canyon. This book is unable to look in detail at all areas, even within the three main islands of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. Distances were large and journeys fraught. The central Edo-Period realm had strong regional differences, in art and so much else, and these will be touched upon. Ezo (now Hokkaido) and the Ryukyus (now Okinawa) were regarded as peripheries with non-conforming practices and are not studied here specifically, though throughout, as far as space and documentation permits, we will be cognisant of geographical as well as temporal divisions.

On the main islands, there was the sense of a binding core, albeit with an oscillating boundary. This they called ‘Japan’ (nihon), or, taken from the Chinese, ‘That Below Heaven’ (tenka), or else, in distinction to China and Korea, ‘This Realm’ (honchō). However named, the shogun, hereditary within the Tokugawa family and resident in Edo, controlled some third of this landmass, including the five main cities: Edo (modern Tokyo), Kyoto (then mostly just Kyō), Osaka, Sakai (Osaka’s port) and Nagasaki. The rest was parcelled out among hereditary regional rulers called daimyo (‘great households’), each controlling a domain or state; their families lived in Edo, while the daimyo moved periodically
between the shogunal seat and his own castle town. There was also the cloudy
figure in Kyoto, whose authority, though devoid of coercive power, carried cul-
tural weight, the ancestor of the present Emperor of Japan. Some scholars call
him ‘emperor’ for historical periods too, some ‘sovereign’. Here we will call him
the court (dairi), which is how he was known to Edo-Period people; the modern
term ‘emperor’ (tennō) was not employed.7

This book is divided into two. The first part is intended to give information
about the mechanisms of artistic production and display. The second part dis-
cusses schools and styles. It has not been possible to cover everything, even focus-
ing on two-dimensional works. I have made the reluctant decision, as already
noted, to omit two major areas, calligraphy and illustrated fiction (in scrolls or
books), that is, fields where the text equals or outweighs the role of the image.

Part One begins with a short chapter on what it meant to make images at
all. We consider the myths surrounding the notion of artistic labour. What, we
will seek to know, did it mean to create, and to what should artists aspire? There
were two strands of thinking: a painter could make images that came to life and
lived among their non-man-made fellows; or they could make complete copies
that confused by their exactitude. The former was allowed the greater enterprise.
The mythologies of art, for the most part, came from China, but they infused
interpretation in Japan. Some readers may be more familiar with the equivalent
European myths of creation, and even if not, these offer instructive comparisons,
so are introduced. The primary European myths were known in Japan too.

In chapter Two we analyse the overriding purpose for creating art across all
of East Asia: the invocation of felicity. Auspicious images (kissō-ga), not much
encountered in European painting, were fundamental in the Edo Period, and
account for a vast body of work in all formats and genres. There was a huge the-
monic range, much also derived from China, some taken from the observation
of nature, some fabricated from cultural assumptions. Happiness was taken to
lie in benign attunement with the heavens, so auspicious images were seasonal,
and tend to incorporate a reference to a bird or flower of a given month, which
also dictated when the image should be displayed. Owners rotated pictures to
match the season. Botticelli’s Primavera (spring), hung up by the Medici for
centuries, would have shocked owners in Japan. A picture offered felicitation by
celebrating nature and culture, but this would be ruined by a mismatch with the
world outside. In Edo times, season was further associated with place – the site
that best demonstrated a particular beauty at a given time, such as cherry blos-
som in spring and leaves in autumn. These sites were much extolled in poetry,
indeed, extolling them was a principal aim of formal Japanese poetry (waka).
These sites became part of representation as auspicious, seasonal landscapes, or ‘painted famous places’ (meisho-e).

Chapter Three offers something similar, but more material. Pictures come in formats, each with its own relevance and associations. A person did not so much obtain ‘an image’, or even ‘a painting’, but a screen, a scroll or a fan, and there were subdivisions within these. We need to learn the nuances.

To take possession of a work of any type, a person had to part with money, or with something else. Historians have rarely investigated how, or how much. We will look at the various modes of acquisition, such as purchase, inheritance, friendship, commandeering or theft.

The first three chapters contain what an averagely instructed Edo-Period woman or man would know, their habitus – truisms of life, or cultural baggage. Part One concludes in chapter Four, with an overview of religious images and their roles, which, in Edo times, meant Buddhism. Shinto remained largely attached to Buddhism, and had only a modest ecclesium of its own and little independent iconography. It was not the independent institution it has become today. Buddhism arrived in Japan in the sixth century, so was a millennium old at the start of the new shogunate, with a wealth of temples and artefacts. But throughout the sixteenth century, civil war, or, as they termed it, ‘chaos’ (ran), had reigned. Much had been lost. The Tokugawa set themselves the task of rebuilding.

Chapter Four will go beyond the two-dimensional orientation of much of this book, since the Buddhist arts readily crossed into three dimensions. Sacred spaces were assemblages of devotional artistry. Not all religious art was for temple use, and devotees of all classes required objects for private prayer, which we also consider.

Schools and movements are particularized in Part Two. We begin, in chapter Five, with the Kano (or Kanō), a blood-cum-studio grouping that dominated much formal work, providing castle interiors, heirloom and gift items for the elite, on a wide range of topics, as painters in attendance of the shoguns and daimyo. We assess their work, and also their academic and bureaucratic structure.

Chapter Six addresses one formal theme, painted by the Kano but also by others, namely portraiture. The role of the portrait in East Asia has long been neglected, and although recent scholarship has revealed how prominent it actually was, a full treatment of Edo-Period portraits has not yet been attempted.

Portraiture merits a chapter to itself as key in personal veneration and succession (crucial concerns in many early modern societies), but relevant too is the extent to which portraits were policed, for the most part even hidden. Portraiture clearly demonstrates the inadequacy of an art history that fails to go beyond some putative and reified ‘viewer’.
Chapter Seven begins with the second elite school, the Tosa. The Kano generally painted political themes of relevance to rulers, which meant the shogunal apparatus. The Tosa mostly provided the court with literary themes, such as those taken from the poems and tales of the past. As the Kano were based in Edo, the Tosa worked in Kyoto. Some Kano worked in Kyoto, and the Tosa opened a school in Edo, known as the Sumiyoshi. In point of fact, Kano and Tosa overlapped in client and subject, but their orientations were different, as will be shown.

The classical literary themes were also adopted by a new artistic lineage. It has come to be known as Rinpa (or Rimpa), and it painted for a wider clientele, including the non-elite, in a radically altered manner. The meaning and nature of Tosa painting, and its mutation into Rinpa, are the theme of chapter Seven.

Kano, Tosa, Sumiyoshi and, to a degree, Rinpa were all formal schools. Chapter Eight looks at a grouping that consciously fled this, preferring to create images of escape and reclusion. Their topics were worthy men, occasionally women, who pursued their interests, learned and refined, unenmeshed in affairs of the world. They carried on a culture hailing from the distant past, as amateurs, a concept that came from China. Today it is called ‘literati painting’ (C: wenren-hua; J: bunjin-ga). In China gentlemen might retire and relocate from Beijing (the ‘northern capital’) to southern villas, so the term ‘Southern-school painting’ (nanzhong-hua) also came to be used. Japan was military, with no retirement from posts, and no ‘south’ to go to, though the term is retained, as just Southern Painting (nanga). In keeping with the continental derivation, Japanese nanga (as we shall call it) worked in monochrome ink. This allowed for and also gave off a sense of gentlemanly informality and spontaneity that was also contained in nanga subjects. Japanese nanga underwent change for internal reasons, and also through encounter with the Southern Painting of Korea (K: namjong-hwa). It also professionalized, changing from an aspirational lifestyle to, in the end, just a style.

Inhabitants of the shogunal realm needed their escapes. The nanga ideal was one. Chapter Nine investigates another, almost its opposite. If the gentlemen fled into some lofty Sinicized classicism, this second group embraced the pleasures of the present, which they called the Floating World, or Worlds (ukiyo) – Japanese has no singular or plural. ‘Pictures of the Floating Worlds’ (ukiyo-e), both paintings and prints, depict urban hedonism, particularly the kabuki theatre and the red-light districts. These are among the most recognizable products in the entire sweep of Japanese art. Men and women both attended the theatre, and people could consort randomly, something otherwise hard to do. The genders mixed in the pleasure districts too (though one half paid the other). The Floating Worlds were rooted in sensual pleasure, and sex was often part of it. This was all decidedly
off-centre and kept at arm’s length by the formal schools, by more straight-laced clients and by the shogunate, and so it comes near the end of our book.

Chapter Ten, the last, looks at the intrusion of Europe. Though there were times of greater or lesser intensity, contact with China and Korea was constant throughout Japanese history. The first arrival of Europeans, Iberian, then Italian missionaries, was only in the mid-sixteenth century, during the time of ‘chaos’ (to which they abundantly contributed). That pre-Edo appearance gave rise to a semi-Christian, hybridized culture known as Nanban (‘Southern Barbarian’, since the Europeans sailed up from the south). The new shogunate soon outlawed Christianity. After the ban, European thought and imagery continued to enter, though shorn of its theological base and much reduced, on ships of the Dutch East India Company. During the next, eighteenth, century Western natural science attracted much interest and a discipline known as rangaku, ‘the study of ran’, from Oranda (‘Holland’), emerged. Japanese commentators did not restrict themselves to science and empiricism, but engaged with the symbols and conventions of Western art. European materials also entered Japan via China.

The above ten chapters aspire to be a comprehensive survey of the painting and prints of the Edo Period, in their free-standing, two-dimensional manifestations. Each chapter is independent to itself, but collectively, I believe, they offer a more thorough grounding in the imagery of early modern Japan than has been presented to readers before, in one volume, in any language.
PART ONE
Stories of painters’ lives and depictions of artists at work offer rich sources of information to reconstruct how the act of creation was understood, and what the purpose of making pictures was thought to be. In Japan a corpus of tales had grown up over the generations presenting aspirations for artistic work and informing what a picture, if truly fine, could accomplish. This book is concerned with the Edo Period (1603–1868), but that age was aware of itself as part of a long though fractured tradition. People who looked at legends wondered how, if at all, these might match actual production in their own time. The discrepancy between myth and fact was a space for interpretation, and also concern.

This first, short chapter will consider the root question of what artistic production meant, both as a legendary, idealized activity, and in the present. Such a topic properly comes before our assessment of Edo-Period painting and prints, which follows in the rest of the book. Here we ask, in the most general way, what it meant to make great art.

Japanese painting myths had mostly come from China, and the shogunal realm continued to defer to the longer traditions of the continent. In this it was not dissimilar to Europe, where artists triangulated themselves against tales of the great creators of Greece or Rome – as we will outline, since that provides a useful comparative example. Actual works by the revered masters of antiquity, in whatever land, were rare, even non-existent, and this allowed legend to develop and, in the case of East Asia, literally take wing.

**THE MYTH OF THE SUPERLATIVE PAINTER**

Painting can be many things, but in sum it is either *making* or *matching*. We will start from making since that, in East Asia, was regarded as the summit, at its peak the making of nothing less than life itself. Two tales of such superlative achievement dominate, evincing similar, though not identical notions. One told of Wu Daozi of the Tang dynasty (618–907), celebrated throughout East Asia,
although not a single accepted work by him survived. Wu’s praise acquired a normative role, stipulating what any artist who aimed for the absolute should strive towards, and what their resulting image would be. Some discussion of Wu appears in the writing of almost every critic of artistic practice throughout East Asian history, and this continued to be true in the Edo Period. For example, the prime educational treatise of the shogun’s official atelier, the Kano School, compiled by a senior master, Kano Yasunobu, in 1680, described what Wu had done. It referred to his finest masterpiece, *Five Dragons*: ‘When Wu Daozi painted the dragons they stirred their fins, making clouds gather and rains fall. Even the artist did not know how this had occurred. It was painting of the highest order.’3 The mechanics of the achievement were not clear even to the person who effected it. Such is the way with mysteries. But Yasunobu had suggestions, ‘It occurred because Wu Daozi believed fervently in the Way of Painting (*gadō*), and often chanted the *Diamond Sutra* (*Kongō-kyō*), to which he adhered devoutly. By this he had come to understand the very core of visual signification (*kensei no honshin*).’

Wu’s *Dragons* moved through the agency of two forces, his complete dedication to his art, and his extreme piety. But note, the creation of movement in pictures is not said to be a miracle. The holy text is an inspiration, but no divine figure comes in to animate the dragons. Wu does it alone, as a human being of superior insight and talent.

The second legend is from somewhat earlier and proposes something better, though also more problematic. It refers to Zhang Sengyou, of the sixth century, who was enumerated among the ‘Three Greatest Painters [of all time]’, along with Gu Kaizhi and Lu Tanwei.4 His feat was to paint dragons that not only flapped their fins, beckoning rain, but came fully alive, shuffled off their inky substances and departed the picture plane, disappearing into vapour. Moreover, Zhang managed this not just once, as Wu had in the highest chamber of the palace, but repeatedly, whenever and wherever he worked.5 The late Edo-Period artist Nagayama Kōin depicted Zhang, showing him having just put the final touch to a hallmark dragon (illus. 2). The page is blank. Fully rendered, the picture has assumed life and is ascending, to the wonderment of artist and onlooker.

No paintings by Wu existed, but, properly speaking, none by Zhang could exist. At the moment of completion, it would lose its status as representation, as matching against some root object, and become the thing itself. By focusing on depiction of dragons, the loftiest of all forms but the exact appearance of which no person knows, the legend sidesteps all idea of accuracy. Indeed both tales invalidate discussion of the role of external likeness.

Those who wished to pursue the absolute, in whatever artistic tradition or lineage, were therefore urged to adhere to the notion that the best painting
was the creation of life. The capacity to achieve so much was restricted to those
who pursued the Way of Painting to its ultimate and devoted themselves to
spiritual exercises.

Edo-Period makers still accepted this as what excellence was. Yanagisawa
Kien, in the first half of the eighteenth century, was sent as a boy to study in the
Kano School, but famously stormed out, angered at what he thought were its
over-rigid teaching methods. He brazenly announced he would thenceforth put
himself under the tutelage of Wu Daozi and Zhang Sengyou. By this he meant
that he would recouple modern practice, which he thought calcified and reduced,
back to the scintillating superlatives of the past.

The putative powers of Zhang and Wu were so authoritative that they were
attributed to others, where a commentator wished to commend with the highest
praise. Retailed in the Edo Period was the story of the medieval monk-painter

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2 Nagayama Köin, Zhang Sengyou, early 19th
century, standing screen, ink and colour on paper.
The ancient Chinese artist paints a dragon which
comes to life and leaves the page, to the amaze-
ment of him and his viewer alike.
Sesshū, perhaps the greatest name in the history of Japanese art (he will be encountered several times in this book). It was inevitable that Sesshū would be raised to some degree of parity with the Chinese masters, yet he was much later in time and the world had slipped from antiquity. What could Sesshū achieve? He had visited China, in 1468–9, one of the few top Japanese painters ever to do so, and been praised there. But Sesshū’s legend refers to while he was a temple novice, so it was not the trip that awoke his powers: they were innate. Lofty creation was possible in Japan too. In conformity with his later age, what Sesshū did was more banal, more utilitarian, and it introduces for the first time the issue of accuracy. Annoyed at Sesshū ignoring other duties in favour of his art, the temple abbot bound him to a pillar in punishment. Vexed, Sesshū wept into the dust and noticed how his tears made a paste. Using his toes, he used it to fashion the forms of mice. They sprang to life, bit through his ropes, and freed him. What mice look like and what they do is common knowledge. It is not especially elevated, but Sesshū created them, body, teeth and all. They must then have gone off to live undetectably with their own kind.

In the Edo Period due deference had to be shown to existing social hierarchies, and so it was that the ancestor of the shogunal school, Kano Motonobu, who had died as recently as 1559, was accredited similar powers, though again a notch lower. His forte was horses, painted on votive plaques (ema). They were there clear enough, and some even exist today (illus. 3). But those who lived near temples that had them said they heard sounds of the animals cantering away at night as the horses went to eat and drink. With practical commissions, paid for and donated by devotees who wanted the object for a purpose, evaporation of the image was not helpful. The horses obediently returned to the status of pictures at dawn, though with muddied hooves. It was a superlative making but for a later age, and it was practical; the horses looked very real.

A meditation on such concepts of creation was offered by Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the period’s most exalted playwright, in Stuttering Matahei (Domo-mata), first performed by puppets in 1708, then adapted for kabuki in 1719. As a popular drama, it would have reached those far outside the circles of serious artists and commentators.

The play opens at the atelier of a now-elderly Tosa Mitsuoki, a genuine figure who had been made official painter to the court in 1654 during the Edo Period itself (see illus. 18, 135); the Tosa School went on to hold that mandate for the Kyoto court as the Kano did for the Edo shogunate. Farmers rush in, hunting a tiger that has been devastating their crops. There are no tigers in Japan, though many paintings of them. Of course, it transpires that the animal is a picture that has come to life, broken from its assigned space and entered the real world.
Notably, Chikamatsu vacillates on the point of making against matching, as characters on stage hesitate between saying it 'looks like a tiger' and 'looks like a painting', even discussing the style. The tiger has hidden in Mitsuoki’s garden, but is not said to be his work, and Mitsuoki recognizes it as by the same Kano Motonobu. It is stated that he painted it when young, suggesting a date of about 1490. Either the tiger has been on the loose for 200 years or, more likely, Chikamatsu is lining up famous masters for his general public, and not thinking very chronologically. Mitsuoki acknowledges Motonobu’s talent, but nowadays the tiger is a menace and must be destroyed. This delicate and dangerous task is assigned to Mitsuoki’s favourite pupil, Shūrinnosuke, who paints out the form, obliterating it both as a living tiger and a picture. He is rewarded with permission to use the Tosa name. How political was Chikamatsu’s intent in having the highest artistic creation of the shogun’s academy destroyed by artists of the court is hard to fathom, though friction between those two centres of power underlies the whole Edo Period like a ground bass.
The drama continues. Mitsuoki has another pupil, Matahei (also Matabei) of the play’s title, a historical figure too. He studied in the Tosa School, but some decades before his death in 1650 had left to pursue a popular type of painting, that of the Floating Worlds (ukiyo), more akin to the images that Chikamatsu’s audience would have known or owned. Matahei’s name is a cruel pun on his stuttering (mata means ‘again’ and -hei is a common suffix). He has been expelled by Mitsuoki because of this disability, and comes to plead for reinstatement just after the farmers arrive. Additionally thwarted in not only being rusticated but also not trusted to eradicate the tiger, Matahei decides to commit suicide. He will leave a self-portrait for his funeral rites, and this he draws on a stone lantern outside Mitsuoki’s house. Matahei works with such intensity that the image shows through on the other side of the stone. When he sees what he has achieved, Matahei decides to live. Mitsuoki realizes what talent he has failed to nurture through pure prejudice, and he awards Matahei too the coveted Tosa name.

The self-portrait is recognizable to everyone as Matahei. It is accurate and like him. The living image in the modern world is an aberration, a danger, and the self-portrait does not live, but it allows Matahei to live. Chikamatsu turns the old legend into something about the self.

**Comparative Legends**

Before moving on to considering the question of likeness in East Asia, we may pause to compare European myths of living images. They offer useful ways to understand, and offset, the East Asian ones. Prominent is the legend of Pygmalion. It is recounted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, frequently retold and made the subject of occasional paintings (illus. 4). An ancient Greek sculptor, Pygmalion, created an ivory statue of a woman, which he named Galataea; it came to life and he married her. Superficially similar to Wu’s achievement, this is actually quite different. As a sculpture, Pygmalion’s work possessed the third dimension of life, and was said to be full sized (rather implausibly, for ivory). The choice of that material, rather than marble, allows a flow between it and flesh. Wu and Zhang, Sesshū and Motonobu all worked in reduced size and two dimensions, and all except Motonobu in monochrome. The sense of any requirement of overlap between the work and reality, as a precondition of the ability to live, is entirely other. It is because Galataea looked so like a real woman that Pygmalion fell in love with her: as Ovid put it, the statue was ‘an image of perfect/feminine beauty’, and ‘This heavenly woman appeared to be real; you’d surely suppose her/alive and ready to move . . . /Flesh or ivory?’
More importantly, Galataea does not come to life through Pygmalion’s artistic merit. It is Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who takes pity on a sculptor desiring his work but unable to make it live, and, in an act of grace, animates it. Depictions rarely fail to show the goddess or her son Cupid hovering above the scene, clarifying that no man can do this.

The tales of Wu and Zhang were updated or attributed to later makers, albeit in diminishing scales. But that of Pygmalion was not. It exists only in deep classical time. The assumption is that the option of animation is foreclosed. The Christian God alone creates life, but would not respond to such vain importuning (though he may empower miraculous images for true religious purposes).

One other European myth is close, but also unlike on careful inspection. This is the tale of Daedalus. He is best known for the wings he made his son Icarus, who flew too near the sun and melted them. But Daedalus also made statues that walked and moved, and had to be chained down. Similarly sculptural, more significantly, Daedalus’ works are unmasked as tricks and ruses – brilliant, but automata, not living things. Something analogous is recounted in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* (1611), where a statue of Hermione, the dead queen, dumbfounds viewers as it starts to move; it is then discovered that it is the queen, not dead after all. As Shakespeare put it, ‘what fine chisel/Could ever yet cut breath?’ This is the gaming of the *Castle of Otranto* (1764) and *Pinocchio* (1883). A Gothic portrait might walk and a child may hope her toys will come to life, but this is scarcely part of mature thinking about art.

REAL IMAGES

East Asian concern with the issue of external accuracy is strong and goes back to the Six Rules of Painting, formulated in fifth-century China and endorsed by all later painting schools, including in Japan. One rule is ‘Correspondence to the Object’. A second category of myth addresses this.
A third-century Chinese master painted fish on wooden plaques for Emperor Ming of the Wei. He hung them by a stream to attract otters that were spoiling people’s bathing. This story was included in a book of artists’ legends compiled in Japan in 1776 by the popular author and wit Koikawa Harumachi (illus. 5). But the painter who tricked the innocent eye of otters is not named. This work was sensational but artisan-like and anonymous. This feat does not make him a truly great man.

Here, too, something similar was attributed to a Japanese master, Narimitsu, named though otherwise unknown, who lived at some time before the thirteenth century. He appears in a book published in the same year as Harumachi’s (1776), and the author, Ueda Akinari, notes, ‘he painted a cock on a sliding screen in the Kannin Palace, and a real cock came up and kicked it’. A visualization of this encounter was printed in the early nineteenth century by Hokkei (illus. 6).

The legends of Wu and Zhang were not attributed to East Asian sculptors, and three-dimensional work was never accorded the parity with painting that it enjoyed in Europe. But sculptors could make perfect ‘correspondences to the object’. In Japan there was Suminawa, first mentioned in the eighth century, also said to have made a cock that a living bird attacked. In 1808 his story was made into a novel by Rokujū-en, under the title of the Tale of the Hida Craftsman (Hida no takumi monogatari), illustrated by Hokkei’s more famous teacher, Hokusai (illus. 7).

A European comparison is available in Zeuxis, painter to Alexander the Great, who depicted a bunch of grapes so accurately that birds flew in and tried to eat them. This tale has been termed the foundational legend of Western art. But in fact it is no different from East Asian equivalents, only that in East Asia it is placed below the making of life.

The dates, 1776 and 1808, suggest that from the later eighteenth century questions of the capacity of pictures were increasingly raised. The tales of Zhang and Wu can be seen to fade in favour of tales of complete matching. Akinari even has it that the professional painter Narimitsu, who created exact copies, was the student of Kōgi, a monk who created works that lived. This implies that the
spiritual making of living forms declines, in time, into absolute external replication. Of interest, then, is that the story of Zeuxis became known in Japan just at this moment and is cited by several Edo-Period sources.26

In 1788 the Edo artist Shiba Kōkan went to the open port of Nagasaki to meet its European and Chinese residents. On return, he painted the legend of Zeuxis. Though sadly lost, his work exists in a black-and-white photograph (illus. 8). Kōkan set the scene in Europe, and incorporated the foreign stylistic topes of shading and cast shadows. He envisaged some sort of integration, and signed his name, ‘Kookan’, in Roman letters on the picture of the grapes. The capacity to create life has waned, and the making of accurate images has taken over, and is internationally recognized.

6 Hokkei, Painted and Living Cocks, early 19th century, multicoloured woodblock print. This private-edition print (sumimono) illustrates the old story of the rooster that mistook a painted bird for a real one.
Zeuxis’ legend is told in Pliny’s *Natural History*, where it is stated that the *Grapes* was part of a competition with another master, Parrhasios, who invited Zeuxis to his home the next day. When Zeuxis arrived, he was asked to pull back a curtain, only to find the curtain was the painting. As Pliny put it, ‘with modesty that did him honour, he yielded up the palm, saying that whereas he had managed to deceive only birds, Parrhasios had deceived an artist’. Kōkan knew of this second stage in the rivalry because the picture on which he based his work, an engraving from Johann Ludwig Gottfried’s *Historische chronyk*, showed both Zeuxis and Parrhasios, though synchronically, in a single space (illus. 9). Kōkan omits this. The sophisticated viewer can distinguish the possible from the impossible, and to imagine otherwise is Pinocchio again. Humans, Kōkan knows, can always tell.

We may conclude with a work that recognizes how the world is not as it once was – that Wu and Zhang are gone and even Sesshū and Motonobu are no more – but will not renounce the hope of life, nor sacrifice it for ‘conformity to the
Shiba Kōkan, *Zeuxis*, 1788, hanging scroll, oil on paper (?). Kōkan reproduces the paramount myth of European painting – the ancient Greek master's tricking of the innocent eye of nature. He signs the painting within the painting ‘Kōkan'.

8 Shiba Kōkan, *Zeuxis*, 1788, hanging scroll, oil on paper (?). Kōkan reproduces the paramount myth of European painting – the ancient Greek master's tricking of the innocent eye of nature. He signs the painting within the painting ‘Kōkan'.
object’ alone, as Europeans do (illus. 10). The painting is by Yamagata Kihō, from the provincial town of Nagahama, and though he signs with the honorific title hokkyō (‘Dharmic bridge’), indicating he has been recognized and rewarded, he is not a famous painter. The work was commissioned by Kunitomo Tōbei, known as Ikkan-sai, still admired as a father of Japanese science.29 An accompanying text states that Ikkan-sai dreamt he painted a hawk that came to life.30 Hawks were symbols of Edo’s military caste (Samurai), so Ikkan-sai associates himself to his own age and class. Edo-Period paintings of hawks abound, but the birds are invariably shown tethered (illus. 1). The hawk is the self-image of the elite person: trained, controlled and awaiting orders. Ikkan-sai crouches in the pin-striped trouser-skirt of his status group, wearing his privileged twin swords, as a modern person. The rendering is accurate and precise. His friends would recognize his face. But the bird has slipped away in a loosely painted ink-wash into a loosely painted world. This cannot happen, or cannot happen now. The man and the bird are free from their ropes only in dreams. By commissioning

9 Johann Ludvig Gottfried, Historische chronyk, Dutch edition (1660), copperplate book illustration, Kōkan’s presumed source, although no other plates from the book seem to have been copied in Japan. Kōkan surely gained access to this image, if indeed he did, via the Dutch translation of the German book. He deleted the figure of the artist Parrhasios, whose painted curtain was mistaken for reality.
another master to depict the dream rather than doing it himself, Ikkan-sai creates a split. The hawk seen leaving the page is not a painting that he ever made, or could; it is his nebulous reverie. Caught in his lucid, disciplined, modern world, Ikkan-sai dreams on, while the hawk takes wing into a more elevated space, somewhere other than here.
Itō Jakuchū, *Bamboo, Plum and Cranes*, mid- to late 18th century, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. An auspicious scene, with a brace of long-living birds and two admired plants. The winter-flowering prunus indicates the season.
people lived among the charming mutations of the world, and took their happiness from them. It would be hard to find a better definition of auspiciousness than society in tune with nature under permanent, dispassionate government. Painting’s purpose was to show this. Matter in place was auspicious. Matter out of place was dirty.\textsuperscript{11}

The lunar (‘Chinese’) New Year falls in mid-February, so the cycle begins with the plum, or winter-flowering prunus. Plum was most representative of New Year. Plum, pine and bamboo are admired when all else dies back, and the trio was known as the Three Friends of Winter, or the Three Nobles, in a combination derived from China but already used in Japan for centuries.\textsuperscript{12} The plum is prettier, more subject to seasonal change and generally without the fixed political nuances of its ‘friends’, so it might be preferable in more modest or relaxed New Year environments, and it was often painted alone.

In Japan the plum had associations with the ninth-century courtier Fujiwara no Michizane, who had tended a plum tree, which responded, even flying to meet him.\textsuperscript{13} Michizane was posthumously deified as the god of poetry, so a flowering plum also evoked literary endeavour. Since poems were habitually composed as New Year celebrations, the match was appropriate. But paintings of plums, if intended to invoke Michizane, could be displayed whenever poetry was composed, all year round, and so here is another case where cultural expectations could override empirical norms.

Everyone changed age on New Year’s Day, not on the day of their birth (though that was also celebrated), so the plum had a further association with a person’s mounting years. The elderly, particularly, deployed plum imagery. Blossoms appear on gnarled old trees (most blossoms come only to young ones), so the plum showed the vibrancy of riper years. A Plum made an excellent New Year’s present to an older relative or colleague, especially if of literary bent. At the close of the Edo Period, one highly educated painter, Nukina Kaioku, when he reached old age, took to sending Plums to friends on his own birthday – a little quirky, perhaps, but as Kaioku was born in the First Month, the pictures could be interpreted as everyone’s age-change gifts, rather than praising the artist’s own extending life.\textsuperscript{14}

After New Year was spring with peaches, but they are less prevalent in Japan than China, and since they always possessed nuances of the Peach Blossom Spring, they were deflected from season by their cultural patination. Japan’s most stunning blossom is the cherry. To display painted cherry blossom honoured the season and delighted the heart after the end of winter. Spring is often rainy in the Japanese archipelago and a period in which one is able to enjoy the blossoms cannot be guaranteed. Painted blossoms overcome meteorological
vagaries. But the very tenuousness of the cherry blossom, short-lived even when precipitation does not ruin it, became integral to its cultural meaning. Cherry blossom shows spring and pleasure, but also their transience. All too soon spring gives way to the furnace of summer. There were more durable spring blossoms to invoke, if one wished – the peach, as we have seen, denoted the opposite of the cherry: permanence.

Certain plants had purported male or female relevance. In a masculinist society, the plum came to be thought of as ‘male’, with improvement in age, and continued flowering late, the preserve of men. This was, however, compensated for with a variety known as an ‘old woman plum’ (obaume). Conversely, the strictly time-delimited effulgence of the cherry was deemed to place it in the orbit of the female. In the end, though, most flowers are short-lived, so, as one Edo critic noted, better restricted to display in female spaces, ‘like women’s embroidery,’ he opined, ‘not appropriate for males’.

After spring came summer with its plentiful blooms. The iris and narcissus represented the early part, and peonies and hydrangeas the late. Chrysanthemums emblematized early autumn, then came red maple leaves. None of these had much in the way of symbolic overlay, but are just the finest examples of their respective moments. For winter, any plant could be painted that showed well under snow. There were also the ‘Three Friends’.

Migrant animals and birds might be coupled with relevant plants: the spring warbler, the summer plover, the autumn-departing geese.

PUNS

Puns, it is said, are the lowest form of wit. But not in East Asia. The Chinese writing system (used in Korea and Japan) permits both aural and visual punning, and pluralities, or slippages, of meaning were taken entirely seriously. Chinese characters are made up of parts, which can also be deliberately manipulated or swapped about for punning effect. The word dharma (Buddhist truth), for example, includes the graph for ‘water’. One venerable Kyoto temple wrote it up with ‘water’ separated from the rest of the character; when asked why, the abbot said it was to prevent flooding.

In seeking to account for the theme of Dogs Beneath Bamboo, it is sufficient to know that the character for ‘laughter’ is formed (more or less) of ‘dog’ under ‘bamboo’. Such a picture would be appropriate for display in party rooms. Often puppies are shown, segregating laughter into the orbit of youth, according it an innocent, frolicsome air; children could be added too, which made a theme good for nurseries, though one would not put it in a schoolroom (illus. 17).
Bamboo is evergreen and dogs breed at any time, so this theme was usable all year round. It could be complemented with a seasonal element painted in or, if done as a scroll, flanking the main theme to form a triptych.

The character ‘crow’ looks somewhat as if ‘nothing’ is embedded within it. Crows might adorn spaces of meditative contemplation, as a kind of *vanitas* (illus. 18). The artist Tani Buncho, when he reached maturity, altered his signature to make it look like a crow (not the character ‘crow’, but the actual bird), announcing that he had attained profundity.19

More common than such visual puns were aural ones. The Japanese language has rather few sounds (much less so than Chinese, Korean or English), so punning is endemic to the language. Japanese also uses a phonetic script (in combination with Chinese characters) written without word breaks, so punning is as common

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17 Nagasawa Rosetsu, *Dogs, Bamboo and Children*, 1789–1801, diptych of hanging scrolls, ink and light colour on paper. The Japanese title of the painting is simply ‘a laugh’ (isshō). The combination of dogs and bamboo takes its meaning from the two characters used to write them, which together form a shape akin to the character for ‘laughter’. The children add an innocent, frolicsome air.
to writing as speaking. The most elevated type of poetry (waka), associated with the Kyoto court, makes great use of double meanings, not to slap thighs with silly double entendres but to convey serious subtexts that impinge on, and colour, a dominant meaning.²⁰

In painting, an object might be represented because it sounded like, though actually had nothing to do with, something else, that other thing being the true referent of the work. Generally, selection was because, being delightful in itself, the object also punned on something auspicious. For example, ‘pine’, shō, has two puns, both on ‘correct’ and ‘government’ – which further accounts for its presence in the shogunal audience chamber. Carp (the fish) is ri, which puns on ‘ethics’, so painted carp abound in Japanese art.

Another case is nanten, a small plant with red berries, known in English (from the Japanese) as nandina. The berries appear in autumn and last throughout the winter, so that would be the time to hang a painting of one. Nandina are delightful, but nan puns on ‘danger’ and ten on ‘turning’. The same shogunal audience chamber had painted nandina, but small, as the room mainly signified permanence (illus. 19). Or rather, the shogun’s majesty superseded season, and his centrality in the realm required the ‘turning’ of danger at all times, though it was none too auspicious to suggest he needed protection and so next to the nandina are sleeping birds, suggestive of stillness and peace. These two motifs were inconspicuously placed behind the shogun, and relevantly on the door that led to the guardroom. Puns keep the shogun safe, as do his soldiery. Had the guardroom door ever been opened, one imagines, the birds would have flown and the flower would have been crushed. Their timid and delicate presences prove that the door was always fast, that guards were never needed, and the shogun was beloved.

Many puns came from China, and though Japanese has borrowed from Chinese over the centuries, as languages they are unrelated. Some puns carried across, though not all. ‘Quail’, for example, is an, which in both Chinese and Japanese also means ‘peace’. Any resting bird is suggestive of peace, but quail, whether flying, nesting or singing, embody it. However, quail are birds of passage, most proper to autumn, which is a limitation.
It more often happened that a Chinese pun failed in Japanese. As a painting theme, it might be rejected or else retained, but with explanation needed to ensure its sense, or else again accepted by virtue of repetition, with some viewers not quite knowing why. For example, chrysanthemums are *ju* in Chinese, which is somewhat homophonic with ‘nine’ (*jiu*), not especially auspicious, but as the flower comes in the ninth lunar month (late October), chrysanthemums are perfectly conformative to their season, which is auspicious, and so ideal to represent. Since ancient times a Chrysanthemum Festival had been held.
on the ninth day of the ninth month across East Asia, so there were celebratory cultural significations too. In Japanese, by chance, another loose pun worked, for ‘chrysanthemum’ is kiku, and ‘nine’ is ku (or kyū). This was a little oblique, so it became customary to paint chrysanthemums and quails together, which clarified the meaning and season – peaceful autumn with its historical events – and also made for a more interesting picture (illus. 20).21

The mynah bird was auspicious in China because its name (jiugang-niao) is homophonous with ‘nine offices bird’, that is, the top echelons of the civil
bureaucracy. The theme entered Japan, but in a roundabout way. In Japanese, ‘mynah’ (kyūkan-chō) offers the same pun, but there were no ‘nine offices’. The bird, as an auspicious theme, survived by a fortuity. Perhaps being known as felicitous in China, there was a wish to recoup it for Japan, and this could be done thanks to its common or garden name, haha-chō; haha puns on ‘eight eight’ (chō is ‘bird’) with eight a lucky number; two eights is double happiness. The notion that eight is lucky is itself a pun, though visual, since the character used to write it looks like a triangle, or pyramid, that widens as it descends, suggesting increase. In Japanese this ‘eight’ shape is called suehiro (‘the end is wide’) and means a cornucopia.

The great master Itō Jakuchū inscribed a work ‘painted at the age of 88’ (illus. 21). Artists often inscribed their age, and such longevity was marvellous, but the ‘double-eight’ was as auspicious as one could hope for. He might have painted a Mynah Bird, but instead opted for an eagle, perhaps to imply the lofty, piercing gaze of an artist at the summit – the eagle, they said, looks up to none (ue minu washi) – the reason, indeed, why eagles were painted at all. Jakuchū was not 88, and he died that same year, 1800, aged 85. It goes to show the irresponsibility of trifling with omens.22

Deer (lu) were much painted in China because they are homophonous with ‘salary’. The pun worked in Japanese (pronounced roku), but in the Tokugawa realm this required some nuancing. ‘Salary’ seemed mercantile and base, and in Edo and Kyoto, with their respective military and monastic dominances, deer paintings would hardly do. They were fine for Osaka, the city of merchants. The same went for the theme of Boatmen Culling Reeds: ‘reed’ is mō while ‘culling’ is ‘kari’, and mōkari means ‘making a profit’. This is a Japanese-originated pun, though as a painting theme it is barely seen outside Osaka. The Osakan painter Mori Ippō specialized in it, acquiring the nickname ‘Mōkari’ Ippō, which is also a pun, since ‘ippō’ (his name) is homophonous with ‘more and more’, thus ‘Ippō of the Culling Reeds/makes more and more money’, which he did (illus. 22).23

Images are flexible. There can be multiplicities of meaning and unitary interpretations are often too reductive. Though it was hard to see a Boatmen Culling Reeds without thinking of commerce, sometimes a deer is only a deer, or rather a deer can be many things, depending on context. Though roku means ‘deer’ and ‘salary’, it sounds like other words too. An Edo-Period box exists with a lid decorated with a deer, and on one side is written the character fuku (‘happiness’) and on the other jū (‘longevity’) (illus. 11).24 Combined, this makes fuku-roku-jū, and Fukurokujū was the god of long life. There is also seasonality here, since deer were firmly entrenched as signifiers of autumn for reasons seen below. Such a box would therefore be best brought out in autumn.

21 Itō Jakuchū, Eagle, 1800, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Jakuchū’s last painting, inscribed ‘at the age of 88’, though he was not so old in fact.
22 Mori Ippō, Culling Reeds, early 19th century, hanging scroll, ink and light colour on paper. Regarded as a typical finance-oriented Osakan theme, ‘culling reeds’ puns on ‘making money’.
As might be expected, a range of military puns was explored in Japan, largely unwelcome in China. *Shōri* means ‘victory’, and since we have seen *shō* is a pine and *ri* a carp, a *Pine and Carp*, perhaps arranged as branches hanging over a stream and fish swimming below, denoted victory. Since *shōri* also puns on ‘good ethics’, it also means winning through virtue, not brute force or skulduggery, as the Japanese military thought they did (illus. 23). Since pines are evergreen and carp swim all year round, this valiant theme could be displayed in any season.

Punning extended to colours. In Japanese, brown is *kachi-iro*, where *iro* means ‘colour’ and *kachi* puns on another word for ‘victory’. Of course, it does not mean that every time a person saw a brown object they made the mental link, but time and place could conspire to join the two, and to offer a fine imagery of prowess.

23 Maruyama Ōkyo, *Pine and Carp*, 1779, diptych of hanging scrolls, ink and light colour on silk. Classic auspicious themes, and in combination ‘pine and carp’ puns on ‘victory’. As with all diptychs, these works may have been intended to hang on either side of an independent central image.
In the Edo-Period realm, as depiction of auspicious puns became a major activity of painters, artists and patrons looked about to renew and invigorate the list. When the first camel was imported in 1647, it caused a stir and the beast was taken to Edo, to be viewed by the shogun ‘with its head pulled down’. Viewers wanted to make the strange-looking animal not just rare, but eloquent, and since ‘camel’ (rakuda) sounds like raku da, or ‘how pleasant!’, pictures were at once produced, innovatively punning the animal’s splendid appearance with life under benign rule. Camels were again imported in 1824 and left a bigger pictorial legacy (illus. 24).

Challenges

Auspicious images invoked the shared desiderata of life: happiness, wealth, longevity and good government. They could also refer to challenges, like examination, illness or death. A common theme was Carp Ascending a Waterfall (illus. 25). A Chinese legend has it that there is a place called the Dragon’s Gate (C: Longmen; J: Ryūmon) where carp leap up over a waterfall and, on doing so, transform into dragons. It was next to impossible for them to do this (in fact, impossible), but for those that succeeded the rewards were immense. An image of a Carp Ascending a Waterfall, otherwise titled The Dragon’s Gate, enjoined concerted effort.

Specific themes matched a range of untoward dilemmas and occurrences. The sickness or death of children was prevalent, and an established prophylactic was a picture of the Chinese divinity Zhongkui (J: Shōki), a failed scholar who had gone on to become a Demon Queller, with particular responsibility for the protection of little perishers. His display was ritualized on the fifth day of the fifth month, which was the Boys’ Festival. Paintings were hung in the home and flags and
streamers tied to poles outside, along with windsocks in the shape of carp. This collectively ensured the neighbourhood children’s healthy and ethical development.27 Most Shōki were painted in red, since the greatest carrier-away of the young was the so-called ‘red’ (aka) disease, or measles (illus. 26).28

Japanese warrior pictures (musha-e) were made. A certain Zenzō, distraught at the sickness of his son, bought one; he had little money and no time, so Zenzō bought a ready-made print.29 He might have chosen a Dragon’s Gate, but that referred to social exigencies, not medical ones, so the ‘warrior picture’ was better. The boy kept calling ‘Show me the picture! Show me the picture!’, and was inspired to fight against his sickness.

Among pre-emptive pictures, much seen is the catfish. Edo being seismically volatile, careful people provided themselves with these. Before quakes, catfish feel

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25 Kumashiro Yūhi, Carp Ascending a Waterfall, or, ‘The Dragon’s Gate’, mid-18th century, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. The theme is common, and encourages striving against the odds. Yūhi worked in Nagasaki where he had been pupil of the Chinese artist Shen Nanpin.

26 Katsushika Hokusai, Red Shōki, 1793–4, hanging scroll, ink and red on paper. The rough image shows Shōki resolutely destroying evil. Such works were hung on the fifth day of the fifth month, the Boys’ Festival.
changes in pressure and appear on the water’s surface as harbingers of disaster. Pictures did well to show the fish pinned down (illus. 27).³⁰

The greatest event requiring prophylaxis was fire. Much fire-retardant imagery involves water, and rooftops might be ornamented with tiles in fish form to keep the building safe. Edo Castle had massive upturned mythical dolphins on its
apex. Hokusai showed this, though with a reposing bird on top and Fuji behind – auspicious to the point of sycophancy, though when commoners made representations of the shogun’s residence they had to be careful (illus. 28).

In the zodiac, water was associated with monkeys (as in *Monkey Trying to Catch a Catfish with a Gourd*), and as they looked more reasonable than fish aloft in eaves and rafters, they could be carved in or painted on. There was a Japanese pun here, in fact two: ‘monkey’ (*sarû*) is homophonous with ‘go away’, and also sounds like the negative verbal suffix, ‘do not’ (*zaru*). In three ways, therefore, monkeys collaborate to negate and expel fire.31

At the other end, the zodiac linked fire with horses. To hang up the image of a horse was to play with fire – although as with deer, it should be stressed that horses can mean many things; military families routinely displayed screens of tethered steeds ready in stables. But a specific theme for fire protection was horses by watersides. Horses will go to drink, and since riverbanks often have willows, pictures of *Horses under Willows* are plentiful.

Monkeys (water) adorned places to keep horses (fire). The stable at Nikkô (a complex discussed in chapter Four) sheltered the shogun’s gift-horses and was carved with monkeys, many of them in the act of not-doing (*-zaru*) in order to make fire ‘go away’ (*sarû*). Among these are the world-famous ‘three wise monkeys’, who ‘do not see, do not hear, do not speak’ (commonly rendered as ‘see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil’), avoiding pollution, but more importantly keeping the shogun’s horses safe (illus. 29).

Perhaps the most curious method of preventing fire was to keep pornography. The male principle (C: *yang*; J: *yô*) was said to be hard and dry, and the female one (C: *yin*; J: *in*) damp and moist, so from the male perspective heterosexual acts meant encounter with liquid (to a female, of course, it was the reverse, an encounter with dryness). In Edo-Period cities, it was not hard to find men who swore they bought erotica only to ward off fire, and moreover that it worked. The mid-Edo painter Tsukioka Settei touted it as a selling point of his copulatory images that anyone who bought them would never lose their home to flames; this would have nicely exonerated possession.32

To fire and earthquake can be added the fear of flood. The archipelago experiences heavy rain in the fifth lunar month (late June) and the eighth (late September),

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28 Katsushika Hokusai, ‘Edo Fuji’, c. 1834, monochrome woodblock book illustration to his *Fugaku hyakkei*. The apex of Edo Castle has fish tiles, and here a bird perches on top, denoting peace. Mt Fuji is seen behind.
the latter with gales and typhoons. Pictures of the Wind and Thunder Gods (Fūjin and Raijin) could be put out to placate them at such times. The theme is not very common, though an admired example was produced about 1620 by Tawaraya Sōtatsu (see chapter Six). The circumstances of its commission are unknown, although it seems likely it was made to guard against flood. More certain is that about 1700 Ogata Kōrin borrowed this composition for a work of his own, and then 120 years on again its owner, the shogun’s father, commissioned Sakai Hōitsu to turn it back-to-front, literally and figuratively, and add a representation on the reverse showing a violent squall buffetting summer and autumn grasses (illus. 30); autumn is a time that suffers from complete absence of rain.

The degree to which genuine cause and effect was attributed to pictorial interventions may be debated. It depended on the period, the credulity of the individual and the stake a person had in perpetuation of the myth. But generally, images were not thought of as magically endowed. Few would have maintained that a painting really either caused or prevented events, and a dig in the ribs would be enough to make an owner come clean about why he bought pornography. But this misses the point: the pictures are not about causations, but auspiciousness.

Nitta Iwamatsu was a mid-nineteenth-century daimyo (regional ruler) who loved to paint and made a speciality of cats. Rats stole rice, killed silkworms and were the bane of country life. Iwamatsu handed cat pictures out to his peasantry. Recipients probably regarded them as of little practical help, perhaps even as facile. But on the other hand, a gift from one’s lord was a magnificent...
Sakai Hōitsu, *Summer and Autumn Plants in a Gale*, 1821, pair of folding screens. Hōitsu added these to the reverse of paintings of the Wind and Thunder Gods by Ogata Kōrin. For preservation and display these are now remounted as independent screens.
thing to have. Iwamatsu’s *Cats* would have been prized and perhaps attributed special powers, even among those who observed no decline in rodents. The daimyo lived to see his paintings exported to Europe, where he gained the nickname ‘Baron Cat’.

**Correspondences**

Any painting had a core subject, but it might benefit from ancillary elements, to add to its credibility and appeal. The extra bits were called ‘helpers’ (*jobutsu*), inserted to prevent the main topic from becoming ‘lonely’ (*sabishiki*). Additional elements could also add the season (if missing) or otherwise particularize a topic, to make it relevant to its owner. When Odano Naotake, a painter from the northern state of Akita, returned from study in Edo, he sent his daimyo a *Rock with Lilies*. Rocks connoted stalwart rule. But a single rock might seem ‘lonely’ and too simple a gift for an exalted person. Naotake would have chosen this helper because Akita was famous for its lilies. They flower in early summer, so that might have been the season of the gift. At the same time he sent the lord’s brother a *Rock with Peonies*. The rock also pertained, though as the younger brother, the recipient would never rule (or one hoped not, as it would mean his brother had died without male issue). The works are lost, but Naotake may have painted the second rock smaller. The second picture does not contain the state’s representative flower, and Naotake chose peonies because they were said to be the younger lord’s favourite and, again, they flower in early summer. The daimyo got a picture of government, his brother one of a more general lordly interest. Lilies and peonies were about equal in the pecking order of flowers, but at least the peony was no higher: Naotake could never give the young brother a superior bloom.

Some themes acquired fixed helpers, such that a viewer on seeing a certain subject took it for granted that a certain subsidiary item would appear alongside, and painters included the two as a matter of course. Prescribed links were called ‘correspondences’ (*yoriai*). The rationale for combination might be a pun (as carp and pine tree), a theoretical link (horses and monkeys, or willows), or a mixture of both (chrysanthemum and quail). They might also be much less evident. The tiger’s correspondent was the bamboo. There was some basis for putting the top animal with a top plant. But why did other members of the cat family go with peonies? That combination, almost always adhered to, hailed from China, so perhaps it was accepted on the grounds of precedent, but its justification is entirely elusive.

An intriguing anecdote tells of a shogunal officer sadly unaware of all this. He ordered a *Horses under Peaches* to hang as a diptych with a *Bulls under Cherries*. 
This would make a set displayable throughout the springtime, and could be used as flanks for a central image he already had or would commission later, such as a sage or an ancestral portrait. The artist should have warned him off, but did not do so, perhaps from deference. The man could only blush when he realized his faux pas. As a better-informed colleague mocked,

> a child not three foot tall knows that the themes are ‘Horses under Cherries’ and ‘Bulls under Peaches’! Even if you don’t know the sources of these classic references, when a subject has been established since ancient times, avoiding making a fool of yourself depends on knowing the rules properly!

The poor man took his paintings back to have them adapted.³⁹

The list of correspondences was extensive. In 1623, shortly after his school was nominated official painters to the shogunate, Kano Ikkei produced a list of possible pairings that runs to several pages. Many common subjects had multiple options, maximizing flexibility and allowing a range of seasonal display: peacocks could go with peonies, banana plants, pear blossom or azaleas; sparrows went with gourds, or flew in white clouds, although if cats were chasing them, the cats took precedence, requiring peonies; parrots could only go with plum blossoms, and magpies with bamboo, but sheep could wander in gardens of any type of flower; a painting of a bamboo grove ought to contain cranes, and if you wanted snow-laden pines, it was acceptable, though not necessary, to add monkeys.⁴⁰

Ikkei’s near contemporary, Tosa Mitsuoki, head of the court’s official painting school, advised care because, since many themes came from China, it was necessary to depict the continental variety of a plant. A lion should never be shown with Japanese peonies; neither should Japanese cherries be put with mynah birds or parakeets.⁴¹

As often in the period, comic versifiers cast a humorous gloss on social conventions, and their capacity to trap the unwary. If an inept painter needed to clarify his production:

> It’s not a cat
> And as a proof
> He paints in a bamboo.⁴²

Bamboo meant tigers. Cats had peonies.
One shogun is recorded as sending the court a painting of a dragon with cherry blossoms and maple leaves. This gift must have been a triptych, with the highest living form in the centre, and hanging outside it plants emblematizing spring and autumn. Those were the two pleasantest seasons and conventionally could be used to denote the full year, where it might crowd the arrangement to include summer and winter too (the more gruelling seasons). To be noted, though, is that these (now lost) works are not identified as Dragon between Cherry Blossoms and Maple Leaves, but Dragon between Mt Yoshino and the River Tatsuta: the cherries and maples were not generic, but tied to specific spots. It was common knowledge that Yoshino was the best site for celebrating the beauty of cherries, and Tatsuta for red leaves. Paintings of the two in a pair (with or without a central motif) are legion across many formats (illus. 31). But just how did a viewer know, on encountering such a work, that the depictions were indeed of those sites, when so many places are known for their cherries or foliage?

Yoshino and Tatsuta dominate illustration of cherries or maples because of the empirical conclusion that they were the best places to enjoy those aspects of nature. But more, it was also thanks to puns: *tatsu* means ‘dragon’ and *yoshi* means ‘good’. Because of this, the assumption was that any painting of autumn leaves, absent other particularizations, was a painting of Tatsuta, and of cherries was, by default, Yoshino. The lie of the actual landscapes was simply not germane, and did not need elaborating to make the painting clear. Neither painter nor viewer probably knew how the places looked anyway, and likely had never been there.

Since Yoshino meant seasonal cherries and Tatsuta meant autumn leaves, it was impermissible to paint either in the ‘wrong’ season. The real trees were always there, as those who lived nearby, or travelled past, knew. But to paint them not in their best array would be absurd – or worse, it would be inauspicious. These are not, then, landscape paintings, but seasonal pictures offered via assumptions made about landscape.

Places accepted as exemplars of a certain timed natural feature or features were known as the ‘famous place’ (*nadokoro, meisho or meishō*) for them, and were the assumed location of any picture on the theme. Take the box above with deer; it also has vague autumn grasses (see illus. 11). It has to illustrate Kasuga, near Kyoto, since that was the ‘famous place’ for deer among autumn plants, never mind that, in reality, other places had them too. A picture purporting to be of Yoshino not set in spring, or of Tatsuta not in autumn, or of Kasuga not in autumn and without its deer, would be a picture of somewhere else.
A classic, pre-Edo text explains this with reference to poetry, though the statement holds for painting:

If asked where Mt Yoshino is, you should answer thus: when someone writes a poem [or makes a picture] about cherry blossoms, they necessarily refer to Mt Yoshino. If they write [or paint] about maple leaves, then they must refer to the River Tatsuta. That’s all there is to it. It boots nothing whether the places are in Ise or Hyūga, or anywhere else, and it is to no purpose to enquire where they might actually be.45

There are other examples. A regular autumn theme was *Tall Grasses*, seen as Kasuga, though without the deer. This made sense, as a seasonal theme, showing the full height after summer, before dying back in winter. A painting of *Autumn Grasses* (without deer), though, was a painting of Musashino, that being the ‘famous place’ for them. Just grass, however, was ‘lonely’, so Musashino was ‘helped’: the Harvest Moon is the year’s brightest, so a moon was regularly included; Mt Fuji is visible from Musashino, so it might be added too (illus. 32).

Not all ‘famous places’ took their strength from a pun (Musashino did not), but still acquired their fame, lexically, not through the toponym but through external writing. This brings us to the concept of the ‘poetic pillow’ (*uta-makura*).46 Peerless verses in the vernacular idiom (*waka*) had been handed down for centuries, and learning them was central to education. It is a peculiarity of *waka* to embed poetic sentiment in named geographical sites from within the Japanese archipelago. The poet may or not have gone there. Often a pun, not a trip, triggered the sentiment, while non-punning places gained their associations by dint of repetition. A ‘poetic pillow’ was the same as a ‘famous place’, but stressed that a notable verse or verses had engendered the site’s meaning.

Musashino was the ‘famous place’ for grasses because the twelfth-century Regent Chancellor Kujō Yoshitsune had composed a *waka* linking them, as all people should know. He also invoked the moon, rising through the grasses,
which explains Musashino’s standardized ‘helper’ (though he said nothing about Mt Fuji):

At my destination
In Musashino,
Where the skies become one,
From a field of grasses
Comes forth the shadow of the moon.47

Yoshitsune had probably never made Musashino his destination, for it was very far from Kyoto. But he created an image of the open skies of the vast moorland (the Kyoto region is hilly) and the bright moon emerging from the empty fields, resulting in an admired composition that, ever after, adhered to the place and accorded it seasonal and emotional signification.

The great medieval poet and monk Saigyō did wander the landscape, and many ‘pillows’ had an original visit by him. It was Saigyō who made Kasuga ‘famous’ for autumn deer, in not the first but perhaps the best-known verse on it, composed in 1218:

Mt Kasuga,
Soaring high.
Over the autumn mist
I hear
The cries of deer.48
Again, deer mean autumn.

Many sites had a foundational verse, whether the first, or just the most widely known. Fame gave rise to emulation, and later poets consciously reworked the original in a practice known as ‘taking a verse’ (honka-dori). It was unnecessary to visit the place (though there was no ban on doing so); what was required was to know the existing body of appreciation, and be inspired by it. If a person had an emotion they desired to communicate, or if they just wanted to hone their poetic skills, they did so via a previously recognized gambit, enmeshing their feeling into a history of sentiment associated with a given place. That was regarded as better than striking out with untried novelties, which only the boldest would venture. Paintings that capture ‘famous places’ are, therefore, seasonal paintings, but also literary ones.

Not far from Kyoto is a town called Uji. It was visited, being on a major road, and was no doubt charming (its tea is tasty). But more important is that Uji sounds like ushi, meaning sadness. Uji earned its place on the literary map because of this and, being sad, Uji was inescapably autumnal, since the dwindling light and chill makes that season doleful. Deer cries are said to sound plaintive, hence poetic mention of them only in autumn. Spring was the reverse, fluorescent and ‘good’ (yoshi). Uji could only be a ‘poetic pillow’ for sad sentiment, and it became about the best known.

There were no botanical or zoological specifics at Uji, but there was Japan’s most ancient bridge. A bridge suggested passage onward, and thus passing and change, also sad. In the classical Heian Period (794–1185), the elite possessed
waterfront villas in Uji for when Kyoto was airless and hot. Ladies would remove there, and men would visit, as their functions permitted. This might have made Uji a summer ‘pillow’, but its placename disallowed that. Name and season joined because families returned to Kyoto when summer was over; to be still at Uji in autumn was to be abandoned.

The foundational verse was from the ninth century and told of the plight of a woman left behind at Uji Bridge, her tragedy increasing with the lengthening nights and the realization that she is not going to be recalled. The anonymous poet imagines it is he who has abandoned her:

On the straw mats  
Spreading out half the bedclothes  
Tonight as well  
Does she wait for me?  
The lady by Uji Bridge.49

Other writers hung their expositions of sadness on this. A century later, Murasaki Shikibu needed a place to set a young woman’s suicide in the Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari; c. 1000) and she naturally worked the plot so that the event took place at Uji, and that also meant setting it in autumn.50 If Uji was autumnal, then the moon could well be referred to, hence the second most celebrated verse, of c. 1200, by Fujiwara no Teika. It ‘takes’ the original verse and adapts it, using a startling transferred epithet:

33 Anon. Uji Bridge, or Willows and Bridge, early 17th century, pair of folding screens, ink, colour gold and copper on paper. Several versions of the composition are known. Some scholars question whether it depicts Uji, but it is the most likely location, and there were no other wooden bridges in the repertory of ‘poetic pillows’.
On the straw mats,
As the autumn wind,
During the cold night through which she waits, wears on,
The lady by Uji Bridge
Spreads out half the moonlight.\textsuperscript{51}

Pictures of such sites are called ‘famous place paintings’ (\textit{meisho-e}), oddly not ‘poetic-pillow paintings’, which might be more logical, and a representative Edo-Period one shows Uji Bridge and the half-moon (illus. 33). It also shows gamions (bank retainers), to indicate the current’s lethal flow, and willow trees, since rivers have them, and whose trailing branches were thought reminiscent of distraught women’s unkempt hair. Other paintings add charcoal boats and grazing horses, which were really to be seen at Uji. Human figures are not included, for dress and trappings would specify an era. ‘Poetic pillows’ and famous place paintings are transhistorical.

Fuji has been mentioned above, and in discussing famous places it will not do to neglect more mention of it. Fuji is the world’s most depicted mountain, and perhaps its most stunning.\textsuperscript{52} It was sadly disfigured by an eruption in 1707, which so alarmed the shogun, who felt his virtue was impugned by this (auspicious occurrences prove good rule, baleful ones misrule), that he declared it ‘the worst calamity in several hundred years’.\textsuperscript{53} But Fuji remained and remains an awe-inspiring sight, and the force of its puns was unaffected: \textit{fu} means ‘not’ and \textit{ji} means ‘two’, hence ‘peerless’; \textit{ji} (or \textit{shi}) can also mean ‘death’, so \textit{fuji} is ‘immortal’.
Verses on Fuji accumulated over time, but a key one was by Saigyō:

In the sky
Filled with Fuji’s smoke
Blowing in the wind,
I know not where they go
My wanderings.54

He juxtaposed the impermanence of volcanic smoke with Fuji’s eternal presence. The translation suggests a pun that Saigyō could not have envisaged, though might have appreciated: wanderings/wonderings.

Fuji is far from Kyoto, but could be widely viewed and on clear days was unavoidable from the shogunal city. In the Edo Period it was exceedingly painted. As eternal, Fuji was right for New Year, and it became normal to put out a Mt Fuji then. By extension it became incorrect to display a Mt Fuji at any other time, without an overriding justification for doing so. The expression ‘Summer Fuji’ (natsu no fujī) meant stripped, or bare, like the mountain without its snow. Sometimes one might want an image of that, though it was rare. As a picture of Fuji is a celebration of New Year, the ‘triple dawn’ (mitsu no asa) could be added to keep the mountain company, with the sun rising joyfully on the new day, month and year (illus. 34).

Most Edo-Period painting was intended to be beautiful. This does not mean that it was beautiful: it means that being beautiful was its purpose. Not all art is so. Its beauty provided auras that pervaded space beyond the painting’s bounds,
making the whole home, city, region and ultimately realm auspicious. Sentiments were validated by ancient conventions, predominantly Chinese, which meant they were both ancestral and shared among all known countries. Auspicious imagery is a truly astoundingly huge corpus of work. But with the turning of the seasons, emotions pass through fluctuations. The human condition is enriched by the sum of these, including sadder ones. Throughout history people had known this truth and had developed responses that later ages learned from, memorized and replicated in words and images. These were lodged in Japanese poetry and associated with places that, somehow, accorded with them and deepened, layer on layer, with the passing years.