

Edo Avant Garde
Introducing the Edo era: Why did Japanese artists create so much innovative art?
Part I

The 17th century was the era of Baroque art in Europe. Catholic countries such as Spain, Portugal and France celebrated Catholicism with lavish displays of architecture, painting, and sculpture in their churches. This was also the era of smaller scale paintings for use in private homes, particularly in Protestant countries such as the Dutch Republic. At the same time, Europe's monarchs used art to display their power and prestige. This was the time of Louis XIV and the commissioning of Versailles, Peter Paul Rubens, Rembrandt.

In 1615, Japan entered a new era with the beginning of the **Edo** period (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: "eh-DOUGH"), named after the capital city that is now **Tokyo** (東京, pronounced: "TOE-kyoh"). It is also called the **Tokugawa** period (徳川, pronounced: "toe-KU-GAH-wah") after the military family that ruled the country during this time. The Tokugawa developed a hierarchical system following Neo-Confucian thought whereby the populace were divided into classes: the military ranked the highest, followed by the farmers (who fed the country), then the artisans (who made things for the country), and the merchants on the bottom. Others, such as monks, nuns, doctors, actors, courtesans, prostitutes, and "outcasts" were considered outside this system. The highest-ranking Tokugawa military figure was the **Shogun** (*[shōgun]*, 将軍, pronounced: "SHOW-guhn"), who controlled the country by assigning territories to high-ranking lords (**daimyo** [*daimyō*], 大名, pronounced: "DIE-me-yoh") according to whether or not their families had supported the Tokugawa rise to power. Regardless of allegiance, all daimyo were required to maintain residences in their home districts as well as lavish residences in Edo. Their families resided in Edo, where they were required to stay year 'round. The daimyo were required to participate in alternate attendance between their two homes, and to spend fabulous sums on the processions of their retinue (**samurai** [*samurai*], 侍 pronounced: "sah-MOO-rye") between Edo and their home areas on a biannual or annual basis (the time frame varied).

In the arts, the classical culture of the **Kyoto** court (京都, pronounced: "KYOH-toe") was adopted by the ruling military families (daimyo or "great lords" and their retinue), as a cultivation of the arts of war on the one hand and the arts of peace on the other. Since the daimyo needed to provide furnishings for both home castles or mansions and the Edo residences, and to participate in artistic activities such as the practice of tea or the art of **Noh** theater (also written as *nō*, 能楽堂, pronounced: "NO"), there was great demand for artisans of all types. The consolidation of daimyo retainers, artisans, and merchants into castle towns led to a rapid urbanization and further rise of the merchant and artisan classes. Simultaneously, patronage of the arts broadly speaking spread to the rest of the populace along with the spread of literacy and a sharing of cultural tastes.

As the merchants, artisans, wealthy farmers, doctors, and others integrated the shared cultural knowledge and history of the court and military into their own lives, they also adopted architecture styles that previously would only have been affordable for the very elite. Architectural features such as folding screens (*byōbu*, 屏風, pronounced: "BEYOO-boo"), sliding doors (*fusuma*, 襖, pronounced: "fuh-SUE-ma") and alcoves called *tokonoma* (床の間,

pronounced: “toe-KOH-NO-mah”) all became formats for innovative paintings that are featured in the documentary *Edo Avant Garde*.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, art in Europe changed dramatically, as the Baroque period gave way to Rococo, the Enlightenment, Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Impressionism, and the PreRaphaelites. Paintings created solely within studios gradually were supplemented by the practice of painters in Europe and the U.S. sketching more from life and then even painting outdoors during the latter half of the 19th century. Academic painting began to contrast with *avant garde* painting, with the accepted historical and didactic subjects giving way to more genre scenes, landscapes based more heavily on studies from life, color experimentations, and different styles ranging from the Impressionists to the British Raphaelite movement and the American landscape painters. The Japanese arts scene was no different in changing rapidly and the interchange of ideas and images between Japanese artists and European and American artists only increased during the 19th century. Japanese artists began to look to European art and science for new ideas and inspiration in the 18th century, and the opening of Japan to trade with all of Europe and the U.S. after 1854 resulted in a flood of artistic influences (as well as social, cultural, political, etc.) moving back and forth between these three areas of the world.

Creativity and Innovation:

The Edo period is particularly noted for the flourishing of creativity and innovation in the arts and, more specifically for the purpose of the documentary *Edo Avant Garde*, in painting. But the artistic approach of the painters in this film was different in important respects from their contemporaries in Europe while, at the same time, sharing some similar characteristics. In both Europe and Japan over the course of these centuries, painters responded to new insights and developments in the sciences, a broadening of the patronage for art, and a move toward incorporating scenes from life—lives of the farmers and commoners, sketches made in the field, images of urban life—into their works. Painters and other artists in both Europe and Japan also typically went through an apprenticeship to learn their art, and part of the study involved doing various chores around the studio, copying the models given by the master teachers, and assisting in group projects for large commissions, among other similarities. Only once one was sufficiently proficient in the technical skills of the craft and had put in the requisite time of training could one then be considered a professional and able to develop his/her own style and clientele.

For the Edo period painter, creativity in painting, as well as in other arts, took a number of forms. Mundane objects, animals, and plants became worthy of representation in paintings (e.g., a turnip or puppies), appeared on family crests, and in the new *haiku* style of poetry (俳句, pronounced: “hi-EE-ku”). Scenes of everyday people and representations of daily life—farmers, tea house girls, laborers—became popular in the arts as early as the 17th century. In Europe and the U.S., genre painting developed as a major subject somewhat later, particularly during the 19th century. And the formats mentioned above of screens and sliding doors forced Japanese painters to adopt compositional strategies that were different from their European counterparts. Painters designed compositions that took advantage of the changing shape of the format, the position of the viewer, and the use of the format in a room. For example, folding screen designs were created with the folds and angles of the screens in mind, so that a view from one angle of a room would be

different from what you would see from another angle of the room. (You will notice numerous instances of this in the documentary.)

One of the most significant innovations in Japan was a cultivation of “playfulness,” or the art of play in arts of all types. Playfulness intersected with an increasingly shared knowledge and cultural base among people of all classes. In other words, the cultural and artistic heritages of the nobility that had previously spread to the military classes were, in the 16th and 17th centuries, disseminated among the merchants and artisans of the cities, and from there outward to reach farms and hamlets all over the archipelago. Thus, a visual or poetic reference to the **Heian** period (平安, 794-1185 CE, pronounced: “HEY-yawn”) collection of poems and narratives called *The Tale of Ise* (伊勢物語, pronounced: “EE-say”) would be suggested in the pattern of a kimono or a scene on a folding screen, and the patron, be they merchant or samurai, would immediately understand the reference. (See the accompanying essay “The Art of Play in Japanese Art.”)

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Recommended further reading:

Christine Guth, *Art of Edo Japan: The Artist and the City 1615-1868* (Yale University Press, 2010)

Stephen Addiss, *How to Look at Japanese Art* (Echo Point Books and Media, 2015)