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

The Art of Play in Japanese Art[i]

One concept in Japanese arts that runs like a silken thread through Japanese history is the concept of play or playfulness. This dates all the way back to the very beginnings of Japanese creative production, in **Jōmon** pottery (縄文, ca. 10,000 BCE. to ca. 250 CE, pronounced: "JOE-mown"), and the later earthenware known as ***haniwa*** (埴輪, pronounced: "ha-KNEE-wah") that were arranged around ancient large-scale imperial tombs (Kofun period, 古墳, ca. 250-552 CE). This is an artistic concept that should resonate with K-12 and undergraduate students today.

Haniwa, female shrine attendant, 6th century
Minneapolis Institute of Art

Very early on, Japanese demonstrated a playful and often irreverent approach to life, religion and art. Early Buddhist temples such as **Tōshōdaiji** (唐招提寺, pronounced: "TOE-SHOW-die-jee") in **Nara** (奈良, pronounced: "NAH-rah") contain graffiti hidden at the joints of pedestals for statues or underneath wooden surfaces (8th century, Nara period). These graffiti were probably painted by men assigned to apply color to the statues in the temples, and consist of caricatures of the men themselves, animals, mountains, rabbits and frogs, and even sexually oriented motifs. It

appears that during their "coffee breaks," these artisans spent some time scribbling (and probably chuckling as they secreted the graffiti in out of the way places on the Buddhist images).

Jumping forward several centuries, one of the most well-known examples of playfulness tinged with satire is the "Frolicking Animals" scrolls (***Chōjū giga***, 鳥獣戯画, pronounced: "CHOH-JEW | GEE-gaah") from the middle of the 12th century. Images include a frog dressed as a Buddha sitting on his lotus petal throne, monkeys and rabbits battling or engaged in contests, and monkeys, rabbits, frogs, foxes and deer at play and/or dressed as courtiers or Buddhist monks. Irreverent? Yes, but also possibly a way for the artist monks themselves to point out hypocrisy and inconsistencies among the monks and priests themselves. The term ***giga*** (戯画, pronounced: "GEE-gaah") means caricature and the element of satire often embedded into *giga* came to be known as ***kyōga*** (satirical pictures, 狂画, pronounced: "KYOH-gah").

From early centuries, the nobility enjoyed anything lighthearted, new or fun, another thread running through Japanese cultural history that continues even today with the passion for new gadgets and inventions in Japan (especially among young Japanese). The world's first psychological novel, *The Tale of Genji* (***Genji monogatari***, 源氏物語, pronounced: "GEHN-jee | moe-no-GAH-tah-ree") by lady-in-waiting **Murasaki Shikibu** (紫 式部, 978-1016 CE, pronounced: "moo-RAH-SAH-key | she-KEY-boo"), uses the word ***okashi*** (可笑しい, pronounced: "oh-KA-shee") over and over to describe things that Murasaki thought were amusing, funny, or new.

During the time of the **Edo** period (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: "eh-DOUGH"), which is the focus of the documentary *Edo Avant Garde*, playfulness and play became a major past time. Group activities such as joint poetry creation parties, group painting and calligraphy gatherings, and the popularity of paintings and prints with playful and satirical themes were common, particularly in the rapidly growing urban areas. Formally "mundane" subject matter such as crows became mainstream in everything from ***haiku*** poetry (俳句, pronounced: "hi-EE-ku") to screen paintings. The term ***mitate*** (見立て, pronounced: "me-TAH-tay") was coined to express a double vision as when a picture of Japanese courtesans spreading cloth mirrored a famous Chinese painting of noblewomen doing the same. *Mitate* also occurred when the normal was turned upside down: the Buddhist figure **Daruma** (達磨, pronounced: "dah-ROO-mah" or **Bodhidharma**) appeared alongside a courtesan, with her wearing his robe and he wearing her kimono. Playful, yet making a point about the profane becoming the religious and the religious becoming the profane.

Parody was also common and intersected with *mitate*, as when a famous and revered poet would be painted as a comical beggar. Visual tricks and oblique references to commonly understood stories or images gave artists material for playful conversations between the artists and their audience, with the painting or print as vehicle.

One of the best examples of this type of play is **Itō Jakuchū**'s (伊藤若冲, 1716-1800 CE, pronounced: "ee-TOE | JAH-ku-chew") *Vegetable **Parinivana*** (Kyoto National Museum, 野菜涅槃図, pronounced: "pa-REE-NEAR-vahn"). This large nearly six feet high hanging scroll is painted in monochrome ink and filled with fruit and around fifty varieties of vegetables, all

parodying the position of grief-stricken humans and animals at the final nirvana of the historic Buddha, **Shakyamuni** (釈迦, pronounced: "shah-KYA-moo-knee"). A large **daikon** (Japanese radish, 大根 ,pronounced: "die-kon") lying on top of a basket takes the place of Shakyamuni on a bench. Jakuchū's own background likely informs this painting, as he operated a wholesale vegetable shop until he was 40, was a faithful follower of Buddhism, and a vegetarian.

Three examples from the film and some explanation of how these works are playful:

Nagasawa Rosetsu (長沢芦雪, 1754 –1799 CE,
pronounced: "nah-GAH-SAH-wah | ROW-set-sue")
Puppies and *Chinese Children Playing with an Elephant*

The image of children spilling all over a large elephant, an animal not native to Japan, is easily understood as playful and even funny. Puppies are by nature cute and endearing. But enlarging a subject like puppies or an elephant to fill the entire space of the composition is something new and fresh. Painting the subjects with quick ink brushstrokes and washes, instead of carefully delineating every detail, is also a way to make the animals and children appear more lively and playful.

Rosetsu
Puppies
Shōeidō Gallery (pronounced: "SHOW-A-E-dough")

Elephants are not native to Japan but had been seen on rare occasions, as they were brought in as gifts for the **Tokugawa** rulers (徳川氏, pronounced: "toe-KU-GAH-wah"). Below is the left screen of a pair of folding screens (***byōbu***, 屏風, pronounced: "BEYOO-boo"). The right screen is also in the Minneapolis Institute of Art and can be viewed online: https://new.artsmia.org

Style of Nagasawa Rosetsu
Chinese Children Playing with an Elephant (left screen of a pair of screens)
Minneapolis Institute of Art

Soga Shōhaku (曾我蕭白, 1730-1800 CE, pronounced: "so-GAH | SHOW-HA-ku"), *Horses and Cranes* and *Lions at the Stone Bridge of Mount **Tiantai*** (pronounced: "ten-EHN-tie")

Eccentric and bizarre, Shōhaku's work combines a knowledge of Chinese precedents (of a serious nature!) with strange and odd facial expressions (the lion's face, for example), eccentric brushwork, and dynamic brushwork. Students could be asked to do some research on the subjects of his paintings and then come up with some ideas of their own from their own cultural knowledge. Cranes are symbolic of several things in Chinese and Japanese painting, but horses? And what is the connection with the lions to the Chinese mountain of Tiantai?

Shōhaku
Lions at the Stone Bridge of Mount Tiantai
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Shōhaku
Horses and Cranes
Los Angeles Museum of Art

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Director, University of Pittsburgh National Consortium for Teaching About Asia coordinating site

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