

Edo Avant Garde

Formats and Techniques: How did Edo Period Japanese Live with Art?

Module 4

INTRODUCTION

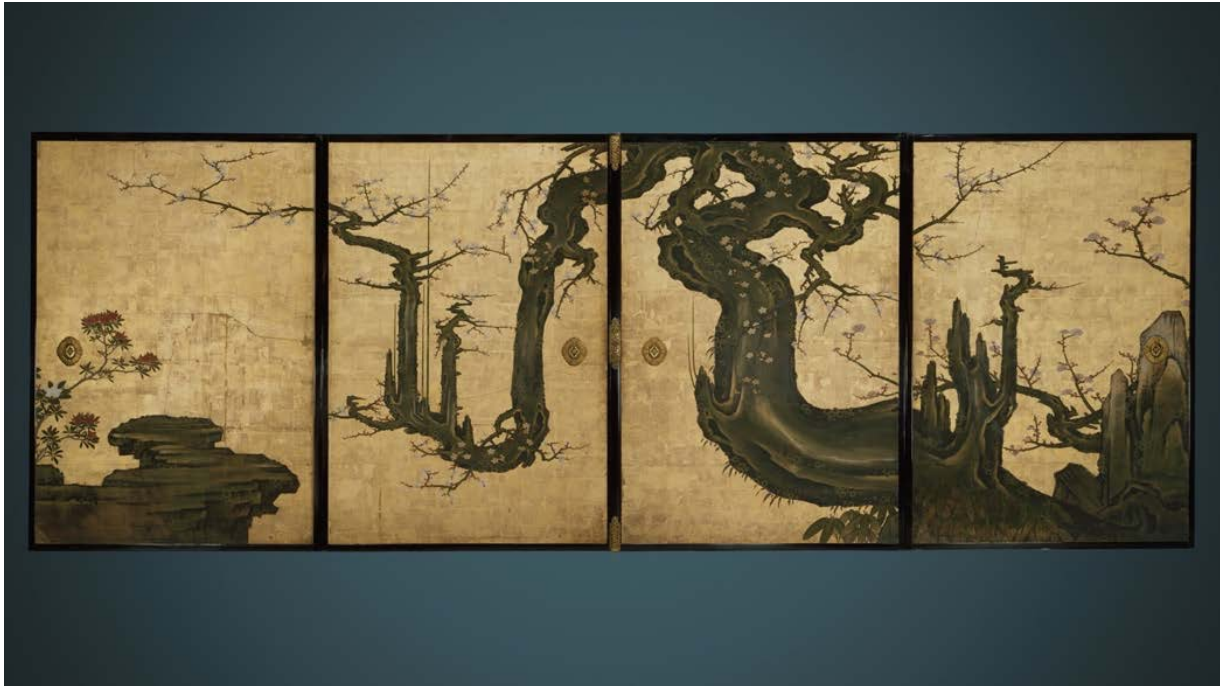
Part 1: Formats in Tokugawa/Edo period painting

The film *Edo Avant Garde* showcases three major painting formats of the **Edo** period (江戸 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: “eh-DOUGH”): the *fusuma* (襖, pronounced: “fuh-SUE-mah”), the *byōbu* (屏風, pronounced: “BEYOH-boo”), and the *kakemono* (掛物, pronounced: “kah-KEH-moh-no”). *Fusuma* are sliding doors constructed from paper and wood that separate one room from another. *Byōbu* are folding screens that come in singles or pairs, can be moved around within a room, and are used to separate space or partition off an area. *Kakemono* are hanging scrolls, used within alcoves or hung on the walls to decorate an interior space. Originally used by high-ranking military, the Imperial family, and Buddhist temples, the use of screens, sliding doors, and hanging scrolls filtered down to wealthy merchants and farmers during the latter half of the Edo period. Thus, these formats became common features of architectural design for anyone with enough wealth to afford them.

These three formats still exist today and are used in architectural spaces where a pre-modern or “traditional” look is desired. In a country where space is at a premium, the use of these formats saved space and enabled room dividers to close or open rooms without a swinging door intruding into narrow hallways or other areas. The *fusuma* or sliding door is a useful device to change the size and shape of a room. Large spaces can be divided off with the doors to create more intimate rooms or opened to create one large room. Contemporary variants of the traditional sliding door are also used in place of swinging doors for storage areas such as the storage of *futon* (布団 pronounced: “fuu-TOHN”), Japanese bedding; these are often wooden doors but can also be made of paper and wood as in the past. The sliding door format is often used to partition space and create privacy in places like restaurants, particularly those with small private rooms for diners.

***Fusuma* (sliding doors, 襖)**

The use of *fusuma* and the type of paintings (if any) on *fusuma* were dictated by function. In castles and mansions of the elite military during the Edo period, *fusuma* could be used to turn several rooms into one large banquet or meeting hall. The outer or public areas of a castle, Buddhist temple building, or imperial or military mansions would contain *fusuma* paintings that spoke to the power and prestige of the owner. Rich colors, the use of gold or silver leaf, Chinese and Confucian scenes, and images ripe with symbolism were employed in these areas to impress the visitor and even intimidate adversaries.



Kano Sansetsu
Old Plum (1646)
Metropolitan Museum of Art

A case in point is the sliding doors by **Kano Sansetsu** (狩野山雪, 1589-1651 CE, pronounced: “kah-NO | SAHN-set-sue”) in the image above. The plum tree is known in East Asia for blooming in very early spring before leafing out. The image of a gnarled and ancient tree with new blossoms symbolizes renewal. The combination of ink, color, gold, and gold leaf on paper typifies the type of panels that would adorn a public area in a building. These panels were originally in a Zen temple in **Kyoto** (京都, pronounced: “KYOH-toe”), the **Tenshōin** (天祥院 pronounced: “TEHN-show-eeen”). Sliding doors such as these might have another painting on the reverse of the panels. In this case, the reverse was a painting of the Chinese Eight Daoist Immortals that formed the wall of the room adjacent to this room. The paintings have been separated and the Chinese theme now resides in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (see detail of this side of the door below).



Kano Sansetsu
Detail from the Daoist Immortals sliding door panels (1646)
Minneapolis Institute of Arts

A particularly good example of how the architecture dictated the format of paintings is the **Ninomaru** Palace (二の丸御殿, pronounced: “knee-NO-MAH-rue”) at **Nijō** Castle (二条城 pronounced: “KNEE-joe”), an early 17th century complex that housed the shogun (将軍 [*shōgun*], pronounced: “SHOW-guhn”) **Tokugawa Iemitsu** (徳川家光, 1604-1651 CE, pronounced: “toe-KU-GAH-wah | e-A-meet-sue”). The palace is located in Kyoto and is a classic example of the interior decoration of the residence of a high-ranking military ruler.



Sliding doors preserved at the Nijō Castle Painting Gallery

Important Cultural Property

The paintings adorning the walls of this residence were created by **Kano Tan'yū** (狩野探幽 1602-1674 CE, pronounced: “kah-NO | TAN-you”) and his studio, when Tan'yū was only twenty-four years old. Studio/atelier productions are today credited to the head of the atelier, but these paintings were group productions. The head of a studio would design the overall composition and then assistants and students would fill in specific areas as assigned. The master painter, in this case Tan'yū, would handle the details or sections that required the most skill. Thus, we see in paintings by Tan'yū and other masters a distinct individual style; that is, Tan'yū's strokes, compositions, colors, and other elements of style are recognizable as his or else by his atelier.

Outer rooms at the Nijō Castle that served as waiting areas for guests and messengers were decorated with tigers and bamboo in color over gold leaf. Other reception rooms contained bird and flower images, also in color over gold. These images carried symbolism that originated in China. For the Japanese military, the pairing of tiger and bamboo symbolized power and strength. Predominant at this castle, however, was a series of huge pines in the Grand Audience Hall, shown in the image above. The meaning of this repeating theme was multilayered. In China, pines meant longevity. Here, huge pines stretching across entire surfaces signaled the shogun's legitimate right to rule, his power and prestige, his military strength.



Tigers and Bamboo sliding doors preserved at the Nijō Castle Painting Gallery
Important Cultural Property

<https://nijo-jocastle.city.kyoto.lg.jp/introduction/tenji/?lang=en>

More intimate rooms, where the shogun met with allies, contained smaller images, particularly various trees such as pine, cherry, and maple as well as Chinese landscapes. These would be painted in ink with light touches of color and some gold paint. This style would be more soothing to the eyes and thus were suitable for rooms used for relaxation or private meetings. Deeper into the palace were bedrooms and other personal rooms where the quieter style of ink and light color

would usually be predominant. An example from the film might be the *Goose and Reeds*, below, which is a folding screen or *byōbu*.

For more, see: <https://nijo-jocastle.city.kyoto.lg.jp/introduction/tenji/?lang=en>



Maruyama Ōkyo (円山応挙, 1733-1795 CE, pronounced: “ma-RUH-YAH-MAH | OH-kyoh”) *Goose and Reeds* (right screen of a pair; 1774)
Metropolitan Museum of Art

***Byōbu* (folding screens, 屏風)**

Byōbu were useful in dividing rooms up and sectioning off parts of a room. They could also be placed behind the lord of a castle or an important guest as a sign of the status of the person. *Byōbu* were multi-paneled screens, hinged together with paper hinges that were interlocking and overlapping. They were not meant to be seen as one so often views them in museum settings, flat against the wall. They were meant to be viewed from different angles: from either side, from directly in front, from seated or standing positions, and from a distance as one enters a room. Because of this, painters thought about how the folds could be used to enhance or change a design, providing a slightly different picture depending on the angle from which the viewer saw the painting. This format encouraged creative thinking in design, and the film shows numerous examples of multi-paneled screens.



Maruyama Ōkyo
Rooster (1770s)
Private Collection

Kakemono (掛物)

Kakemono are hanging scrolls that were used in *tokonoma* (alcoves, 床の間, pronounced: “toe-KOH-NO-mah”). A *kakemono* is a painting or calligraphy on silk or paper that is mounted on a flexible backing so that it can be rolled up. There is a roller at the top from which the painting hangs, and a slenderer rod at the bottom to weigh the painting down. Paintings were mounted surrounded by various kinds of silk and other materials, often in different patterns. There were a number of different styles used, depending on whether the hanging scroll was produced in China, Japan or Korea, or what the subject of the painting might be, just to name a couple of factors. The **Itō Jakuchū** (伊藤若冲, 1716-1800 CE, pronounced: “ee-TOE | JAH-ku-chew”) hanging scroll on the next page from the film shows a typical style of mounting.



Itō Jakuchū
Moonlight Sun Through Plum Blossoms (1755)
Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Penn State Center for Global Studies has a website with more details on *kakemono*: <https://cgs.la.psu.edu/teaching-resources/k-12-resources-1/cgs-k-12-curricular-materials/high-school-level-8-12/japanese-painting-and-calligraphy-on-scrolls-1/akejiku-kakemono-wall-scroll-painting>

Hanging scrolls are meant to be temporarily displayed, often corresponding to the season or occasion. Thus, *kakemono* were rolled up and stored in wooden boxes until needed. They were very often used in the tea house, accompanied perhaps by a flower arrangement or object such as a Chinese bronze vessel. The display would be kept simple, however. An early spring (late winter in the Gregorian calendar) painting might include flowering plums in the snow; mid-spring might be Japanese cherry blossoms; summer could be Japanese iris (*Iris ensata*) or hydrangeas; fall often was represented by the moon and maple leaves; winter would be suggested by barren trees, winter peonies (a specific variety artificially cultivated for winter bloom) or pines in the snow.



Itō Jakuchū
Moonlight Sun Through Plum Blossoms (1755) [closer detail]
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Part 2: Material Culture and the Techniques of Painting

Paintings were normally done on either silk or paper during the Edo period. Raw, nonglossy silk was preferred for this purpose. A type of transparent or semi-transparent glue called *nikawa* (膠, pronounced: “knee-KAAHWAAH”) was used as both an adhesive and as a binder. *Nikawa* was an animal glue made from various parts such as bones and tendons of animals or fish that were boiled in water to produce a gelatin. After excess water evaporated, there would remain a jelly-

like glue. This could be used to adhere pigments and bind them to a surface. It was also used as a binder for the white pigment, *gofun* (胡粉, pronounced: “go-FUUN”), and mixed with alum to make a sizing for paper.

Brushes used in Japan were ultimately derived from the type of brush used in writing in China. Writing was considered a high art in East Asia, and the strokes that one learns for calligraphy are often the basic strokes learned for painting. These were round brushes, although some flat brushes were also used for certain effects, such as in the depiction of rain or rocks. Handles could be of wood (including lacquered wood) or bamboo or other materials. Animal hair was used for the brushes and might come from deer, rabbit, squirrel, or other wild animals. A Japanese painter in the Edo period would typically work on the floor, with the painting lying flat on the floor of the room. As with calligraphy, the painter holds the brush vertically, as opposed to the slanted position with which Americans hold their paint brushes.

The quality of line was of paramount importance, and a painting or even the painter’s spirit was critiqued on the basis of the strength and skill of the brush strokes. This is one of the main reasons for Japanese paintings emphasizing linear qualities, and why the creativity of the Edo period included moving away from the predominance of line to use of “boneless” painting (no outlines) as well as techniques that suggested light sources, such as shadows and highlights.

The use of *sumi* (墨, pronounced: “sue-ME”) or ink in East Asian painting is also a signature feature. Ink was produced from soot obtained through burning plants such as pine or else from burned lamp oil, and then molded into solid form using glue that was obtained from animal parts such as deer horn. Perfume, such as musk perfume, was added as well. A stick of ink is rubbed in a small amount of water on an ink stone until liquid ink is produced. Ink changes color and texture over time, and liquid ink that has been left overnight has a different color and sheen compared to freshly made liquid ink. *Sumi* is considered a color in Japanese painting; Japanese had a deep appreciation for the various shades and tones of ink. Even the character of the ink stone has an effect on the quality of the black produced.

One video on YouTube that shows the process of rubbing an ink stick onto the ink stone is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zczJAF7A7Wk>

Paint is water based in these Edo period paintings, and there were a number of different methods for color painting. Light washes of color and the use of gold is one such method. Another method involved repeated coats of carefully laid paint; this method was often used for the screen paintings that we see in the film *Edo Avant Garde*. Other painting methods included a (1) regular application of color without the multiple coats, (2) the *mokkotsu* (没骨, pronounced: “moh-COAT-sue”) or boneless style, (3) a type of painting in which dark brown color or light ink is applied over dark ink lines, and, of course, (4) painting only with ink.

Another technique mentioned in these modules and the film is *tarashikomi* (溜込, pronounced: “ta-RAH-SHE-koh-me”), a painting technique of dropping color or ink onto wet paint and allowing the dropped color to bleed outward and move on its own. This technique requires a fine balance between control and non-control of the paint, and can create the impression of moss or lichen, for example, on trees. The detail below shows the technique when painted on silk.



Detail from **Sakai Hōitsu** (酒井抱一 1761-1828 CE, pronounced: “SAH-kai | HOH-eet-sue”) *Wisteria, Lotus and Maple* (early 1800s)
MOA, Atami, Japan

According to Henry P. Bowie, who studied painting and the Japanese language in Japan during the late 19th century, colors were mixed with light glue, except for yellow which was mixed only with water. Many pigments such as crimson, made from the saffron plant, were vegetable based. Others might be mineral based, such as what we call Prussian Blue. The Japanese also used powdered gold and silver, in both paint and in sheets or small chips. The opaque color white (*gofun*) was made from pulverized high quality oyster shells.

Kirikane (截金, pronounced: “key-REE-kah-neh”) was also a technique used in paintings. This is a technique of cutting gold, silver, copper, tin or platinum into lines, squares or triangles and applying these to a painting or other surface.

In the painting below by **Kano Shigenobu** (狩野重信, early 17th century, pronounced: “kah-NO | she-GAY-NO-boo”), gold leaf is used as a background to the entire painting. In the low light of the interiors of castles, Buddhist temples or mansions, the gold leaf would shimmer in the glow of candles. This way of using gold leaf for enhanced effect under the lighting conditions of the period was also employed for theatrical costumes and instruments, particularly in the **Nō** theater (also spelled **Noh**, 能楽堂, pronounced: “NO”).



Kano Shigenobu
Bamboo and Poppies (1600s)
Seattle Art Museum

Also common was the use of gold or silver paint for calligraphy or details, and the use of small squares of cut gold scattered across a painting for various effects, such as within clouds.

For more on *kirikane* including videos:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/kirikane-the-kyoto-museum-of-traditional-crafts/8AISioulAfNkIA?hl=en>

Also:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/use-of-gold-in-paintings-kyoto-national-museum/fALy7oXz0ilaLw?hl=en>

Brenda G. Jordan
Director, University of Pittsburgh National Consortium for Teaching About Asia coordinating
site
(2021; 2022 update)

Works Referenced and Recommended Further Readings:

For parts of this essay, I consulted *On the Laws of Japanese Painting* by Henry P. Bowie. This is available in Kindle and paperback editions, as well as (more expensive) hard cover. The original is by Dover Publication, 1911 and is considered an important contribution to the understanding of Japanese painting during the late 1800s.

Another important source for information on Japanese painting is JANUS, the on-line dictionary of architectural and art historical terminology: aisf.or.jp

<http://www.aisf.or.jp/%7Ejaanus/>

An excellent book that explains the relationship between art and early Tokugawa power is Karen M. Gerhart's *The Eyes of Power: Art and Early Tokugawa Authority*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press: 1999.