

Edo Avant Garde

Why do Ōkyo's puppies look so cute?
The significance of Edo period artists observing nature to create art.
Module 3

INTRODUCTION

“If the painting specialist cannot duplicate the form of things he sees, no matter what it is, then he cannot be said to be a painting specialist.”

From the *Kyōsai gadan* by Kawanabe Kyōsai (河鍋曉齋, 1831-1889 CE)¹

“As for the pine, learn from the pine; as for the bamboo, learn from the bamboo.”

Matsuo Bashō (松尾芭蕉, 1644-1694 CE, pronounced: “maht-SUE-oh | bah-SHOW”) From Dohō’s *Sanzōshi* (compiled 1702)²

Painters in Japan had long looked to the natural world as part of their practice, but the method of integrating “working from life” or “sketching from life” into paintings and poetry became more prevalent during the **Edo** period (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: “eh-DOUGH”). In terms of painting, the word *xiasheng* (pronounced: “SHE-eh-SHUN”, Japanese: *写生*, pronounced: “shah-SAY”) had been established by the **Qing** dynasty (1644-1912 CE, pronounced: “CHING”) in China to mean portraying an object as it appears to the eye, or in other words, the depiction of optical reality. Often used in reference to the genre of bird-and-flower painting, the term extended to the ability to capture the liveliness of an object. But the term’s meaning was not fixed and as the Edo period progressed, Japanese painters of many different styles and schools, from the academic **Kano** painters (also written **Kanō**, 狩野, pronounced: “kah-NO”) to the “amateur” scholar-literati, concerned themselves with how to balance optical reality with what they regarded as the inner essence of a subject.³

To put this in a more international perspective, the art of botanical illustration was prevalent in Europe by the 17th century although the illustration of plant life dated back centuries earlier. (This was also true in China.) In the absence of photography, the skill of looking carefully at botanical forms and rendering them accurately in a painting were important steps for the study of botany in Europe and the U.S. The painter Pierre-Joseph Rudouté (1766-1854) is one oft-cited example of this type of illustration. And we should not forget that still life painting as an independent genre began to flourish in Northern Europe as well as in Germany and France in the early 1600s, with stunning still life compositions focusing on verisimilitude. Still life paintings of floral arrangements were especially prominent and required a careful study of the subject.

Working entirely from the subject outdoors, however, took longer to develop as a practice. European landscape painters generally made rough sketches outdoors and then completed their paintings indoors. This was even true of the mid-nineteenth century Barbizon group in France, who were known for working outdoors. Painters such as Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867) sketched directly from nature and then usually completed their paintings back in the studio. In

the U.S., Thomas Cole (1801-1848) founded the Hudson River School, an informal group of painters who studied the specific characteristics of the American landscape and then used their observations and sketches to create landscapes. A major reason for this practice had to do with the difficulty of mixing paints and moving heavy easels outside. The development of tubed paints in the 1840s and the invention of a lightweight, portable easel made painting outdoors much easier. In the late 1860s, the Impressionists were instrumental in popularizing *en plein air* painting, landscape painting on site, often with an emphasis on the impression of the light, the air and the sky. Photographs as well as paintings from the latter half the century show Camille Pissarro (1830-1903), Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), among others, painting on site.

Meanwhile, however, Japanese painters were using their knowledge of optical reality to develop new kinds of painting that either blended with the traditional styles and methods of painting nature or else superseded them to create something different from what had gone before. In both cases—Japan and Europe/U.S.—painters used the method of working from life to grasp the essence of the subject or the impression of fresh air, rain, snow, sunshine. In other words, working from art melded with artistic expression, but expression that grew out of direct observation of nature. And significantly, it was important that what was expressed was something new and different. This was as true for the Japanese as it was for the Impressionists.

A good example of this blending is a **Tosa** school (土佐派, pronounced: “TOE-sah”) *Quails and Autumn Grasses* folding screen from 1590-1600 (below). The cries of quails within the autumn grasses conjures up thoughts of the changing of the seasons and coming winter, loneliness and the cry of deer, much as we find in the poetry of the early Edo period.

sadness of the high voice
trailing in the dark—
night deer

Charcoal Sack (1694) by Matsuo Bashō⁴



Unsigned
Quails and Autumn Grasses (1590-1600)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Placing the grasses and birds on floating fields of gold leaf pushes the composition toward design as the gold leaf acts simultaneously as expanses of ground (that is, soil) and negative space at the same time. The grasses and quail, however, vary in their details, leaving one to speculate that the painter had carefully observed the way grasses move in the wind, with stems overlapping one another and varying in size and width. Each quail, in addition, is painted in a different position, including foreshortened poses and one bird (on the left) burying its head in its back feathers (either preening or falling asleep). (The image on the *Edo Avant Garde* website can be enlarged to see these details.)

Even in the early 1600s, you can sense the degree to which painters are looking to real life examples rather than models from previous generations. A good example is *Crows* (below). If you look carefully at these nearly silhouetted birds, you will see that each bird is depicted in a different position; attention is paid to the shape of legs and toes, including how a bird's claws curl around the branch of a tree; and there are fine details included in the open beaks of two of the birds. Yet, if you squint your eyes, the gold background jumps out and becomes a pattern of its own. Thus, there is a balance of design and optical reality within the painting.



Unsigned
Crows (early 1600s)
Seattle Art Museum

In tandem with working from life was the increased interest in representing the mundane rather than the canon of acceptable, and often highly symbolic, subjects of pre-Edo painting. Tigers and dragons, for example, continued to appear but artists also moved to painting crows or writing **haiku** (俳句, pronounced: “hi-EE-ku”) about frogs or mosquitoes.

The scholar-literati **Yosa Buson** (与謝蕪村, 1716-1783 CE, pronounced: “yo-SAH | BOO-sohn”) emphasized the mundane in both his haiku and his paintings, as seen in *Horse* from the late 1700s, below. Instead of representing the horse within scenes of military valor, Buson paints the horse in an almost sketch-like fashion, unencumbered by reins or saddle, and appearing more like a farm animal than the type of steed that would have been ridden by a **daimyo** (大名 pronounced: “DIE-me-yoh”). There are numerous paintings in *Edo Avant Garde* that demonstrate this interest in the everyday and mundane subjects. A good class discussion might be had on why or how the subjects, be they animal or plants, represent the everyday as opposed to representing such things as the power of the military or the culture of the court. This discussion would give the teacher a chance to provide some background on the history of paintings of animals and plants in both Europe and Japan, and what meanings were attached to, for example, Baroque oil paintings of dogs and horses with their masters compared to the animals in the Japanese paintings shown in the film.



Yosa Buson
Horse (late 1700s)

Japanese artists were known to keep animals in their yards, and clearly drew ideas from those domesticated creatures. **Itō Jakuchū** (伊藤若冲, 1716-1800 CE, pronounced: “ee-TOE | JAH-ku-chew”) came from a family of grocers, and drew on his knowledge of vegetables in his paintings. He also kept chickens at his house, and obviously looked carefully at the shapes and colors of the feathers of these birds, as well as their different poses, be they a rooster, the hen or their chicks. (The image on the next page can be enlarged when using the image from the “List of Artists and Their Works” on the *Edo Avant Garde* website.)



Itō Jakuchū
Rooster and Family (1797)
Minneapolis Institute of Art

A school of painting that was notable for subjects that appeared to be drawn directly from life was the **Maruyama-Shijō School** (円山四条派, pronounced: “ma-RUH-YAH-MA | SHE-joe”), of which Ōkyo and the painter **Matsumura Goshun** (松村呉春, 1752-1811 CE, pronounced: “maht-SUE-MOO-rah | GO-shun”) were considered the founders. Through the late 1700s and into the 19th century, these painters became known for what we might call highly “realistic” depictions of animals in particular.

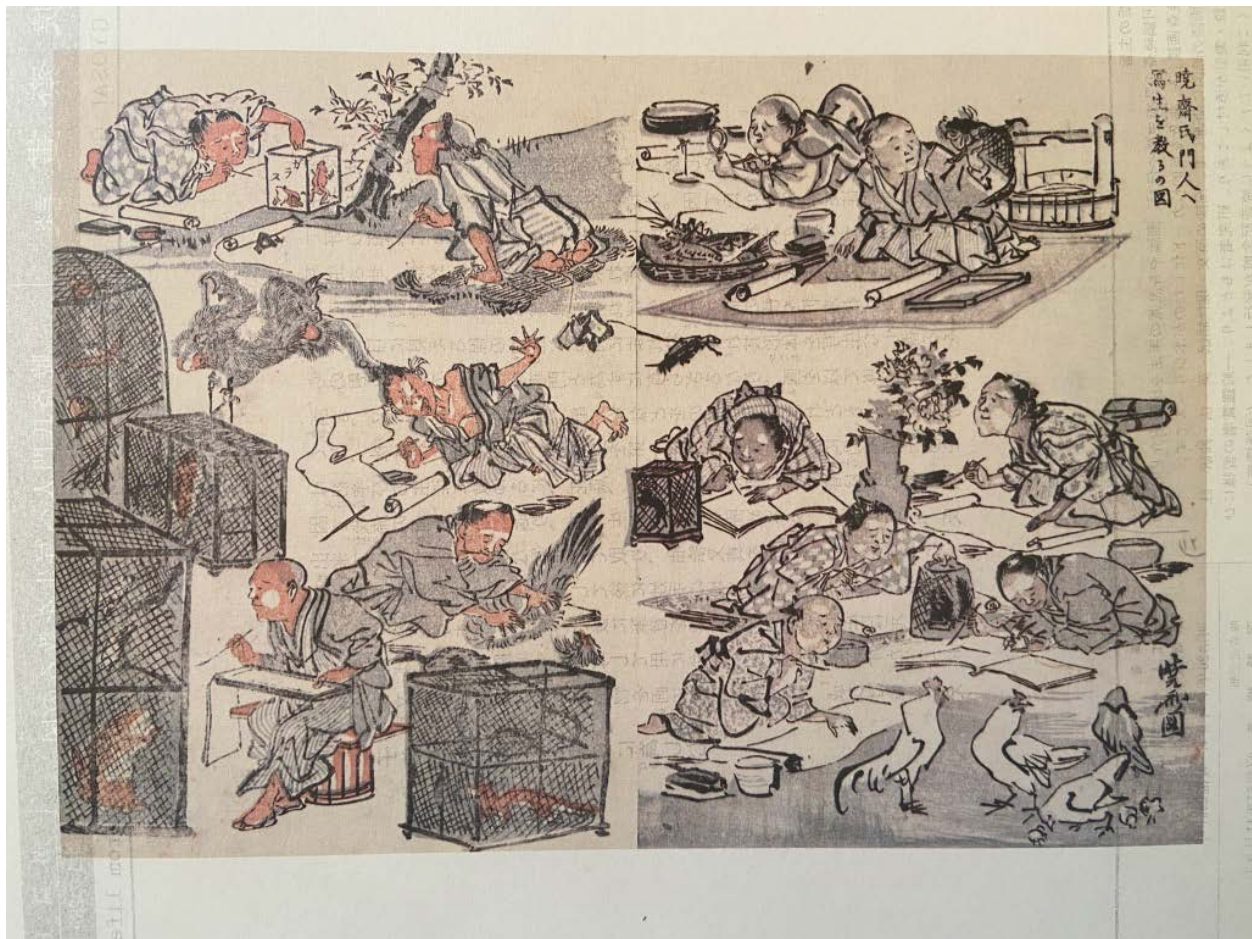
The monkey painting by **Mori Sōsen** (森狙仙, 1747-1821 CE, pronounced: “moh-REE | SOH-sen”) on the next page is one such example. Sōsen still relies on the preeminence of line that is characteristic of much of Japanese art, but at the same time paints the soft fur of the monkeys without any contour lines, thus creating more of a sense of real fur. Also note the gaze of the monkey at the flowers and leaf in its hand: the way that the eyes focus directly on the flowers, and the manner in which the fingers grip the plant. These sorts of details suggest that the painter benefited from direct study of live monkeys.



Mori Sōsen
Two Monkeys (late 1700s)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Over the course of the Edo period, painters produced sketches labeled as *shasei*; **Kano Tan'yū** (狩野探幽, 1602-1674 CE, pronounced: “kah-NO | TAN-you”), **Ogata Kōrin** (尾形光琳, 1658-1716 CE, pronounced: “OH-GAH-tah | KOH-REEN”) and **Watanabe Shikō** (渡辺始興, 1683-1755 CE, pronounced: “wah-TAH-NAH-bay | SHE-koh”), to name three examples. Fueled by the influx of Western ideas that came into Japan increasingly in the 1700s, the study of natural sciences, and the practice of empirical investigation as it developed in Japan, working from life became much more the norm. Books about science with images of animals and plants, including those seen under microscopes, became available in Japan through trade with the Dutch. But Chinese Neo-Confucianism, natural history studies, woodblock printed books from China, and the history of Chinese painting and art theory all played a part in this as well.

There are some records of how Japanese painters, at least in the 19th century, worked from life. Prominent among these are the records left by the Edo/Tokyo painter and print designer **Kawanabe Kyōsai** (河鍋暁斎, 1831-1889 CE, pronounced: “kah-WAH-NAH-bay | KYOH-sigh”). In his painting manual cum autobiography *Kyōsai gadan* (暁斎画談, pronounced: “KYOH-sigh | GAH-dahn”), Kyōsai shows himself learning painting in the studio of **Utawaga Kuniyoshi** (歌川国芳, 1797-1861 CE, pronounced: “uu-TAH-GAH-wah | ku-KNEE-YO-she”) while cats roll around the room, including one happily curled up in the breast of Kuniyoshi’s kimono. Other images in the book show the young Kyōsai sketching a carp from life that he has brought back to the Kano school where he also studied. But one of the most telling is the image of the adult Kyōsai’s studio. In the picture below, students study frogs from life, use a magnifying glass to study an object carefully, battle with monkeys that have gotten loose from their cages, and work directly from vases of flowers and chickens in the yard.



Facsimile *Kyōsai gadan*
 Publication of the Kyōsai Memorial Museum (1983)

Realizing that exaggeration is likely in this image, Kyōsai was making a point with humor and caricature. The most interesting aspect of all this is the way in which Kyōsai understood the “copying of things as they are” (from the *Kyōsai gadan*). We learn from his interviews with the English artist Mortimer Menpes (1860-1938) that Kyōsai’s method was to look at, for example, a bird until the bird moved. He would then turn away from the bird and try to copy as much of a pose as he remembered. Then he would go back to the bird and repeat the process. In this way, he said that he might spent a whole day watching a bird and trying to *memorize* a particular pose that he wanted to recreate. In the end, Kyōsai stated that he would have “remembered the pose so well by continually trying to represent it that I am able to repeat it entirely from my impression—but not from the bird.”⁵

In fact, Kyōsai told Menpes that he simply didn’t understand how an English artist could work directly from a model. Naturally we don’t know how other Japanese painters earlier in the century may have worked from life, but Kyōsai claimed that this is the way he was taught by Kuniyoshi when he was young.

This way of learning to look and training yourself to memorize an image is different from the way in which we often teach studio art in the United States. Memorization is not something that modern American education has considered a high priority, and even is considered at times to be detrimental to critical thinking. But in the case of working from life and learning from nature, it would be an interesting exercise to teach students how to train their memories to reproduce a natural object or creature from repeated study, in the manner of Kyōsai.



Maruyama Ōkyo
Gamboling Puppies (1779)
Minneapolis Institute of Art

Which bring us to “why are Ōkyo’s puppies so cute?” The same can be said for the animals of **Nagasawa Rosetsu** (長沢芦雪, 1754-1799, pronounced: “nah-GAH-SAH-wah | ROW-set-sue”) that we also see in *Edo Avant Garde*. Ask your students what they think. Could it be that observation of puppies in real life led these painters to realize how many different poses puppies have when playing, sleeping, watching one another, and rolling around? The puppies depicted in these paintings certainly don’t sit calmly in a row, after all. Could it have something to do with the fact that baby animals (including humans) often have larger heads compared to the size of their bodies and other features that we “read” as cute and endearing? Could the very roundness of baby animals have something to do with the cute factor? All of these features can be found in the baby animal paintings and students will likely come up with even more. Just thinking about what makes something “cute” or not can lead to new insights and hopefully more interest in learning from what we see around us every day. Just as the Japanese painters of the Edo period did in their time.

Brenda G. Jordan
Director, University of Pittsburgh National Consortium for Teaching About Asia coordinating site

(2020; 2022 revision)

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)

¹ *Kyōsai gadan* (autobiography and painting manual by painter Kawanabe Kyōsai; 1887).

Translation by the author.

² Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams; Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 261.

³ This introduction is adapted from the chapter “Kawanabe Kyōsai’s Theory and Pedagogy: The Preeminence of *shasei*,” in the book Brenda G. Jordan and Victoria Weston, *Copying the Master and Stealing His Secrets* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 2003).

⁴ Shirane, *Traces of Dreams*, p. 274.

⁵ Mortimer Menpes, “A Personal View of Japanese Art: A Lesson from Khiosi,” *Magazine of Art* (April 1888): 195. Menpes visited Kyōsai in 1887 and the discussion he had with the artist was assisted by Captain Francis Brinkley (1841-1912)’s translation during the visit.