

Forgotten Masters: Japanese Literati Painters in the Meiji Flux

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To the delight of some and the consternation of others, Japan opened to the West with the beginning of the Meiji period (1868–1912). Almost every field was affected. In painting, there grew an increasingly wide chasm between those who continued to practise traditional Japanese artistic styles and those who preferred what they were learning from the West. This fundamental divide, which also occurred in literature and music, has remained a dominant theme in Japanese aesthetics over the last 150 years.

In this period of disputes between exponents of Japanese and Western styles, it may come as a surprise that, especially during the early and mid-Meiji period, there was a late flowering of Chinese-derived literati painting, also known as *nanga* (lit. 'Southern Painting', a reference to the Chinese Southern school practised by scholar-officials). As Prince Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838–1922), twice prime minister and an advocate of Western science and culture, wrote in his important book *Fifty Years of New Japan* (1909): 'For about twenty years from the era of Genji [1864–65] ... hereditary artists were reduced to such straits as to defy description ... there was one school of painting, however, which ... was in popular favor. ... this was Nanga' (pp. 342–43).

It seems counterintuitive—why was a Chinese style so appreciated at a time when Japan was facing the West? There seems to have been several reasons. First, some of the most fervent leaders of the Imperial Restoration (the beginning of the Meiji period, following the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate) were artists; a few, such as the samurai Fujimoto Tesseki (1817–63), even gave up their lives in the struggle. Second, many of the young intellectuals who formed

and advised the new government were themselves literati, having received thorough Confucian educations; several of them were highly skilled at *kanshi* (poems in Chinese) and *karayō* (calligraphy in Chinese characters). Third, travel to China was now allowed, and several painters went there to study. Finally, *nanga* had already been assimilated enough for Japanese to consider it, at least in part, to be one of their own traditions, no matter how much or how little remained of continental subjects and styles.

Although they are as yet little studied, a number of artists working between 1868 and the end of the Meiji period in 1912 carried on the Sino-Japanese literati tradition with great aplomb and notable success. The only one whose popularity continued strongly in later ages was Tomioka Tessai (1836–1924), but many others were very highly regarded in their day. As a result, they received multiple commissions, including for very large landscapes that were considered perfectly appropriate for the new larger-scale Western-influenced buildings as well as for traditional Japanese halls. To understand the particular aesthetics and styles of *nanga* painters at this time, a study of a few of their major scrolls, including significant details, can offer visual evidence of the confidence and prowess that they exhibited. It can also reveal their own conceptions of the role of humans in nature compared with the conceptions of Japanese artists a generation earlier.

The least known of the scholar-artists discussed here is Nukina Kenjō (1834–1907), whose uncle and teacher, Nukina Kaioku (1778–1863), was much more famous. Yet it was Kenjō who painted one of the larger known *nanga* scrolls of this era, *Early Spring Landscape* (Fig. 1). Kenjō's panorama is dominated by



Fig. 1 Early Spring Landscape
By Nukina Kenjō (1834–1907), 1878
Ink and colour on paper,
175 x 95 cm
Stuart Katz Collection



Fig. 1a Detail of the painting in Figure 1 showing bamboo painted in sumi

a huge, twisting mountain peak, like dough kneaded by a giant baker for a monster loaf of bread, or like a massive tiger crouching as it faces a potential rival to its left, unsure whether to attack or make friends. In contrast to this powerful form, the lower part of the painting is composed largely of delicate bamboo created with tonally varied leaves in sumi over light washes of blue-green (Fig. 1a), a technique perfected by Yosa Buson (1716–83) some 100 years earlier. In the middle ground, the bamboo reaches upward towards gnarled and flowering plum trees, with pink and white dots representing the blossoms.

As in many literati paintings, the human presence is small but significant. A visitor stands at the gate, dressed in a robe of a rosy pink-red, a colour that is echoed by two nearby mushrooms and the curtain of a two-storey pavilion far above. One solitary plum tree at the bottom bends towards the guest, as though encouraging him to climb a path that appears and disappears, leading finally to the dwelling. Here his host may be waiting to share his view of the roiling mountains that dominate the top section of the painting.

The poetic couplet that Kenjō inscribed on this landscape is a form of homage to the Chinese verse master Lin Bu (also known as Lin Hejing; 967–1028), taking pairs of words from Lin's poem on plum blossoms as follows:

All other fragrances have fallen—alone lovely in the warmth!
Their occupation now complete of feeling in this little garden.
Their **sparse reflections** slant across where water is pure and shallow;
Their **secret fragrance** floats and trembles as moonlight comes with dusk.
Frost-chilled birds wish to land, but first they steal a glance;
Pollen-dusted butterflies, if they could know! would surely break their hearts.
Happily, I have my quiet poems, which brings me close to them:
No need here for sandalwood clappers, or golden jugs of wine!

(Lin Bu)

The secret fragrance, pure, enters the room
Sparse reflections, austere, slant across the window.
(Nukina Kenjō)

The landscape is certainly expansive enough for visitors to lose themselves several times: strolling among the bamboo groves, climbing the (sometimes hidden) path or contemplating the craggy mountains. Yet despite the huge size of the painting and some overlapping of forms, there is little sense of recession—the size of the few plum trees peeping out near the top of the main peak indicates that they are not deep in space. The entire monumental landscape can therefore be experienced as Kenjō's personal understanding and expression of nature as he pauses on a resplendent spring day. The Chinese influence is undeniable, but it is modified by the individual, more Japanese touches of Kenjō's style.

In separating personal style from the development of period style, Kenjō's scroll can be compared with an earlier and similar (if somewhat smaller) landscape by Hoashi Kyō-u (1810–84) (Fig. 2). Beginning in 1824, he had studied with the well-known *nanga* master Tanomura Chikuden (1777–1835), including making journeys to visit literati in nearby areas together, before gradually forming his own style. Chikuden had also prevailed upon Kyō-u to study Chinese culture and literature, so he was well prepared for a career as a literati painter.

Since both Kenjō and Kyō-u were students of successful late Edo period (1603–1868) literati artists, it is not surprising that their works have much in common. Both establish a huge, twisting central mountain peak, trees reaching up and out, a dwelling near bamboo groves, a brushwood gate with a red-robed guest arriving (and a small tree bending towards the guest), and a colour scheme of light red-pink and blue-green. But in Kyō-u's work, the mountain twists less and is not challenged by a leaning second peak, the guest is followed by his servant carrying provisions, there is no long climb, the dwellings are larger, the gate is partially open, and a figure peers out through a window above. In essence, the human presence is larger and more notable, and Kenjō's expression of nature's grandeur is partly replaced by a more comfortable expression of a gentleman's life in the mountains, reinforced by Kyō-u's poetic inscription. Is this difference because in 1840 Japan was more secure and comfortable than during the stressful early years of the Meiji? Kyō-u's sociable quatrain mentions a 'golden age':



Fig. 2 *In a Riverside Pavilion*
By Hoashi Kyō-u (1810–84), 1840
Ink and colour on paper, 132 x 34.6 cm
Private Collection



Fig. 3 *Autumn Clouds Shed No Shadows*
By Yamamoto Chiku-un (1820-88), 1871
Ink and colour on paper, 132.7 x 52.6 cm
Private Collection

In a riverside pavilion, you welcome your guests, wine
filling the jars;
Forest birds return to roost, rest and work perfectly
matched.
With children by the hand, visiting you—here is a little
Golden Age:
One single call is solely for the sake of trimming the
autumn lamps.

(Hoashi Kyō-u)

Kyō-u's landscape is the more unified of the two, especially by the clusters of modular rocks surging inwards, outwards and upwards through the



Fig. 3a Detail of the painting in Figure 3 showing the figure on the bridge

composition. Overlapping each other and larger at the bottom than at the top, they produce a sense of recession into distance while adding vibrancy throughout the surface. Nature still retains much of its internal power and energy, but in 1840 it seems to have been partially tamed; by Kenjō's day it once again exhibited a monumental force that was somewhat less comfortable for humans than it had been a generation earlier.

A different approach to ink landscapes was taken by Yamamoto Chiku-un (1820–88) in a scroll where, instead of strength and lucency, he offers complexity (Fig. 3). This is particularly true in the lower half of the painting, where tree branches overlap to make it difficult to visually penetrate their forms despite the generally diagonal composition. As in the Kenjō landscape, there is a something of a split between the top and bottom halves of the scroll, and near the bottom there is a small figure, perhaps a sage-poet, here crossing a bridge (Fig. 3a). Despite the fact that he is depicted in thin lines with just a touch of colour, he is vital to the painting, which Chiku-un emphasizes by portraying him in a space-cell of his own, with one small tree-branch bending towards him. Ahead is a twisting melange of trees; the traveller could easily get lost in their confusing forms before reaching a dwelling in the lower right, where a friend awaits. From here he will have a choice: he can walk upward in a diagonal to the left, where there is another dwelling and then, partially visible, a hut; or, he could climb to the right up to a lonely pavilion, much like those in the sparse and austere dry-brush paintings of the Chinese artist Ni Zan (literary name Yunlin; 1301–74). This is not coincidence, for Chiku-un added a quatrain that an obscure poet, Hua Youwu (1307–75), had inscribed on the Ni Zan painting *Landscape with Bamboo and Rocks by Yunlin*:

Autumn clouds shed no shadows, trees emit no sounds;
Flowing, flowing, the Yangtze River—surface mirror-smooth.

Over distant peaks, mist evaporates, as the bright moon rises:

In a little pavilion, seated upright, I watch the tides take form.

(Hua Youwu)

The poem humanizes the scene more than the painting itself does—unlike Chiku-un, Ni Zan did not find it necessary to include a figure in his mature paintings. It is up to Chiku-un's sage-poet

on the bridge to climb as high as he can. He will be rewarded with a clear view of a series of 'dragon-back' mountains that rise in diagonals until the final vertical of the tallest peak. This style of mountain depictions is rarely so stark and dramatic; indeed, Chiku-un painted the scale-like forms reaching over a dragon's back from the view of facing the dragon directly, giving a strong sense of perspective and distance. The contrast between the lower and upper halves of the composition is very bold, but the diagonals, implied below and clear above, hold the composition together.

Although the theme of a figure ready to climb upwards in a mountain landscape is common, the experience of this painting is unlike the others we have seen, with its own aesthetic flavour. This may partly be a result of Chiku-un's long experience with the Chinese form of steeped tea, sencha, and also the patience he needed to become a fine seal-carver, a skill regarded as akin to painting and calligraphy. As the figure moves up through the painting, he journeys from confusion to clarity, from intensity to tranquillity. And yet Chiku-un had a more nervous and difficult aspect to his personality, which can be seen as much in his paintings as in his life. In a fit of despair, after an argument with his wife, he drowned himself in a mountain lake outside of Kyoto in 1888.

Yoshitsugu Haizan (1846–1915) was at first a student of the *nanga* painter Nakanishi Kōseki (1807–84), but since it was no longer forbidden by the government, he also travelled to China to study, returning with a penchant for strong brushwork and bold forms. Demonstrating his artistic determination, after suffering an injury to his right hand in 1871 he learned to paint with his left, becoming known as 'Left-handed Haizan'.

Despite the primary verticality of Haizan's composition in Figure 4, the large central mountain seems to be reaching down, rather than up as is usual, as its rocky fingers descend into the blank space below. Although everything seems at least temporarily secure, if an earthquake were to loosen the main mountain's vigorous fingers of rock, would they not destroy everything in their path, including all signs of human habitation?

Compared to the mountain and rocks, impetuous though they seem, the trees are painted with such free and energized brushwork that, when viewed close up to the painting, they can seem almost abstract, but from further away, everything makes



Fig. 4 *White Clouds and Green Mountains*
By Yoshitsugu Haizan (1846–1915), 1905
Ink and light colour on silk, 158 x 67 cm
Oliver and Yuki Behr Collection

sense. This is similar to pointillist and impressionist painting techniques, but instead of dots or small dabs of colour, the trunks and branches are composed of loose calligraphic strokes, creating the illusion that they are whipping the trees and rocks around them.

In this activated surface, a single small area between the mountain mass and the middle-ground trees and dwellings on the left stands out as being different. Rather than using specific brushstrokes, it is similar to the *tarashikomi* or 'dripping in' effect employed by painters of the decorative Rinpa school, who added a second colour before the first colour had dried; here, tones of grey-black are merged with grey. This semi-defined wet-ink area serves to partially connect the mountain and the lower trees and dwellings, creating the almost full circle of the total composition, with a large blank area representing mist and water in the centre. Adding a quiet level to this forceful painting is the subtle use of blue-green and rose-pink, here so restrained that one might imagine this to be solely an ink painting.

Even though Haizan has painted a bold and vigorous new variation on an old literati theme, he takes a modest role in his quatrain of seven-character lines, ending with the date of 1905 and his signature:

Too lazy to take a single step through the vain world's
soft dust:
It's in the green mountains, everywhere, that the white
clouds beam.
Idle within, obsessive by nature ... just no use at all:
At open window, or out with my walking stick, I always
remember the men of old.

(Yoshitsugu Haizan)

Haizan calling himself lazy and useless is another literati trope, as is his bow to the past. Yet the artistic energy that underlies this work was not uncommon during a period in which *nanga* artists produced a significant corpus of paintings, which are only now being reconsidered. In terms of Japanese literati art, they represent a renewed burst of creative energy, almost forgotten over the past 100 years, that is only now beginning to reach the art world and the public once again.

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All translations of poems are by Jonathan Chaves, a professor of Chinese at George Washington University in Washington, DC, and are previously unpublished.