

# Yōgakusha's Landscape Views and Visions, Metaphors and Symbols in Late 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Japan

Donatella Failla (University of Genoa)  
E-mail: donatella.failla@alice.it

## abstract

The gigantic change that from 1868 onwards transformed Japan into a modern state was deeply rooted in the 18th-century movements known as ‘Dutch studies’ (*rangaku* 蘭学) and ‘Western studies’ (*yōgaku* 洋学), which first fuelled the country’s quest for the innovation of Japanese art, culture and science. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, several Japanese painters, captivated by western arts’ naturalism and realism, became fervent *kyūri gakusha* 究理学者 and *yōgakusha* 洋学者, i.e. scholars of natural sciences and western studies, thus laying the foundations for the modernization of Japan in the Meiji era (1868–1912).

## Introduction

In about 1620 the Tokugawa shogunate had enforced the strict measures known as ‘Prohibition of the Seas’ (*Kaikin* 海禁), impeding foreigners to land on Japanese soil – with the exception of the Dutch and the Chinese in Nagasaki – and banning Japanese subjects from going abroad. This severe isolationist policy also restricted all fishing activities to the coastal waters, in order to avoid the risk of the boats drifting away and falling into the hands of foreigners eager to obtain information on Japan. European prints imported by the Dutch residing in Deshima, however, filtered into Japan, forming secretly owned collections that came to be studied in Nagasaki, Edo and the provinces.

Japanese painters and *ukiyo-e* print makers active in the last quarter of the 18th century undertook experimenting *chiaroscuro* and linear perspective, copying exotic cityscapes and landscapes, imitating European oil paintings, copperplate engravings (*dōbanga* 銅版画) and ‘lens-and-mirror pictures’ (*megane-e* 眼鏡絵).

Innovative painting studios, amongst which the fief-patronised Akita school, diffused in Japan pivotal elements of western visual culture and science, thus contributing to trigger awareness that the country’s backwardness urgently necessitated to be amended and updated. Albeit politically monitored and repressively surveyed, the European artistic and scientific vision took root in Japan’s intellectual humus and in the figurative artists’ milieus, further enhancing propensity to cultural innovation.

## Yōgakusha's landscape views and visions

Prominent *yōgakusha* such as Shiba Kōkan 司馬江漢 (?1747–1818; figs 1-2), Satake Shozan 佐竹曙山 (1748–1785; fig. 3) and Odano Naotake 小田野直武 (1749–1780; fig. 4), all pupils of Hiraga Gennai 平賀源内 (1726–1779), also painted landscapes using the traditional hanging scroll format (*kakejiku* 掛軸), and adapting their habitual techniques for rendering *chiaroscuro*. Constructed and conjured up as eclectic compositions rich in symbolic contents and imbued

with exotic, outlandish atmospheres, these *yōgakusha*'s views are legible as visual allegories, cryptographies and metaphors. In plain words, these works constitute innovative landscape configurations,



Figure 1. Shiba Kōkan, View of Mimeguri as a Parody of a Western Landscape, 1790 ca. *Kakejiku*, ink and colours on silk, 93.5 x 31 cm. Genoa, Museo Chiossone (P-194).

expressing the artists' aspirations and hopes to travel the unknown world and to get to know foreign countries and cultures located beyond the ocean.

In a view of Mimeguri 三囲 painted by Shiba Kōkan (fig. 1), for instance, the shape of the famous place's (*meisho* 名所) stony shrine gate (*torii* 鳥居) is hybridised with that of famous archaeological remains in the Roman Forum, the so-called Tempio dei Càstori. This work also bears a satirical poem (*kyōka* 狂歌) by Ōta Nanpo 太田南畝 (1749–1823) containing a clear reference to America 亜墨利加, as well as the expression “to go around to see” (*mimekuri* 見めぐり). To put it simply, the Edo *meisho* depicted in this *kakejiku* is a metaphoric landscape, a true and proper cryptography, a vision covertly expressing Kōkan's aspirations to travel the world “from the northern to the eastern corner”.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 2. Shiba Kōkan (?1747-1818), Japanese crested ibis (*toki*), young grey heron (*aosagi*) and kingfisher (*kawasemi*) on the shore of a stretch of water with the view of a western towered town, 1793-1796. *Kakejiku*, oil painting on silk, 139 x 79.8 cm. Collection of John and Kimiko Powers (Source: Asano, Ozaki, Tanaka 1985, fig. 49 p. 33).

The analysis of a few other paintings reveals that the *yōgakusha* artists had a pictorial idiom in common. Amongst the symbols and figurative tools appearing in their allegoric and metaphoric paintings, birds and water expanses are of primary importance. Whether in flocks or singly, birds represent the artists' desire to take wing in the free, open and vast dimension of knowledge. This meaning is especially clear and cogent when great flyers, migratory and exotic birds are depicted – i.e. creatures capable of venturing along the inscrutable routes leading to the Immortals' fabulous islands located in the middle of mythical oceans (fig. 2).

Incidentally, the Japanese were fond of the voices and colourful plumages of exotic birds imported by the Dutch into Japan from South Asia and Australia. Over time, several exotic birds escaped from their cages settling in Japan, thereby becoming symbols of freedom regained.

For instance, the red parakeet (*inko* インコ, *Alisterus scapularis*) was studied and copied from life by several *yōgakusha*, including the Akita school artists, who reproduced it in several scientific drawings.

Satake Shozan, the founder himself of the Akita school, painted an impressive *kakejiku* whose protagonist is an *inko* perched on a pine tree against the background of a western waterscape (fig. 3).

Lakes, paddy fields, ponds, and even simple stretches of water appearing in *yōgakusha*'s pictures can be interpreted as symbolic substitutes of the ocean, the latter representing not only the natural border of Japan, but also the elemental dimension through which relevant cultural innovations had reached the country in the course of several centuries. The boats depicted sailing off shore possibly hint at these historical circumstances, but may be also understood as a hoped-for transgression of the 'Prohibition of the Seas'.

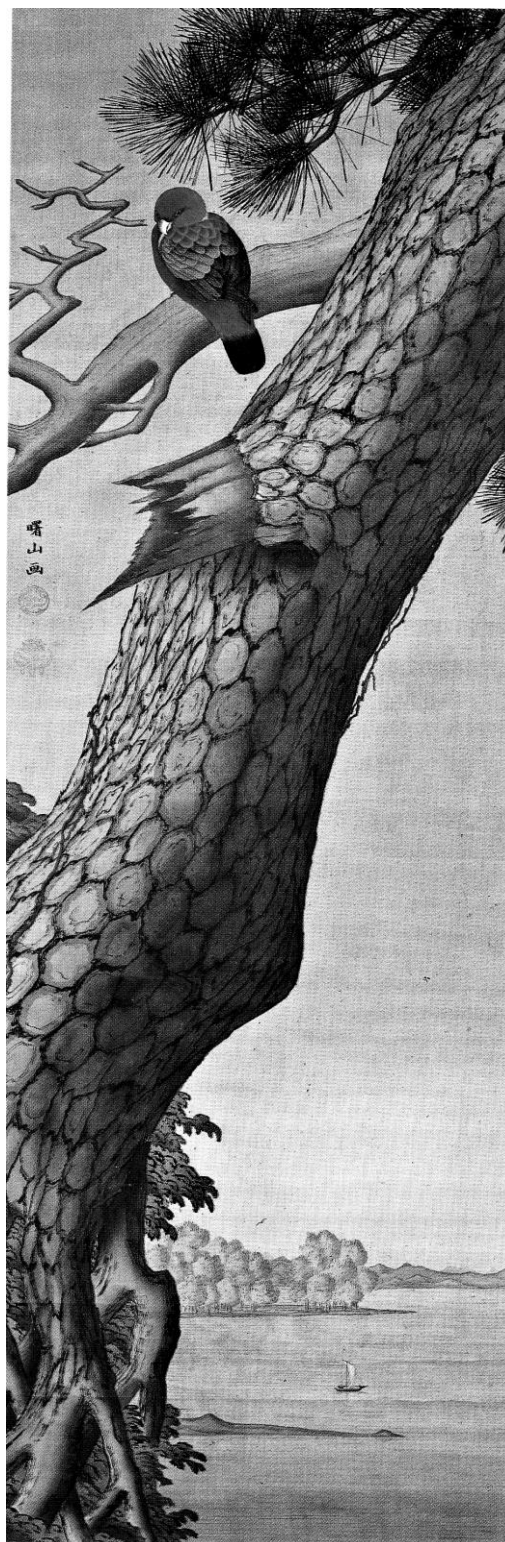


Figure 3. Satake Shozan (1748-1785), Red parakeet (*inko*) perched on a pine tree with the background view of a western waterscape, before 1785. *Kakejiku*, ink and colours on silk, 173 x 58 cm (Source: Asano, Ozaki, Tanaka 1985, fig. 25 p. 29).

A celebrated painting by Odano Naotake depicting a perspective view of Shinobazu no ike 不忍池 shows on the horizon, in the middle of the pond, the islet hosting the ancient shrine dedicated to Benzaiten, the female divinity of the ocean (fig. 4).



Figure 4. Odano Naotake (1749-1780), Potted herbaceous peony (*shakuyaku*) against the background view of Shinobazu pond, 1775 ca. Colour on silk, 98.5 x 132.5 cm. Akita Prefectural Museum (Source: Asano, Ozaki, Tanaka 1985, fig. 22 p. 28).

The islet is legible as an image of ocean-surrounded Japan, whilst Benzaiten is knowledge itself, implied in the ocean dimension.

In the right foreground, two pots containing Japanese plants include a beautiful, blooming grass peony (*shakuyaku* 芍薬). A vegetal emblem of the traditional Sino-Japanese pharmacopoeia, the peony is potted into a molded terracotta vase from Holland – this image suggesting not only Naotake’s personal history and his *rangakusha*’s views and visions, but also hinting at the botanical collections gathered in Japan and conveyed to the Netherlands by the Dutch.

Then, the covert message intentionally encrypted by the artist in this beautiful painting suggests that Japan’s traditional science, if ‘planted’ into a western method of thinking, can happily flourish while constantly remaining in view of the world.

#### Notes

- 1) For a thorough analysis of this painting, see Failla 2015.

#### Works cited

- Asano Tōru 浅野徹, Ozaki Masaaki 尾崎正明, Tanaka Atsushi 田中淳. *Shajitsu no Keifu I – Yōfū Hyōgen no Dōnyū – Edo Chūki kara Meiji Shoki made*. 写実の系譜 I・洋風表現の導入。江戸中期から明治初期まで. *Development of Western Realism in Japan*. Exhibition catalogue. National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, National Museum of Modern Art, Ōsaka, National Museum of Art. National Museum of Modern Art. Tōkyō: Inshosha, 1985.
- Failla, Donatella. A Virtual Escape from the ‘Closed Country’ Through Painting and Humorous Verses: Shiba Kōkan’s Seiyō Mitate Mimeguri Fūkei Zu 西洋見立三囲風景図. *Ming Qing Studies*, 2015, pp. 111–135.
- Kyūshū National Museum, Kōbe City Museum, 九州国立博物館・神戸市美術館 (eds). トピック展示。視覚×革命異国と出会った。江戸絵画。神戸市立博物館名品展. *Feature Exhibition – The Visual Revolution in Edo Painting – Masterworks from Kobe City Museum*. Exhibition catalogue. Dazaifu: Kyūshū National Museum, 2013.
- Linhartová Vera. *Sur un Fond Blanc: Écrits Japonais sur la Peinture du IXe au XIXme siècles*. Paris: Le Promeneur, 1996.
- Narazaki Muneshige 榑崎宗重 (gen. ed.). *Hizō Ukiyoe Taikan 10. Jenova Tōyō Bijutsukan I. 秘蔵浮世絵大観 10. ジェノヴァ東洋美術館 I. Ukiyo-e Masterpieces in European Collections. The Museum of Oriental Art, Genoa*. Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1987.
- Suntory Bijutsukan サントリー美術館. *Nozoite Bikkuri Edo Kaiga – Kagaku no Gan, Shikaku no Fushigi* のぞいてびっくり江戸絵画。科学の眼、視覚のふしぎ。 *The Scientific Eye and Visual Wonders in Edo*. Exhibition catalogue. Tōkyō: Suntory Bijutsukan, 2014.