



James Ulak on “Modern” Edo Art

It's very common to hear visually articulate Western people comment on works by Sōtatsu and others, saying, “My goodness, how modern. How did they do it before the technology we have today?” And the presumption in that comment is that there's a linear progression in knowledge.

My own personal theory is that people like Sōtatsu and others of his day, and even earlier, probably had the same ideas as we have but didn't have the technology. For example, you can look at Japanese screens, which had beautiful scenes of nature, and set in those scenes are *shikishi*, poem cards. Some of them decorated; some of them just text. When I first saw them in the 1980s, Bill Gates was coming out with his Windows, and Steve Jobs was playing with his computers. Windows within windows.

So my idea is that if Sōtatsu had access to technology, what you're looking at is, like, a big computer screen: the ability to zoom in and zoom out. So I think the human imagination has the ability to see things in a variety of ways.

I also think there is a huge decorative perspective—not using that word pejoratively—in Japanese painting from this period. Many of the artists and designers that worked on these paintings were also employed by textile producers: designers of kimono and so forth. So you begin to think of space and of impact in a different way than simply, “I'm going to show you something in nature.” And I think they played with these ideas. It's just playing with vision, using your imagination to do it.

I think that, in the enterprise of creating visual culture, the mind always races ahead of the technique. And we want sometimes to look back and think of our predecessors, four or five centuries ago knew far less than we did and didn't experience the same emotions. And the whole point of having a museum, particularly an art museum, is to allow us to stand in front of works like this... and strip away all the explanations, all the books, all the encyclopedias that come between us and the art and say, “My goodness, there is a human hand that did this. Who were they? What were they seeing? What were they thinking?” And get away from the idea of diminishing them because they were older and in the past.

Because they're present right here. Someone or some hands are present right here with us. And we have to link with that, and sit and look and say, “Who were you? What was in your mind when you did this?”

“Interview with Jim Ulak.” Hoaglund, Linda, dir. *Edo Avant Garde*. 2019; United States; Japan.

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Screens within Screens (detail); late 17th–early 18th century; pair of six-panel folding screens; ink, color, and gold gilt on paper; 66 15/16 in × 12 ft 4 in (170 × 376 cm), each. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Fletcher, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Foundation and Dodge Funds, 2010 (2010.402.1, .2).