



## Excerpts from “The Logic and History of Kawaii, Cute, Art”

During the first half of the Edo period, from the seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century, after the shogunate took command of Japan, daily life stabilized and the country’s urban economy flourished. As a result, classes of people who had had little to do with culture began to actively engage with it. During the first half of the Edo period, most patrons of art remained powerful men who belonged to the warrior class or were religious authorities. But eventually wealthy merchants began to patronize artists, and woodblock prints, however rudimentary, emerged as a pleasure created by and for commoners. This was a major development, because once art no longer depended on a limited class of those in power, both the purpose of art and its techniques of expression began to expand.

[...]

In the second half of the Edo period, from the mid-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, *kawaii*, cute art, became explosively popular. This period coincided with the decades when artists such as Maruyama Ōkyo and Nagasawa Rosetsu... competed by expressing their individuality, resulting in a dazzling golden era of Japanese art.

[...]

It was during this time that in addition to art depicting traditional themes and art created for religious purposes, art began to be created for the pleasure of depicting human emotions. Many works depict the subtle vagaries of the human heart, of love between parents and their offspring, whether human or animal, or scenes that tug at the heartstrings. For instance, Mori Sosen is

renowned for his astonishingly realistic depictions of monkeys, but the essence of his artistry is not simply authenticity, but his skillful depictions of the emotions in each individual monkey.

[...]

Maruyama Ōkyo was at the center of this shift. When Ōkyo painted something, instead of relying on an image in his head, or on traditional examples, he explored how to depict its exterior surface, creating the illusion of being in the presence of the “real thing.” Ōkyo’s approach became immensely popular and his “modernistic” depictions created a new artistic standard. He had the eye and the technique to distill a single moment of “cuteness” from a puppy in constant motion and render it into a specific shape. Ōkyo’s trademark puppies that still enchant us today were born from such groundbreaking explorations.

Nobuhisa, Kaneko. Excerpts from “*Kawaii e’ no ronri to rekishi*” [The Logic and History of Kawaii, Cute Art]. In *Kawaii Edo kaiga* [Cute Edo Paintings], edited by Fuchu City Art Museum. Tokyo: Kyūryūdō, 2013. Translated by Linda Hoaglund.



Maruyama Ōkyo, *Gamboling Puppies* (detail); 1779, hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk, 15 1/2 × 20 3/4 in (39.37 × 52.71 cm). Minneapolis Institute of Art, Bequest of Richard P. Gale (74.1.136).