



Excerpt from “Expansion of Pictorial Culture”

Peacetime, agricultural innovation, and the construction of castle towns led to sustained economic growth during the first two centuries of the Edo period. This phenomenon enriched the merchant status group in particular and instigated a concomitant expansion of pictorial culture, especially in and around Kansai urban centers such as Kyoto and Osaka. Whereas cities had been served by floating world artists and “town painters” (*machi eshi*) for many decades, the later eighteenth century onward witnessed an embrace of painting at all levels of the urban citizenry and increasingly among rural elites and village elders. Regional daimyo and temples commissioned paintings with greater frequency, and it was not uncommon for artists to travel the countryside for years at a time to meet ever-widening demand. The appreciation and ownership of painting was quickly becoming a nationwide pursuit.

The ascent of Maruyama Ōkyo (1733–1795), the most popular painter of the eighteenth century, is characteristic of the new opportunities in the art world for aspiring painters. Born to a farming family in Kameoka, outside of Kyoto, Ōkyo apprenticed as a teenager at a curio shop in the ancient capital, where he demonstrated a facility for design and painting and experimented with single-point perspective in the form of *veu d’optique*, or stereoscope images (*megane-e*). From there, Ōkyo’s training exposed him to a wide range of pictorial approaches. Apprenticeship with Kano painter Ishida Yūtei (1721–1786) allowed him to establish a technical foundation, which was enhanced by his study of older Chinese paintings of the Song and Yuan periods; his sobriquet “Ōkyo” makes reference to the Yuan period painter Qian Xuan (1235–1305), who was admired in Japan for the magical realism of bird-and-flower paintings.



Maruyama Ōkyo, *Five Puppies* (detail), 18th century, hanging scroll, ink and slight color on silk, 41 1/8 × 19 3/4 in (104.4575 × 50.165 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Carl Holmes (M.71.100.164).

Special mention should be made of Ōkyo's indebtedness to the works of the Shen Nanpin school. Shen Nanpin (also known as Shen Quan; c. 1682–1760) was a Chinese painter who, in an unusual turn, was invited by shogunal officials to Japan; he arrived in the port city of Nagasaki in 1731 and stayed for two years, training a handful of Japanese painters who spread his highly realistic mode of bird-and-flower painting across the archipelago. Two factors led to the popularity of his works. The first was their evocation of classical Chinese bird-and-flower painting as practiced in the Imperial Academy; many such works had been brought to Japan centuries earlier and had become a cornerstone of Kano painting. The second was the emerging popularity of natural history, especially among daimyo, who sponsored or themselves painted albums of rare creatures and plants. The mode of painting associated with Shen Nanpin resonated with these contemporary cultural trends and served to reinvigorate nature painting among a broad spectrum of Japanese painters. Ōkyo was no exception...

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