The Newsletter | No.50 | Spring 2009

A Japanese Bestiary from 1700 to 1950

A Brush with Animals; Japanese Paintings 1700-1950, is the companion volume to an exhibition that opened at the Kunsthal in Rotterdam in 2007 as a celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Society for Japanese Arts. The Society is an international organisation with a distinguished history of publishing articles, books and catalogues on a wide array of topics in Japanese art in all media.

Elizabeth Horton Sharf

Schaap, Robert, with essays by Willem van Gulik, Henk Herwig, Arendie Herwig-Kempers, Daniel McKee, Andrew Thompson. 2007.
A Brush with Animals; Japanese Paintings 1700-1950.
Society for Japanese Arts, The Netherlands, in association with Hotei Publishing, Leiden, an imprint of Brill. 206 pages, 275 colour illus., ISBN 978 90702 160 78.

THE BOOK IS IN ESSENCE a loving probe of the subject of Japanese animal imagery using Society collections; individual and institutional members contributed all of the works exhibited and many of those used to illustrate the text. Most of the artists featured work in the tradition known as *Shijō* (or *Maruyama-Shijō*). Others have adopted elements of the *Shijō* style - a poetic, naturalistic mode of painting that originated in Japan's Edo period (1615-1868).

Soft and lyrical style

Shijō artists, following the lead of the celebrated painter Maruyama Ōkyo (1733-1795), incorporated elements of imported Western pictorial methods but nonetheless elected to remain faithful to traditional Japanese media, formats, and subjects. They further refined Ōkyo's achievement by incorporating a brushwork-oriented aesthetic derived from Japanese literati painting (*nanga or bunjinga*) to evolve a style, often described as soft and lyrical, so appealing that it continued to reverberate in paintings throughout the Meiji (1868-1912), Taishō (1912-1926), and Shōwa (1926-1989) periods. In these later periods one often finds the *Shijō* style dovetailing in a single work with freshly encountered European techniques such as watercolour painting. One also finds the style evolving into *Nihonga* – works by innovative artists interested in creating a national style in opposition to a contemporary movement that was overtly tied to European pictorial methods (Yōga).

Yet although the *Shijō* aesthetic is a thread uniting many of the animal paintings one encounters in the volume, it is not the sole subject of discourse by the book's contributors, nor is it the only school of Japanese painting represented. Notably earlier or disparate works such as 'Falcons', attributed to Kanō Tsunenobu (1636-1713), 'Quails and flowering chrysanthemums', attributed to Tosa Mitsunari (1646-1710), and 'Elephant' by Watanabe Kakushū (1778-1830), are also included in the Catalogue section. A variety of works – *netsuke* (miniature sculptures used as toggles of old), prints, and painting albums – also illustrate the text and add interest.

This is not a book featuring style, however; the purpose of its four main essays is to retell the story of pictorial animal imagery in Japan.

Challenging perceptions

Daniel McKee begins by challenging the notion that the Japanese have an innate affinity with nature, a notion that is often repeated uncritically in modern accounts of Japanese painting. McKee quotes Howard Stern, who opens his classic catalogue, *Birds, Beasts, Blossoms, and Bugs: The Nature of Japan,* with the statement: 'Nature and Japan sound alike to the initiated, and to these enlightened people they are synonymous.' McKee counters that it is not until the coining of the word *shizen* (nature) in modern times that the Japanese begin to tout their sympathetic intimacy with the natural world as a national characteristic. He thus links Stern's declaration to the nationalistic tradition of *nihonjinron*, or 'discussions of Japaneseness' (although he does not use the term). But he has far more to say than this. McKee guides readers to the Japanese patrons themselves to see which animals have been chosen for depiction and display, and *why*. It is not surprising to find that, especially in the pre-modern period, members of different social classes in Japan had specific preferences. For example, for courtly patrons 'only select animals of elegant appearance and gentle demeanour – cranes, deer, pheasants, ducks, oxen and domesticated horses – are allowed as subjects.' Likewise, painters serving the warrior elite favoured energetic portrayals of birds of prey, tigers and other fierce animals. Middle-class merchants preferred the symbolism of the humble rat, whose presence underscored an excess of rice (wealth) at hand. It is only with the 'new, industrial definition of nature as a world of resources distinct from the human' in modern times that animals lose their symbolic ties to certain social classes. We moderns have to remind ourselves of these links when looking at early paintings.

Turtle-frogs and demon-monsters

The next two essays, by Willem van Gulik and Arendie Herwig-Kempers, do just this by providing a handy reference to Japanese animal lore. Van Gulik's essay highlights the animals of the 12-year zodiac cycle: rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep/goat, monkey, cock, dog, and boar. He briefly introduces the Chinese, Japanese, and Buddhist origin myths for the zodiac (literally, *circle of animals*) and then recounts for each sign the best-known stories. Arendie Herwig-Kempers' enjoyable overview of supernatural creatures – animals still, but ones that can bring good luck, trick, bewitch, terrify, or otherwise exercise magical powers – continues in this vein. Her subjects include all the animals of the zodiac, (who, except for the dragon, are rather ordinary but nonetheless have uncommon influence over human beings), and truly fabricated beings such as the unicorn (*baku*), phoenix (*hō*), turtle-frog (*kappa*), half-human creatures (*tengu*) and demon-monsters (*oni*). The illustrations are appropriately lively, and are often of *netsuke* (miniature sculptures), which make a good comparison as they feature many of the same animal subjects. Indeed, the authors of her most venerable sources, T. Volker's *The Animal in Far Eastern art and especially in the art of the Japanese Netsuke* and Henri Joly's *Legend in Japanese art*, were inspired in part by *netsuke* to compile their animal lexicons.

The fourth essay by Henk Herwig, a self-described 'biologist interested in Japanese art,' happily addresses the history of avian imagery, with special reference to an anonymous scroll depicting dead birds. Bird-and-flower painting (literally, flower-and-bird painting; *kachōga*), has a long history in East Asia and is a natural subject for inclusion in this volume. The author surveys the vast topic of bird imagery from ancient to modern times. Echoing McKee, Herwig concludes that, 'by this time [early 20th century] *kachōga* were no longer advertised as sophisticated artefacts full of emblematic connotations that could be valued only by the well educated… [they] were now accessible to a wide audience that appreciated *kachōga* as romantic and peaceful representations of nature.' Herwig argues that this anonymous scroll may have been executed by an amateur bird lover-cum-painter indebted to earlier artists interested in documenting nature – and in collecting exotic birds too – following European precedent. It is fortunate that this scroll survives to document a new, ornithological interest in birds.

This brings us to the beautiful catalogue, which features many works that, although they seem typically and traditionally Japanese at first glance, also incorporate European achievements in the visual rendering of the natural world. For example, Meiji-born Watanabe Seitei's dreamlike image of two crows in flight, reproduced in crystalline detail on the book jacket, is a striking black-on-gold vision dependent in part on the artist's training in Western techniques. In choosing this image for the cover, the designer, Robert Schaap, graphically captures the purport of the book's title; 'a brush with animals' and connotes a brief encounter, unexpected and perhaps vaguely alarming, with animals in the wild. The cover image and title in turn evoke yet another dreamy reverie, one of ink morphing into animal shapes via skilful brushwork. Indeed, the artists featured in the book draw on the most powerful and popular techniques of their time for wielding brush, ink and colour in the avid pursuit of their subjects. The sheer variety of what they are able to achieve is of tremendous interest.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the ambitious nature of the book, I must mention some minor omissions and failings: I should have liked a few sentences about each contributor (I found this at the Brill and the Society for Japanese Art

websites); a few works illustrated with their mountings would highlight the age and context of the material and better incorporate the final technical essay on the Japanese hanging scroll (Andrew Thompson); easily avoidable typographical errors often disrupted my enjoyment of the book; two essays give no citations; Japanese sources, although evidently consulted, are rarely included in the notes or bibliography.

As for larger concerns, I was uncomfortable with the overlap between the van Gulik and Herwig-Kempers essays, where variant accounts of the same story of a given zodiac animal make the reader do the work of consolidating the information. More unfortunate, McKee's sensitive and in-depth account stops short of delving into the *Maruyama-Shijō* tradition and its legacy. The informative catalogue entries return the reader to our knowledge of later painting circles via artistic lineage biographies and other insights specific to individual works (Robert Schaap). Yet little beyond these entries and a few paragraphs in the McKee and Herwig essays guide the reader in his or her appreciation of the central styles and social contexts of the paintings in the volume.

Not quite ideal

Is *A Brush with Animals* the ideal book of Japanese animal imagery on silk and paper? Not quite. It is not intended to be. We must remember that this is a compendium of imagery from later times, imagery now in foreign collections, and so, although standard works such as the 12th century *Chōjū giga* (known as the 'Scroll of Frolicking Animals') are mentioned, the intent is not to feature celebrated, monumental masterpieces of Japanese animal painting. Is it a true Japanese bestiary? Not so. Deer are featured in McKee's discussion but never illustrated, for example. Again, deer were emblematic of the ancient Japanese court and not as important a subject in later times. Is it a handy reference – a good jumping-off point for Westerners who want to delve more deeply into the subject? Yes. Is it a beautifully crafted volume that rewards repeated opening? Absolutely. High-quality colour reproductions accompany the 74 catalogue entries and five essays, including some beautiful details. 85 reference works, also reproduced in colour and amply sized, are appended. The design of the book is superb, the selection of images admirable, and the whole – from the cover image to the choice of fonts – sensitively conceived. The essays provide a wealth of material essential to understanding the meaning and function of the later Japanese animal depictions featured in the book. And the final, technical essay on the traditional Japanese hanging scroll reminds us that the interval under review – 1700 to 1950 – was one still strongly tied to the time-honoured vertical format of the East Asian hanging scroll.

Elizabeth Horton Sharf
University of California, Berkeley
esharf@uclink.berkeley.edu

Fig. 1 (far left): Takeuchi Seihō (1864-1942). Lion. Annemiek & Eric van den Ing, The Netherlands.

Fig. 2 (left): Mori Ippō (1798-1871). Spiny Japanese lobster. René van der Sar & Jan Dees, The Netherlands.

Fig. 3 (right): Watanabe Seitei (1851-1918). Two crows in flight (detail). Gert-Jan van Gaalen, The Netherlands.