



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Critical Perspectives on Classicism in Japanese Painting,  
1600-1700 (review)

Frank Lewis Chance

Monumenta Nipponica, Volume 60, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp. 143-145 (Review)

Published by Sophia University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mni.2005.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/182357>

arly contribution of each chapter. As a whole, the strength of this lucidly written volume is that it does not simply scrape across the surface of a vast scholarly terrain, but delves and probes into particularly interesting and challenging formations to present fresh insights. I will certainly assign it as a required text for my survey course on the history of Japanese art as an intellectually engaging complement to Penelope Mason's *History of Japanese Art*.

*Critical Perspectives on Classicism in Japanese Painting, 1600–1700*. Edited by Elizabeth Lillehoj. University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. 272 pages. Hardcover \$35.00.

FRANK CHANCE  
University of Pennsylvania

As a collaboration of ten authors brought together for a symposium in 1999, *Critical Perspectives on Classicism in Japanese Painting, 1600–1700* explores a theme of importance in any area of world art—classicism. The historian of Western art might be disappointed by the invisibility of icons of “classic” European style here, since neither the Apollo Belvedere nor Appelles make any appearance, but for scholarly readers with East Asian interests, the richness of the issues raised more than compensates for any lack of Greco-Roman antecedents for Japanese classicism. Both Chinese and native sources are noted for the imagery, styles, and iconographies discussed, providing a quite specific context for the analysis of paintings created in a century regarded as one of the most culturally active in Japanese history.

A foreword by Samuel C. Morse introduces the volume, setting the background for an extensive introduction by the editor, Elizabeth Lillehoj, establishing the framework for the periods and themes taken up in the subsequent chapters. Lillehoj defines the term classicism concisely, linking it to both preexistent East Asian concepts and nineteenth-century neologisms, while noting “it is doubtful that ‘classical art’ was understood as a distinct category” during the period in question (p. 3). (This issue is covered in more detail in the first of the seven essays that make up the body of the volume.) In the remainder of her introduction, Lillehoj provides a brief conceptual map for the whole work.

In the first essay, Melanie Trede delves into the issues of terminology and ideology with regard to the use of such terms as “classicism” in the art-historical writing of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Japanese scholars. The nationalistic implications of the ideology of classicism provide a clear subtext for her discussion, which turns primarily on a historiography of interpretations of Sōtatsu (d. 1643?) and the Rinpa style associated with him. Her conclusion, almost foregone from the outset, concerns the depth of ideological charge in the terminology of classicism and sets a strong tone for the following essays.

The second chapter, “Tawarayama Sōtatsu and the ‘*Yamato-e*’ Revival,” by Satoko Tamamushi and translated by Patricia Fister, continues the investigation of Sōtatsu and the seventeenth century. Tamamushi concentrates on four masterpieces attributed to Sōtatsu—three screen paintings and the restorations of the decorated sutras dedicated by the Taira family. From the nineteenth century onward, the latter work,

mentioned in an inscription by Fukushima Masanori (1561–1624) dated to 1602 and another by Asano Mitsuakira (1617–1693) dated to 1648, was linked with Sōtatsu through stylistic implications. Tamamushi also chronicles interpretations and reinterpretations of the three screen paintings, linking the *Matsushima* screens now in the Freer Gallery and the screens depicting the “Sekiya” and “Miotsukushi” chapters of *The Tale of Genji* in the Seikadō Bunko Art Museum, Tokyo, to depictions of the Sumiyoshi shrine near Sakai. Finally, she briefly discusses the *Wind and Thunder Gods* screens in Kenninji, Kyoto, but is able to draw rather less of a conclusion concerning them.

Keiko Nakamachi’s essay, translated by Midori Oka, also looks at Sōtatsu and his stylistic successor, Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716), along with their patrons. Nakamachi investigates a rather wider range of paintings than Tamamushi, with special attention to their ownership in the seventeenth century. The linkage of scrolls and, especially, of painted screens to the holders of power is hardly a surprise, though her assertion that “people of the day considered Sōtatsu’s and Kōrin’s paintings as the most valuable art” with national roots is forceful (pp. 93–94).

Chapter 4, by Laura Allen, explores subjects, rather than artists or their patrons, in the light of “classicism,” looking at depictions of *The Tale of Genji* from the Tosa school. She establishes the function of these works in providing exemplars to serve “the burgeoning discourse on proper female conduct” in the seventeenth century (p. 101). Weaving together the issues of the text of the *Tale*, the choice of episodes for depiction, and the mode of these depictions, which vary from woodblock-printed illustrations to elegantly painted handscrolls to large-scale painted screens and even lavishly decorated lacquer boxes, she draws conclusions about the didactic efficacy of the visual vocabulary exploited across these media.

In the fifth essay, Joshua S. Mostow moves to the canonization of a newer text as a “classical” theme, analyzing depictions of *The One Hundred Poets* set edited by Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241) in the early thirteenth century. Mostow comments on three sets of *Hundred Poets* paintings from the seventeenth century and two albums of paintings, one by (or attributed to) Kanō Tan’yū (1602–1674) and his followers and another attributed to Tosa Mitsuoki (1617–1681). The essay traces the history of the poetic portrait up to the seventeenth century and integrates discussion of the text of some of the poems with the various illustrations, linking them as well to theoretical discussions and later renditions. As with the other contributors to the volume, Mostow supports his argument with extensive notes, but in addition includes appendices listing the calligraphers involved in the three collections of poetry illustrations.

The penultimate chapter is by Karen Gerhart, who analyzes the connection of classical imagery, especially that of Chinese “sages,” to patrons wielding immense political and military power in the seventeenth century. Her discussion centers on two painted palaces, loci of semipublic display within the larger walls of Nijō Castle in Kyoto. Her first example is the Visitation Palace, built for the five-day visit of Emperor Go-Mizunoo (1596–1680; r. 1611–1629) to Nijō in the ninth month of 1626, dismantled two years later, and ultimately destroyed in fires. We know of this project through records of the time outlining the subjects of eight of the eleven decorated rooms, mostly Chinese topics of exemplary or didactic nature. Gerhart’s second example, by contrast, survives as one of the most-visited sites in Kyoto, the Ninomaru Palace of Nijō Castle, whose subjects, in rooms decorated in the Kan’ei period

(1624–1644) and hence roughly contemporaneous with the Visitation Palace, are primarily drawn from flora and fauna with overtones of military power and splendor. The message to Go-Mizunoo must have been clear—the Tokugawa warlords were creating a tradition to rival, or even outshine, that of the imperial court.

In the final chapter, by Lillehoj, Go-Mizunoo and his consort, Tōfukumon'in (1607–1678), figure as major players in the canonization of the Gion Festival as a classical motif. Paintings of floats from the festival link this commoner celebration, its warrior-class patrons, and the imperial villa at Shugakuin into a matrix of cultural implications. An afterword, by Quitman Eugene Phillips, sums up the topics covered in the volume and suggests that the issues of classicism and of native and imported pasts put into the service of an ever-changing present are both distinctively Japanese and universally important. A section of color plates situated between the fourth and fifth essays illustrate some of the most important works discussed in the text. Though the images are small and somewhat lacking in clarity and color saturation, inclusion of these plates is a welcome addition to the volume. Appendices include artist biographies, a glossary of Japanese terms, a Chinese character list, an extensive bibliography, brief biographies of the contributing authors, and, finally, an index.

Overall, *Critical Perspectives on Classicism* is useful, not only for specialists interested in the particular paintings or personages discussed, but also for a more general readership concerned with the interplay of interpretations and ideologies, patrons and pedagogies, and symbols and styles in artistic expression.