

The Discovery of Spatial Depth: How the Japanese Adopted the Vision of European Origin

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Abstract

This presentation outlines the overall European-style expression found in seventeenth-to-nineteenth-century Japanese painting, providing specific illustrations. It shows that beneath Japanese painters' adoption of Western images was their avid pursuit of a rational way of seeing things. In most cases, however, that adoption derived less from a deep philosophical intention than from their eagerness to showcase exotic taste. Overall, the revolution in perceptions that would pave the way for modernity had gradually been building from around the mid-eighteenth century, especially among people in urban areas.

In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Western-style Japanese paintings had been modeled after Christian paintings and genre paintings by Jesuit missionary painters. These "early-phase Western-style paintings" vanished when the shogunate imposed the ban on Christianity.

A second major current of Western-style expression emerged in the late eighteenth century while the national seclusion policy was still in effect. After shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune eased restrictions on the import of Chinese translations of European books, except for Christian books, in 1720, so-called Dutch learning spread and Japanese began studying European natural science through Dutch books. The current of the times led Japanese painters to study Europe's manner of rational perception through the few Dutch paintings and engravings that were among goods imported from the West. The paintings and engravings produced mainly in Edo (now Tokyo) under the influence of European paintings and engravings are what we call "second-phase Western-style paintings."

Earlier, in the 1740s, ukiyo-e art that incorporated compositions with depth created using linear perspective—*uki-e*—had played an important role paving the way for acceptance of Western-style artistic expression in Japan.

Ships from China brought Chinese paintings and woodblock prints using Western perspective to Japan in the 1740s. The importation of these Western-style Chinese works, probably made in Suzhou, had a strong impact on Edo painters. That coincided with the time of the rise of Dutch learning, when medical doctors in Edo began studying Dutch. China's popular Western-style painting thus served as a conduit for these developments.

The late 1760s is thought to have been the time of an influx of European-made optical prints into Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo. European hand-colored etchings and the instrument to show them were imported. Edo painters had no opportunities to see first-class Western paintings firsthand or to be trained directly by Dutch artists; they studied Western expression on their own, such as through viewing stereopticon slides and realistic illustrations in Dutch books, and applied what they observed in their own painting.

Katsushika Hokusai's "Under the Wave off Kanagawa" is famous for its very Western-style sense of perspective, in which the stylized and decoratively portrayed waves set off a sharp contrast between foreground and background.

Japan quickly adopted Western civilization after the start of the Meiji era (1868–1912), it is true, but by that time Japanese had studied Western material culture and science through books. We can say that as early as in the middle and late eighteenth century Japanese had trained themselves in modern perceptions, through the Western techniques of expression they incorporated into ukiyo-e prints and into the Western-style oil paintings of Shiba Kokan and others.

Key words: European-style expression, revolution in Japanese painters' perceptions, Dutch learning, "second-phase Western-style paintings"