

Omitting the Prominent, Valuing the Intricate, and a Spirituality-Imbued Gold: Birds and Flowers in a Landscape by a Kano Artist

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Birds and Flowers in a Landscape (花鳥図屏風, second half of 16th century, 154.8 x 355.6 cm, ink wash on paper, pair of six-panel folding screens, fig. 1, 2) “formerly attributed to” Kano Utanosuke (狩野雅楽助, dates vary) is painted in a style belonging to the most prominent familial school of artists in medieval Japan who created paintings on fans, sliding door panels and folding screens for diverse clients, including the shogun and the powerful warlords Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi of the Muromachi Period, in a timeframe immediately following the activities of the school’s founder and second head, Kano Masanobu and Kano Motonobu, respectively.ⁱ The painting is one of “several six-fold screens in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,” most of which “demonstrate the extension of Motonobu’s interpretation of Chinese academic-style flowers and birds in a landscape (8),” according to Carolyn Wheelwright in “Kano Painters of the Sixteenth Century A.D.: The Development of Motonobu's Daisen-in Style.” Although *Birds and Flowers in a Landscape* is representational and uses a full range of colors, great abstraction has been subtly rendered in its initially barely perceptible details- compositionally and within different elements themselves- transporting the careful observer to another full-scale viewing experience akin to that of an uncanny parallel universe, which they may have never known existed.

Birds and Flowers in a Landscape represents what its title suggests, with trees and rocks on either sides of the two-screen composition and streams of water running through and around the middle of the picture from each side, with flowers on a pointed rock in the middle, mist in the middle ground and background and a waterfall and cliff of rocks on the left, while gold paint represents the atmosphere. In the two right-most panels of the composition are the densest subject matter, with a pair of handsome pine trees, a stream, a bed of grey earth and birds including a pheasant. Very fine lines of lighter ink were used for the contours of the birds and other smaller details, suggesting the artist's interest in a naturalistic representation of volume. The flow of water in the streams was delineated in obvious stylization, and the shapes of the water surfaces and volume vary between two nearly opposite methods of depiction- one of almost straight lines and the other of half-circular bulges with parallel line patterning. A peacock and two pheasants are the largest animals depicted. Ten pairs, four groups of threes and three single smaller birds of fifteen species are scattered across the painting with white, red and pink flowers of various kinds.

The two aforementioned pine trees on the right side of the scene is balanced by two smaller trees on tall rocks on the left-hand side of the painting. One counts a dozen different species of birds, of various appearances, in the painting- a degree of the artist's attention to them to suggest a symbolic connection between the birds and Japan's numerous political entities in the Muromachi Period as much as joyous plentitude in nature. The artist has painted two sets of mutually distinct mountains in the background, symmetrically placed and visible through openings in mist of comparable size, of entirely differing perspectives- one an aerial view of a valley and the other a view of the ridgeline from below, made less jarring by the dense and

expansive mist. The mountains are foreshortened and are surreal in being of different apparent scale as well as perspectives from one another.

There are hints of naturalistic volume in the larger birds' feather gradation and the artist's use of variation in tones for the flowers. The pine leaves and branches convey a sense of motion through their somewhat slanted irregularity of form. The bark of the pine trees represents its texture with both high verisimilitude and a relative extent of stylized repetition comparable to the rows of string forms in samurai armor, where both bark and armor protect (fig. 3). Roughly half of the birds are chirping, denotatively contributing to the painting's lyricism. Considerably light-colored contours of ink lines are used in the white flowers. The tall waterfall beside the aforementioned cliff-like valley of rocks, in one of the left-most panels, falls straight from the top of the screen to its landing below the picture's mid-level. The peacock possesses an elongated neck like the tortoise or phoenix of the Four Creatures Guarding the Four Directions. The peacock's tail feathers are stylized in a neat, frontal arrangement, which in its day would have conveyed pictorial formality together with aesthetic idealization.

Like the positioning and sizes of the visible area of the background's mountains, other elements too, including the peacock and two pheasants, on the stone-grey earth on either sides of the entire picture find opposites of their own while contributing to an overall compositional symmetry. A certain hierarchy of life among the plants, animals and solid inorganic matter here is articulated by each paired element's degree of symmetry with its other pair. For instance, the pheasants and peacock form the most precise symmetry, followed by the trees, and the rocks are less symmetrical as those on the left side of the two-screen picture are tall and cliff-like while

those on the right side of the same picture are much smaller and lower. The birds are represented as highly mobile so their even scattering may be taken into account instead. The mountains in the background are covered in mist to an extent rendering them less visible and thus less relevant than the scenery in the foreground, but there are flowers on a rock placed in the center, introducing tension into this hierarchy. In the foreground, the stream and earth on the right-hand-side of the picture are somewhat higher and more recessed than those on the opposite side, which happens to be a fixed, recurring tendency in works by the greatly popular Korean modern-era ink wash painter Kim Ki-Chang (Feb. 18, 1913-Jan. 23, 2001). Echoing this elevation, however subtle, of the ground on the right are the mountains in the right screen's background, the ridges of which are elevated on the right as if to pull the painting inward from right to left at the mountain ridges, thus completing the picture's subtle perspectival slant to render the space depicted on the right more expansive and the elements on the left closer to the viewer than would a perfectly squared, frontal view.

A full range of colors have been employed for naturalistic chromatic representation. This landscape is an idea rather than an actual view, obvious from its stylized arrangement of elements including uses of multiple perspectives for the background's mountains and the convenient composition of trees, in relation to the symmetrical arrangement of streams and land, in the foreground. Nonetheless, the birds depicted are of a tremendous verisimilitude and the edges of splashing water and the earth, the shape, color and texture of trees are painted with great care and regard for their implied senses of volume, as if to offer viewers a virtual experience of these natural elements, otherwise enhancing the convincingness of this imagined and idealized composition, possibly as a surrogate for actual natural scenery in the medieval era. This

possibility is based on the assumption that the political unrest in Muromachi Period Japan may have made it dangerous and difficult for warriors, who were major patrons of the Kano family, to frequently enjoy recreational excursions outdoors for fear of unguarded, open exposure to enemy threats. During this prolonged period of warfare across Japan, warriors imaginably may have developed a repressed desire to enjoy natural landscapes which was possibly satisfied, as intended by the artists, within practical boundaries through large, folding screen landscape paintings such as Kano Utanosuke's, which it is known have been used occasionally or seasonally.

Despite the abstract qualities of the amount and density of mist throughout the screens and certain stylizations in some of the depicted subject matter, the artist of *Birds and Flowers in a Landscape* has represented a number of surprisingly minute details throughout the painting. For example, he has painted dozens of miniscule yellow dots, perhaps a millimeter in diameter each, on very fine stamens and many hardly perceptible thorns contoured with light-colored ink on some of the plant stems. The background is painted in gold and, according to Bettina Klein in "Japanese Kinbyōbu: Gold-leafed Folding Screens of the Muromachi Period (1333-1573)," "Gold and flowers are among the means employed for gaining entrance into the Buddha-world (21)," and "The Buddha-world for believers of most Buddhist sects is visualized as a magnificent garden of paradise (21)." As for the subject matter of birds and flowers, the following by Caroline Wheelwright in "Kano Painters of the Sixteenth Century A.D.: The Development of Motonobu's Daisen-in Style" regarding Kano Motonobu, who is said to have influenced his successors past the mid-sixteenth century, discusses their origins in Japanese painting, as well as how readily connectible they are to Chinese styles.

Motonobu developed styles for various themes-landscapes, flowers and birds, figures-based on the traditions that were current in the Muromachi art world. Two of his three major flower-and-bird type-styles came primarily from Chinese models; the third has closer links with Japanese yamato-e. The Daisen-in paintings, which are discussed in this article, represent Motonobu's formal style of richly colored flower-and-bird painting (shintai saishiki kachoga). For this type-style, Motonobu incorporated the tradition that had originated in the Chinese Imperial Academy, and set polychrome flowers and birds into an illusionistic ink landscape. For his informal style of flower-and-bird painting in ink (gyotai suiboku kachoga) Motonobu looked to another Chinese tradition: the style of the thirteenth century monk-painter Mu-Ch'i as it had been transformed in Muromachi Japan.... Motonobu's third flower-and-bird style evolved from his mastery of ornamental yamato-e techniques of gold leaf and strong color (6).

The plaque for *Birds and Flowers in a Landscape* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston reads "Formerly attributed to Kano Utanosuke." Kano Utanosuke, also known as Kano Utanosuke Yukinobu, according to the British Museum's online database lived between 1513 and 1575 and was a son and pupil of Kano Masanobu (1434–1530), who is "credited with establishing the Kano school as a professional atelier in Kyoto." However, Shimizu in "Workshop Management of the Early Kano Painters, ca. A.D. 1530-1600" writes the following in contradiction of the above birth and death dates of Kano Utanosuke.

Biographical accounts of the early Kano family members remain elusive. Various Edo sources give conflicting information on the vitae of these painters. According to some of them, Masanobu is said to have had three sons. A certain Utanosuke Yukinobu, believed to be the older brother of Motonobu, apparently died young (at about 39 years of age).

If Kano Utanosuke was the older brother of Kano Motonobu (1476-1559), who was a family head and thus whose birth year was presumably at least somewhat accurately documented, then Utanosuke could not possibly have been born later than 1476, much less in 1513 as the British Museum's database lists. Either that or Kano Utanosuke was not an older brother of Kano Motonobu. The highest age attained in life by Kano Utanosuke has at least two different precise values, one is the difference between 1575 and 1513, sixty-two, while the other is thirty-nine. More than one source lists Utanosuke's death year as 1575 or circa 1575, which compounds the paradox. One other possibility appears to be that there were perhaps more than one Kano Utanosuke and all of the birth years or age accounts are actually correct. One or more of the Utanosukes may have been adopted as is said to have been standard practice in medieval Japanese painting lineages,ⁱⁱ and it is imaginable adopted individuals may have also adopted the names of hereditary Kano family members. The feasibility of this may depend on whether other, and if so how many, early Kano members also have conflicting records of time of birth and death, and how common it was for assistants to adopt the first and last names of family members. An individual's birth year and oldest age attained in life are two pieces of information which should be difficult to falsely record in precise values, particularly by differences of more than thirty-five years for year of birth and twenty for years lived. A discernment between whether there lived one or two persons by the same name who belonged to the Kano family would aid the understanding of degrees of variation in style, particularly naturalism or a sense of energy in lines, between individuals in the same school who were unified to an extent by a shared style, which for the Kano school was, according to Akiyama Terukazu in *Japanese Painting*, "clarity of expression, sharply defined linework, and balanced composition (120)." The plaque for *Birds and Flowers in a Landscape* in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston simply reads "dates unknown"

for the artist.

According to Wheelwright, “As early as 1513, Motonobu had begun to direct a cohesive group of painters in executing projects characteristic of the Kano studio: in the four rooms of sliding-door panels painted at the Daisen-in under his supervision, the hands of six artists can be distinguished (7).” In the Kano school, the role of chief artistic director was passed down from a father to one of his sons, which implies that Kano clan sons were obligated to strive to acquire and hone their painting skills and aesthetic judgment since childhood in an exceptionally rigorous manner in order to eventually assume the role of Kano school leader. While individuals are highly specialized in their trade in contemporary society, it could be said that in the medieval world, in Japan at least, entire families were specialized in certain crafts and that society consisted of such specialized familial groups.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art introduces the Kano School of painting as follows.

The Kano school was the longest lived and most influential school of painting in Japanese history; its more than 300-year prominence is unique in world art history. Working from the fifteenth century into modern times, this hereditary assemblage of professional, secular painters succeeded in attracting numerous patrons from most affluent social classes by developing, mastering, and promoting a broad range of painting styles, pictorial themes, and formats.

Wheelwright’s discussion of the professional context of the Kano school in “Kano Painters of the Sixteenth Century A.D.” leaves ambiguous the issue of agency in who determined or directed the day’s prevailing styles and how, and to what extent of leverage and initiative in

determining prevailing subject matter.ⁱⁱⁱ According to scholars, the Kano school, the name for which comes from the village of Kano in Izu province according to Akiyama Teruzaku in *Japanese Painting*, descended from a warrior family but were townsmen by the time the painting school was visibly inaugurated, and scholars agree was founded by Kano Masanobu (1434-1530), whose patrons included the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa (ruled 1449-1473; d. 1490), and began accepting commissions from patrons of more diverse backgrounds, both religious and secular, beginning with the second family head Kano Monotobu. Of the commissions, those for sliding door panels and screens were most lucrative and the period of their early formation, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were when wash painting was gaining serious incorporation in Japanese painting. The subject matter of Kano school painting took their inspiration from traditional Chinese paintings, mostly from the Sung and Yuan dynasties.^{iv}

Caroline Wheelwright states explicitly that “Models such as the 1548 designs for flower-and-bird screens continued to be used by Kano school artists after Motonobu’s death, and the screen of *Civets and Pine* (fig. 4) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, probably adheres to one of these (10).” *Civets and Pine*, or *Civets, Pine Tree, Birds, and Flowers* happens to be currently attributed to Kano Utanosuke by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. However, while pointing out that a seal in the painting over which a Shuin or Moin is stamped “is interpreted by Tsuji Nobuo as a variant of Motonobu,” Wheelwright disagrees because she believes the style of this painting belongs to a later period than the time she considers Utanosuke to have been active, somewhere earlier than 1513-1575 and more contemporaneous with Kano Masanobu and Kano Monotobu, and argues that the actual painter was more likely to have been a “main-line” family member who “considered himself a faithful follower of Motonobu, and it is possible that he was a

nephew of Motonobu (10, 11).” According to Wheelwright, even if Kano Utanosuke were a younger brother of Kano Motonobu, as opposed to an older brother, the years of 1513-1575 are too far removed from the active years of Kano Masanobu and Kano Motonobu. We can infer from this that Wheelwright would also reject that a painting made in the second half of the sixteenth century, i.e. *Birds and Flowers in a Landscape*, is likely to have been created by Kano Utanosuke, the brother of Kano Motonobu.

That the Kano school’s patrons included Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi implies that the school’s style was in a position to influence a more unified national style to follow because the two warlords politically and ideologically unified the Japanese archipelago while presumably also centralizing art patronage. Despite the simplicity of the painting screens in the large swathes of empty space and the mildly limiting aspect of the artist having depicted birds, flowers land and water only, the talented artist of *Birds and Flowers in a Landscape*, whoever he was exactly, has taken significant measures to imbue his painting with meaning through a carefully considered and subtly represented expanse of positive space in the painting’s details as much as in its composition. Perhaps it is telling about the personality of the Japanese as a people that a painting with such subtlety in details which leads on to a visual experience as rich as that of any elaborate or monumental colors and forms in art was esteemed to a position of unprecedented national influence at the dawn of a politically unified and culturally centralized Japan. Because of traditional East Asian art’s time-honored unity of aims, we may consider it an important potential of this art to be capable of attesting to a more fundamental and lasting set of characteristics and values of its people- i.e. the big picture of East Asian identity. We will remember that at a certain peak in Japan’s political and cultural history there stood tall and

confident a painting style which kept a safe distance from outspoken splendor while allowing for a tweaking of perception where great and small are reversed, encapsulating thus the spiritual universe of the Japanese.



[Fig. 1] Screen 1 of 2 in *Birds and Flowers in a Landscape* (花鳥図屏風), formerly attributed to Kano Utanosuke, 2nd half of 16th century, ink and color on paper, 154.8 x 355.6 cm.



[Fig. 2] Screen 2 of 2 in *Birds and Flowers in a Landscape* (花鳥図屏風), formerly attributed to Kano Utanosuke, 2nd half of 16th century, ink and color on paper, 154.8 x 355.6 cm.



[Fig. 3] Detail. Screen 2 of 2 in *Birds and Flowers in a Landscape* (花鳥図屏風), formerly attributed to Kano Utanosuke, 2nd half of 16th century, ink and color on paper, 154.8 x 355.6 cm.



[Fig. 4] *Civets, Pine Tree, Birds, and Flowers* (松に麝香猫図屏風) by Kano Utanosuke, mid-16th century, ink and color on paper, 160.1 x 348.8 cm.

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ⁱ According to Yoshiaki Shimizu in "Workshop Management of the Early Kano Painters, ca. A.D. 1530-1600," "the market for works of art expanded in the late medieval period" of Japan, which led to prosperity for "independent professional painters' shops that were organized around a familial structure," where "the most notable example was that established by the house of Kano, which lasted, with varying degrees of prosperity, for four centuries." According to Shimizu, the Kano studio was organized to consist of one master, who was also the head of the Kano family, "senior assistants" and "junior assistants (32)."

ⁱⁱ Yoshiaki Shimizu. Ibid. p. 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wheelwright p. 6.

^{iv} Yoshiaki Shimizu, "Workshop Management of the Early Kano Painters, ca. A.D. 1530-1600;" Akiyama Terukazu *Japanese Painting*; mention of Monotobu's work on sliding door panels and screens with apprentices in Wheelwright p. 6.