

Strand 2: The Historiography of Art Nouveau (looking back on the past)

Paris and Kyoto—Asai Chu making a bridge onto the Art Nouveau from
Japan Mori Hitoshi (Professor, Kanazawa College of Art)

In Japan, from the fifteenth century onwards, the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and the incense ceremony have existed as arts and the art theories cultivated there gave form to basic concepts such as “*mitate* (likening)” or “*shitsurai* (arrangement)”. There, not only the actual things visible but different perspectives and entirely new concepts were presented through a variety of implements and combinations of them. On such occasions, vases, incense burners, and tea caddies were employed as “tools” to express such ideas. The significance of the existence of such works of art as tools to give form to such ideas was great.

In addition, having accomplished the Meiji Restoration in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Japan became open to Western politics, economics, and culture and aimed to form a new nation-state. In doing so, thanks to Japonism, Japanese-made products were highly appreciated abroad. However, in the 1880s, Japonism diminished and export declined. As a result, the producing centers lose confidence. This trend became definite with the emergence of Art Nouveau at the Paris Exposition of 1900. On that occasion, nearly 200 people visited Paris from Japan and recognized the actual state. While, on the one hand, this answer was a scheme to secure the market by means of a price war relying on low wages, on the other hand, there were people who attempted to launch Japanese artistry out into a new art, i.e. the world of Art Nouveau. That is to say, from Japan’s point of view, the former was a complete surrender to the new trend in art and design that had emerged in Europe and the latter could be regarded an effort to open up something beyond the new trends. A man who put this into practice was Asai Chu, who is introduced below.

1.

Asai arrived in Paris in February 1900 as professor at the Western Painting Faculty of Tokyo Fine Arts School. His purpose was to do research on Western-style painting. He originally intended to study in France for two or so years, return to Japan, and make a living teaching oil painting. However, while in Paris, he accepted a position as professor at the Design Faculty of Kyoto College of Technology, which was to be founded in Kyoto. The first reason Asai accepted this position had to do with his family background. He was born in Edo as the son of a vassal of the Hotta family of the Sakura domain. The boys who entered the Painting Faculty at the Technical Fine Arts School (Kobu Bijutsu Gakko), where Asai first studied oil painting under Antonio Fontanesi, were all, like Asai, sons of vassals of *daimyo* affiliated to the Tokugawa shogunate. There was no chance for them to rise to distinction as politicians or military personnel in the Meiji period. Nevertheless, they turned their eyes enthusiastically towards the new world. At the same time, they had already received education based on traditional Japanese values in their childhood, namely, martial arts, Confucianism, and traditional literature. Almost all of them aspired to paint landscape paintings close to those esteemed in the Orient and there was only one person that aspired to paint portraits.

When the Western Painting Faculty was established at Tokyo Fine Arts School in 1896, it was Kuroda Seiki that was put in charge. He was from Satsuma and was a member of the House of Peers. He was assigned to get artistic expressions employing European techniques enrooted in Japan and was well aware of his mission. The Japanese title of the work he presented at the Paris Exposition of 1900 was *Wisdom, Impression, Sentiment*, but he submitted it to the Exposition as *Etude de Femme*. As his aim was for the Japanese to produce nineteenth century-like *kosoga* (planned paintings), by painting well-proportioned nudes conforming to the European sense of beauty, he made this work correspond to the European standard of beauty. However, as his true object was to express contemporary concepts through his painting, he placed Japanese women portrayed with red shading amidst an abstract gold folding screen-like background in an effort to symbolize three emotions. Asai also produced a work in the same method in 1905, which suggests that this may have been a style easy for Japanese

artists to conceive. Kuroda's enigmatic stance is disclosed in the way he presents his work as a *kosoga* to the Japanese and a study of Western painting to the Europeans. In other words, towards the Europeans, by complying with the established European style, he wanted to be approved amongst the Europeans' art. Towards the Japanese, while employing European techniques, he wanted to indicate that he was establishing a new concept and style of painting. Meanwhile, Kuroda thought that a craft section should be added to the Teiten (Imperial Fine Arts Academy Exhibition). That is to say, he considered that the accomplishments enjoyed by modern *samurai* included the tea ceremony and alcove ornaments and tried to be loyal to the manner of regarding them as subjects of artistic appreciation. The formation of design in Japan had to take root in the turmoil of such transplantation of art and a soil of aesthetic senses unrelated to that.

2.

The second reason was Asai's foresight. He visited the exposition site time and again and decided that "Japanese-style paintings and Japanese oil paintings are totally lacking in face." In other words, in comparing the same technique or the same concept, he felt that thirty or so years of training would hardly suffice for the Japanese works including his own to rival their European counterparts. Of course, Asai had to find a solution to this while in Paris.

In Paris, from May 1900, Asai lived in the same boardinghouse as Fukuchi Mataichi, who was professor at the Design Faculty at Tokyo Fine Arts School, and Ikebe Yoshikata, an expert on Japanese literature. According to Asai's diary, he and Fukuchi were due to visit Bing in July. The meeting once fell through but realized on July 10th. The following day, they visited Bing's pavilion at the Exposition with an interpreter and Asai writes that "it was extremely beneficial." He visited Bing again in September with his old friend Koyama Shotaro and Fukuchi. Bing and Felix Régamey were the only Frenchmen Asai, who did not understand French, visited more than once. During that period, he also went to Sèvres several times. Amidst such circumstances, around November, he met Nakazawa Iwata, who was due to become principal of Kyoto

College of Technology and visiting Paris, and accepted the position as professor at the Design Faculty.

What Asai spent most time on and was most keen on during his stay in France was painting at Grez-sur-Loing, a village in the suburbs. To Asai, who spent his childhood in Sakura, fifty kilometres east of Tokyo, the natural scenery in Grez must have been congenial. Through such contemplation of nature, no doubt his interest in representing his view of the world as an artist would have grown. In November 1901, he visited a pottery in Montigny with Fuji Masazo, an old classmate at the Technical Fine Arts School, and obtained permission to paint ceramics. By the end of the year, thanks to the cooperation of a potter named Albert Boué, Asai was able to produce some decorated dishes. The phoenix on the dish shown here is a traditional motif in the Orient and it is finished in gold on a black ground, the same colouring as lacquerware. Is this then a commonplace work going along with Japanese tradition? Compared to the traditional style of depiction, Asai endeavours to make the motif correspond with the shape of the dish. Moreover, we can see that he keeps the portrayal as flat as possible without trying to produce a sense of depth by heaping the pigment. That is to say, while quoting traditional design, which he was good at, Asai was not attempting to follow tradition. The diary accounts that Asai devoted himself to designing during his stay in Grez from November to December. This must have been a method he discovered then.

The influence of Edo art, a school of Japanese decorative art of the last days of the Tokugawa regime which Asai was familiar with, should be considered in the background of this. For example, Shibata Zeshin, who lived from the end of the Edo period to the Meiji period, was a renowned popular artist from his lifetime and is considered to have been the best at representing the sensibility of the Edo citizens of the nineteenth century. While employing traditional techniques, his surprising ideas and way of depicting the subject objectively should be described more modern than traditional. This sort of sensibility appears to be shared in *jizai okimono* (articulated iron figures of animals, and life-sized dolls, which emerged in the last days of the Tokugawa regime and proved popular. These are all works that managed to appeal forcefully to the sensibility of the Japanese people around the same period.

Fifty or so years earlier, there was a school of painting known as Edo Rimpa, which was founded by Sakai Hoitsu. Though born to a *daimyo* family, in 1797, at age 37, Sakai became a priest and spent the rest of his life concentrating on painting. While aspiring to succeed the Rimpa of the seventeenth century, he differed in that his style was more subtle and overflowing with humour compared to his predecessors. This was related to the fact that Sakai and his generation took to *haiku* literature. The sensory world concise and yet full of suggestiveness was a field they were good at. Shibata Zeshin, whom I mentioned above, could also be regarded an artist belonging to this genealogy. *Ukiyo-e*, which is well-known as a genre of Japanese art in the closing days of the Tokugawa regime, was based on a red-light district culture which blossomed in areas such as Yoshiwara. Despite existing in the same period as Edo Rimpa, *ukiyo-e* was an existence that did not intermingle.

Asai had many points in common with the culture of this genealogy. Firstly, he was born to a *samurai* family. The samurai class of the Edo period was normally expected to enjoy paintings of the Kano school and regard landscape painting as the most esteemed genre of painting. Edo Rimpa, in that respect, was easy for Asai, who was a *samurai*, to accept and it was also a proud legacy of Edo culture towards the end of the Tokugawa regime, which he himself had experienced. One of Asai's best friends was the *haiku* poet Masaoka Shiki. Shiki endeavoured to revive *haiku*, which had degenerated in the late Edo period, as a literary expression. Their magazine *Hototogisu* covered not only *haiku* but also painting and architecture. The lithographs which appeared on the cover and back cover often demonstrated new and sophisticatedly witty tendencies for the time and clearly exemplified what their artistic taste was like. It goes without saying that Asai's works also made the cover.

Having met Bing, Asai "felt he leads a truly enviable life and that it must be fun to be able to make money in such a delightful way". Analyzing Bing's presentation at the Exposition, Asai notes, "Bing focuses on the point that the mood in and before the Genroku period was grand and openhanded." Therefore, I imagine that Asai may have thought that by relying on the legacy of Edo Rimpa, which he was familiar with, he would be able to create works similar to Bing or different from Bing but innovative as

designs. The reason I suggest this is that Asai had never attempted ceramic painting before going to France and I cannot find any reason for him to spend his precious time on such work during his stay in Grez. It is especially important to note that while both seventeenth century Rimpa and nineteenth century Edo Rimpa focused mainly on painting, they also applied their sensibility enthusiastically to works of art such as ceramics. Perhaps this gave Asai a hint for him to extend his sphere of activities.

How then did Asai develop this idea? It was after he took up his new position in Kyoto that there was progress.

3.

It was ceramics that Asai worked on most. This was due partly to the fact that Kyoto was a prominent center in Japan where ceramics were produced and worked eagerly on new products. In 1896, the city of Kyoto established a ceramics laboratory and began working on technical development and pioneering new products. This institute was transferred to the national level in 1928. The ceramics industry was an important article of export for Japan and the management were aware it was necessary to give priority to technical development in order to realize an expansion in exports after the decline of Japonism. Nakazawa, who scouted Asai, considered that the staff at the College of Technology should respond to the demand from the business community. With Nakazawa as the head, young artists participated in the organization of groups such as Yutoen and Kyoshitsuen and workshops, exhibitions, and trial manufacture took place at the laboratory. The young artists living in Kyoto who took part in these projects were eager to reform their work from an adherence to the early Meiji school to designs fit for a new era. As they had no capacity to create new ceramic paintings on their own, they asked the newly arrived Asai to provide them with designs. Asai responded to their request and works began to be produced.

Side Dish(Fig.1)

The green border and the rust-coloured painting clearly inherit Rimpa and Oribe. However, the motifs such as dandelions, lilies, and geese are obviously a choice

unidentifiable in traditional designs. Other works are also painted in a *yoga* (Western-style painting)-like realistic style, providing a novel impression.

Cylindrical Vase with Ume Blossoms(Fig.2)

Although the Japanese plum is a traditional subject and design in Japan, this vertical portrayal of branches entwined shows the influence of Art Nouveau. The shape of the branches stretching upwards is depicted taking advantage of the elongated form of the vase. While an *ume* blossom is normally depicted with five petals in the traditional method, Asai captures it as closely as possible to the impression visible to the eye and represents it simply as a circle. Moreover, by cutting off the upper part of the picture, he aims at providing a sense of spatial expanse.

Soup Bowl with Violets, 1907(Fi.g.3)

Violets were an entirely new motif for Japan. The tall bowl was designed to correspond with the elongated Art Nouveau-style pattern, resulting in the form, too, deviating from tradition.

Maki-e Stationery Box with Fowl Design, 1906(Fig.4)

The very two-dimensional treatment of the fowl and plants chosen as the motif is a method shared by Rimpa. However, the bold contours outlining the fowl provide a sense of novelty. He quoted this method from the Otsu-E, that is a kind of popular paintings originated near Kyoto. Having said so, the method of inlaying a black lacquered box with a picture is obviously no other than a Rimpa-style technique.

Not all the Japanese artist that visited the Paris Exposition of 1900 sympathized with Art Nouveau. For example, Kamisaka Sekka, who was sent to Europe from Kyoto, reported that there was nothing to learn from Art Nouveau.

Asai took in Art Nouveau as a new art. At the same time, he also foresaw that, adjacent to the novelty, it shared an underlying unreserved, sophisticatedly witty taste

with certain parts of the traditional world in Japan, i.e. Rimpa, Oribe, or *haikai*, and seems to have put this into practice upon his return to Japan. Looking at the works that remain, it appears that his scheme was attained to quite an extent.

On the business side, around September 1907, Asai had Isoda Taka, a *geisha* in Kyoto, open a ceramic shop named *Kyuundo*, whereby his plan to sell the works he and his friends had made was put into practice. However, unfortunately, Asai passed away at the end of that year. Consequently, just when the dream he cherished in Paris was about to bloom in Kyoto, it withered. Indeed, there were no further attempts to challenge new productions at the level Asai had attained to be witnessed from the craft circles in Kyoto thereafter. The leading designer who had the greatest influence was the above-mentioned *Kamisaka*. By reproducing an introverted Japanese taste, he and others supplied designs that were stable from the point of view of marketing and dominant towards the production centers. In other words, from then on, alongside the economic development in Japan, they found a means of survival in fostering a conservative taste which would not change so easily in the domestic market. That also meant confining their work to a domain dissimilar from creative development of traditional techniques. The fact that museums in Japan have been focusing on Asai's designs and holding exhibitions in recent years proves that the present-day significance of his undertaking still has not been forfeited and that people recognize the importance of making it known to the public again. This is the point I wish to confirm and I hope to share what Asai aspired to as a designer with you anew.