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BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Salon Culture in Japan: Making Art, 1750–1900* edited by Akiko Yano. London: British Museum Press, 2024. 256 pages, 220 illustrations.

Salon Culture in Japan: Making Art, 1750–1900 argues that cultural salons functioned as spaces where collaborative artistic production transcended the rigid four-class social system promoted by early modern Japan’s neo-Confucian ideology. By examining collaborative practices and works among established and “ordinary” participants, the book demonstrates that cultural production operated across social boundaries in ways that challenge conventional understandings of Edo period (1603–1868) social structure. It reveals more fluid and participatory cultural networks than previously understood.

In this volume – which is simultaneously an exhibition catalogue and a scholarly contribution – the authors examine in five essays the salons’ persistent social dynamics that operated across the late Edo period and early Meiji era (1868–1912). Published to accompany the exhibition “City Life and Salon Culture in Kyoto and Osaka: 1770–1900” in the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries (April 2024–March 2025), it presents initial findings from a larger digitization and database project¹. The research project draws on over 100 illustrated book titles, 500 paintings, and 3,000 *surimono* (privately commissioned woodblock prints often featuring poetry) from the British Museum’s Kyoto-Osaka collection, one of the most significant outside Japan.

Japan’s cultural salons brought together artists, poets, and “ordinary” people across social boundaries. Examples include collaborative paintings by

¹ British Museum, “Making art together in Japan 1780–1880”

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/projects/making-art-together-japan> (accessed 22 July 2025).

multiple unrelated artists and *surimono* prints combining poetry and images from members of poetry clubs using pseudonyms. Through this approach, the book's authors complement the British Museum's parallel focus on exhibiting individual artistic achievement such as that of Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) (“Hokusai: Beyond the Great Wave”, 25 May–13 August, 2017) or Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) (“Hiroshige: artist of the open road”, 1 May–7 September 2025), ultimately painting a bigger picture of visual and poetic culture during the Japanese early modern period.

Bridging academic analysis and public engagement

Salon Culture contains five major essays and seven shorter contributions. After a historical contextualization by C. Andrew Gerstle, subsequent essays approach salons from the perspectives of knowledge transmission, e.g. Tim Clark's and Rosina Buckland's essays, and collaborative practices, e.g. Alfred Haft's and Akiko Yano's essays. While the volume's shorter contributions provide further insight into auxiliary topics such as printed manuals, the Nagasaki school and painting literati, it is in combination with the major essays that these contributions become most valuable.

Clark effectively presents scholarly analysis for general readership by connecting the salon's themes to perspectives that should also matter to exhibition visitors: the life around the private individual. He acknowledges Jack Hillier's *The Uninhibited Brush* (London: Hugh M. Moss, 1974), at the time of its publication foundational for studying the Shijō school of “naturalistic” painting (p. 90) outside Japan. The Maruyama and Shijō schools originate with the painter Maruyama Ōkyo (1733–1795) and were continued by Go Shun (Matsumura Gekkei, 1752–1811), with Shijō taking its name from the “Shijō” or “Fourth Avenue” district of Kyoto. Clark develops more nuanced understanding of knowledge transmission in salon networks by addressing the central question of whether artists drew inspiration from life or from surrounding materials. His engagement with the motifs of people, places and things juxtaposes the different ingredients necessary for spontaneous artistic production: technique, experience, and observational skills, not only of the motifs, but also of the circumstances limiting certain forms of expression, such as disasters or current political events.

Equally reflecting on the images' relationship with reality and with observation while focusing on the procedural acts of “capturing nature”, Haft examines Ōkyo and his followers, arguing that Ōkyo's followers, sometimes described as the Maruyama school, synthesized spiritual, scientific and poetic practices to “capture nature” and “set it free” (p. 164),

a discussion he convincingly supports with extensive textual and visual evidence and contextualizes with a profound secondary literature framework.

Next, Buckland examines the presence of Chinese works in Japan and their impact on various Sinophile arts ranging from painting over incense to seal carving, which all involved degrees of social interaction and co-creation. China was both present and a distant idea at the time. While its systems shaped social hierarchy and military government and were a substantial subject of study, the region itself remained physically remote due to period travel restrictions. In consequence, literati (*bunjin*) values, particularly their focus on individual cultivation of skill became popular among the educated public as they allowed a respite from worldly concerns. In the works Buckland discusses, this Sinitic influence is discernible in areas ranging from the medium of ink painting, its motif selection and painting-manual mediated aspects of brushwork, to tea culture as a backdrop for collaborative creation.

Yano continues the discussion of collective creativity by focusing on the joint appearance of poetic and visual imagery in works like *surimono*, poetry anthologies, and illustrated books. She demonstrates that *surimono* function as historical documents of collaborative meetings, which she frames as concrete evidence for network analysis, able to counteract the observation that “*surimono* and illustrated poetry anthologies have rarely been integrated into the study of an artist’s body of work” (p. 226). That an inclusive view on artists’ oeuvres is beneficial is demonstrated by her essay: as pictorial works containing poetry are frequently the product of collaborative composition events, these works do not only document the artist’s skill and knowledge, but give insight into the associated context of the moment of creation. The occasion (such as the New Year), master poets, contributors and even their places of origin can be read from these poetic images and provide insight into the “inventiveness of a broad spectrum of individuals” (p. 234).

The essays and shorter contributions work together in updating the research on professional and amateur artistic activities that Hillier began with his pioneering work: while he provided the English-reading public with an introduction to the various media of the “Shijō style” together with the appropriate terminology, *Salon Culture* puts the personal connections and legacies of the involved figures of 18th and 19th century Japanese art and society in dialogue with each other.

Critical discussion: Material evidence and visual analysis

Reflecting its exhibition book format, the volume equally serves exhibition visitors seeking visual engagement and scholars requiring access to primary source materials. This dual orientation creates productive tension: as an exhibition catalogue, the volume grants readers insight into the complex cultural networks, while as a visual resource, it presents substantial visual material. However, scholarly apparatus and analytical depth are limited by this dual function. While the volume succeeds at demonstrating salon culture's social significance, it provides limited access to primary research data. The multi-essay format offers readers diverse perspectives on salon networks, and the volume's findings provide a strong foundation for future work that might more explicitly demonstrate how these various collaborative practices – from Clark's everyday life themes to Yano's *surimono* evidence – functioned as an integrated social system.

The book presents over 200 illustrations carefully placed near their textual discussion, which visually demonstrates how richly and variedly the salons' outputs were integrated across different media. However, while the underlying research includes comprehensive digitization and transcription of poem inscriptions, artist names, and other texts, the volume itself provides scholars only limited access to such detailed materials. For example, the lack of comprehensive translations of the poems discussed in the essays represents a missed opportunity, particularly given the volume's argument about text-image interaction. Scholars cannot fully assess the evidence for collaborative practices without access to the textual content that currently requires studying the images directly.

The editor's indication that the database will be maintained by the Art Research Center at Ritsumeikan University and will provide, as its project aims declared, "a new portal for early modern Japanese culture with the capacity to absorb similar collections in the future"² suggests that this volume represents an initial stage of a more comprehensive scholarly undertaking. The promise of forthcoming academic articles addressing these analytical gaps indicates recognition of the need for more detailed research publications that can fully utilize the project's database resources.

The research project's comprehensive digitization aims promise another opportunity: systematic visual analysis. As the current presentation, while of high quality and visually compelling, holds further analytical potential, comprehensive publication of research data could enable computational

² "Aims," in: British Museum, n.d., "Making art together in Japan 1780–1880" [research project], <https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/projects/making-art-together-japan> (access date: 22 July 2025).

analysis. Data visualizations, such as network diagrams of collaborative relationships, as well as temporal and spatial mapping, could have provided visual evidence for the volume's arguments about the mechanisms, scale, and influence of these cultural networks.

Significance

Salon Culture demonstrates how studying “ordinary” cultural participants alongside established figures can transform understanding of early modern Japanese society, showing how collaborative production persisted across political changes. Its geographic focus on cultural networks in the Kansai region (Kyoto-Osaka area) challenges Edo-centric narratives while showing how different urban contexts shaped collaborative cultural production. By assessing artistic styles and identity creation through pen name usage and other identifying factors, its researchers and authors establish models for understanding how cultural networks operated across social boundaries applicable to further research contexts.

The project's integration of materials from multiple institutions – British Museum, Kansai University, and private collections – offers methodological models for international collaborative research. This approach of examining over 3,600 objects across multiple collections provides a template applicable far beyond these specific materials, demonstrating the potential for comprehensive resource sharing to advance scholarly understanding.

The announced database at Ritsumeikan University's Art Research Center will determine whether this research fulfils its transformative potential, though this volume provides valuable preliminary approaches that point toward more systematic frameworks for future salon culture studies. Despite limitations, this volume will be indispensable for specialists as both resource and starting point for future network studies.