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# *THE WOMEN OF EDO*

*Andrea Rojas*

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### Abstract

The Tokugawa period was the longest reign in Japan, beginning in 1603 and ending in 1868, and demarcated a significant two-hundred-plus-year period in the history of Japan. This era is often referred to as the Edo period due to the establishment of the city of Edo, or modern-day Tokyo, during this time. Japan was established during this period and had a very structured and restricted social order that was divided into four main classes that included samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants. This social structure was patriarchal in orientation and completely omitted women from inhabiting any ranks of power. In light of these histories, my goal in this paper is to exhume the repressed histories of the women artists of Edo. I will closely analyze the political and socio-economic status of Edo during the Tokugawa period through the artworks of Ema Saikō (1787-1861), Yamakazi Ryū-jo (1716-1861), and Katsushika Ōi (1800-1857) to reveal how the political and socio-economic structures had alluded to giving women autonomy while simultaneously restraining them. Ema Saikō, for example, was able to establish her artistic career and specialize in bunjin art where she produced biographical works such as *Landscape*, (1856) which revealed the hardships she experienced as a woman artist at that time. Other artworks like *Courtesan Viewing Cherry Blossoms* (unknown year) by Yamakazi Ryū-jo, a child prodigy who worked in the ukiyo-e style, and *E-iri nichiyō onna chōhō-ki* (Illustrated Handbook for Women (1847)) by Katsushika Ōi, daughter to the well-known Katsushika Hokusai who also worked in the ukiyo-e style, similarly reveals insights into gender constructs, expectations, and social histories. Despite their odds, these three artists were able to surpass their gender expectations and live beyond the shadow of the men in their lives; they deserve to be recognized and credited for their contribution to Edo Japan's art history.

The Tokugawa Era in Japan is historically characterized by its structured and restricted social order in which women were often kept from inhabiting ranks of social, economic, and political power. Socio-economic structures often alluded to giving women autonomy by encouraging education and self-cultivation while concurrently restraining them. My goal in this paper is to exhume the repressed histories of the women artists of Edo. Despite living in a feudalistic government with Neo-Confucian ideologies that controlled and limited their character, female artists such as Katsushika Ōi (1800-1857), Ema Saikō (1787-1861), and Yamazaki Ryū-jo (1716-1735) managed to break the cultural gender norm and became well-renowned artists. These women made art that showcased their skillful techniques while they told their stories and struggles as women artists. By pursuing the arts against a deeply hetero-patriarchal society these women challenged the gender standard and became more than “the daughter of...”. Unfortunately, due to the low status of women during the Tokugawa era not much-written information about these artists exists without connecting their lineage back to the men in their lives. Nonetheless, I argue that their artworks provide insight into what their lives were like while challenging the gender normative and stressing the importance of centralizing their efforts within a canon that has continued to benefit Western male artists.

Katsushika Ōi worked primarily in woodblock ukiyo-e style, floating pictures, and was the daughter of established artist Hokusai. She learned the trade from her father but many of her works were not signed and not much about her is written, her works live in the shadow of her father. In *The Floating World: 1657-1853*, Jonathan Clements adds to speculations of “when Hokusai became old and infirm, she is believed to have ‘helped’ him in his studio, possibly to the extent of passing off her works as his.”<sup>1</sup> Similar artistic techniques are shared between the two

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<sup>1</sup> Clements, Jonathan. “The Floating World: 1657–1853.” In *A Short History of Tokyo*, 43–62. Haus Publishing, 2018.

artists, so similar that some of Ōi's works might be out in the world signed off as her fathers, all for-profit value, as her signature does not carry the same value as Hokusai's and buyers were not always concerned with technique. Not many details about Katsushika Ōi's personal life are known other than she joined her father's workshop after a divorce from Minamizawa Tōmei, another artist of the time. The limited signed oeuvre left behind by Ōi is filled with picturesque works with sophisticated compositions and bold colors. Her artwork *E-irin nichiyō onna chōhōki*, 1847 is a work that highlights her complex compositions, it is a woodblock printed handbook for women (*onna daigaku*) completely illustrated by Ōi. These women's handbooks were common during the Edo period, frequently authored by women but never illustrated by them. The handbooks were meant to teach women traditional values, how to properly function in Japanese society, how to dress and apply make-up and it told women what hobbies were appropriate for them. This form of artistic commission was not highly regarded since the targeted audience was women. This handbook has many intricate compositions and depictions that showcase Ōi's technique in the use of depth of space and attention to garments patterns and draping. For example, the birthing scene strategically places the figures to fill the page using the foreground for the main scene and the background for the midwife and other female figures. Above this scene Ōi depicts in a banner-like manner the position of the fetus during each stage of the pregnancy, this was considered appropriate woman knowledge. In other pages, she illustrates proper female attire, here she cautiously draws garments to showcase the patterns and draping. There is no record of Katsushika Ōi after the death of her father, seemingly as if she died with him or only received recognition and commissions because of him.

Emma Saikō was a poet and painter that worked in the literati Chinese style (*bunjin*) which was largely promoted as feminine art. I believe that because of this, she is one of the few

Japanese female artists from this time period who has been greatly written about. Saikō was the daughter of a Doctor of Medicine and a Confucian scholar, Ema Ransai, therefore considered elite class, her father encouraged her arts from an early age when he first recognized her skill. Saikō was able to study the arts of painting and poetry writing with the support of her father. Ransai hired teachers to assist Saikō in perfecting her art and literature. According to Saikō's histories, as reiterated by Japanese academic Patricia Fister, she refused to ever marry "on the grounds that she was too deeply involved in her studies of painting."<sup>2</sup> After her father's passing, she is still able to continue the arts due to her increased popularity and the funds left set aside for her by her father. Due to the feminine quality of bunjin art, it was often paired with poetry, in the case of Saikō, she both painted and wrote her own poetry, the poetry on her paintings often reveals something about her life at the point that she is creating. Such as in the work, *Landscape*, 1856, a piece she created at a later stage in her life, it is paired with a short melancholic poem where she reflected on her life before her old age. The poem states: "*How many places have I once traveled. Where pure streams rushed between white rocks? As I grow old, I can no longer freely roam, So I pick up the brush and depict those hills and mountains.*"<sup>3</sup> The landscape depiction that joins this poem is done in black ink, it is a zig zag mountain landscape done with rich brush techniques. In this work Saikō not only uses her brush to paint her story, but she also uses language to express distant memory of the place she once knew. This biographical work, as well as others like *Poem at Age Fifty* (1787-1761) and *Bamboo and Rock* (1852), reveal her class-based advantage as an elite woman artist who was able to pursue the arts due to her choice to not marry and the continued funding, even after death, by her father.

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<sup>2</sup> Fister, Patricia, "Female Bunjin," In *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, University of California Press, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Fister, Patricia, "Chapter Seven," *Japanese Women Artists, 1600-1900*. (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1988.)

Yamazaki Ryū-jo was a child prodigy, daughter to a samurai vassal, is said to have painted superb ukiyo-e, floating picture art, as early as the age of six.<sup>4</sup> Ryū-jo's work has often been attempted to be credited under Hishiwaka Moronobu, a popular male educator of art at the time, but no evidence exists that proves that she ever studied under him. Since his work was so common at the time it may be possible that she learned by recreating his works.<sup>5</sup> Similar to Katsushika Ōi, very little is known about Ryū-jo's life, since she started painting so young more paintings are available. Dating her paintings is also easier since she was very good about signing and dating her artworks, mostly her earlier works that she created as a child. Ryū-jo's themes were those common to Edo, she depicted courtesans either alone or with her attendants her palette was bright and colorful. These characteristics are shown in her work, *Courtesan Viewing Cherry Blossoms* (1700-1730), the composition of the work is as it is titled a courtesan and her child attendant viewing cherry blossoms. The courtesan is portrayed in an ordinary pose with a pensive look wearing a radiant red kimono making her one of the only two things to stand out in this work, the other being the cherry blossom flowers. The child attendant and background are a gold color that blend seamlessly together. Like Saikō, Ryū-jo also wrote poetry that was formally incorporated into her paintings. In this artwork, the poem reads: "To tread on them is bad; Yet if she doesn't step, she cannot move, And there is nowhere else to go. Scattered here for her pleasure - The mountain cherry blossoms."<sup>6</sup> The language and imagery combination provokes the viewer and reader through an ambiguity – you do not know whether she is talking about the cherry blossoms or the life of the courtesan. Stylistically, Ryū-jo's courtesans tend to look

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<sup>4</sup> Fister, Patricia, "Chapter Three," *Japanese Women Artists, 1600-1900*, (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1988.)

<sup>5</sup> Fister, Patricia, "Chapter Three," *Japanese Women Artists, 1600-1900*, (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1988.)

<sup>6</sup> Fister, Patricia, "Chapter Three," *Japanese Women Artists, 1600-1900*. (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1988.)

pensive and are depicted as women with emotions unlike the courtesans depicted by male artists who only illustrated women as idealized beauties. Ryū-jo's work is not necessarily something out of the box, but she does create works that show a personalized female perspective. Per Fister, many women envied high-ranking courtesans due to their freedom, she says, "Their work was perceived as play, and despite the moral issues involved, many women would have gladly exchanged places with them."<sup>7</sup>

What makes each of these artists so important? While my goal with this paper is to highlight a few of the female artists of Edo Japan during the Tokugawa Era, I find these artists important to this effort because they challenged their gender expectations by professionally painting, they painted their reality, and they were skillful enough to surpass the male artists of the time yet limited written histories exist. These women were some of the few female artists who were able to become professionals in their craft against an otherwise repressive society. Though they were largely able to accomplish this due to the privileges of their social status, their artwork should not be diminished given the immense gender bias that they still faced under Japan's Neo-Confucian government.

The political and social climate in Edo Japan during the Tokugawa Period significantly influenced women's oppression during this time. Patricia Fister states in her book *Japanese Women Artists, 1600-1900*, "From the seventeenth century on, the Tokugawa government fervently promoted Confucian teachings which generally regarded women as inferior to men."<sup>8</sup> The government upheld male superiority in multiple forms that were demonstrated through education, society, legislation, and economies. Women's education was different from that of

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<sup>7</sup> Fister, Patricia, "Chapter Three," *Japanese Women Artists, 1600-1900*. (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1988.)

<sup>8</sup> Fister, Patricia, "Intro," *Japanese Women Artists, 1600-1900*, (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1988.)



men since many Confucianist theorists still did not see the benefits of women getting an education. For instance, education was segregated after the age of seven. While boys stayed in the classroom, girls stayed home and were educated as homemakers. Another major difference in education was the literature that was permitted to men and women. Women had *onna daigaku* (women handbooks) that provided long lists of what was appropriate for women to wear, how to behave, how to be a good wife and become a wise mother. Modern Japanese cultural histories academic Marcia Yonemoto states, that “while instructional texts invariably posited the importance of learning, they also emphasized that a woman should not be so educated that she neglects her daily household duties, nor should she flaunt her learning in front of others or scorn those who are less refined.”<sup>9</sup> The illusion of obtainable autonomy through self-cultivation was spread by the Confucian belief that states that “self-cultivation was the root of all virtue... self-cultivation meant a conscious and deliberate attempt by an individual to nurture within himself or herself recognized virtues such as filiality, obedience, compassion, devotion, learning, diligence, orderliness, and attentiveness to others.”<sup>10</sup> The practice of this belief leads to a realm of possibilities for women, as stated by Yonemoto in some cases women had the ability “to blur if not transgress status boundaries”<sup>11</sup> as did Katsushika Ōi, Emma Saikō, and Yamakazi Ryū-jo.

A major political decision that heavily influenced society and art during this period was the then-Japanese ruler Tokugawa Iemitsu’s decision to close the country, by establishing the Seclusion Policy (*Sakoku*). This decision was in response to the fear that Christianity might spread and threaten Japanese religious institutions. This seclusion policy led to a focus on

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<sup>9</sup> Yonemoto, Marcia. “Self-Cultivation.” In *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan*, University of California Press, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Yonemoto, “Self-Cultivation.” In *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan*, University of California Press, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Yonemoto, “Self-Cultivation.” In *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan*, University of California Press, 2016.

education, for the first-time literacy was encouraged throughout all social classes. Due to this focus on education and the spread of Neo-Confucian self-cultivation philosophy female literacy increased. However, the reading materials for women were heavily supervised, the only reason women were being educated was because as stated by scholar Martha Tocco in *Norms and Texts for Women's Education in Tokugawa Japan*, “uneducated women undermined the stability of the family and by extension the stability of the state.”<sup>12</sup>

The status of women heavily influenced what was considered right and wrong. Elite women had more leisure time since they did not have to focus on working to make a living. Common of the time was licensed brothels, Yoshiwara was the name of the pleasure district that housed many women, the women in the brothels had freedoms that the other women in the other ranks did not. Although these freedoms varied on their rank within the pleasure district, as there were different ranks of courtesans, the highest-ranking courtesans used their time to cultivate and refine their skills in poetry, painting, and other genteel arts in order to attract wealthy sophisticated customers.<sup>13</sup> This is why Fister suggests artists like Ryū-jo whom primarily paint courtesans envied the life of their subject matter and the freedoms they had regardless of the taboo.

Although these women were able to accomplish so much by breaking out of their gender conformities, they still did not achieve complete autonomy. Their patriarchal society ruled by a feudal government with Confucian ideals only alluded to allowing them independence, by permitting them to paint and write but their art was never recognized or highly revered. It was never given the chance. Although these women were greatly skilled, their privileged social status

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<sup>12</sup> Tocco, Martha C, “Norms and Texts for Women’s Education in Tokugawa Japan,” In *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, University of California Press, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Stalker, Nancy K, “Edo Popular Culture: The Floating World and Beyond: (Late 17th to Mid-19th Centuries).” In *Japan: History and Culture from Classical to Cool*, University of California Press, 2018.

and their male lineage was the key reason for their success and why their scarce written histories exist. Ema Saikō's artworks reveal the struggles she faced due to the choice she made of choosing her career rather than a 'traditional' life of homemaker; Katsuhika Ōi only pursued her artistic career after her divorce and while her father was alive and although her works do not depict her struggles as a female artist, the lack of reverence in her artistic techniques shows the imbalance female artists were faced with. Lastly, Yamazaki Ryū-jo a natural born talent, whose art depicts women as humans with emotions and character rather than just pretty faces to suffice the male gaze, her artwork knowledge, and techniques are still being attributed to a male teacher, whom she most likely never met, because she cannot just be a talented young woman. Regardless of their efforts and their great talent, these women were not able to pursue their careers freely on their own because the male-dominated society of Japan did not allow them their individuality.

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