

Art and Gender in an Age of Revolution

Simon PARTNER

This essay examines the social, cultural, and economic life of Kawai Koume (1804–1889), a *bushi* housewife and artist living in the Wakayama castle town of Kishū domain in the final years of the Tokugawa era and the early years of Meiji. Using a diary that Koume kept over a period of at least fifty years, the essay examines the ways in which Koume’s art was integrated with her daily life as household manager, and it explores the transformations of those relationships after the Meiji Restoration. While acknowledging the reality of class and gender ideologies and their effects on daily life, the essay focuses on Koume’s determination to contribute meaningfully to her family’s social, cultural, and economic life. And in the wake of a decade of disruption and transformation following the Meiji Restoration, it points to the unsung heroism of many women in forging new paths to economic recovery and self-sufficiency.

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This essay examines the social, cultural, and economic life of Kawai Koume 川合小梅 (1804–1889), a *bushi* 武士 (member of the samurai class) wife and artist living in the Wakayama castle town of Kishū 紀州 domain in the final years of the Tokugawa 徳川 era (1603–1868) and the early years of Meiji 明治 (1868–1912). Using a diary that Koume kept over a period of at least fifty years, the essay examines the ways in which Koume’s art was integrated with her daily life as household manager, and it explores the transformations of those relationships after the Meiji Restoration.¹ While acknowledging the reality of class and gender ideologies and their effects on daily life, the essay focuses on Koume’s determination to contribute meaningfully to her family’s social, cultural, and economic life. And in the wake of a decade of disruption and transformation following the Meiji Restoration, it points to the unsung heroism of many women in forging new paths to economic recovery and self-sufficiency.

Kawai Koume was born in 1804 to Kawai Kanae 川合鼎 (d. 1808) and his wife Tatsuko 辰子 (d. 1866). Kanae was a teacher in the Kishū domain school, the Gakushūkan 学習館. Tatsuko’s father had been one of the founding teachers in the school, and Koume’s husband Hyōzō 豹藏 and son Yūsuke 雄輔 were in turn to become teachers in the school. Kanae died

1 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974. Only seventeen years of the diary have survived, in whole or in part.

when Koume was still an infant, and she was raised in the home of her grandfather, Kawai Shunsen 川合春川 (1751–1824). She remained in the Kawai family residence until the end of her life.

The Kawai family had a hereditary stipend of around twenty *koku* 石 (3,600 kg) of rice, placing it at the lower end of the domain's samurai hierarchy. Unlike samurai retainers who had served the Tokugawa since fighting their way across Japan in the civil wars of the sixteenth century, the Kawai family were relative newcomers to Kishū domain. Shunsen had been the son of a doctor in central Japan, and he had only arrived in Kishū after a lengthy personal journey across three domains and several areas of knowledge. A brilliant man, he quickly became a key figure in Kishū's developing educational system. Along the way, he was granted retainer status and a hereditary stipend, as well as a large house in the Uji 宇治 district north of Wakayama Castle.²

In addition to his public duties as a schoolteacher, Shunsen operated a private academy out of his home. Koume grew up alongside students in the academy, and she attended at least some of their classes, becoming highly literate, gaining a basic knowledge of Chinese philosophy and poetry, and a deep understanding of Japanese literary traditions. Koume's mother was a locally noted composer of *waka* 和歌 poetry, and she made sure that Koume studied with one of the domain's leading teachers, Motoori Ōhira 本居大平 (1756–1833).³ Koume also studied painting under a highly regarded artist, Nogiwa Hakusetsu 野際白雪 (d. 1849).

Hakusetsu painted in the literati (*bunjinga* 文人画) style that was popular among the scholarly elite of Kishū's *bushi* class. It took its themes from traditional Chinese painting: landscapes, images of birds and flowers (particularly bamboo, plum, orchid, and chrysanthemum), and portraits of well-known historical figures.⁴ *Bunjinga* were often collaborative productions (*gassaku* 合作): paintings overlaid with prose and poetry in Chinese or Japanese, usually brushed onto a section of the painting by literary collaborators. This style had an obvious appeal to Koume's family, since most of its male members were poets and writers in the Chinese tradition. Koume also benefited from the relative openness of *bunjinga* to female practitioners.⁵

At the age of fifteen Koume was married to the twenty-five-year-old Umemoto Hyōzō 梅本豹藏 (1794–1871), who had been a live-in student in the Kawai household through much of Koume's childhood. Although Hyōzō was from a samurai family, he too had shallow roots among the ranks of the Kishū retainer corps. His grandfather had been a common foot soldier (*dōshin* 同心), and his mother was from a merchant family. Hyōzō was now a junior teacher in the domain school, and, shortly before Shunsen's death in 1824, he was adopted into the Kawai family and became its head. Koume's status as the wife of a *muko* 婿 (a son-in-law adopted as heir into the family headship) may have enhanced her authority and influence in family affairs.

2 Abe 2013, pp. 209–219.

3 Ōhira was the adopted son of the renowned *kokugaku* 国学 scholar, Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730–1801).

4 Yonezawa and Yoshizawa 1974, p. 116. See also Satō 2015, pp. 194–201.

5 Fister 1988, p. 97. See also Buckland 2013, pp. 13–14.

Artist and Household Manager

As her husband became established as a teacher and scholar in the domain's cultural elite, Koume in turn established her reputation as an artist. Her art was an essential element of her identity throughout her life, but it was not the only element. Koume was also a wife, with duties to her husband and family that often took precedence over her art. Through the 1850s and 1860s Koume referred in her diary to her activities as a painter only once or twice a month on average. Later in her life, after the death of her husband and her retirement as household manager, Koume's references to painting would dramatically increase.

During Koume's prime years in the 1850s and 1860s, the Kawai household was a busy space of family life, education, and economic and cultural production. The full-time residents of the household included Koume and Hyōzō, their son Yūsuke, and Koume's mother Tatsuko. In addition, a succession of students took up temporary residence in the household.

As wife and household manager, Koume's role was to support and care for her husband, mother, son, and daughter-in-law, resident students, and, from the end of the 1850s, grandchildren; to manage the family's complex family and social networks; to hire and supervise servants and helpers; to maintain the family's property; to provide food and drink for family members and guests; to control the family's day-to-day finances; and to participate in the ritual and cultural life of the family and community. She was helped in these activities by her high standing in the community, her intelligence and eagerness for information, and by her status as wife of a *muko*.⁶ Koume's diary is an important witness to her multiple contributions to the family's social economy. For Koume, it was also a central tool in her management of the information needed to fulfill her role.

Koume's diary describes intense, daily interactions between the Kawai family and their network of friends, colleagues, and extended family. While Hyōzō and Yūsuke went out visiting or attending parties or study groups, Koume often stayed home. Her duty was to make sure that the household was running smoothly, and to receive and entertain guests when they called. But despite her limited movement outside the home, Koume was a central figure in her family's social networks. There was a constant stream of visitors into the Kawai family home, none of whom were sent away without first being offered a cup of saké and a few simple snacks. Often, Koume prepared more elaborate entertainments for the many events the family hosted, including study groups, family and school celebrations, poetry gatherings, and drunken parties for Hyōzō's colleagues. Throughout the day, Koume gathered information from visitors, passersby, shopkeepers, domain officials, servants, and others, recording it all in her diary. She supplemented it with information which her family picked up on their excursions outside the house and subsequently related to her.

At the heart of the social networks over which Koume presided was the culture of gift exchange. For cash-poor *bushi* families, gift giving was a way to obscure differences in wealth, and to recognize value without engaging in monetary exchange. In Koume's diary, almost every day's entry includes some record of a gift received or given. Koume generally included enough detail for her to assess the gift's rough value, maintaining a

⁶ Women who married to *muko* husbands had a different status from those who married into outside families. Since they stayed within their birth family, they retained some sense of power and ownership of their inheritance. Indeed, women with *muko* husbands had a reputation for being entitled and dominating.

complex balance sheet of service and obligation so that no favor would go unreturned, and no kindness unrequited. Gifts were given to celebrate family milestones; to express sympathy on the occasion of a loss or disaster; or to express thanks for a service received. Often, gifts represented a form of payment: these were more acceptable than a cash payment in a samurai culture that disdained commercial transactions, and more elegant. Much of Hyōzō's teaching was paid for in such gifts, so the Kawai family received a significantly greater value than they gave.

Servants and household helpers were also an integral part of the smooth operation of the Kawai household, for which Koume was responsible. Koume generally employed one manservant, either a young man from the town (who would attend the family during the daytime) or a student who offered his services in exchange for board and lodging. For heavier jobs or those needing a handyman's skills, Koume used the services of day laborers with whom the family had a connection. The Kawai family also usually kept a live-in maidservant. These young women were either residents of the *nagaya* 長屋 (tenement houses) in the nearby neighborhoods, or they were from the villages surrounding Wakayama.

Koume's diary also shows that she played a significant role in the family's financial management. In the pages of the diary, she recorded most of the family's financial transactions, from salary received and loans made and given, to daily purchases and the costs of commodities in the marketplace. Koume seldom clarified whether discussions and decisions about finances were made by Hyōzō, Koume, or both together. Probably Hyōzō handled major transactions, particularly those involving the domain administration, while Koume oversaw the day-to-day management of the family's cash resources. She took responsibility for most purchases, sending her servant to the shops to pick up merchandise. She made and repaid small loans, and she also took charge of the family's obligations to its social network, including gift giving and offering financial assistance to needy relatives.

Koume often faced a cash crunch when it came time to pay her retail suppliers. In most cases accounts were to be settled monthly. Faced with pressing cash needs, Koume resorted again and again to sending her servant to the pawn shop. There is a pattern throughout the diary of Koume buying nice clothes when money was available, and using them as security when times were harder. Fine clothes kept their value, sometimes for generations, if they were properly cared for. Silk cloth was high-value, portable, and easily stored. And fine clothes were also beautiful—and necessary for a woman of Koume's social status.

Koume also presided over an active domestic production regime. The scarcity of cash meant the family had to do all it could to provide for its own needs. The Kawai had a vegetable patch in the back of the house in which they grew eggplants, cucumbers, turnips, radishes, sweet potatoes, and burdock root, as well as an orchard with citrus and plum trees. Koume and her helpers pickled many of the vegetables, as well as the plums, for off-season consumption. She also tried distilling the fruit as a flavoring for homemade liquor. Koume occasionally bought vegetables in the market or from farmer acquaintances, but these were usually bulk purchases for home pickling. In the eleventh month of Kaei 嘉永 2 (1849), for example, Koume bought a total of two hundred daikon radishes, which she and her helpers pickled during the twelfth month.⁷ Koume also bought large quantities of raw cotton,

7 Purchases were made on 11.21 and 11.29. The pickling took place on 12.7 and 12.20. Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 1, p. 22, 23, 24, 28.

which she and her daughter-in-law Kano 鹿野 span into cotton thread, either for sale or for eventual weaving into clothes.⁸

Koume's duties as household manager also included ensuring that her family correctly observed the numerous holidays and religious rituals in the annual calendar of the domain. Many of these doubled as family celebrations: the New Year's holidays, for example, when the family ate celebratory rice cakes, drank plenty of saké, and put on their best clothes to call on their neighbors. Others involved visits to temples and shrines to observe rituals, but also in many cases to enjoy the spectacle of spring blossoms or festival parades. The family also participated in rituals connected to the daimyo and his court. Most involved only Hyōzō, but a death or memorial observance could require the entire castle town to forego entertainments, as on Kaei 6 (1853).3.3, when Koume wrote "Very fine weather. Calm. This is a day of *chōji* 停止 [suspension of music, dance, and entertainment as a sign of mourning for a prominent person] so it was gloomy (*sabishiku*)."⁹

Although she stayed at home much more than her husband and son, Koume's role in the family's social and cultural life was by no means passive. Her education, artistic skills, and status as a birthright Kawai allowed her to interact with the family's social networks as an equal. When guests visited in Hyōzō's absence, Koume discussed matters of family and domain business with them, recording the information in her diary so she could pass it on to Hyōzō. Hyōzō even trusted her with some of his official duties. On Ansei 安政 6 (1859).6.4, for example, "Koume wrote five memorials," indicating the official requests for advancement or promotion that Hyōzō would submit to the domain.¹⁰ She also took it on herself to respond to business letters at times, when Hyōzō was busy with other work.

Koume was a skilled entertainer, putting on parties for dozens of colleagues and friends, and sometimes also attending them with Hyōzō. Often, those parties were occasions for cultural production, as the participants vied to compose poems and to brush paintings and calligraphy. Koume was more than equal to these occasions. An accomplished poet as well as a skilled painter, she and her mother were regular contributors to the scholarly community's *gassaku* production: collaborative compositions that included painting, calligraphy, and Japanese- and Chinese-language poetry and prose. An excursion to the seashore at Arahama 荒浜 on Kaei 4 (1851).3.11 offers a glimpse into Koume's participation in such events. Arahama means "rough shore," but Koume commented, "It was calm, an Arahama only in name." Koume spent the afternoon painting and composing poems:

あら浜は其の名のみして春の海
なみもしづけくたつもわすれて

Arahama wa
sono na nomi shite

8 In the ninth month of Bunkyū 文久 1 (1861), for example, Koume and Hyōzō bought at least 40 kg of raw cotton, which they span through the ninth and tenth months.

9 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 1, p. 86, Kaei 6 (1853).3.3. For spring blossom viewing, see for example Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 1, p. 50, Kaei 4 (1851).4.5. For a shrine festival, see Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 2, pp. 22–23, Bunkyū 4 (1864).4.17.

10 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 1, p. 175, Ansei 6 (1859).6.4.

haru no umi.
Nami mo shizukeku
tatsu mo wasurete

The ocean in springtime
Arahama only in name
The waves are quiet, as though
they had forgotten how to stand up¹¹

Afterward, a friend invited them back to his house, “where we amused ourselves” composing linked verses. Each participant was given a word to place at the start or end of a poem. Koume was given the place-name “Yoshino” 吉野 to start, and the character *aru* 有 (there is, there are) to end. “The flowers were in full bloom, with just one or two petals fluttering to the ground. The moon was shining its white light on the flowers, and the view was beautiful. But the lines would not come, and our spirits just got flustered. It had been a long day, and eventually we all fell silent from exhaustion.” Finally, as they were about to give up and go home, Koume found her inspiration. “To the east of this house there is a pure water stream that runs through the garden ... I wrote and recited the following”:

よし野にもますをの清水底すみて
照らせる月に花の影有

Yoshino ni mo
masu-o no shimizu
soko sumite.
Teraseru tsuki ni
Hana no kage aru

In Yoshino too
The trout-filled streams are
Pure to the bottom
In the moon’s shining light
There are the shadows of flowers¹²

We can sense Koume’s satisfaction that it was she, rather than the eminent men in the gathering, who had found the inspiration for this atmospheric poem.

Local historians in Wakayama have tended to see Koume’s painting and poetry as a hobby or ladylike pursuit that she pursued when she had the time amid her duties as a wife and mother.¹³ Indeed, her gender and social status required her to present such an appearance. But Koume’s cultural production also contributed significantly to her

11 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 1, p. 46, Kaei 4 (1851).3.11.

12 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 1, p. 46, Kaei 4 (1851).3.11.

13 Abe 2013, pp. 511–514; Wakayama-shi Kyōiku Inkai 2012, p. 17.



Figure 1. Kawai Koume and Kawai Hyōzō, *Manzai no zu* 万歳の図. Collaborative work (*gassaku*) of *manzai* performers, date unknown. Courtesy of Wakayama City Museum.

management of the Kawai family's affairs. In a world in which financial capital was scarce, intangible assets such as cultural prestige were a meaningful currency for social and career advancement. By contributing to the family's cultural standing, Koume was helping her husband and son build their positions as valued members of the domain's educational community. Their value was recognized with successive increases in Hyōzō's official stipend, culminating in his appointment as principal of the domain school.¹⁴

Koume's art also contributed to the family's complex economy of non-cash exchange. Koume often used her art as currency in this economy, giving paintings to friends and acquaintances, and accepting requests to produce sketches or more formal works without any direct expectation of payment, but rather as part of "the complex economies of obligation and exchange within which literati artifacts acquired meaning and value."¹⁵

In *Kaei* 4 (1851), Koume mentioned painting on average two or three times a month. The recipients of her work came from all over the social spectrum: courtiers, patrons, colleagues, friends, family members, and servants. On 1.22, a friend requested to her to execute a painting for one of the ladies in waiting at the retired daimyō's residence. On 1.27, she decorated a folding fan for the priest of Ennyoji 円如寺 Temple. In the second month, she worked on several paintings of young dancing girls for Noro Seikichi 野呂清吉, a colleague of Hyōzō's. On 3.8, Hyōzō hosted two friends for an evening of *gassaku* poetry-writing and painting. Koume was happy to contribute, but commented on the stress of managing their guests' entertainment while also painting and composing poetry. At the

¹⁴ Abe 2013, p. 335.

¹⁵ Lippit 2008, p. 167.

end of the day, she “rested, exhausted by being pressured by everyone.” On 3.20 she was painting and reciting poems with a book seller called Kusumotoya 楠本屋. And on 3.25, she composed some poems and painted chrysanthemums for a scholar’s sixtieth birthday. In the fourth month, she did a series of paintings on silk for Ichikawa Hitoshi 市川斎, to go into an exhibition he was helping organize. A courtier who saw the paintings proposed to send them to the Edo residence of Andō Naohiro 安藤直裕 (1821–1885), daimyo of Tanabe 田辺 (a sub-domain of Kishū). In a panic, Koume asked for the paintings back so that she could work on improving them. In the sixth month, she created a series of eleven paintings for a patron, Mr. Taya 田屋. And in the seventh month, she gave two painted fans to her maid Toyo とよ, to take back to her family in her home village.¹⁶

With such a wide variety of recipients, it is not surprising that the content of Koume’s work should be diverse. Although Koume herself used the word *bunjinga* to describe her own artistic training, the diary shows her painting in a variety of genres that defy easy categorization.¹⁷ Koume was commissioned to decorate sets of sliding screens (*fusuma* 襖) that were used to divide the rooms of a house, or smaller versions (*kofusuma*) for ornamental shelving used in reception areas. She painted military surcoats (*jinbaori* 陣羽織) as the warriors of the domain prepared for war in the 1850s and 1860s.¹⁸ She painted classical Japanese themes, such as portraits of warriors from the *Tales of the Heike*, as well as portraits of living and dead friends and family members. She sketched birds and flowers for her students to use as study aids, as well as a variety of trivia: “O-fuku” お福 masks (portraying a popular female figure associated with good fortune); comic sketches of fish and animals; and portraits of popular deities such as the “seven gods of good luck” (*shichifukujin* 七福神). The largest surviving collection of her work is a copy of a sixteen-volume book called *Kankai ibun* 環海異聞 (Strange things heard in foreign lands), which Koume made in 1837 on the request of her husband’s boss. The book, which was an account of eight years spent in Russia by a group of shipwrecked sailors, was illustrated with over one hundred color pictures in the style of popular illustrated publications, with little reference to literati traditions.

An 1853 portrait of Miwa Bunkō’s 三輪文行 parents (figure 3) helps illustrate why Koume’s work was in such demand. Bunkō asked Koume to paint a portrait of his parents for him to carry with him to Edo, where he was about to go for a period of residence. The portrait shows an elderly couple sitting companionably side by side. The details of their old age are vividly but sympathetically drawn: wrinkled skin, thinning hair, slightly bent stature, wispy eyebrows, and loosely worn, informal clothing. The wife has a cushion resting on her lap and a cup of tea in her hand. She is sitting on the floor with one knee raised, as though in readiness to take care of her husband. He is depicted smoking a pipe, a look of calm satisfaction on his face. In front of him is a small flask of saké, and in his right hand

16 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 1. Painting for lady in waiting, p. 35, Kaei 4 (1851).1.22. Folding fan, p. 36, Kaei 4.1.27. *Gassaku* event, p. 45, Kaei 4.3.8. Kusumotoya, p. 47, Kaei 4.3.20. Sixtieth birthday, pp. 48–49, Kaei 4.3.25. Request to return paintings, p. 57, Kaei 4.5.11. Taya paintings, p. 64, Kaei 4.6.13. Gift to Toyo, p. 70, Kaei 4.7.15.

17 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 238, 9 August 1882.

18 The Kishū retainers were mobilized in 1853 for a possible war against the United States, in 1863 to combat the Tenchūgumi 天誅組 rebellion, several times during the 1860s to quell unrest in Kyoto, and in 1866–1868 for the two campaigns against Chōshū domain.

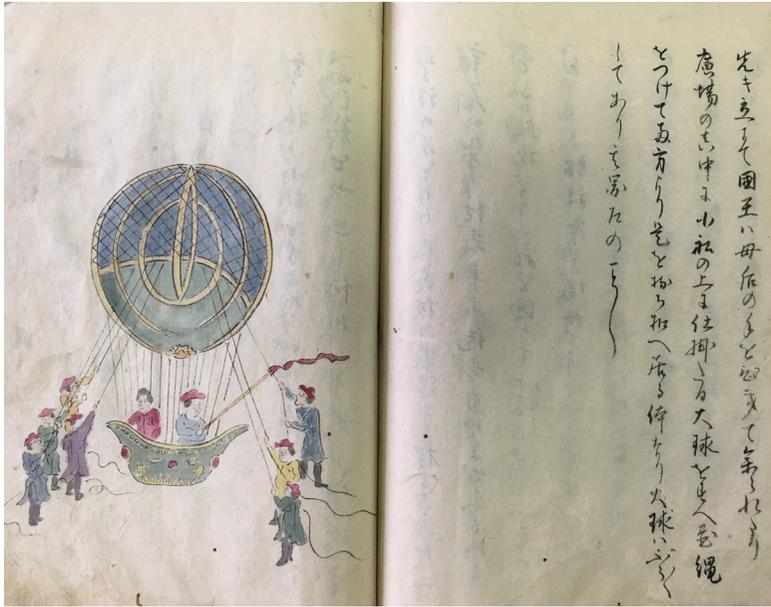


Figure 2. Kawai Koume, *Untitled*. Illustration in Ōtsuki 1837. Courtesy of Wakayama Prefectural Library.

he holds an *inrō* 印籠 (a small box worn suspended from a belt) ornamented with a *netsuke* 根付 (sculpted fastener) in the shape of a disk. The colors are subdued, but expressive of peace and calm. Both subjects are looking into the middle distance outside the frame of the painting, and the wife's right hand is raised, perhaps suggesting a farewell gesture as their son sets off on his long journey. The painting presents at the same time a charming domestic scene; the peace and calm of a well-earned retirement; a homage to family conventions; an endearing depiction of old age; and an acknowledgement of the separation that was about to take place. This charming portrait owes less to any particular school of painting than to Koume's deftness of portrayal and her warmth of expression.

Most of Koume's artistic production was in response to commissions and requests. She had some regular patrons: people who repeatedly requested paintings from her, often to pass on to other collectors within the community. Most prominent among these were Sakai Baisai 酒井梅齋, Endō Ichirō 遠藤一郎, and Ichikawa Hitoshi. Sakai Baisai was an old family friend, perhaps a former pupil of Hyōzō, and an amateur painter himself. Endō was a domain official and an avid patron of the arts; and Ichikawa was a teacher in the domain school. We do not know why these men were so keen to promote Koume's work, but they continued to support her for decades, placing her art with dozens of collectors throughout the domain.

It was a lot of work to create a beautiful painting, especially for a collector whom Koume may not have known personally. The proscriptions on overt commercial activity by the samurai class, as well as the social expectations about the role of women, made it difficult for Koume to ask for cash payment. But that does not mean she was painting purely for the love of it. While *gassaku* paintings at elegant gatherings might accrue to the Kawai family's cultural capital, Koume expected to be rewarded for commissioned work.



Figure 3. Kawai Koume, *Miwa Bunkō fubo zō* 三輪文行父母像 *A Portrait of Miwa Bunkō's Parents*. 1853. Courtesy of Wakayama City Museum.

Her reward was usually in the form of “thank you” (*rei* 礼) gifts, such as fresh fish, sweets, and saké coupons. For example, on Genji 元治 1 (1864).9.9 a messenger came bringing three sea bream, some tobacco in an elegant box, and a stick of *yōkan* 羊羹, as thanks for a set of paintings Koume had executed for an acquaintance. A high-quality fresh fish was worth anything from two to five *monme*, so the total value might have been around ten *monme*.¹⁹ As a comparison, on Genji 1 (1864).8.13 Koume had paid fourteen *monme* to two gardeners for two days’ work. Sometimes, Koume’s patrons even brought cash as payment for her work. On Genji 1 (1864).3.5, Sakai Baisai came to visit, bringing two hundred *biki* [around fourteen *monme*] as thanks for Koume’s painting a fan. Koume wrote: “I tried to refuse it, but [Baisai] left it anyway.”²⁰

There are a few references in the diary that suggest Koume was sometimes producing material directly for the commercial market. On Tenpō 天保 8 (1837).3.29, Koume wrote: “On the twenty-seventh, I bought three pieces of *chirimen* [crepe] cloth, a total of three *shaku* [about 36 inches] for 3.6 *monme*. I received this money from Yasuda as payment for making *haribako*.” A *haribako* 貼り箱 is a box made of wood or thick paper, over which is

19 There are numerous references to fish prices throughout the diary, varying with size, quality, and rate of inflation. For an example of prices of top-quality fish, see Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 1, p. 178, Ansei 6 (1859).6.18.

20 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 2, p. 41, Genji 1 (1864).8.13; p.16, Genji 1.3.5.

stretched decorative paper. Such boxes were typically used for accessories or jewelry. Why was a cash transaction considered acceptable in this case, while it was frowned on in others? Perhaps because the *haribako* was clearly for commercial distribution. Many samurai at the low end of the salary scale had to struggle to make ends meet. It is possible that Koume, who was still in her early thirties at the time, was producing these boxes for Yasuda to sell into the commercial market. Koume was still working on *haribako* in the ninth and tenth months of Kaei 6 (1853). By this time, she was working on a larger scale, with several young relatives coming regularly to help her out.

Around thirty of Koume's paintings have survived, most owned by the descendants of friends and family members. The largest collection, which includes nine paintings, is in the Wakayama Prefectural Museum. The works include portraits, humorous sketches, a representation of the deified poet Sugawara no Michizane, portraits of Miwa Bunkō and his parents, and several flower paintings. A particularly striking work in this collection is the undated *Kanbai ensō bijinzu* 観梅円窓美人図 (Beautiful woman gazing at plum blossoms through a round window, figure 4). In this painting, a richly-dressed woman with a Chinese hairstyle is staring dreamily out of a circular window at a flowering plum branch. The wintry scene of the plum tree over a background of horizontal banded grey clouds (all executed in *sumie* ink and wash) contrasts with the vivid colors of the woman's clothing. Kondō Takashi 近藤壯, the former director of the museum, speculates that this painting represents the story of a sage of the Sui Dynasty, who lived on Mt. Luo Fu 羅浮仙 [Jp. Rafusen], famous for its plum blossoms. One day, the sage entered a drinking house and began carousing. After a while, a beautiful woman appeared, accompanied by young dancers and musicians. The woman and the sage talked and drank long into the night, until eventually the sage fell asleep. When he woke up, he found himself in a plum grove, lying at the foot of a beautiful plum tree. He realized that in his dream he had been talking to a sprite of the plum trees. Kondō suggests that this painting, when hung in the *tokonoma* (alcove) of a reception room, would be an evocative image to accompany a scholarly drinking party.²¹

One of the seals Koume used to stamp the painting reads Rafudōsen 羅浮洞仙, a pseudonym Koume sometimes used, which could be translated as “the cave-dweller of Mount Luo Fu.” The scene of plum blossoms associated with Mount Luo Fu suggests an autobiographical nuance. Did Koume (whose name means “Little Plum”) want to suggest that she herself was the plum sprite sitting inside the window? The references to Chinese legends, plum blossoms, drinking, and dreams are all characteristic of the *bunjinga* style. It is tempting to see this dreamy scene of a beautiful woman and blossoms as particularly feminine, a representation of Koume's gendered esthetic. But women had no monopoly of *bijinga* (images of beautiful women), which were equally popular among male painters. Patricia Fister, author of the standard English-language work on Japanese women painters, comments that looking for “feminine” traits in paintings is a futile exercise.²² Gender was embedded in the social context of Edo-era paintings more than in the images themselves.

The painting is, however, representative of an elegant and unworldly esthetic, common to *bunjinga* art. As a female artist, Koume was encouraged to present the appearance of

21 Kondō 2019, pp. 9–12.

22 Interview with Patricia Fister, 26 November 2019.



Figure 4. Kawai Koume, *Kanbai ensō bijinzu* 観梅円窓美人図, *Beautiful Woman Gazing at Plum Blossoms*, detail. Date unknown. Courtesy of Wakayama City Museum.

a gifted amateur, a lady practicing painting and poetry as an elegant cultural pursuit. Male artists in the *bunjinga* tradition, including Koume's teacher Hakusetsu, might attain positions as official painters within the domains, effectively establishing themselves as salaried professionals. Others painted purely for the commercial market, ironically cultivating a spontaneous, amateur style as a mark of their professional skill, developing what Yukio Lippit calls "sophisticated techniques of de-skilling in order to cultivate an amateurity of expression."²³

For women of the samurai class, it was much harder to establish professional careers. There were renowned female artists, but those women often achieved professional success at the expense of the security and comfort of a traditional family structure. Ema Saikō 江馬細香 (1787–1861), one of the best-known female painters in the *bunjinga* style, lamented toward the end of her life that she had never married, asking "Why should it be the lot of talented women to end up like this? Most of them in empty boudoirs, writing poems of sorrow."²⁴ Okuhara Seiko 奥原晴湖 (1837–1913), a highly successful artist of the late Edo and early Meiji eras, also renounced marriage, cutting her hair short, dressing like a man, openly living in a lesbian relationship, and ignoring the gossip and opprobrium heaped on her by society.²⁵

Koume's path in life was much more traditional. She grew up educated and skilled in the fine arts, but still she prioritized marriage and the domestic duties of a wife and mother.

23 Lippit 2008, p. 169.

24 Fister 1988, p. 103.

25 Wakamatsu 2016. See especially chapter 4, "Female Masculinity: Discursive Constructions of 'Okuhara Seiko,'" pp.171–243.

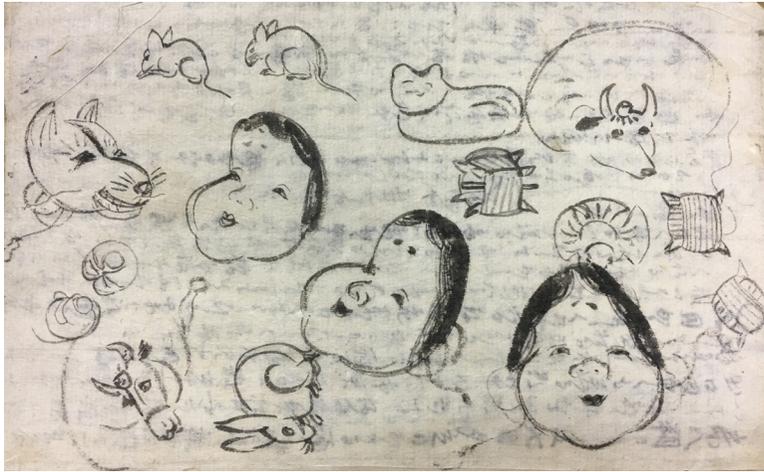


Figure 5. Kawai Koume, untitled sketches of O-Fuku faces and animals from her diary. Courtesy of Wakayama Prefectural Library.

As an artist, Koume accepted and even embraced her designation as a *female* painter, usually signing her work “Koume joshi” 小梅女史 (Madame Koume). Much of her artistic work was in the tradition of the “passionate amateur” and contributed to the complex culture of exchange rather than to her family’s cash balance. But other aspects of her work suggest a more commercial orientation. Was Koume operating as a professional even while maintaining the guise of a literati amateur? Her diary is too reticent to yield a definitive answer. It seems likely that she was bringing in a small cash income. But the bigger picture is clear. Through her art, as through her household management, Koume was adding to the family’s material well-being as well as its intangible capital.

The Meiji Restoration and the Female Artist

Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the new government initiated an unprecedented program of reforms aimed at unifying the country, creating a strong central government, and developing the infrastructure for a modern nation-state. In five short years, the government abolished the semi-independent domains and unified the nation under the emperor; ended the centuries-old system of class distinction and privilege; created a national army under universal male conscription; launched a compulsory education system; placed households and land under a compulsory registration system; and replaced in-kind taxes with a standardized land tax payable in cash. These radical changes to the nation’s social, political, and financial institutions inevitably had profound effects on families throughout Japan. Families of the *bushi* class, which saw the abolition of their Edo-era privileges and the loss of their hereditary stipends, were among the most affected.

Koume’s diary is missing for the years 1868 to 1875. When it resumes in January 1876, Koume was a widow. Her son Yūsuke was now the family head. Yūsuke had followed in the footsteps of his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, qualifying as a Confucian scholar and getting a job in the domain school. But in 1871, the domain itself was abolished, replaced by Wakayama Prefecture. The following year the school was closed, and its faculty

left jobless. Yūsuke's samurai stipend amounted to only four yen a month, and even that was under threat given the poor state of the prefecture's finances.

In 1876, after four years eking out a living as a private instructor, Yūsuke secured a job as teacher in a village elementary school, moving later in the year to another school closer to Wakayama. His salary was still about four yen a month. Although he was highly qualified, Yūsuke's career as an elementary school teacher only lasted a year. The new school curriculum emphasized Western science and mathematics over Chinese literature, and classically trained teachers like Yūsuke were ill-equipped to meet the schools' needs. By 1877, Yūsuke was once again taking in private students.

According to Wakayama prefectural records, the family was still receiving a rice stipend of twenty *koku* in 1870. At some point in the early years of the 1870s, that was converted to a cash payment of forty-eight yen per year. Then, in September 1878, that was in turn converted to a government bond, in the amount of 617 yen and paying interest of thirty-seven yen per year.²⁶ It was the last official support Yūsuke would receive from his hereditary status as a member of the samurai class. From the late 1870s prices went into an upward spiral in Japan, with the price of rice doubling between 1877 and 1880, and the buying power of Yūsuke's bond sank proportionately.²⁷

The Kawai family gained a little extra income from several rental houses that the family had purchased at the beginning of the Meiji era. The income was about five yen per month including rent and income from the sale of the tenants' "night soil" (sewage). The family also owned a little rice-producing land. Combining these resources, the Kawai family had a total income of around one hundred and fifty yen per year in the late 1870s, enough to buy around nineteen *koku* of rice. That was sufficient to maintain a middle-class lifestyle, but it did not represent financial security. Yūsuke had a family of seven to feed and clothe, a large house to maintain, and several big expenses on the horizon, including the marriage of his two oldest daughters. His employment was unstable and his income precarious, and prices were going up. By 1880, one hundred and fifty yen would buy only fourteen *koku* of rice. He could not have found it easy.

Koume, too, struggled to adapt. During the Edo era, she had been an integral partner in the social, cultural, and economic life of the Kawai family. In situations of cash scarcity, she had contributed to the family's finances through careful household management, through the complex economy of gift exchange, through domestic production of foods and textiles, through nurturing and teaching students in the family's home school, and through her art. As the manager of most aspects of the household, Koume had also been free to spend as she saw fit. Now, her daughter-in-law Kano had taken over most of Koume's former responsibilities and privileges. Koume not only lost her authority in the household; she also lost her access to spending money. Koume could not expect much support from Yūsuke, who was himself struggling. He gave her a small share of the house rental income, about 0.50 yen per month, but it was not enough to buy clothes or participate in entertainment. When she was invited by her daughter-in-law on a shopping expedition, Koume wrote: "I have no money so I didn't go. Instead, I stayed home and sewed socks."²⁸ As a widow, then, Koume

26 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, pp. 37–38, 2 September 1878.

27 Shindo 1954, p. 46.

28 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 2, p. 271, 6 December 1876.

had to earn her own economic independence. We see her working as hard in her old age as she ever did during her middle years.

In 1876, Koume was working as both artist and teacher, while also doing her part to support her family. In the early months of the year she spent several weeks helping Yūsuke get himself set up in Nishimura 西村 Village, where he had taken a job as an elementary school teacher. She also devoted much energy to the care of her grandchildren, particularly her eldest granddaughters Yone 米 and Tsune 恒, for both of whom the family was seeking suitable marriage partners. Tsune's case turned out to be particularly difficult, as over the next five years she endured several failed negotiations, and two marriages that ended quickly in divorce. But amid these family duties, Koume also worked hard to increase her income.

In July 1876, a relative helped get Koume a position as tutor to O-Tei お貞, a daughter in a senior branch of the Mizuno 水野, one of the great families of Kishū. Each morning Koume taught her pupil reading, writing, and drawing. It was understood that Koume would also make herself available to paint for O-Tei and other family members, and she often found herself staying late into the day painting, particularly for O-Tei's grandmother, who needed company and entertainment. The Mizuno paid her two yen a month—not a bad income for a part-time teacher, considering that Yūsuke only made four yen working full time at the Nishimura school. But for reasons that Koume was never able to discover, the Mizuno abruptly laid her off in November. Although she lost her most lucrative teaching position, Koume continued to accept students who would come to her house for instruction once or twice a week. In 1876 she was teaching two girls, Ayame あやめ and Masue 益恵. Both studied painting, and Ayame also studied literature and composition.

Koume also taught many of her son's students, particularly after Yūsuke abandoned school teaching and began to focus exclusively on his private academy at end of the 1870s. Koume often sat with Yūsuke's students, teaching reading and writing to some, and drawing and painting to others. In addition to teaching the students, Koume prepared copy-books, with examples of flowers, birds, and other common themes, for them to use as models in their drawing practice. Sometimes she just sat with them to keep them calm. On 16 August 1880, Yūsuke gave an exam to his students. "Many children came. Fusanosuke had a fight with the boy from the bathhouse, so I painted for them to calm them down. Then they all came upstairs and I painted for them, and they drew lots [for the paintings]. There were sixteen of them."²⁹ Incidentally, this incident also points to the democratization of Chinese learning in the new era: Yūsuke would probably not have taught the children of a bathhouse keeper in the Tokugawa era.

Koume worked with other teachers, particularly her patron and close family friend, Ichikawa Hiroshi 市川潤. The Kawai family's ties to the Ichikawa stretched all the way back to the 1840s, and there are hundreds of mentions of them throughout the diary. Ichikawa Hitoshi was the same generation as Hyōzō and Koume. He was a scholar, a poet, and a fellow teacher at the domain school. By the 1870s, Hitoshi's son Hiroshi was the family head. Like Yūsuke, Hiroshi became an elementary school teacher in 1876.³⁰ Later, like Yūsuke, he started his own private academy. The exact relationship between Yūsuke and Ichikawa's academy is unclear, but both Koume and Yūsuke often went there to offer

29 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 79, 16 May 1880.

30 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 42, 26 September 1878.

instruction or to paint with the students. For example, on 11 June 1877, Koume attended a school event to celebrate the autumn colors.³¹ After a picnic lunch, she sat with the students and did seven paintings of autumn flowers, to which the students added poems. The event was in the *gassaku* (collaborative) tradition that Koume had valued so much in her years as a scholar's wife. But rather than the intangible capital accruing to Koume and Hyōzō in the Edo era, Koume's work on this occasion was part of the financial economy of the Kawai household. Yūsuke received a cash income for sharing Ichikawa's teaching work, part of which he shared with Koume.³²

Koume's work as a teacher was partly to help Yūsuke, and partly for a little extra income for herself. But most of her effort went into her painting. The years between 1876 and 1882 (when the diary ends) were a period of extraordinary artistic activity for Koume. In her diary there are almost one hundred references to painting in each of the six years recorded by the diary, with many projects extending over days or weeks.³³ It is tempting to attribute this intense activity to Koume's greater leisure as a widow relieved from her duties as wife and mother, and finally free to pursue her lifelong love of painting and poetry. But it would be wrong to see Koume as a retired lady pursuing her passion. Although she was by now in her mid-seventies, Koume worked as hard as she ever had in her life. And her work was driven primarily by financial need.

Now that she had lost her husband, Koume was seldom invited to the creative gatherings that had been such an important part of his cultural circle. But she still received numerous commissions and requests. Some of these came from close friends and family members, and as she always had, Koume painted in the knowledge that the reward would be largely intangible. Other requests were from students, for whom she painted samples and copy-books. But most came from her patrons, who commissioned large numbers of paintings from her either for their personal use, or for circulation among the community of art lovers in Wakayama and the surrounding region.

Most prominent among Koume's patrons was Ichikawa Hiroshi. Through the late 1870s and into the 1880s, Ichikawa used his wide contact network to find commissions for Koume, who painted in a wide variety of genres and mediums for his friends and acquaintances. For example, on 14 November 1876,

After noon, I worked on *tanzaku* 短冊 [rectangular paper used for poetry and painting] paintings of Yō Kihō 楊貴妃 [Yang Guifei, a famous beauty of Tang era China] requested by Ichikawa. Three paintings. In the early afternoon I went to Ichikawa to temporarily mount the paintings, and while [the glue] dried I painted a woman in a rice field as well as a *daruma* [stylized image of Bodhidharma]. Finished by the evening. Then I did another *tanzaku* with autumn leaves and cherry blossoms. When it got dark, they gave me saké. They also offered me food, but I didn't eat. Their maid accompanied me home as far as Omotebashi.³⁴

31 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 2, p. 314, 11 June 1877.

32 For example, on 29 September 1877, Yūsuke received monthly tuition of 0.15 yen from a student. He divided the fee with Koume, giving her 0.06 yen. Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 2, p. 334.

33 Abe 2013, p. 516.

34 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 2, p. 270, 14 November 1876.

On 16 November, a letter from Ichikawa asked her to bring over some paintings she had been doing for a third party, and to stay overnight and do more painting. Koume had been planning to quietly mount paintings at home, but instead she went to the Ichikawa house and worked on paintings of roses, bamboo, daffodils, pinks, lotus, dandelions, and field horsetails. She worked all through that day and the next. On 17 November, “in the morning, I was asked to paint a pine in front of the rising sun, in gold on silk. I complied. Then I was called to lunch. I was planning to go home, but instead I painted the [portrait] I had promised, then five or six other paintings. I also quickly painted some masks on folding fans.” She finally was able to go home late in the day.³⁵

Ichikawa was placing Koume’s work with new owners throughout the area. Sometimes Koume mentioned the name or location of the ultimate owner, though often she painted in bulk for Ichikawa to place the paintings in his own time. And he paid Koume for her work. Shortly before she went home from her overnight stay with Ichikawa, “a traveling saleswoman called Yasuno came [to the Ichikawa house], offering a purple-lined silk crepe kimono for 2.30 yen.” Koume knocked the price down to two yen and bought the kimono. While this was a common thing for her to do in her prime, she very seldom bought clothes after becoming a widow. Clearly, she was in the mood to indulge herself a little. She added: “I used my own money for this. I had been told I would receive two silver coins [probably 0.25 yen each] in wages.” This is one of the most explicit acknowledgments Koume makes that she was being paid by Ichikawa for her work. Just a month later, on 26 December 1876, she wrote: “Ichikawa came over, and as always he gave me two *shu*, or half a yen. Three of his students contributed 0.10 yen each.”³⁶ Koume mentions receiving the same sum of money from Ichikawa, 0.50 yen, on two other occasions in her diary. At other times, she received smaller amounts of money from Ichikawa, or small gifts.³⁷

Ichikawa was not the only patron who acted as commissioning agent for Koume’s work. Sakai Baisai, another old family friend who was himself an artist, also sometimes requested work. For example, on 26 August 1878, Koume received a letter from Baisai asking her to paint six sliding screens (*fusuma*) for an acquaintance of his in Yamada village. Baisai specified that four were to be of chrysanthemums and two of plum blossoms, in black ink or in pale colors.³⁸ Later in the year, on 31 October, Sakai Kiyotami 酒井清民 (whose relationship to Baisai is unclear) sent a servant to pick up several paintings he had commissioned from Koume. In a letter, Sakai wrote “Since I am not planning to keep them myself, please name your price.” Koume reflected: “I had no choice but to say how much, so I said 0.12 yen per painting. [The servant] immediately handed over the money and left. It certainly made me feel dirty (*hiretsu* 卑劣), but that’s the world we now live in, so what can I do?” Since Koume had done six black ink paintings for Sakai, she was paid 0.72 yen.³⁹

In October 1880, Koume traveled to Nango 永穂 Village, a half day’s walk from Wakayama, where she spent more than two weeks working on a total of twenty-five *fusuma* screens for a family friend, Tsuji Kenzaemon 辻健左衛門. She painted flowers of the four

35 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 1, p. 270, 16 November 1876.

36 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 2, p. 277, 26 December 1876.

37 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 196, 22 January 1882; pp. 209–210, 13 April 1882.

38 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 36, 27 August 1878.

39 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 47, 31 October 1878.

seasons, lucky gods, and other scenes for the *fusuma*. Koume was also in charge of the delicate and time-consuming job of stretching the paper over the screens. And while she was staying with Kenzaemon, she received many visits from the villagers and their children, who often asked her to do small paintings. She was busy from morning till night, and ended up staying much longer than she had originally planned. Koume did not mention payment at the time, but the following year, on 20 March, she had a visit from Kenzaemon, who gave her a bolt of white cloth and one yen “as payment for the *fusuma* I did for him last year.”⁴⁰

On 10 June 1881, Koume discussed another commission in Nango Village, this time at the request of another old friend, Miwa Saizō 三輪才藏, on behalf of the priest of Eishōji 永生寺 Temple. The main hall of the temple was being rebuilt, and Miwa wanted Koume to paint one hundred and eighty ceiling panels. In this case, the negotiation was transparent, and purely financial. Koume asked for 0.05 yen per panel, but she accepted the temple’s counteroffer of 0.03 yen. It is unclear if Koume ever completed the commission, but the total fee for the project (5.40 yen) would have been substantial even at this low rate per panel.⁴¹

Between 1878 when she had found asking for money to be “dirty,” and 1881 when she negotiated this contract, Koume’s views on cash payment seem to have undergone a transformation. Since her patrons were old family friends, it is easy to see why Koume might have felt uncomfortable with the commercialization of her work. In the past, Koume had painted for the samurai community mainly in exchange for intangible rather than financial capital. It must have been difficult for her to discuss money transactions with those same people. However, painting for cash became acceptable for Koume, partly because she needed the money, but also because her friends were in turn selling her work to people she did not know. As she herself wrote, this commercial economy was the new world in which she lived.

Indeed, by the 1880s, Koume seems to have had a clear expectation of payment for her labor. Several times, she referred to payments she received for her work as a “wage” (*chin* 賃).⁴² When she failed to receive an expected payment, she was embittered. On 27 August 1882, for example, “Kusano came to thank me for the paintings.... He gave me fifteen sweets and two hundred sheets of paper.... He had promised to give me 1 yen, but that’s all he brought.... There’s nothing I can do about it. It’s a big loss.”⁴³ In another entry, Koume complained: “I have been painting for many people, but I haven’t even made one *sen* [0.01 yen]. It’s charity.”⁴⁴

The members of the Kawai family’s ex-samurai community were the hardest to work with. While some, like Ichikawa, clearly understood the economic importance for Koume of her work, there remained an awkwardness around the question of money, and a tendency for others to undervalue Koume’s work. Koume’s identity as a female artist in the *bunjinga* tradition, whose practitioners had always prided themselves on their remove from the sordid commerce of the marketplace, made it all the harder for her to ask for money.

But in this new Meiji era, Koume also found a market in the burgeoning commercial culture. Increasingly, she became involved in commercial ventures with residents of the

40 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 128, 20 March 1881.

41 For a discussion of this commission, see Takeuchi 2012.

42 See, for example, Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 204, 17 March 1882.

43 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 243, 27 August 1882.

44 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 220, 31 May 1882.

townsmen's quarters, as well as with ex-samurai who had gone into business for themselves. These ventures also led her into a variety of new types of painting.

From the late 1870s, Koume began drawing stencil designs for embroidered cloth (*oshi-e* 押絵). She mostly collaborated with an Aoyama 青山 to produce a large number of drawings, and worked with seamstresses to create the finished product. For example, on 12 April 1878, Koume spent the day drawing humorous pictures, including one of a baby racoon carrying a flask of saké, and one of a monkey stealing peaches. The next day, some of Aoyama's workers came and worked on embroidering the designs onto cloth. Koume added her own touches to the finished cloth, painting it to embellish the work. Koume also worked on painting cloth to stretch over paper or wooden boxes (*haribako*), although it is unclear if she did this as a commercial venture.⁴⁵

On 26 April 1878, Take 竹, one of the women living in the Kawai rental houses, came to Koume to ask her to paint the curtain (*noren* 暖簾) of a rickshaw the family had acquired. Koume spent much of the day painting an imaginative design. Take had asked her to include the character for bamboo (*take* 竹), so Koume wrote a poem and painted it on the cloth:

竹の子ものり出でこゝろ社千代のかげ

Takenoko mo

Nori idete koso

Chiyo no kage

If you ride the bamboo shoot, you will have eternal shade.⁴⁶

Above the poem she painted a bolt of lightning in black and indigo, as well as a pair of bamboo stilts; and below, she painted a humorous image of a dwarf. On 31 May 1880, Suzuki Yoshiemon 鈴木芳右衛門 came over to ask Koume to paint a pair of *noren*. Koume undertook the commission, and delivered it on 4 June. On 12 July, the Suzuki family gave her 0.50 yen for the *noren* in addition to three other paintings.⁴⁷

Clearly, Koume was painting for a living. And she was extremely busy with it. Her output during the six years from 1876 to 1882 was enormous, and it increased as time went on. Koume mentioned her painting activities 225 times between 1876 and 1878, but 318 times between 1880 and 1882, the last year of the diary. Undoubtedly she loved painting, but often her descriptions made it sound more like work than pleasure. Koume describes staying up late at night painting; working to finish paintings even though she felt unwell; working with frozen hands in the winter; struggling to mount paper as her glue froze; and tearing up drafts as she struggled to get a painting right for a client. For example, on 10 March 1877, she wrote, "Since yesterday I have been working on the painting requested by Yoshiyama Suitei 吉山水偵, on paper of five to six *sun* [15–18cm], but it just won't come out well. I tore one draft I did into pieces. Oh dear, it's hard." Four days later, she wrote, "Today

45 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 16, 12 April 1878.

46 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 19, 26 April 1878.

47 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 82, 31 May 1880; p. 82, 4 June 1880; p. 91, 12 July 1880.

I finished the three small paintings requested by Yoshiyama. They came out much worse than I expected. It was cold so that the glue froze.”⁴⁸ In a particularly woeful entry, she recounted,

Worked on my painting of pine trees that I’m supposed to send to Ichikawa tomorrow. But I couldn’t do it. I was disgusted with myself, so I drank seven and a half *choko* [small cups] of saké all at once. Kano came home from Naito, and I listened to her [while she told me about family problems], but then I began to feel sick as well as drunk. [Later] I picked up the brazier to carry it downstairs, but I dropped it, and the hot ashes scattered everywhere. When Kano heard the noise she came up, and she pushed me out of the way and stomped on the embers.⁴⁹

In August 1882, an exciting request was delivered to Koume. The prefecture was planning to submit several works of art to the Domestic Painting Competitive Exhibition (Naikoku Kaiga Kyōshinkai 内国絵画共進会) to be held in Ueno Park in Tokyo starting 1 October, and a prefectural official invited Koume to submit some paintings. Koume was summoned to the prefectural offices, where the official read her the rationale for the exhibition: “These days the fashion is for Western art, oil paintings and things foreign, and Japanese art is being completely abandoned.... His Majesty is concerned that people have become ignorant of the way things used to be, and so we are asking traditional painters such as the Kanō family, painters in the Chinese style, and Utagawa Toyokuni and painters in the Maruyama style and others to contribute to the exhibition.” Excited at the invitation, Koume responded that, “I will submit two paintings, one of a court lady looking at flowers, the other of peonies, orchids and crab apple blossoms. I paint in the *bunjinga* school, having learned painting under Nogiwa Hakusetsu, who was a student of Noro Kaiseki.”⁵⁰

Both were subjects she had painted many times, but she took her commission very seriously, painting multiple drafts and having her work professionally mounted before she was satisfied enough to submit it at the end of August. From September till December, Koume wrote many entries about the exhibition in her diary. She was excited to think of her work being exhibited in the Ueno Park exhibition hall, and she also had to deal with all sorts of paperwork coming out of the prefectural office.

The exhibition was widely reported in the press. It featured the work of 2,480 artists. The emperor visited the exhibition on 24 October, and the publicity brought huge crowds to view the show. (At a second exhibition held two years later, soldiers had to be brought in to control the crowds.)⁵¹ The exhibitors included some of Japan’s most celebrated artists, and prizes were awarded to twenty-nine exhibitors. One celebrity artist, Kawanabe Kyōsai 河鍋曉齋 (1831–1889), shocked the judges by putting a price tag of one hundred yen on a black ink painting of a crow.⁵²

48 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 2, p. 290, 10 March 1877.

49 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, pp. 114–115, 7 January 1881.

50 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, pp. 239–240, 15 August 1882. Noro Kaiseki 野呂介石 (1747–1828).

51 Buckland 2013, p. 3 See also Miwa Hideo, “Naikoku kaiga kyōshinkai” in Kokushi Daijiten (<https://japanknowledge.com/lib/display/?lid=30010zz354090>; last accessed 6 January 2022).

52 *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 15 November 1881, p. 1.

However, Koume's artwork was not so avidly received. On 22 December 1882, she reported, "I went to the prefectural office. My works were indeed exhibited at the prize show [in Tokyo]." But "The ink painting was sold for 0.50 yen, while the painting of the court lady will come back [to Wakayama]. The price was very low. It barely covers the cost of the paper."⁵³

The concern of the organizers of the Domestic Painting Competitive Exhibition that traditional Japanese arts had fallen into decay turned out to be misplaced. The early Meiji years opened new possibilities for professional artists in the literati style, including women. The boom in education, including Chinese studies, the continuing rise in incomes of the commercial and farming classes, and the spread of printed materials including primers on Chinese poetry and painting, contributed to the popularity of *bunjinga* painting in the years after the Meiji Restoration. Far from falling into decay, its practitioners experienced a boom in interest and demand, accompanied by what Yurika Wakamatsu calls "commercialism and commodification on a scale never witnessed before."⁵⁴ Indeed, one critic commented of this period that anyone with a little knowledge of Chinese culture thought they could paint "landscapes, orchids, or bamboos, by merely smearing India paper with ink."⁵⁵ Although most professional artists in the *bunjinga* style continued to be male, some women were able to take advantage of the "wide-open atmosphere" of new possibilities in the early Meiji period.⁵⁶ The aforementioned Okuhara Seiko, who had a studio and academy in Tokyo, was so popular that "an article in the newspaper *Yūbin Hōchi Shinbun* 郵便報知新聞 proclaimed that two things had come to be sold nonstop in Tokyo since the Meiji Restoration of 1868: Hōtan 宝丹, a medicine for intestinal problems that was said to prevent cholera, and paintings executed by Okuhara Seiko."⁵⁷

Whether or not she was aware of these trends, Koume worked hard to establish herself as a professional artist through the late 1870s and early 1880s, and she was consistently in demand as a painter in the *bunjinga* style, as well as in a variety of other genres. She expected to be paid, and, increasingly she was rewarded in cash for her work. But her age, gender, and class background hampered her efforts. At best, she was able to eke out a modest income. The evidence from the diary is very partial, but it appears that Koume was earning around 0.12–0.13 yen for a single painting, and 0.50 yen for sets of paintings that might take from one to several days to execute. Adding up the fragmentary references to payment, it seems reasonable to conclude that Koume was making between 2 and 4 yen a month from her painting. Koume's income could not compare with that of Okuhara Seiko or other celebrity female artists of the time. Nor indeed was she able to earn as much as the artisans and craftsmen living in the townsmen's quarters. Koume's income was more comparable to that of a female textile factory worker.⁵⁸

53 Kawai, Shiga, and Murata 1974, vol. 3, p. 265, 22 December 1882.

54 Wakamatsu 2016, p. 15; Buckland 2013, pp. 43–95; Fraleigh 2015.

55 Quoted in Buckland 2013, p. 100.

56 See Howell 2009, p. 204.

57 Wakamatsu 2016, p. 171. According to Wakamatsu, a price list published in 1882 states that the going rate for a painting by Seiko was seven yen (p. 196).

58 According to the standard compendium of long-term statistics, carpenters in 1885 earned an average 5.675 yen for a twenty-five-day working month. Female textile workers earned 2.825 yen. Sōmuchō Tōkeikyoku 1987, vol. 4, pp. 228–231 (chart 16–1).

Koume was able to engage in these semi-professional painting activities because of the profound changes that were taking place in her own society. The social contract, in which she had accepted her role as a mostly unpaid cultural producer in exchange for the intangible capital accruing to herself and her husband in a world of status and privilege, had disappeared together with the disestablishment of the samurai elite. In the new environment of equal rights and the privileging of commercial development, Koume had opportunities to pursue her painting as a professional activity. Indeed, the world she now lived in at times demanded that she set a price for her services.

However, the evidence of the diary suggests that her ability to professionalize her work was only partial. The one salaried job she took, as art teacher to the daughter of the wealthy Mizuno family, lasted only a few months before being abruptly terminated without explanation. As an artist, Koume was sometimes able to negotiate directly for monetary payment for her work. She herself expressed discomfort with the need to ask for money. But more often, she expressed her frustration at the difficulties she encountered monetizing her efforts. Those frustrations were particularly evident when she was dealing with former members of her samurai circle, who tended to still see her as a scholar's wife, producing art for the sake of intangible benefits, and who failed to acknowledge her need to provide for herself.

Conclusion: Art and Gender in an Age of Revolution

In the basement of Wakayama Castle, there is a display of a half dozen famous citizens of the prefecture. They include Matsushita Kōnosuke 松下幸之助 (1894–1989), founder of the National/Panasonic electronics empire; Mutsu Munemitsu 陸奥宗光 (1844–1897), one of the great statesmen of the Meiji era; and Kawai Koume. We learn from this exhibit that Koume's grandfather, father, husband, and son were all teachers in the domain school; that she married early; that she kept a diary; and that her substantial body of work "was not merely a housewife's hobby, but was an accomplishment that earned her the name of artist." Similarly, the most comprehensive work on Kishū artists of the Edo era devotes three-quarters of its brief entry on "The Female Artist, Koume-san" to her pedigree. Each of the male members of her family—grandfather, father, and husband—is introduced, as well as her (male) teachers of poetry and painting. The entry mentions Koume's diary. Only at the end does it describe in a few words two of her paintings, before concluding: "Koume was particularly good at these kinds of paintings of beautiful women, and of flowers and birds."⁵⁹ As an artist, Koume's most distinctive features were not her style or the quality of her work, but her (male) scholarly pedigree and her gender. Even today, it seems that Koume is defined to a great extent by those social markers, neither of which she chose.

Status and gender are indeed two of the most pervasive categories of historical identity in Tokugawa Japan, and no scholar of Tokugawa-era women's history can altogether avoid their pervasive reach. In the decades after the Meiji Restoration, the rigidity of the Tokugawa-era social system, "one of the most conscious attempts in history to freeze society in a rigid hierarchical mold," was often taken for granted, a useful foil for the celebration of Japan's successful modernization.⁶⁰ Women, in particular, were seen as victims of an

⁵⁹ Wakayama Shiritsu Hakubutsukan 2016, p. 57.

⁶⁰ Norman 1940, p. 12.

oppressive Confucian patriarchy, doomed to “the three obediences,”—obedience, while yet unmarried, to a father; obedience, when married, to a husband and that husband’s parents; obedience, when widowed, to a son.”⁶¹

Later research has cast doubt on the rigidity and even the meaning of these categories. Class boundaries turn out to have been surprisingly porous. Intermarriage between members of different status groups was relatively common, as were career jumps between groups (Koume’s own family offers several examples). There was no dominant ideology of race or caste to keep people in a fixed place.⁶² Rather, the system is best understood, as Maren Ehlers recently defined it, as “a flexible mechanism of governance that accommodated social change and inspired people’s energies and aspirations.”⁶³

Women’s destinies, too, were far more varied and (often) empowered than Tokugawa gender ideologies might lead us to expect. In her biography of the poet and activist Matsuo Taseko 松尾多勢子 (1811–1894), Anne Walthall asserts that, “To become a woman is a process in no sense fixed.” Walthall’s protagonist was able to occupy a conventionally respectable position in society and play a vital role in the economic life of her family; but, when she felt the call, she was also able to throw herself into the activist politics of the restoration movement.⁶⁴ Amy Stanley’s recent biography of Tsuneno, a priest’s daughter from Niigata, vividly illustrates her protagonist’s willingness to risk everything in the hope of forging for herself a new and better life in Edo, ultimately helping to “shape the modern world that she would not live to see.”⁶⁵ A popular Edo-era *sugoroku* 双六 board game offered women thirty possible paths in life, including maid, midwife, child-minder, shamisen player, bride, brothel keeper, schoolteacher, acupuncturist, and tomboy.⁶⁶ “Real life,” writes David Howell, “is infinitely complex. Even with all the structures to classify and thereby constrain social relations—household, community, and national status order—people nonetheless found ample space to engage in all manner of activities autonomously of status, however defined.”⁶⁷

Koume’s life as artist and household manager, while conventionally respectable and in no way challenging to the Tokugawa ideologies of class and gender, also shows the inadequacy of those categories to describe the complex world in which she lived and worked. Koume was far more than “The Female Artist, Koume-san” described so condescendingly in the compendium of Kishū painters.

Despite its elite scholarly pedigree, her family was relatively poor. It had close ties to the merchant classes, and Koume was as much at home gossiping with shopkeepers and servants as she was in the company of scholars and retainers. Like social actors at all levels of society, Koume was determined to use her skills and energy for the betterment of her life, and of her family. She played a leading role in almost every aspect of her family’s social, economic, and cultural lives. And although the conventions of class and gender precluded her from openly

61 Chamberlain 1902, p. 424.

62 Howell 2005, p. 25.

63 Ehlers 2018, p. 2.

64 Walthall 1998, p. 59.

65 Stanley 2020. The quote is from Stanley 2016, p. 447.

66 Yabuta and Yanagiya 2010, pp. 3–4. The game is “New sugoroku game for instructions in female success” (*Shinpan musume teikin shusse sugoroku* 新版娘庭訓出世雙六). See also <https://library.u-gakugei.ac.jp/digitalarchive/pdf/honji-sugoroku1.pdf> (Accessed 12 January 2020).

67 Howell 2005, p. 43.

pursuing a professional artistic career, she accepted commissions and requests from a wide range of constituents, from leading cultural figures to maidservants. Her painting, injected into the complex economy of gift exchange, helped enhance her family's material well-being. And through her art, she helped advance her family's cultural standing and contributed to the advancement of her husband's career.

After the Meiji Restoration, Japan's social and economic conditions changed significantly, particularly for the *bushi* class. While some scholars have pointed to the disruption and resistance created by this era of change, others have emphasized the new sense of potential, particularly for women who mobilized to call for changes in their status and legal rights.⁶⁸ For Koume, the new era brought the challenges of lost status, widowhood, and economic insecurity. As she had throughout her life, Koume accepted the status quo. She was not an activist, nor, in her diary at least, did she articulate a vision of new opportunities. Outwardly, her life appeared to be that of a dignified widow, pursuing elegant accomplishments in her old age. But once again, she refused to be defined by labels of status, gender, or age. Driven by economic need and loyalty to her family, she worked extraordinarily hard to produce works of art that would be valued and compensated accordingly. Despite the enormous challenges for someone of her age, class background, and gender, she moved toward establishing herself as a self-supporting, professional artist.

Koume faced many challenges. Her one salaried job was insecure and lasted only a few months. As an artist, Koume struggled at times to obtain reasonable compensation for her efforts. Her frustrations were particularly evident when she was dealing with former members of her samurai circle, who tended still to see her in terms of her role as a scholar's wife producing art as an elegant hobby, and who failed to acknowledge her need to provide for herself. Her class background and her gender remained obstacles to the fulfilment of her aspirations.

Yet the fact remains that faced with the loss of much that had made her life comfortable and pleasant, Koume confronted the challenges of the brave new world of the Meiji state mostly without complaint. Many were the days when she painted in the cold, her hands barely able to feel the brush, the glue she used to mount her paper coming unstuck from the cold. She painted furiously, sometimes completing dozens of sketches in a day, other times painting and repainting the same work until she was satisfied that she had it right. She persevered out of determination and need. And, increasingly, she was able to establish a stable place for herself in the commercial economy of artistic production. Kawai Koume never achieved wealth or fame as an artist, nor did she stake a claim as an activist pushing against the boundaries of social custom or political ideology. Nevertheless, her work seems more like the trailblazing of a pioneer than the leisurely pastime of a retired old lady.

68 See, for example, Sugano 2010; Anderson 2011.

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