

BOOK REVIEW

*Obtaining Images: Art, Production and Display in Edo Japan***Timon Screech**University of Hawai'i Press, 2012
384 pages. ISBN 978-0-8248-3613-9

Obtaining Images, by Timon Screech, Professor of the History of Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies, shows under-appreciated connections between Edo-period (1600–1868) cultural production and various artistic genres and schools. Although there are numerous studies that cover particular schools or artists in more detail, such parochial foci are unable to show the interrelated nature of Edo culture in the way that Screech's work does. This is where *Obtaining Images* really shines. Some readers may find this panoramic approach a little threadbare—trying to take on too many forms and schools, or not speaking enough about a particular artist or school. Nevertheless, the end result is a solid foundation from which to reevaluate individual artists and schools within a much more clearly interconnected landscape of image production and circulation.

The word “obtaining” in the title has two connected definitions: first, images are obtained through consumption. In this sense, the book explains why people acquired images. For those with an interest in the marketplace of production, the book includes fascinating details on the interactions between consumers and patrons, on one side, and the artists and producers, on the other. It traces interactions from “commissioning, commanding, paying and receiving payment.” This returns the history of Edo art to the real world away from abstract ideals of beauty. Screech's research clarifies how the various factors of class, gender, familial relationships, and religious status each influenced how individuals obtained images.

The second definition of “obtaining” relates to how images obtain meaning, becoming “valid” and conveying “senses that are accepted and understood” (p. 7). In other words, this study shows how people “understood” and drew meaning from images—how the images were read and comprehended at the time of production and initial consumption. As Screech notes, this is a book that “seeks to take the extra-visual aspects of images seriously.” It begins with a bold assumption for art history, namely that the visual or act of viewing may not have been the “primary purpose” of images in the first place. That is to say, images in Japan were created and circulated for purposes other than viewing. He demonstrates how images “acquired meaning only as exchange items, seasonal accompaniments, accessories to pray or play”; or as background for the main events taking place in front of them (p. 7).

Obtaining Images is divided into two complementary parts. The first four chapters provide the basic knowledge an educated Edo-ite used in reading and obtaining images. Topics covered include the ideas and ideals of artistic representation; the encoded meanings

of various auspicious images (deer, carp, tigers, dragons, etc.); the quintessential rules of decorum for interacting with artists and paying for images; and, finally, the religious significances and efficacy of images. Screech anecdotally introduces a large number of people, events, and images, which might be overwhelming for non-specialists. The concluding section of each chapter, however, transforms this kaleidoscope of seemingly disparate images, into a cohesive and quite satisfying whole. The second part of the book, comprised of chapters five through ten, integrates the fundamental knowledge presented in part one into fascinating studies of better known aspects of Edo-period art production. These include chapters on the Kano school, portraiture, domestic landscapes, and idealized landscapes of China (*nanga*) ukiyo-e, and interactions with European images.

Art history books are inevitably judged on their aesthetic merits. In this regard, as well, *Obtaining Images* is quite successful: it is a beautifully produced book, with color images on nearly every page. There are, however, two minor insufficiencies with the treatment of images in the book. First, the notes about the images do not provide measurements of dimensions. Hence, it is hard to gain an appreciation of the magnitude of images relative to each other, especially when large wall hangings are at times indistinguishable from much smaller images.

The second issue is that, although Screech does a tremendous job of describing visual components of the images (particularly identifying auspicious imagery and visual/verbal puns), he often elides the full text (particularly poetry) inscribed in and on the images. That is to say, while signatures, seals, and dates of composition are each meticulously catalogued, longer poems and narratives are too often left under explored. Screech made the decision to omit calligraphy and illustrated fiction, “fields where the text equals or outweighs the role of the image.” This justification seems to make sense; at 384 pages and ten chapters, the book covers more than can be expected for one project. Nevertheless, this justification rests on an assumption, which the book actually does a good job of refuting: that the images and their larger contexts (including textual ones) can be divorced from each other and separately weighed in their roles.

As primarily a scholar of literature, I found this book to provide a clear and compelling case for the need to learn to “read” the visual codes of images in their entirety. However, I noticed a few cases where selfishly I wished the author had brought the images and words into a greater dialog. In art history there is, at times, an excessive focus on the image alone; and, unfortunately, this is all too often mirrored by an excessive focus on words in literary studies. As Screech points out in his introduction, “Much Japanese painting took the form of handscrolls illustrating literary themes. ...[T]o be understood properly the underlying stories need to be known, and the graphs used to write them recognized in meaning and in the nuances of their form and shape” (p. 9). This is not meant as a critique of the quality of the book, nor of Screech’s scholarship per se. In fact, *Obtaining Images* makes the case that future scholarship should transcend this artificial divide between art history and the rest of cultural production, including literature. In many ways, it shows how verbal and visual composition of images from this time can be read together in order to understand better why and how images were obtained. In the end, I strongly recommend this book to all scholars and students (especially literary specialists) with an interest in Edo-period culture.

Reviewed by Brian Dowdle