

BOOK REVIEW

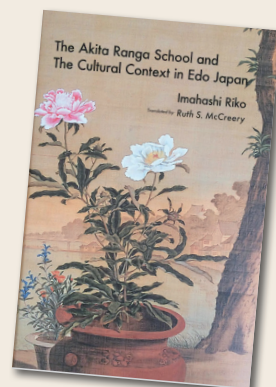
*The Akita Ranga School and
The Cultural Context in Edo Japan*

By Imahashi Riko;

Translated by Ruth S. McCreery

International House of Japan, Inc., 2016
434 pages.

Reviewed by Matthew LARKING



The present volume, the translation of Imahashi Riko's *Akita Ranga no kindai: Odano Naotake "Shinobazu no ike zu" o yomu* (Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai 2009), invites a wider audience to reconsider the so-called Western-style painting produced in Edo by Akita daimyo and vassals. These artists and paintings were relatively unknown in their own time. Pictures were likely not made for sale but circulated among a coterie culture following literati practices. Recent times have seen it overshadowed by interest in *ukiyo-e*, the "eccentrics," and Rinpa. The "Edo boom" from the 1980s did little to shine further light on its efflorescence (less than a decade, concluding with the youthful samurai/painter Odano Naotake's death, 1780). Still, Akita Ranga is ostensibly part of the mainstream, featuring in the major Japanese art historical narratives.

The modern rediscovery of Akita Ranga began with an article published by the *nihonga* painter Hirafuku Hyakusui (1877–1933) in 1903. The prevailing view developing thereafter discerned Akita Ranga emerging from the partial relaxation of the ban on Western books in 1720, and the subsequent spread of Western science, anatomy, and botanical studies. But the significance of the "West" appears to have been exaggerated, obscuring the precedent (the nexus of Chinese literary and visual relations), and the coincident (*honzōgaku*, the local study of flora, fauna, and minerals, and Edo period customs and pastimes). Imahashi's mission has been to rehabilitate Akita Ranga's contexts, pursued through an unusual painting, Naotake's *Shinobazu Pond* (c. 1778–1779).

No contemporary commentary on *Shinobazu Pond* exists. Discovered in Yamagata Prefecture in 1948, then designated an Important Cultural Property in 1968 (the first Western-style Edo painting to be so honored), *Shinobazu Pond* has since become Akita Ranga's definitive masterpiece. Conventionally understood as a detailed perspective landscape, though one in which many of the Ueno site's emblematic and identifying features are absent, the mysteries of these erasures in addition to the painting's depicted elements have mostly been left unplumbed. The thrust of Imahashi's scholarship is to uncover the image's referential complexity in regard to a collage of its Japanese/Chinese/Western sources. She then reconceives *Shinobazu Pond* as a composite landscape/still-life/figure (*bijinga*) painting.

Among Imahashi's explanatory contexts are *Shinobazu Pond* as a topos related to China's West Lake, tragically ending romantic assignations, Edo period religious figures and apothecaries related to Akita Province, and pastimes like visiting the pond to worship Benzaiten or view lotuses. These features are potentially part of the cultural stock of period or informed viewers in Imahashi's analysis. Her pictorial contexts include *ukie* and Shen Nanpin realism, though without reference to older Chinese paintings extant in Japan that may also have appealed to Akita Ranga painters. Further contexts address the peony as a symbol of feminine beauty, the Chinese poetic tradition of the boudoir lament, and the requisition for Akita Ranga of literati concepts and worldviews.

Imahashi's final chapter, buoyed by the earlier ones, abandons grounded period contexts for half-imagined places and concepts from modern times. Imahashi conjectures *Shinobazu Pond* was made by Naotake for the daimyo Satake Shozan (1748–1785), potentially commissioned to be installed in the three-storied tower that became the Akita domain's Edo compound, completed in 1783 (p. 281). But while Imahashi makes further reasoned speculations based on historical records of kinds mostly unrelated to the painting, this is rather different from actual historical evidence. For Imahashi, Naotake produced the painting for a "secret location" (p. 278), prepared it "in secret" (p. 284), and too readily forgives the fact that Naotake died three years before the supposed Edo display space was finally erected (p. 284).

Compounding these musings, Imahashi posits the painting in its imagined architecture as being viewed through an interior Chinese-style circular window (for which there is no verification), or seen through a telescope. Cropped circularity would potentially intensify the three-dimensional aspects of (only part of) the picture (see Imahashi's diagrammatic representations, pp. 290, 291). It would also permit close-up viewing of the picture's *trompe l'oeil* features, though attentive spectators could likely apprehend these up close anyway. Viewing *Shinobazu Pond* and its environment through a telescope was also a sexualized, Edo pastime, and Imahashi addresses the representation of this in print culture to bolster her claim. But viewing *Shinobazu Pond* through a telescope simply may or may not have been an intended picture-viewing mode. And with the third-floor space for Naotake's painting being conceived of by Imahashi as having a "recreational" character (p. 284), her speculations tend to cast *Shinobazu Pond* as being less radical, more gimmicky.

Akita Ranga is referred to as "avant-garde" from Imahashi's introduction, a heavily theory-laden characterization referring the reader forward to modernism (in line with the Japanese title of her book). Chapter 6 is specifically about "An Unrecognized Avant-Gardism." Her book becomes, then, about locating the origins of Japan's art-historical modernity, or, fledgling modernity interrupted by Naotake's untimely death. Enthusiastically asking her reader to "begin again, with *Shinobazu Pond* [...]" to talk of the modernity, the future, that Akita Ranga might have shown us" (p. 301), Imahashi's contextual approach lapses into chronological and conceptual conflations.

Pursuing some of Imahashi's arguments to their ends can at times require some critical suspension. The real merits of her book arrive before the concluding/colluding thoughts, realized in her stimulating accounts of Akita Ranga and *Shinobazu Pond*'s interpretatively pregnant surrounds, triumphing in the recovery of *Shinobazu Pond*'s largely unrecognized pictorial complexity.