How the Thousand-Year Capital Created Genius Painter Ito Jakuchu and the City of Kyoto*

Tree, Flowers, Birds and Animals, pair of six-panel folding screens, color on paper, H137.5×W355.6cm (pair of right, above in this page), 137.5×366.2cm (left, below in this page), now in the collection of Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art.

Note: Special Exhibition "NO KYOTO, NO JAKUCHU," November 22 to December 4, 2016 at the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art

Sugaya Atsuo, freelance writer

The remarkable painter Ito Jakuchu was born in Shotoku 6 (1716), and was the eldest son of a Kyoto greengrocery wholesale store. The house in which he was born was located in the present-day Nishiki food market, where a line of shops now runs along the main street.

“When we consider Jakuchu’s work as a painter, the fact that he was born in eighteenth-century Kyoto has a special significance,” says art historian Kano Hiroyuki, the leading expert on Ito Jakuchu. When Jakuchu lived, over 100 years had passed since Tokugawa set up his shogunate in Edo [former name for
Tokyo. The Emperor still had his palace in Kyoto but the city was no longer the center of political power. The people of Kyoto had an important issue to consider: what kind of city to build for the future.

Meanwhile among aspects of Kyoto culture, the city’s thriving crafts were attracting attention.

“Ogata Korin, who brought the Rinpa school of decorative art to perfection during the early Edo period (1603–1867), was the son of a Kyoto dry goods merchant,” says Kano. “Originally, painting and crafts were very closely connected in Kyoto.”

Jakuchu also had traditional Nishijin brocade merchants among his close associates. “We can see influences from that environment in Jakuchu’s designs,” points out Kano.

A prime example is the *masume-gaki* (grid painting) technique by which he depicted scenes with small colored squares. We can guess at a number of sources of inspiration, but “it is almost certain that he referred to the patterns used to make Nishijin brocade,” says Kano.

**Freedom of Spirit from Zen Monks**

Looking at the intellectual aspects of Jakuchu’s work, there is a deep connection with the Obaku school of Zen Buddhism, which was established by Ingen, a respected priest from seventeenth-century Ming China. Obaku monks brought the latest written works from China to Japan. After the Ming Dynasty on the continent fell, however, the new Qing Dynasty built their nation and the monks were no longer able to return home. The shogunate assigned them land in Uji on the outskirts of Kyoto and they lived there.

“Jakuchu had friendly relations with the Obaku monks. It is significant that he had direct contact with the latest and most refined elements of Chinese culture,” says Kano.

The learned men of Ming China, such as the Obaku monks, valued freedom of the spirit. They are said to have expressed that freedom with the Chinese characters *ki* (strangeness) and *kyo* (madness). This is exactly the same state of mind that Jakuchu sought to reach via his paintings.

What about the Kyoto in which Jakuchu lived? Kano states, “It was an age when culture was most valued, and the arts shined.”

In eighteenth-century Kyoto a spirit of freedom developed that was not possible for Edo, which lay in the shadow of the Shogun’s castle. Precisely because of these influences, the innovative artist we know as Jakuchu was able to fully demonstrate his creativity.

**Using the Very Best Materials and Copies of Temple Treasures to Perfect his Sense of Color**

Probably the most alluring feature of Jakuchu’s works is the gorgeous coloring of the paintings.

It is well known that, in order to achieve vibrant colors, Jakuchu used expensive painting materials. It is surmised that he ordered the purest and highest quality paints from China via Nagasaki, which was Japan’s sole port for foreign trade at the time. Most of his silk canvas and drawing paper was also the very best made in China.

As Kano explains: “Kyoto greengrocery wholesale stores were large stores, equivalent to today’s general trading companies.” Jakuchu didn’t need to worry about money. He didn’t drink, enjoy entertainment, or have any hobbies other than painting. He was prepared to spend his personal wealth
freely for the purposes of painting great works. In a sense we can call him the ultimate hobbyist.”

Of course, there is no point in having the best painting materials if you don’t have the technique to use them. Jakuchu learned his painting technique almost all by himself. Particularly when he was young, he learned from the technique of painters belonging to the orthodox Kano school. But he also learned much from copies of Chinese and Buddhist paintings belonging to Kyoto temples. According to records, he studied thousands of paintings. But could he really have consulted so many? As an unknown painter he couldn’t have asked to view precious temple treasures, but no doubt this is where his status as the owner of a greengrocery wholesale store came to his aid.

In His 50s: Saving the Nishiki Market from Crisis

After a thorough training in the fundamental elements of painting, now it was time for Jakuchu to explore his own creativity. His aim was to observe the real things of the world, and to portray their shinki (spirit). This shinki might even be described as their life force. To this end it’s said that he released tens of chickens into his garden to paint. Then at the age of 40 he passed the family business over to his brother, and devoted himself single-mindedly to his painting.

Animals and plants that one wouldn’t normally see in Kyoto also feature in Jakuchu’s works. Where he could, he seems to have ordered these from traders in rare foreign items. For example, there is the painting “Cockatoo on Pine Tree.” The appearance of the cockatoos in the tree with their twisted bodies would have been difficult to create using ancient paintings, and it seems to have been drawn from life.

From facts such as these, we can see that Jakuchu had a sociable side to his character. During his 50s, when the vegetable market on Nishiki-dori faced having its license to trade taken away, Jakuchu volunteered to act as a negotiator and solved the problem. Jakuchu was even a hero as the savior of the market.

“Jakuchu wasn’t someone who turned their back on society and lived only through their pastime,” says Kano. “He continued his creative activities while engaging with everyday life. The more I learn about that, the more surprised I am by the breadth of his creativity.”
Thanks to Jakuchū’s enormous natural talent, his miraculous paintings make a deep impression on people even today. But we cannot overlook how contact with the latest Kyoto culture inspired the diverse range of techniques he used.

Jakuchū was also a master of ink wash painting. In his 40s, not long after he devoted himself fully to painting, Jakuchū was charged with a major work: a series of ink wash murals in the ōjūn (great study) of the famous Rokuon-ji temple (better known as Kinkaku-ji). This was thanks to the relationship Jakuchū had with a Zen priest at the temple, Daiten Kenjo. But his skill as a painter had surely been recognized.

Imbued with a deep spirituality, the Rokuon-ji works were well suited to a Zen temple. But Jakuchū’s ink wash paintings are notable for the large number of giga comic illustrations, such as the “Wrestling of Frog and Pufferfish.” The local men of business and the monks who viewed them seemed to have a playfulness to match their seriousness that allowed them to enjoy the paintings (see the giga of “Vegetable Nirvana”).

Meanwhile, the eighteenth century saw a craze for woodblock prints across Japan, and Jakuchū made numerous efforts in the medium. One that deserves special mention is the unusual takuhanga (rubbed prints) method. In this woodblock print method, the carved parts of the woodblock are left white. In China it was mainly used to create copies of calligraphy. Jakuchū used the method for his art instead, producing finely wrought works such as “Imperial River Voyage.”

“Jakuchū disliked doing the same things as other people,” says Kano. “He was a person who wanted to do a different thing every day.”

As a result, Jakuchū has left as a hugely varied body of work that is almost impossible to believe one man could produce himself.

**Note:** Special exhibition: “NO KYOTO, NO JAKUCHU”
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