

# Art and Power in Tokugawa Japan: The Kano School of Painting

Background Notes

*Dr Meri Arichi - 15 Oct 2014*



***Audience Hall of the Nijo Castle, Kyoto, 1624 - 26,***  
Painting by **Kano Tanyu and his studio**, Ink, colour and gold  
on paper



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## **Historical background**

The Kano School was a hereditary group of professional painters who continuously produced the sumptuous large scale paintings for the rulers of Japan from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their dynamic style of paintings appealed to the Shoguns and warriors who built many magnificent castles and palaces to project the image of authority, wealth, and power. The Kano School operated with a highly efficient studio system, and dominated the artistic scenes by creating a style that came to be recognized as the orthodox style in the Edo period (1615 – 1868).

### **The Origin of the Kano School**

The man who is credited for the establishment of the Kano Studio in Kyoto is Kano Masanabu (1434 – 1530) who excelled in the Chinese style ink painting. Under the strong influence of Zen Buddhism during the Muromachi period (1392 – 1573), Masanobu's austere landscape painting in monochrome ink attracted the favour of Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1436 – 90) who employed him to decorate his palace in the eastern hills of Kyoto. The emphasis on the calligraphic ink brushstrokes remained a trademark of the Kano School for the next 350 years. Masanobu's son Kano Motonobu (1476 – 1559) continued to secure the official commissions, further consolidating the School's reputation as the painters in residence to the Shogunate. His style of painting became less austere than his father's, as he began to incorporate colours in his painting. Motonobu was a versatile artist who took on wide range of commissions, from the

secular landscape, the theme of birds and flowers, to the Buddhist subject matter, and his studio flourished under the patronage of the court and the influential temples as well as the Shogunate.



Detail from “***Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons***” by Kano Motonobu, 1513, Daisen-in Temple, Kyoto, Ink and colour on paper

## **Kano Eitoku (1543 – 90)**

Motonobu's grandson Kano Eitoku is considered to be the greatest painter of the Momoyama period (1573 – 1615). When the war lord Oda Nobunaga (1534 – 82) eliminated the Ashikaga Shogunate in 1573 and unified Japan after a long period of wars between the provincial rulers, he built a grand castle as his head-quarter at Azuchi near Kyoto. Nobunaga commissioned Eitoku and his studio to decorate the entire complex with colourful sliding door panels on gold background. The bold and innovative paintings by Eitoku with large colourful motifs on gold became the signature style of the Kano School. Although the Azuchi Castle was destroyed after the assassination of Nobunaga in 1582, the opulent interior decoration can be imagined from Eitoku's works such as the "Chinese Lions" screen.



***Chinese Lions*** by **Kano Eitoku**, Six-fold screen, Late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ink, colour and gold foil on paper, 224 x 453 cm. Imperial Collection

## **Kano Tanyu (1602 – 74)**

Eitoku's grandson Kano Tan'yu (1602 – 74) was the most successful member of the Kano School in the Edo period when Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542 – 1616) established his government in Edo (present day Tokyo). Tan'yu's precocious talent was recognized when he was only 15 years old and he was appointed as the Shogun's painter in residence. Tan'yu developed his grandfather's energetic style further into a dignified and sophisticated style, examples of which can be seen today in the Nijo castle in Kyoto. The decorative scheme for the series of buildings in the castle was devised by Tan'yu. The most grandioso was the Great Audience Hall where the simple yet powerful image of the huge pine trees on gold background enhanced the imposing setting, and symbolized the longevity of the Tokugawa regime.



***“Pine and Eagle”*** by **Kano Tan'yu** and his studio, 1624 - 26, ink and colour on gold foil, wall painting in the Reception room of the Nijo Castle, Kyoto

## Kano Sanraku and the Kano studio in Kyoto

Although the main branch of the Kano School was relocated to Edo when Tan'yu moved his studio with many followers to be in attendance to the Shogun, an off-shoot studio of the Kano School still undertook the commissions from the Court and religious institutions in Kyoto. The head of the Kyoto studio was Kano Sanraku (1559 – 1635), not a blood relation, but one of Eitoku's talented pupils who was adopted by the family. Sanraku collaborated with Eitoku in many projects and painted in a flamboyant style similar to Eitoku's, but his style was characterized by a touch of decorative quality. His son-in-law, Kano Sansetsu (1590 – 1651) continued the Kano tradition in Kyoto, and established the reputation for the decorative Kyoto Kano style with his meticulous attention to detail.



**“Peonies”** by **Kano Sanraku**, Early 17<sup>th</sup> century,  
Sliding door panels, Ink, colour and gold on paper,  
Daikaku-ji Temple, Kyoto

## Kano studios in Edo

The Kano School continued to flourish throughout the Edo period, monopolizing the official commissions. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, there were three branches of the Kano School operating in Edo, each with a great number of painters and pupils who were organized into a strict hierarchical master-pupil relationship. In order to execute the large number of commissions and to maintain the coherent style, the Kano School placed a strong emphasis on the study of master's brushstrokes. Copying the prescribed models was prioritized above the creativity of the individuals, and consequently the Kano style became formulaic and repetitive by the end of the Edo period. The critical assessment of the Kano School in the recent scholarships has not been favourable for the lack of individuality, yet it is undeniable that the contribution of the Kano School painters to the formation of the Japanese visual culture was extensive in the Edo period.



***“Cranes, Pine, Bamboo and Plum Blossoms”***, by Kano Hisanobu, Mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Pair of six-fold screens

## Further Readings

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