

A Modern *Ukiyo-e* Painter—The Work of Tanihara Natsuko

Nakai Yasuyuki

Vice Director/Chief Curator

The National Museum of Art, Osaka

‘Art’ and ‘death’ have always maintained a close relationship with each other. Religious subjects provided one of the earliest forms of art and together with sculpture, paintings were used to capture an image of the departed or even create a likeness of the gods that rule the next world. With the advent of modern times, people began to talk of the ‘death of God’, and art’s role as a device to express fables decreased, to be replaced by Surrealism, which gave new meaning to artworks and started a new trend to reveal the world that exists in the subconscious. These artworks, which attempt to express something that is invisible to the eye, serve to constantly rein in the progressive tendencies that are driven by the intellectual and superficial world, as represented by Formalism.

However, in Japan, we are able to discern another artistic lineage—the *ukiyo-e* school of genre paintings that is said to have been founded by Iwasa Matabe-e. Iwasa miraculously survived the massacre of his entire family, including his young mother, the year after he was born, which resulted from his father, Araki Murashige’s, rebellion against Oda Nobunaga. After the death of his family, Matabe-e became a page to Nobunaga’s son, Oda Nobukatsu, and being well-versed in all the arts, such as writing, painting, etc., he became a trusted advisor. After Nobukatsu was banished, Matabe-e moved to Kyoto as a *ronin* (masterless samurai) where he became active as a painter. At around the age of 40, he was invited to serve the *daimyō* of Fukui domain, Matsudaira Tadao, and later his younger brother, Tadamasa, living in Fukui for around 20 years and producing numerous works. It is thought that it was while he was living in Fukui that he created his greatest work, the picture scroll, ‘*Yamanaka tokiwa monogatari*’.

This work was based on a *ningyō jōruri* (puppet theater) play that was popular at the time. The main plot of this play follows Tokiwa gozen, who travels to Hiraizumi to visit her son Ushiwakamaru (later to become the hero, Yoshitsune) but is attacked and murdered in the mountains by bandits who are in turn killed in revenge by Ushiwakamaru.

Consisting of 12 scrolls and with a total length of 150 meters, this work has long been famous for the horrific depiction of Tokiwa gozen's murder. It shows a man with his hand wrapped in her hair as he stabs her with a sword, the dark red blood flowing from her soft white skin creating a shocking scene that is easily the equal of any Hollywood splatter movie. It is unlikely that Matabe-e could remember the murder of his family when he was an infant, but it is quite possible that he took the tales of the people who had witnessed it and superimposed them on the plot of the drama, adding his own emotions to the scene. It seems that this masochistic act of recreating the cruel murder of his own mother served as proof of his existence, while presenting the viewer with a frightful scene.

It may be thought that I have concentrated too much on Matabe-e, but the fact is that when I was first confronted with the work of Tanihara Natsuko I found it quite fascinating, but for some reason its dark atmosphere reminded me of the gruesome scene from Matabe-e's picture scroll. That is why I gave a rough outline of Matabe-e's career as a painter. Now however, I must explain the details of my chance encounter with Tanihara's work. Four years ago I visited 'Hanarart', a local art project in Nara Prefecture that is held in multiple venues dotted around the area. The last place I visited was the old, deserted Takiman Ryokan hotel that is situated on the approach to Hōzanji Temple in Ikoma and which had been converted into a huge exhibition space. Before I went there, I had visited the old Kawamoto building that had once served as a brothel in the castle town of Kōriyama. The memory of the dark, narrow rooms in the brothel were still fresh in my memory and dusk was fast approaching as I entered the guest rooms of the old hotel. In this way, these incidental stage effects were all in place when I first saw Tanihara's body of work. Among them was an iconic picture of a young girl who seemed to stare back at the viewer, she was wearing a loose, white garment and sitting in front of a round fire. In that quiet space, I felt that I had discovered a bottomless, spiritual darkness as I was drawn into the picture. There were numerous other works—a naked man wandering through a dark forest, a prostitute with a young girl in a dark bamboo grove, a naked girl in a dark park who was breathing fire—all of which clamored for attention. Tanihara paints all her works on a black, velvet-like material. Her choice of subjects also gives rise to a synergistic effect, expressing the complicated sentiments of the young girls clearly. Furthermore, it is easy to imagine that the images painted there are spun together from painful memories experienced by the artist. Thinking back, these works, which can almost be described as self-harming, bring to mind the horrific scene

of murder depicted in Iwasa Matabe-e ‘Yamanaka’.

To return to the subject of ‘genre paintings’, the first examples of these can be seen in the *Yūrakuzu* (Amusements in the Outdoors) works produced by the Kanō School during the Momoyama period (1568–1603), but after the Tokugawa government became firmly established and peace finally came to the country, there was a sudden increase in the number of works depicting the amusements of the ordinary people. In the scenes of young men and women enjoying themselves, such as the ‘Hikone byōbu’ folding screen, we can feel something of the ‘transient’ or ‘floating world’, which had its roots in the Buddhist-influenced ‘world weariness’ that had influenced art from the Heian period (794–1185). This style of work, which combines a feeling of ‘the helpless transience of life’ with ‘enjoying high spirits’ first appeared in the early Edo period (1603–1868) and was developed by Iwasa Matabe-e. There is no more room to go into greater detail here, so I will summarize by saying, the spirit of Iwasa Matabe-e, who established the *ukiyo-e* style genre paintings that are imbued with the shadow of ‘death’, has reappeared in the work of Tanihara Natsuko and her work demonstrates that she is progressing down this path as his true successor. It is our first encounter with Tanihara, the contemporary *ukiyo-e* artist.

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