

How do Japanese aesthetic ideals within Traditional Japanese painting inform modern landscape design?

Kyoto, Japan



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Taro Yamamoto: Coke Plum Blossoms 2004 (1560x1722mm)

<http://www.h7.dion.ne.jp/~nipponga/menu.html>

Visual artists have given us images that help us understand our relationship with each other and our environment. Representation can be a key to understanding how cultures perceive spatial aspects of the aesthetics they have created. As designers understanding cultural landscape perception we can more easily successfully synthesize objective design inputs with colloquial aesthetics.

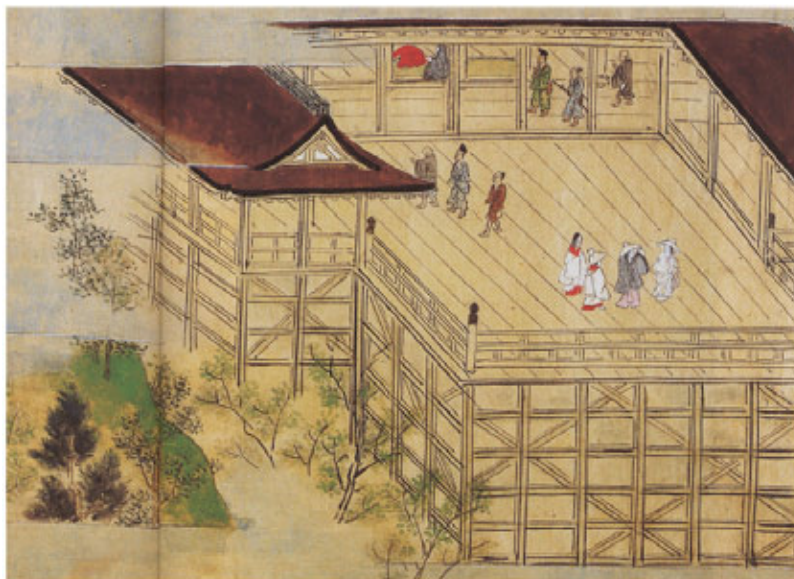
Ma shapes the fundamental Japanese understanding of space; by simple definition it measures space within time, similar to recent western theories of space-time which describes a type of three dimensional space absolutely connected with the fourth dimension time. Japanese perception of space is a series of two dimensional planes each within its own time.

A general theme in traditional Japanese painting is the ephemeral; in the above painting the plum blossoms spatially signify a relationship with the passing of time. Taro Yamamoto not only conveys this traditional idea but in juxtaposition to modern social and environmental problems.

Yamato-e or Japanese painting emerges during the Heian period (794-1185) and is recognized separate from what had previously been called kara-e or Chinese painting. Its fundamental spatial characteristics are of Chinese origin and remain present even today. The types of work that I will be focusing on range from late Muromachi period (1336-1573) and onward to late Azuchi-Momoyama period (1568-1603). Yamato-e at this time had been far enough away from kara-e and still not yet influenced enough from the West. This time period sees the most mature body of work that deviates from Western influence.

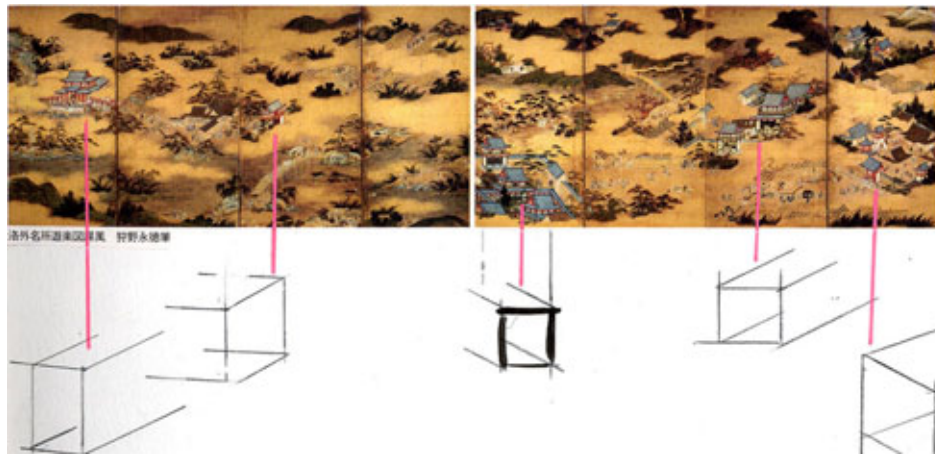


Takekawa Tale of Genji Heian period



Mitsunobu Tosa Kiyumizudera(1517)

Representing the actual-ness of objects and places wasn't the goal of most Japanese painters nor their clientele, although the idea of "likeness" or nise-e was highly regarded. Instead Japanese painters depicted subjects like, buildings and mountains from previous observations and other recollections with little care as to its likeness but rather its ability to capture the character and spirit of the object. Kiyumizudera on the left has no diagonal structural supports also the proportions of the building are way off but the idea is delivered. Other logistic sacrifices were made to maintain a control over what was to be shown, such as manipulating adjacent spaces around each other in such a way to reveal more and more of the picture, this could involve tilting and twisting separate but level planes. Although tokaku shazo or "same angle illustration" creates a consistent parallel line grid it technically skews and stretches spaces along their receding lines, not only based on practical measurements but to compensate for the idea that perspective even exists.



Tokaku shazo reveals more spaces, and spaces that aren't shown are implied; this technique places the viewer within the piece, no longer is the viewer expected to see as the artist intends them to see, so strictly, but now there is a great deal of choice as to where to begin and proceed to look. The viewer commands an ominous power in a way, like a narrator or in this case a shogun or the machishu (townspeople). The idea in Japan was that tokaku shazo was a more objective approach to representation, which was desired, it is never noted that the Japanese knew of perspective, although once they started seeing western art they used it in combination with tokaku shazo almost immediately.



Raphael: The School of Athens 1507

Tokaku shazo isn't like most paraline drawings that usually choose a diagonal view much like the typical 2 point perspective view just without perspective, Plan Oblique paralines are most similar to tokaku shazo, where the front of façade of the buildings or space is shown straight on, and it recedes' around a 45 degree angle or sharper, the sharper this angle becomes the more warping and skewing of reality happens. The cube in plan view as this angle gets more acute becomes a longer parallelogram. One might notice that many Japanese paintings render 90 degree angle below 30 degrees. This leaves inaccurate depictions of even the simplest of spaces, artists will end up compensating for this unusual form or representation by making guesses as to how spaces interact, converge, and recede. Although the clear advantage of this technique is its ability to show or imply a greater distance or show more in a smaller space.



Hiroshige edo period



Sanjo Ohashi eastern view toward Higashiyama

Rakuchu rakugai-zu literally “views within and around the capital” is a genre of painting which depicts Kyoto in a comprehensive map like vividly using tokaku shazo. The distinction between within and around is quite literal; at the time that rakuchu rakugai appeared Toyotomi Hideyoshi constructed an earthen wall that separated the original grid planned city from its suburbs, this intern created a limited number of gates around Kyoto. These gates had a large impact on settlement and activity in and around Kyoto. Sanjo Ohashi or Sanjo Bridge is the main gateway from the Tokaido route from Tokyo. Sanjo Bridge crosses the Kamogawa, or wild duck river. The Kamogawa is just as central to the many different rakuchu rakugai-zu as it once was, and still is, to the life of the city along with the many bridges south of it including Shijo and Gojo Ohashi.



Iwasa Matabei: 1614. Fanaki Rakuchu Rakugai-zu detail Shijo Ohashi(bridge)

One of the more famous and more comprehensive rakuchu rakugai paintings is The Uesugi Version attributed to the infamous Kano Eitoku and was painted shortly before 1574. It is comprised of two large byobu or screens, the one on the right depicting Shimo-kyo (south Kyoto) and Higashiyama (east Kyoto); and on the left Nishiyama (north Kyoto) and Higashiyama. The right screen depicts summer and spring while the left depicts winter and autumn, they appear in counterclockwise formation. The painting is thought to have been painted at Sokokuji, yet today there is no public access to the small pagoda and larger buildings may be blocking most view anyways.

If we think about the landscape as space between architecture, landscape paintings such as the Uesugi reveals very little singular landscape which is often the concern of many western paintings; that is to frame a particular view. Un-en or “cloud smoke”, the bold golden or hazy white clouds that covers most of the painting are tools to manipulate and imply space. They simultaneously imply an over head and ground plane. They relate heavily to Ma in this sense, even their relationship as being between places of interest. Also clouds in their natural state were seen as art their movement and concealment of mountains is still an extant theme in many forms of Asian painting. This way of interpreting space excited the aristocracy of its day and ironically was some of the first and only patronized work that included secular, religious and court-life themes. Rakuchu Rakuga-zu’s popularity also implies that people understood this perspective and highly related to it. In the west it is rare for one picture plane to contain more than one period of time and could be quite confusing to a broad audience.



Kano Eitoku: Uesugi Rakuchū Rakugai zu 1574



Kyoto Nishiyama to Shima-kyo as seen from Arashiyama



Akira Yamaguchi: One Hundred scenes of Osaka Trams.2003

Supposedly the Japanese language refrains from having accent, or intonation. When listening to Mitsuru, our host, and a friend of his converse for about an hour I noticed quite a bit of intonation, maybe because they both speak very good English or maybe Kyoto has more accent, a.k.a. Kansai dialect. Our friend from Tokyo said that in order for us to understand Japanese words, he accents the syllables, he mentioned how this was unusual and that if a Japanese person heard him it would be quite weird.

This idea of intonation in language is paralleled in painting. Much of Japanese painting implies depth and texture with a single tone of color. The use of tone is often separate from what may be considered more physical objects, for example clouds and sky are often but not always represented with tone unlike more tangible objects in the landscape that are often outlined and colored a solid color.

Akira Yamaguchi paints what he believes to be the difference in such perception of tone and depth in the following painting.

Although art as a global idea had most recently been dominated by western philosophy and mediums the Japanese have maintained their affinity for the brush and ink known as sumi as well as many Japanese pigments. Nearly every street has a high presence of calligraphy, the use of sumi-e in illustration or the shops that supply the materials themselves. This isn't just for effect but also for function, with many characters, or kanji, fonts become redundant and seldom, or very expensive. Calligraphy in the sense of the language is inseparable keeping brushes and ink close to not only artists but the vast literate population.

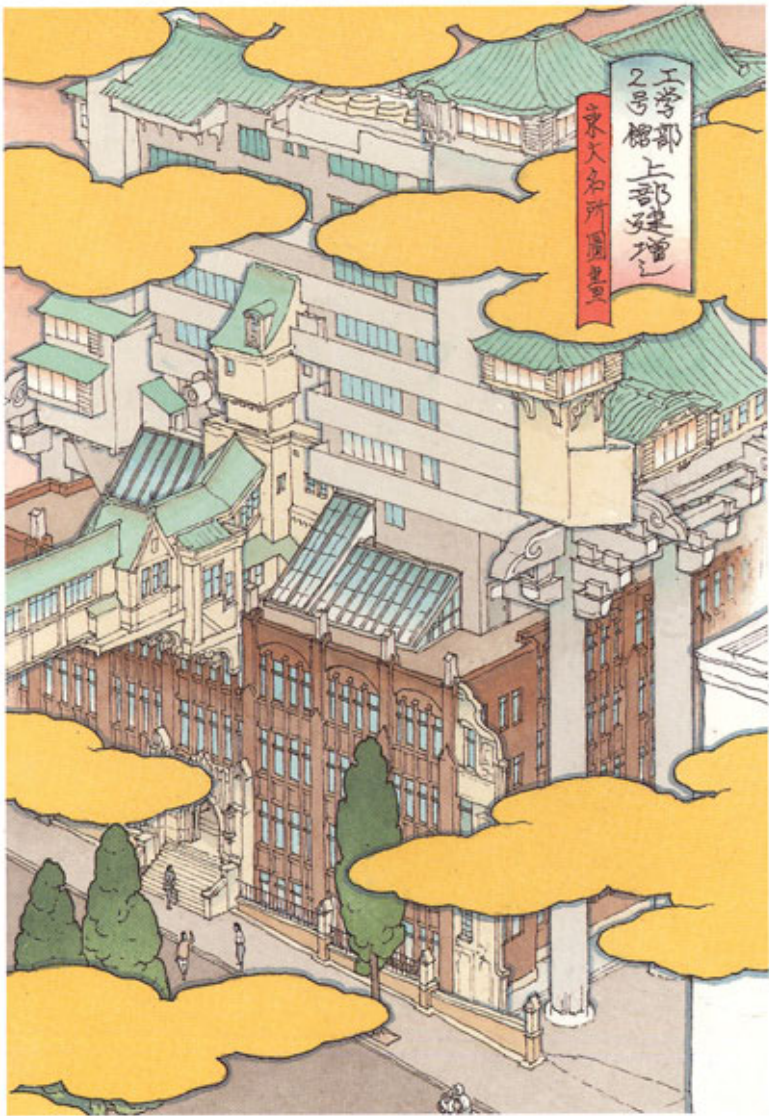
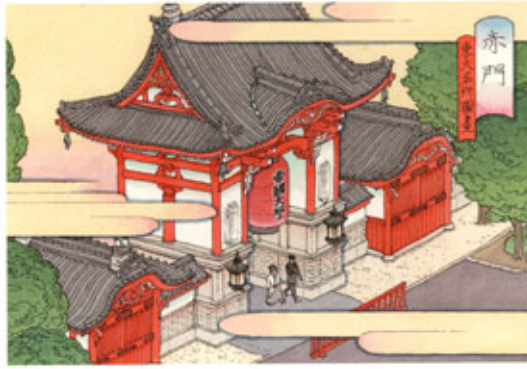
Modern and tradition are constantly side by side in Japan, even in these brush and ink shops. Now self-inking nylon bristled brushes are available, packaged like toothbrushes, and adjacent to traditional bamboo horse bristled brushes and ink blocks. These mechanical

brushes allow for continuous painting yet the consistency of the nylon bristles in both ink amount and line weight leave most work less dynamic than traditional brushes. It's much like comparing graphite to Bic pens.

In most classical western art the appearance of straight line is accompanied by tones, and rarely appears with consistent line weight if at all. Japanese painting however relies on the straight line singularly with great success in creating space. One straight line can imply a vast number of things with little confusion. In a way the straight line is another objective tool in itself much like tokaku shazo.

When using a brush it becomes quite difficult to create consistently straight lines. The Japanese recognized this and often used rulers but maintained their ability to create a straight line without one. The appearance of straight lines through history becomes more plentiful as time progressed, in early Chinese sumi-e paintings architectural lines don't even necessarily appear to be ruler straight like lines. In Akira Yamaguchi's work, Heisei period the presence of straight lines is so plentiful that he begins to change his media to accommodate the modern landscape.





Artists like Akira Yamaguchi confronts the way in which we perceive modernity and tradition, fantasy and reality.

Yamaguchi did a series of illustrations in and around Tokyo University in the same sense as Hiroshige's 55 stations of Tokaido or Hokusai's 36 views of Mount Fuji. Yamaguchi's exaggerations and fantastic interpretations of ordinary things is right on point with Japanese representation yet taken to a science fiction level.

The above painting is titled after this exact gate which is the main entry gate to Tokyo University. As you can see there is a great exaggeration, maybe westerners would see little difference. Yamaguchi wants to amplify reality, to capture the essence of things it's just that the essence of things today are very different. Artists living in Kyoto in 1500 were surrounded by people, forests and farmlands, today in Tokyo the biggest city in the world you're surrounded by an intense amount of technology.

Above Right: Todai meishozue (An Unconventional Tour of the University of Tokyo Campus): Akamon (Red Gate) 2006

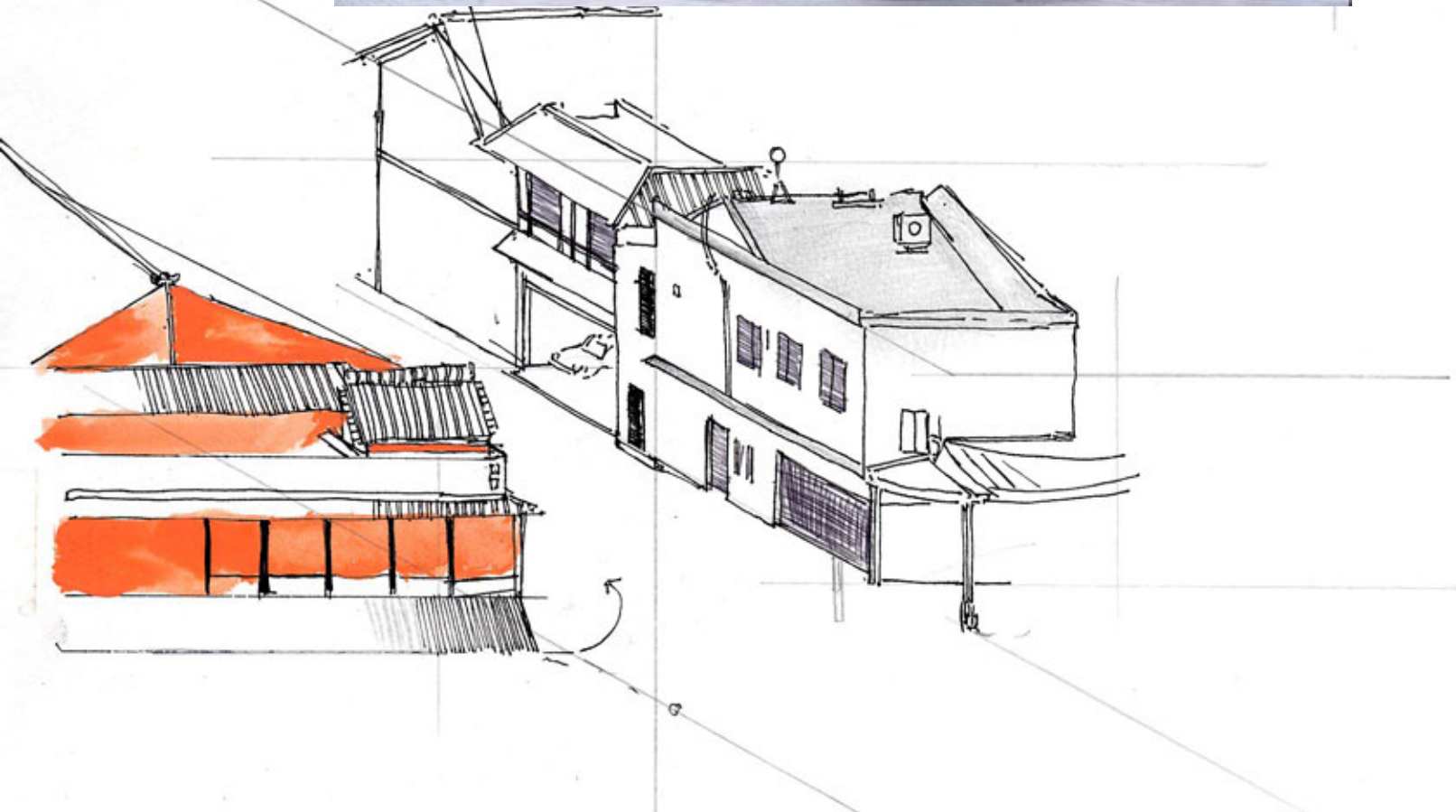
Below: "Popping the Top" of faculty of engineering Building two. 2006

Devising Representational Emulation

To obtain an objective view like ones seen in many rakuchu rakugai one must move all around the object. This “objective” view allows the viewer to understand the real relationship of the space stripped of perspective. It is literally like unfolding the planes of an object like a box, with all sides flattened and seeing all six at one time or separate from each other a more Japanese understanding of space like tokaku shazo can be approached. Without having access to the site, aerial photos and extensive photo collections representing the space becomes superficial Japanese artists doing rakuchu rakugai and other similar works must have had an intimate relationship with the landscapes, constantly traveling and observing around kyoto during their painting sessions.

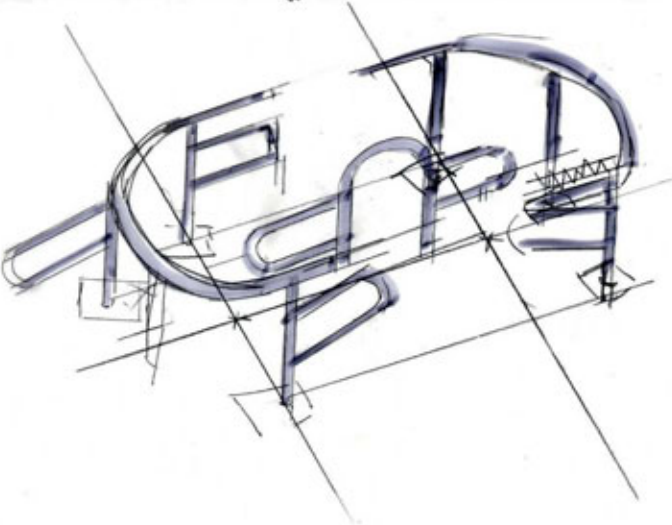


Gion: Hanamikoji & Shijo Dori

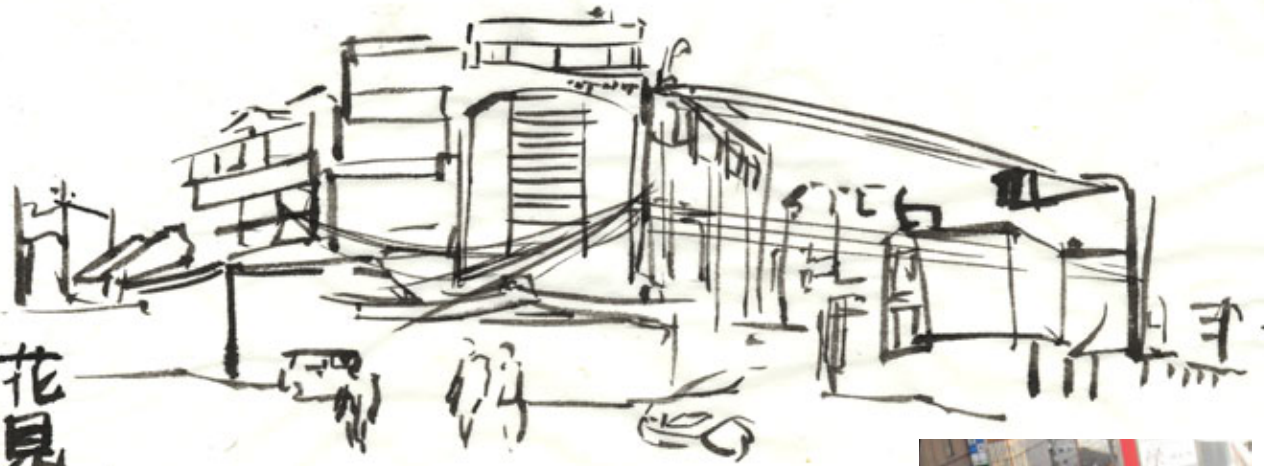


Removing perspective on site.

Where as Japanese painters simply did what they did I find it quite difficult to draw without perspective, its habit. Even in drawing and painting paralines for these paintings I was challenged to change my own understanding of space. The sumi-e drawings on the right are of a device common in the Japanese landscape, I don't think it has a name but its purpose is to keep bikes out of certain areas, especially mopeds and motorcycles, which are very common. For this approach didn't use a plan view, I was trying to work with the many angles of the device to make it seem as if it could appear stylistically Japanese. The first thing I noticed after looking so much at Japanese painting is that odd angles and diagonals just don't exist in much. What may be truer is that they didn't exist much in the traditional landscape or the complexity of them was overlooked. Today it seems difficult to find a perpendicular landscape. With the increasing complexity of spaces the Yamato-e aesthetic also evolved but with total dependence on perspective until work like Yamaguchi Akira can we really get a handle on how these spaces might have been represented or thought about.



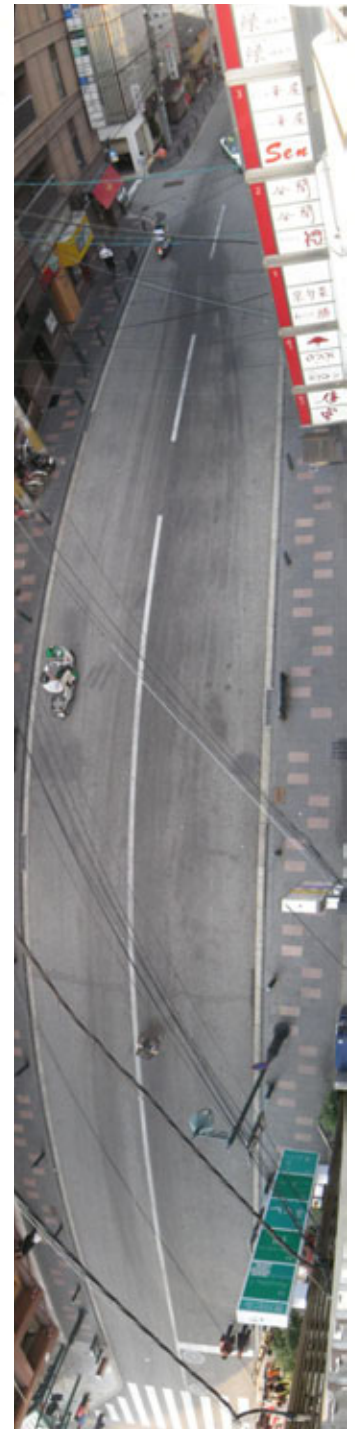
花見小路

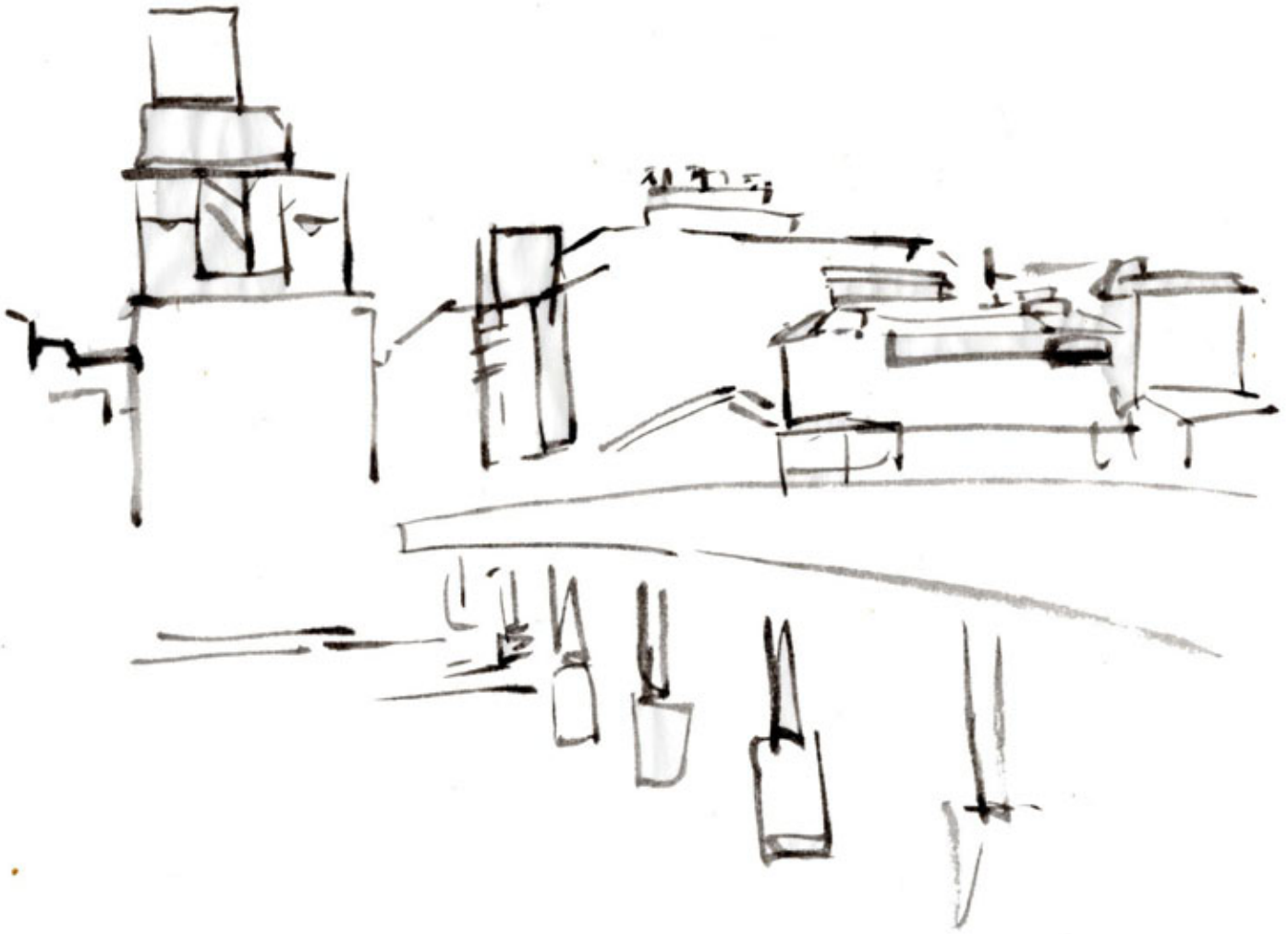


There are areas of Kyoto where tourists especially flock, Hanamikoji is one of the few that isn't related to a temple or shrine. People come to Hanamikoji because it's the neighborhood of geisha. Geiko or student geisha's scurry through these alleys ways always with a tourist on their tale.

Where Hanamikoji, a north south road, divided by Shijo it makes a drastic transition. To the south of shijo is the geisha block, with exclusively more traditional architecture and the stunning absence of powerlines. This .2 mile strip has the most stringent zone ordinances in all of urban Kyoto, but cross Shijo north and this all instantly changes the most dense power line activity and instead of geishas dancing around men in suits stand outside brightly lit hallways with photos of young women posted all over asking you "you want sex". Prostitution is illegal although there are many loopholes but what the business really is, is an opportunity to talk to a man or woman about anything that you might fancy, it costs about 60 USD an hour.

Shijo is "the tracks" but its hard to differentiate which is the wrong side, the southern more traditional side seems pretentious and superficial while the northern section is real in a business and functional sense.

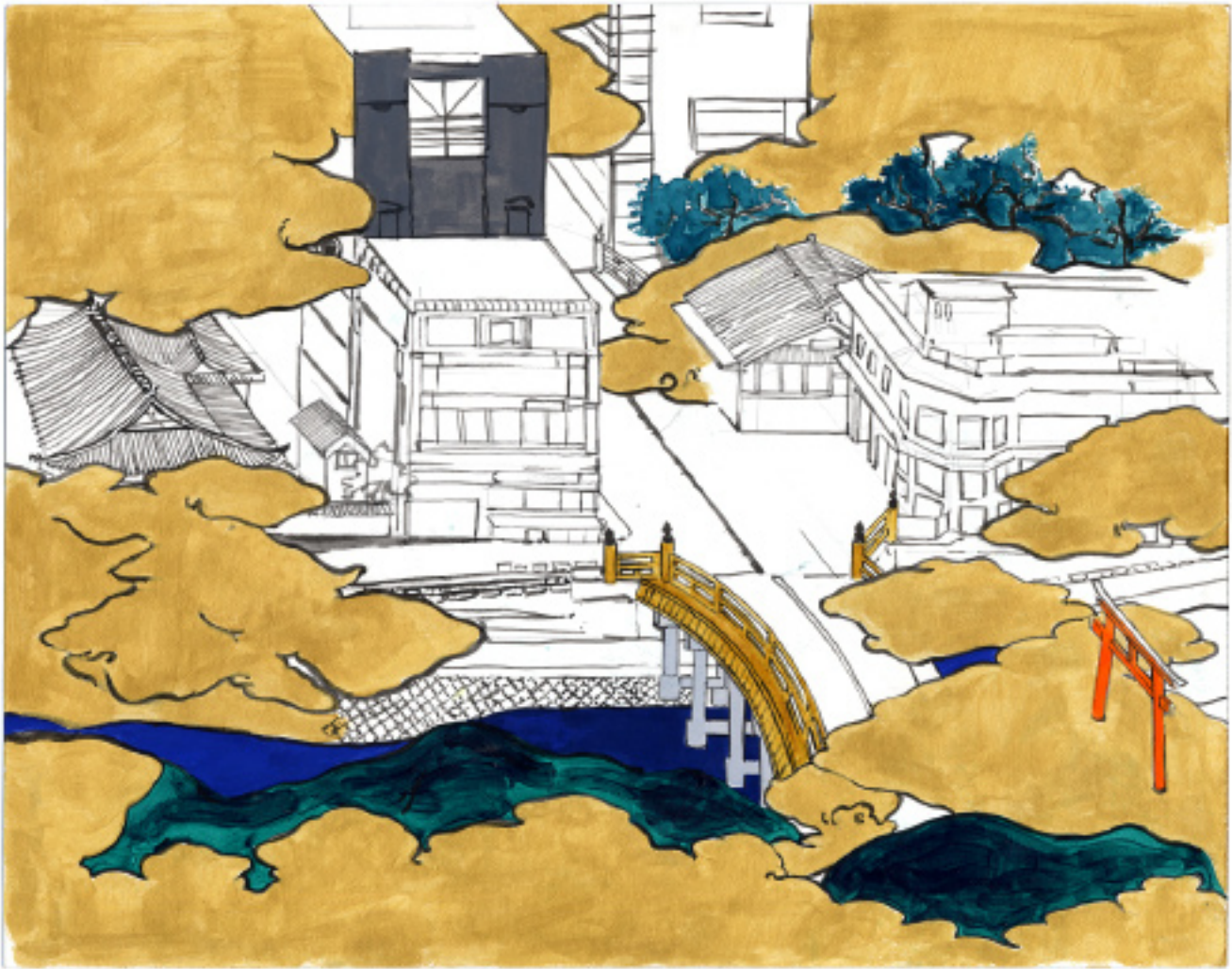




Sanjo Ohashi was the ending of the Tokaido route which linked Kyoto with Tokyo. Almost every famous artist has commented in some way on Sanjo Ohashi. Today it acts in a similar way as a gateway in terms of transportation, mainly by train. Shopping districts and restaurants flank the west bank of Kamogawa that draw a young crowd keeping the bridge always busy. The banks of Kamogawa are in terms of place the real attraction. In season they are always bustling with people well into the early morning. Sanjo Ohashi is a haven for the youth of Kansai and come as far as Osaka. While Sanjo attracts a younger audience, the Shijo Bridge a quarter mile south has an older user group, possibly affiliated with the department stores adjacent to the bridge, or the presence of Pontocho, a street with more traditional high end restaurants.



Hiroshige: 55 stations of the Tokaido: Sanjo Ohashi



This is my interpretation of the Sanjo bridge area through the lens of rakuchu rakugai as directed by tokaku shazo and in particular the Uesugi Screen done by Kano Eitoku.

In comparison to The uesugi screen I think its quite apparant first of all how intamate Eitoku was with Kyoto, a mere four months forms only a small cognitive map.





Gion is as mentioned before is an edge of highly relative micro cultures and “time”. In this representational emulation it’s apparent that this transition exists. It is a stark and bitter truth about the way we live and how culture evolves.

This hybridization of Japanese spatial attributes with my own style is in many ways surreal. Subconsciously I have added in a scale that seems more American, I am clearly challenged with this perception of space and as Kano Eitoku demonstrates that it takes time to depict such a range of place oriented things.



Western paintings often rely on an outline or sketch similar to the concept surrounding blueprints, the main idea and even details can be expressed in one simple map like representation, this usually guides the process until its final stages. However Japanese painting philosophy simply begins, often with no immediate reference at all, either from life or sketches. This doesn't mean that Japanese painters lacked intent to do a specific thing, what it means is that Japanese painters conjured their ideas with a less ridged mindset. The process from the onset is seen as the art.

Traditional Japanese garden design is treated in the same sense; many garden designers acknowledge their life time commitment to an ever changing space such as a garden. Being in the space and listening to what the rocks say so to speak is in this sense far more practical in a garden rather than a strict blueprint.

In landscape design practice it seems that many blueprints assign a characteristic or aesthetic to any given landscape, the blueprint in most design is a frozen moment in time and even seen as such to landscape designers.

Attaching and relying on paper rather than people disables designs ability to change instead blueprints dictate what happens on site and can become a crutch. Most professional design goes through many trials and errors the piece of paper can rarely show the big picture or any four dimensional space, it's the people and process that make the actual site. Landscape design in general attracts middle men. Japanese garden designers and painters never distanced themselves from the physical constructs of their work.

How we understand what we see and express will always change, but it seems the processes in which traditional cultures functioned was more sustainable than current lifestyles. In central New York it would seem beneficial to learn about native habitation of the region but we opt not to even recognize the importance of Native American culture.

Design can have a profound effect on the way people see. It can be quite telling of how and what people choose to see, just like each country has their own interpretation of the sound of a rooster.

The eye always chooses what to see; it magnifies and blocks out other areas, either by literally focusing or some other psychological process. Vision is our chief sense of scale, time, light, and maybe the most important in a design sense not only as designers but as partakers in landscape. That interpretation can be guided, but maybe only in a homogenized culture, understanding as an outsider becomes both advantage and disadvantage.

In an increasingly globalized world design work presents it self from more and more foreign countries. Understanding culture and design through traditional arts and philosophy can help us come closer to educating and designing for people in a regional sense. And because traditional arts are very accessible images which tell narratives that can help define a culture, representation in art may be the one international language we can use to understand each other.