

## Gassaku, Japanese co-productions

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In Japan the making of collective paintings, called *gassaku*, is an interesting phenomenon. In the West the only collective paintings we are familiar with are the studio works of certain very successful masters like Rembrandt and Rubens who had a large number of students. Well-taught students would paint sections of large canvases; the master would sign the finished work. It would be astounding to find these works signed by the students as well as the master, but not in Japan.



A *gassaku* is a collaborative work that can take many forms. It can be a single hanging scroll painting, a hand scroll, an album or even a screen executed by two or more artists. Sometimes they are painted on commission, but always for the fun of it. In this short article I will limit my discussion to the *sekiga*, the party scroll.

When looking at a *gassaku* you feel like an intruder peeking in to catch a glimpse of a group doing something intimate. It is like the feeling you may have when looking at a personal album of photographs, which is often one of pleasure. People who are together having fun spread joy to others.

**Fig. 1.**  
**Murase Taiotsu (1804-1881): *Jinsei Ichiraku*, Human life is one party**  
**Nagoya, 1870s, Sumi on paper, 135 x 64,5 cms.**

## **Gassaku and the *bunjin* tradition.**

*Bunjin* were scholars who studied and were deeply committed to Chinese artistic values and chose to confine their artistic and literary life to amateur status in accordance with Chinese literati practice. Some of the *bunjin* really did live as amateurs, but most only pretended to do so. This *bunjin* lifestyle had become an ideal from the early 18th century. Japanese were forbidden to travel to China throughout nearly the whole of the Edo period. Instead Chinese came to Japan in large numbers in this period of national 'closure' allowing interested Japanese a small window into Chinese cultural practice.



Social events like New Year parties, or parties organized by patrons, as well as the cultural and literary gatherings, memorial services and exhibitions all provided good opportunities for the *bunjin* to affirm their shared ideals and to exchange ideas and knowledge and obviously paintings and calligraphy. Many *bunjin* artists travelled around the country (*bunjin bokkaku*) to meet their fellow *bunjin*, exchanging works of art for hospitality. They also exchanged tokens of friendship at these visits and in a number of cases participated in the production of *gassaku*.

Sometimes pragmatic reasons might be the inducement for making a *gassaku*. The story goes that when the famous painter Rosetsu and his equally famous Confucianist friend Kien were carousing in one of the pleasure quarters of Kyoto, they decided that Rosetsu would paint a scroll on which Kien would add an inscription knowing that such a joint work would fetch a higher price than their separate works. More money meant that their night of revels could last longer<sup>1</sup>.

**Fig. 2**  
**Nagazawa Rosetsu (1754-1799) & Minagawa Kien (1734-1807): Turtle and bamboo, wagging your tail in puddle of mud**  
**Kyoto, c.1895, Sumi & some beige on paper,**  
**121,5 x 27,9 cms.**



Economic growth (for some) in Japan in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century led to the formation of some interesting groups of artists and connoisseurs who came from both the merchant and samurai classes. In Edo Ota Nampo (1749-1823) became the central figure of such a group. It included samurai and wealthy merchants, actors and geisha, and musicians and artists. A striking detail is that adherents to many different schools of painting came together in these groups: ukiyo-e artists, *bunjin* of the Nanga school, and a little later members of the neo-Rimpa school. Members of competing poetry clubs also took part. The party scroll, *sekiga*, produced at gatherings of these individuals mirror this interesting mix of cultural life.

Minagawa Kien (1734-1807) also attracted many people around him in the Kansai region (basically Kyoto and Osaka). This group was at least as wide, but the “members” taking part in *gassaku* were less mixed and were mainly artists from the Maruyama-Shijō school. While Nampo in Edo tended to organize parties, Kien organized exhibitions. After Kien’s death this Maruyama-Shijō and Kishi group turned more and more into itself. The joint works of these painting schools after this period do not include many contributions from the group of *bunjin* who gathered around the scholarly Confucianist Rai Sanyō (1780-1832), who was more or less the successor of Kien.

**fig. 3**  
**Kinoshita Ōjū (1777-1815) & Maruyama Ōshin (1790-1838):**  
**Pine at the beach under full moon**  
**Kyoto, 1815, or earlier. Sumi and light colours on paper, 105,5 x 28,7 cms.**



### **Sekiga, or party scroll**

The *sekiga* might be a collection of miscellaneous little paintings on one sheet, *harimaze*. Sometimes each image is divided by lines from the others, and sometimes pasted together as a collage. They can be mounted as a hanging painting (*kakejiku*). The fragmentary little paintings are often of subjects for which the painters were well known. The paintings can be a single subject or a complete scene in which the different artists compose individual parts (*fig. 3, fig. 4 & fig. 8*).

*Sekiga* are rarely pleasing aesthetically because there is often an imbalance between the contributions of the various artists and occasionally a feeling of clutter. But they are interesting and of a great documentary value. They provide an insight into who knew whom. The order in which the artists contributed to the painting may reflect their relative importance or seniority, although age and rank were often linked. At the top, or in the centre you will find the individual considered most important, and moving towards the bottom or the edges are the lesser and/or the younger contributors.

When a calligraphic inscription (*san*) is present, it is usually placed at the top of the picture. The simple reason for that is that calligraphy is considered more important than painting.

**fig. 4**  
**Azuma Tôyô (1755-1839) &**  
**Matsumura Keibun (1779-1843):**  
**Distant view on Mount Fuji and the**  
**wedged rocks at Futami no ura**  
**Kyoto, c. 1800. Sumi on paper, 59,6 x**  
**12,8 cms.**



In *gassaku* by a teacher and his pupil, usually the teacher does the “simpler” subject as an indication of his approval of the student’s work. In this painting by Ōshin and Ōjū the tortured pine on the beach has been painted by the young Ōshin. As approval the teacher in this case his father added the moon looking over the edge of a cloud. A single brush stroke less than writing down his own name (*fig. 3*).

The other *gassaku* of the married rocks with Mount Fuji in the distance by Tōyō and Keibun has the same idea. Mount Fuji is the “simple” subject as the rocks and the waves is the more complicated part. As this is a very early painting by Keibun it might suggest a so far unknown teacher-pupil relationship with Tōyō (*fig. 4*).

Interpreting is playing, puzzling asks for answers. These people had fun making *gassaku* as some of the titles suggest. It is also fun looking at and reading *gassaku*, but maybe that’s just for an enthusiast like me.

**fig. 5**  
**Gassaku by 4 artists from Edo**  
1820s. Sumi and colours on paper, 99,2 x 28,5 cms.

Tani Bunchō (1763-1840): bat  
Onishi Keisai (1773-1829): bat  
Haruki Nanko (1759-1839): stag  
Haruki Nammei (1795-1878): mushrooms

The *gassaku* with 2 bats, the stag and fungus (*fig. 5*), was produced in the 1820s. Bunchô was a famous artist, he is at the top. Keisai who was also well known, is just below Bunchô. In the West Keisai is more or less forgotten. His son Onishi Chinnen (1792-1851) has drawn more attention, mainly because of Jack Hillier. Hillier spent half a chapter on Chinnen and not a word on Keisai in his book "The uninhibited brush", the earliest and most important book on Maruyama-Shijô painting. Such changes of vision are fun to witness when looking at a painting like this. They demonstrate that art history can easily be influenced by individual scholars' opinions and accidents such as the types of material available to them for study. (It may very well be possible that Hillier never saw a work by Keisai, or that he did not like what he saw.)<sup>2</sup>

Although Nanko is placed third he moved up the ladder fast in the 1830s to become Bunchô's equal<sup>3</sup>. It had taken Nanko some time to gain recognition in Edo because he spent many years travelling to study Southern Chinese painting. But in the course of his travels he gained many students. When he returned to Edo he introduced this Southern painting style where all Nanga painters in Edo still worked in the Northern style. His son Nammei, still very young at the time this *gassaku* was produced, is placed at the bottom.

### Kyoto and Osaka *gassaku* are harder to interpret



**fig. 6**  
**Gassaku by 6 artists from Kyoto:**  
 1813, or earlier. Sumi and some colours on paper, 38,3 x 44,1 cms.

**Kinoshita Ôju (1777-1815):**  
 coronation  
**Nishimura Nantei (1775-1834):** mouse  
**Haramitsu (act. 1770s -1826):**  
 aubergines  
**Gan Ku (1749-1838):** Fuji and Miho beach  
**Matsumura Keibun (1779-1843):** peony  
**Yoshimura Kôkei (1769-1836):** wagtail

The painters in Kyoto and Osaka were in a sense much more each other's equals. There are some slight differences because of their backgrounds. In the Kyoto *gassaku* (fig. 6) Gan Ku is the most famous contributor and therefore in centre. The relative ranking of the others is harder to define.



In the Osaka *gassaku* (fig. 7) painted in the 1810s at a special guesthouse in Osaka, Shunkin occupies the central position but Chikusô, who is the oldest contributor, is at the top. Tetsuzan appears below him. This makes the relative ranking of these artists difficult to ascertain.

fig. 7

**Gassaku by 5 artists from Osaka:**  
1810s. Colours on silk, 93,5 x 30,8 cms.

Morikawa Chikusô, (1763-1830): bamboo  
Mori Tetsuzan (1775-1841): gourd  
Yamanaka Shônen (-1819): camellia  
Uragami Shunkin (1779-1846): landscape  
Nakayama Kôin (1765-1849): cicada

'The four greybeards of Mt Gao' (*fig. 8*) dates from 1813 or slightly earlier. It is a remarkable painting. The poet Sodô contributed the inscription, which as we would expect, is placed at the top of the work. But the relative ranking of these artists is difficult to determine. Bumpô (if born 1779) the youngest of the four the painters is at the top, the oldest Kôkei, ten years Bumpô's senior (?) at the bottom. Was Bumpô the most important of the four, he was last to paint his contribution, or moves the ranking from foreground to background and then



the criterion might be their difference of age? When the latter should be the case it would be nice to find that you get closer to a year of birth of Bummei. It has been unknown so far, but then you can limit it in between 1769 and 1775. Another remarkable detail is the seal Nantei used here: *sekijô giboku*, 'enjoying the ink while being together in a room', which he must have used strictly for these occasions.

**fig. 8**  
**Gassaku by 4 painters and a poet from Kyoto:**  
**4 Wise men on horseback**  
**1813, or earlier. Sumi on silk.**  
**101,7 x 35 cms. Private collection**

Sodô: poem  
 Kawamura Bumpô (17..-1821)  
 Nishimura Nantei (1775-1834)  
 Oka Bummei (17.. -1813)  
 Yoshimura Kôkei (1769-1836)

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fig. 9

*Gassaku* by 3 generations painters of the Joun-sha.

*Juraku*, “fun forever”.

Possibly 1888. Sumi on paper, 137 x 61 cms.

Nishitani Kisui (1826-1891): *Juraku*, fun forever

Takegawa Yûkô (1835-1913): Bat

Kawabe Kakyo (dates unknown): Mouse

Mori Kansai (1814-1894): Daikon

Keigaku ?: Pine sprout

Yamamoto Shunkyo (1871-1933): Adonis flower (*Fukujusô*)

Umemura Keizan (1866-1934): Okame mask

Mochizuki Gyokusen (1834-1913): Crane

Kawabata Gyokusho (1842-1913): New Years decoration (*Shimenawa*)

Kokubu Bunyû (1823-1900): Small citrus (*Kinkan*)

Suzuki Mannen (1868-1893): Camellia

Morikawa Sôbun (1847-1902): Tama

Kunii Ôyô (1868-1923): Rododendron

Nakajima Yûshô (1837-1905): Tai

Mori Yûzan (18..-1917): Daikon sprouts

Maekawa Bunrei (1837-1917): Shellfish (*Hamaguri*)

Shunko (dates unknown): Ripe rice stalk

Hara Zaisen (1849-1916): Mush room (*Saru no koshitake*)

Yamada Shôkei (1866-...): Ise-ebi (lobster)

Hoshino Zensui (1833-1902): Daikoku's mallet

Takeuchi Seihô (1864-1942): Tortoise

Miyake Gogyô (1864-1919): Stone

Sôseki (?): Adonis flower (*Fukujusô*)

Nakajima Kahô (1866-1939): Coins

It appears that the *gassaku* illustrated as (fig. 9) by members of the *Joun-sha* was executed at a New Years party on the 11<sup>th</sup> of the first month in 1888 when 3 generations of Kyoto painters came together. The dating is based on various symbols associated with the New Year. One of them, a rat, affirms the date 1888, which was a 'rat' year. Possibly all the artists were members of the *Joun-sha*, a Meiji Kyoto painters association, which had its meetings on the 11<sup>th</sup> of every month<sup>3</sup>. The title is: "*Juraku*", "fun forever". Mori Kansai the oldest, 74 by then, had long been the leading representative of the Maruyama school in the Kyoto-Osaka area. Kunii Ōyō the new head of the Kyoto branch since 1887 is also present along with a large number of prominent Kyoto painters of the Meiji era: Gyokusen, Sōbun, Zaisen, Yūshō and Bunrei. The 3<sup>rd</sup> generation is the group of young painters who were to determine the painting styles in the late Meiji and Taishō period in Kyoto: Shunkyo and Seihō. Mannen would have ranked among them but his premature death took away this opportunity. Gyokushō, slightly older, moved to Tokyo to become a professor at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts teaching the Maruyama-Shijō manner. He became a person of great importance. (Their mutual relationships are fun to dig out, but for the moment this must do.)

### **Other *gassaku* formats**

Albums, usually to be found in concertina album format, or hand scrolls, fall into different categories: such as liber amicorum, guest books and collectors' albums. Liber amicorum were compiled by groups of artists to commemorate or celebrate a colleague. In guest books artists contribute to an album at the request of a host (who often was a collector) after having enjoyed his hospitality.

There were also collectors who went to various gatherings to solicit contributions to an album from artists, some rather like autograph seekers today. One of the most famous such collectors' albums is that of the collector Nyoī Dōjin (1744-after 1797) who toured Japan from Edo to Nagasaki in 1792-1794. He was a dealer in antique household furnishings, who asked painters and calligraphers to contribute a painting to his album, which he intended to present to a shrine. His taste must have been exquisite. His album contains paintings both from artists already famous and also from artists not yet famous. Nakai Monju, another collector, invited numerous artists to a banquet and asked them to create works. At the end of a party, a memorial gathering, an exhibition or another appropriate occasion, the artists present might decide to produce an album together. The result should be an artistic 'epilogue' to the gathering, which would be left as a memento of the event with the organizing patron. Sometimes these were handed over to a publisher to be copied and issued as a printed anthology in book form.

A number of the beautiful printed anthology books are *gassaku*. Some three examples of these books are:

*Yume no Inano*, a country outing, published in 1801, a memorial book in commemoration of the famous haiku poet Takai Kitō (1741-1789).<sup>4</sup>

*Shunkei chō*, album of the spring valley, 1839. When Akino Kikutan visited Osaka and was entertained at a cherry blossom viewing party, which

was attended by many of the notable literary figures and artists from Osaka. Kikutan subsequently collected the poems and drawings and published them in memory of the occasion.<sup>5</sup>

*Shikogusa*, Rank weeds, 1841, a memorial book for Kumagawa Harukaga.<sup>6</sup>

*Suginoya shun chō*, ('New Year's album of the Suginoya haiku group'). 1853. It was an annual tradition since the Genroku period (1688-1703), that at the occasion of New Year an anthology was published from the haiku (and drawings) collected in the previous year.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes screens were painted by a group of artists, but more often you'll find *harimaze* screens. They contain a collection of paintings, drawings, *tanzaku*, small upright poem or painting slips about 6 cms wide and 36 cm high, *shikishi*, square sized, and/or fan paintings attached to their surface.

In the *ukiyo-e* business after 1840 some prints and print series imitated this format, combining designs from a number of "brushes". Like the Tokaidō set by Hiroshige and Kunisada, *Sankai medetai zu*, products of the provinces by Kuniyoshi and his daughter, and a variety of *harimaze* sets. Also sets were produced in which individual designs were produced by several artists, such as Kuniyoshi, Hiroshige and Kunisada: *Tōkaidō gojusan tsui*, Various publishers, 1843-1845.

The study of *gassaku* is not new, the format has been touched upon in several books, but it has not yet been examined in depth. It is a treasure room to roam through. It offers so many possibilities to the study of relationship among artists in a spectrum of cultural and social context. But you can decorate your wall with a *gassaku* and just live it. Gradually you will discover that it is more than just a picture.

#### Notes

1. See Mitchell p. 136

2. See Roberts p. 119

3. See Conant pp. 76-77

4. See Mitchell p. 558: This is a memorial book for the poet Kito, who died in 1788 (Takai Kitō (1741-1789). According to the prefaces, Kitō was a disciple of Buson. Various poets and artists who were friends of Kitō contributed to the book. Among the poems is one by Socho (Tatebe Sōchō (1761-1814) with the notation "written at Osaka". This seems to be the only book containing work by all three of the Shijō "founders" (Goshun, Toyohiko, and Keibun) published while all three were living (at the time Keibun was only 22 years of age).

5. See Mitchell p. 494

6. See Mitchell p. 474: According to the first preface and the closing note, this is a memorial book for Kumagawa Harukage, published by his elder brother Kumagawa Haruo. Harukage was a native of Ako and apparently died at a relative early age (some time between 1833-1841). According to the preface, the elder brother Haruo was 91 years old at the time the book was published.

7. See Mitchell p. 504

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