

John M. Rosenfield, *Mynah Birds and Flying Rocks: Word and Image in the Art of Yosa Buson*, The Franklin D. Murphy Lectures 18 (Lawrence, KS: Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, 2003)

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Mynah Birds and Flying Rocks: Word and Image in the Art of Yosa Buson is a concise introduction to some of the most compelling aspects of the painting and poetry of a major artist of the eighteenth century. Buson (1716–1783), who was outstanding both as a *nanga* painter and as a *haikai* poet, presents formidable challenges to viewers and readers of his work, in no small part because of his impressive productivity. Buson completed around 800 paintings, composed nearly 2,800 *hokku*, and participated in some 120 linked verse sequences; he also authored numerous short prose pieces—mainly prefaces to *haikai* anthologies and *haibun* (*haikai* prose). As an artist who was exceptionally skillful at both painting and poetry, Buson's work makes a cross-disciplinary approach virtually essential, requiring students of art history and of literature alike to extend their reach into less-familiar ground. Rosenfield addresses these challenges by keeping the focus of the book very narrow; instead of trying to take on the entire scope of Buson's work, he selects two motifs—birds and rocks—as a starting point for his discussion of a number of issues that figure prominently in Buson's paintings and *haikai*. While the limited space of the book (around 60 pages of text) does not allow for very deep exploration of any one of these issues, it provides an excellent introduction to key ideas in Buson's work, and points the reader in the right direction for further investigation of Buson and the art and literature of the late eighteenth century.

The book starts with an introduction that outlines basic information about Buson's biography, reception, and interaction with his contemporaries. The remainder of the book is in three chapters, each of which examines a different category of Buson's paintings. The first looks at "poetic pic-

tures," that is to say, paintings that demonstrate a literary sensibility and an affinity with examples drawn from both the academic and scholar-amateur schools of Chinese painting. The second considers poems and pictures combined, or *haiga*—a genre of simple-looking paintings that integrate a *haikai* inscription. The third discusses a category of extremely simplified paintings without an accompanying text employing what Rosenfield calls "indexical imagery;" his term for visual images that have become so well known from their literary context that they need no written explanation to be comprehensible. There are also several appendices, including a translation of the preface to *Shundei kushū* (Shundei verse anthology), as well as glossaries of terms and names that should prove very helpful for specialist and novice readers alike.

The introductory chapter provides an overview of Buson's biography, his place in the communities of painters and *haikai* poets, and the reception of his work. The biographical section is informative—its emphasis Buson's relationship with Hattori Nankaku is too strong perhaps, as there is no evidence that the two ever met—but otherwise it works well. The section on "Buson's Reputation" could have gone into much more detail. The chapter as a whole does a good job in describing the contrasts inherent in Buson's work, in particular, the friction between Japanese and Chinese cultural traditions, and between high and low culture, that informed Buson's aesthetic.

However, I was surprised and interested to read Rosenfield's characterization of Buson as "first of all a poet." The quality and quantity of Buson's writing certainly justifies the impression that he made poetry the center of his life. However, painting, not poetry, was the way that Buson earned a livelihood; painting was behind his choice of residence after the death of his *haikai* teacher Hayano Hajin: his moves to Tōhoku, Tango, Sanuki, and eventually the decision to establish himself in Kyoto were all motivated by his need to study paintings or find clients. It is true that he wrote some *haikai* in all these places, but even though the *haikai* he wrote was often extraordinarily good, it was also a means to make connections with people who would support him as a painter. He did not "reopen" his teacher's Yahantei school until he was well into his fifties,

and he was a reluctant leader in the *haikai* community even then. The periods in his life when he was most active as a poet were also those in which he was most active as a painter, and there were times, such as when he was in Tango and Sanuki, when his focus on painting was so intense that he wrote (or preserved) very little *haikai* at all. In other words, one could easily say Buson was primarily a painter who wrote poetry, in no small part because poetry was vital to his work as a painter.

The chapters that discuss the three different kinds of Buson's painting are the strongest part of the book. Rosenfield's first topic is a pair of paintings, *Mynah Birds Fighting in Plum Tree* (dated 1776) held by the Freer Gallery in Washington, DC. Rosenfield tells us that while Buson borrowed the subject of mynah birds from Chinese paintings that had recently been imported to Japan, the energy, skill, and "spirit of *haikai* verse" that it displays marks it as a considerable improvement on the paintings that were its models. The painting combines techniques derived from both native and Chinese painting traditions; it owes at least as much to the academic flower-and-bird style then filtering into Japan through Nagasaki as it does to the scholar-amateur style (also called *nanga* or *bunjin-ga*) with which Buson is more commonly associated. Rosenfield uses this example as evidence of Buson's dislike for orthodoxies. Self-trained as a painter and schooled in eclecticism as a *haikai* poet, Buson's work typically embraces and reconciles elements of apparently contradictory styles with relish, and Rosenfield provides the reader with an insightful analysis of the way that this takes place and helps position Buson in the context of the scholar-amateur painting community of the time.

The second part of this chapter looks at the ways in which bird imagery figures in Buson's *hokku*. This section was a little more problematic. The translations are excellent, and the *hokku* indeed make use of bird imagery, but it was not so easy to see how these verses were related to the paintings, or whether it was necessarily of any significance that Buson also mentions birds in his poetry. This section, and a similar discussion of rock-related *hokku* in the chapter on indexical imagery, is one of the few parts of the book that raise questions. Rosenfield states in the acknowl-

edgments (x) that he deliberately avoids a theoretical approach in his discussion, and there is nothing wrong with this. However, one of the most remarkable and fascinating things about *haikai* is the fluidity with which it can move between the realms of verbal and visual expression, almost as if there was no difference between mentioning a bird in a poem, and painting one in a picture. We see this most obviously in *haiga*, of course, but it is especially relevant to discussions of the poet-painter Buson. Indeed, the subject of "visuality" in Buson's poetry, or "*haikai* spirit" in his painting, is one that commentators have been grappling with at least since the time of Tanomura Chikuden (1777–1835), and is probably the most interesting aspect of Buson's work; so just a sentence or two that would help the reader frame the word-image problem here, or to understand Rosenfield's take on it, would have been very useful.

The next chapter discusses *haiga*, a hybrid form of painting and poetry. Rosenfield gives us a brief overview of the form, paying particular attention to the contributions Matsuo Bashō made to its development, and then compares a Bashō *haiga* (*Gate to the Bashōan*) and a collaborative *haiga* by Bashō and Hanabusa Itchō (*Bagworm*) to one of Buson's (*Young Bamboo*). The analysis here is excellent, and does a lot more to explain the dynamics of *haiga* than would an abstract, general description. The next short section of the chapter is less impressive, however: in setting out to define the aesthetic principles of *haikai*, Rosenfield quotes lengthy passages from Haruo Shirane's *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) with almost no comment (41-2). The quotations themselves are illuminating and persuasive, and anyone could be forgiven for thinking that they could not have said it better themselves, but it would have been good to know Rosenfield's own views on *haikai* more directly. The rest of the chapter is much stronger; it examines several more *haiga*, two by Buson and one that was a collaboration with Maruyama Ōkyo.

The last chapter focuses on a screen painting, *Rocks* (1783), now in the collection of Kimiko and John Powers, an example of the category of painting where Buson simply presents an image

without an accompanying inscription, confident that his viewers would understand that it was a literary allusion—in this case, to the writings of Bashō, in whose memory it was painted. Rosenfield tells us that when the painting was first shown in the United States, some viewers compared it to the René Magritte painting *Clear Ideas* (1958), which shows a rock floating in the air between the sea and a cloud. Other viewers, some of whom were art historians, regarded *Rocks* with suspicion, calling it at best an anomaly among Buson's paintings and at worst a fake. Rosenfield defends it by assigning it to a category of "indexical images," the kind of pictorialized literary motif that Joshua Mostow talks about in *Pictures of the Heart: The Hyakunin isshu in Word and Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996). These are images of things or places so well known from literature that they can be put forward without a contextualizing comment, as every literate person already knows what they refer to. The rest of the chapter, which explains the relationship between the *Rocks* screen and Bashō on the one hand, and Chinese painting guides like the *Mustard seed garden manual of painting* on the other, is very detailed and informative. As in the "Poetic Paintings" chapter, we are given a list of *hokku* with imagery that relate to the painting.

In short, this is an excellent book by one of the most eminent historians of Japanese art that greatly contributes to scholarship on early modern art and literature.

