

# Asian Art

Volume III, Number 3 Summer 1990

Published by Oxford University Press

in association with the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

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# Putting Yokohama in Place

Henry D. Smith II

The “Yokohama prints” that became the rage in the Japanese capital of Edo (present-day Tokyo) for about one year beginning in the late autumn of 1860 pose questions that are still both pressing and perplexing. What do the Japanese think of those who come from across the sea? Was Japan a “closed” country, and what does it mean to “open”? The evidence of the art of more than a century ago suggests that no clear-cut answers are possible, since Japanese attitudes on these issues are fundamentally—and understandably—ambivalent.

Ambivalence certainly seems to describe the attitude toward the Americans and Europeans depicted in these Yokohama prints. Sometimes the foreigners are gross in appearance, threatening and unruly. Yet at other times they seem blessed with otherworldly beauty, bedecked in extraordinary ornament. Are the artists looking down on us in the prints—or up at us?

One answer is suggested by comparison with a genre of woodblock prints that had come into sudden fashion just five years earlier, in the wake of a great earthquake that struck the city of Edo on the night of the second day of the

tenth month, 1855, causing widespread death and destruction. The prints all depict personifications of catfish, the creature that in Japanese folklore was thought to cause earthquakes by shaking its tail from an underground abode.

The hundreds of “catfish prints” that flooded Edo soon after the earthquake have been analyzed in a remarkable study by the Dutch ethnologist Cornelius Ouwehand. One of his basic insights is that the catfish was seen by the people of Edo as an essentially ambivalent force, at once destroyer and restorer, both hated and worshiped.<sup>1</sup> In the prints, we see the catfish at times smashing houses to smithereens with its tail, at other times taking up the tools of the carpenter to rebuild the city. In some images, the catfish is carved up and eaten, while in others he is placed on a pedestal and worshiped as a god.

And so it is, perhaps, with the foreigner in Yokohama prints, who seems to be at once welcomed and repelled. On many of the prints, the term for the foreigner is *ijin*, or “stranger,” a concept that anthropologists use for a whole class of visitors from the outside

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Note: Japanese print artists are referred to by their most commonly cited artistic name. Other Japanese names are given in Japanese order, surname first.

in traditional Japanese culture, such as itinerant priests and performers. Sometimes these visitors are welcomed for their divine powers and envisioned as bringing wealth and fortune, while at other times they are feared as a source of trouble and destruction. The *ijin* that appeared in the port of Yokohama after 1859, like the catfish that appeared after the earthquake of 1855, fits into this broad pattern. The two-sided character of the visitor is precisely what typifies it.

The ambivalent image of the foreigner raises the issue of Japan's relations with the outside world. The conventional view of Japan under Tokugawa rule (1615–1868) is that of a “closed” country, isolated from the rest of the world under a “policy of national seclusion.” This language is largely anachronistic, however, and betrays an underlying Western bias. The Japanese themselves did not perceive the edicts of the 1630s, by which the Catholic nations were excluded from Japan and Japanese citizens were forbidden to travel abroad, as particularly “isolating” the country. Rather, as historians have come to understand, the edicts were concerned both with controlling the threat of aggressive and disruptive Westerners and with restoring cordial relations with Japan's East Asian neighbors.<sup>2</sup>

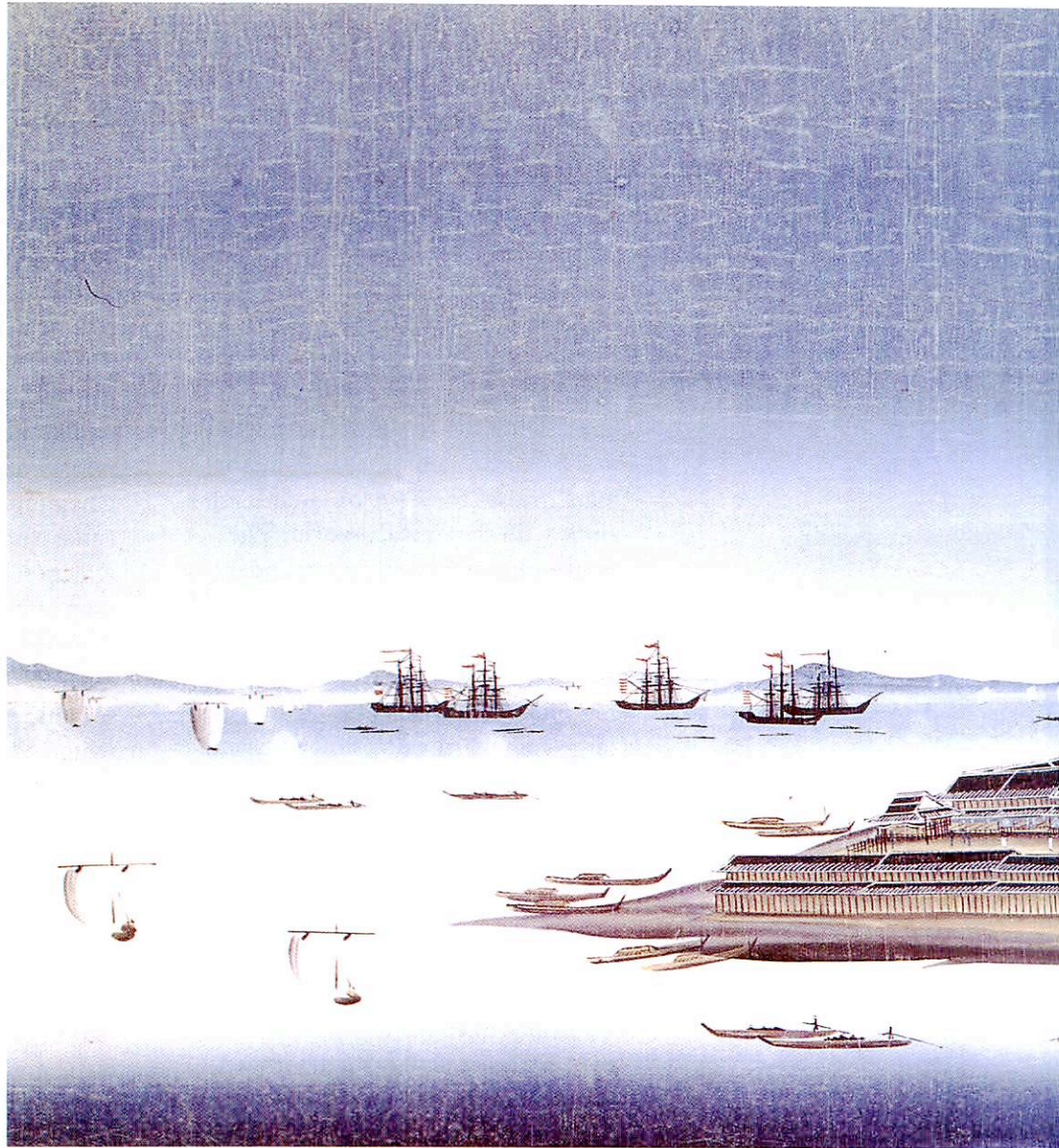
The notion of a “closed” country came not from Japan but from a German doctor who visited the nation in 1690–92.<sup>3</sup> The irony is that Engelbert Kaempfer considered the way in which Japan was “shut up” (as he put it) to be both natural and beneficial, allowing it a peace and prosperity unknown to Europe and an ability to live within its means. The term took on a negative

connotation only when translated into Japanese in the early nineteenth century as *sakoku*, or “chained” country, implying a sense of imprisonment and impoverishment that was the last thing intended by Kaempfer. But the term stuck and came to be used by Japanese and non-Japanese alike to characterize the foreign policy of the Tokugawa regime in a negative way.

The real problem with the idea of the “closed” country is that it obscures and even negates the substantial impact of foreign cultures on Tokugawa Japan. Most of this influence came from China or from the West by way of China. It all came through the port of Nagasaki, which is typically depicted as a “tiny window” but is more appropriately imagined as a broadcasting station, the messages of which were greatly amplified by a sensitive and efficient internal network of communication. The messages and the lessons they carried with them became more numerous and persuasive as the years passed and began to work transformations on Japanese culture—not the least on Japanese art.

A revealing indication of this impact is the painting of the port of Yokohama reproduced here (pages 4, 5). It appeared at the height of the Yokohama print boom but differs significantly in medium. Woodblock prints were highly calculated images involving the collaboration of artists, carvers, and printers, all under the direction of a publisher sensitive to the demands of the mass market. This painting, by contrast, is the work of an anonymous street painter, a work of true folk art. The genre is known as *doro-e*, or “mud pictures,” after the opaque pigments that the artists used.<sup>4</sup>

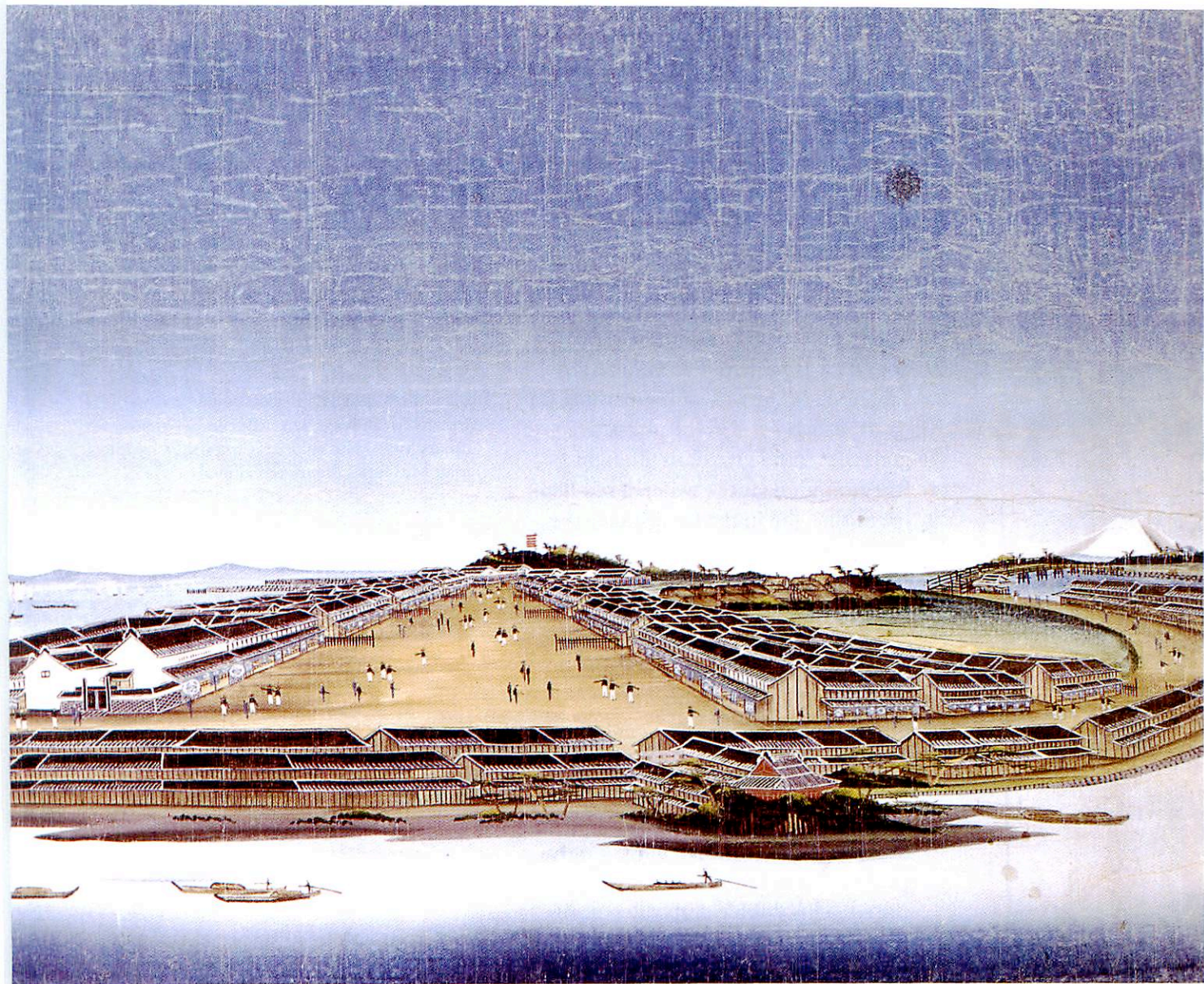
Anonymous, *View of Yokohama*, ca. 1860. Ink and color on paper, 227/8 × 52 in. Tamba Collection, Kanagawa Prefectural Museum, Yokohama



This example of *doro-e* is special, to be sure, for it is by far the largest of the genre known, measuring almost two feet high by more than four feet wide. Yet in style and technique it is typical of *doro-e* in general. The ground is an underpainting of *gofun*, a chalky pigment made from ground shells. Buildings are shown as simple, regular patterns of black on white, and

people as stylized stick figurines, with samurai distinguished by their two swords (and foreigners, in this case, by the white sailor's pants).

The first and most striking lesson of this painting is that Japan's openness to the West had created a dramatic openness of landscape vision. We are struck immediately by the low, straight horizon, the exaggerated lin-



ear perspective of streets and buildings, and above all the great expanse of blue sky. None of these features can be found in traditional Japanese art—all were learned from the West over the course of the eighteenth century. Many different models (some of them Chinese) were involved in this complex process of learning, and the artists were various as well. By the 1850s,

however, it had devolved into an anonymous street art, created as souvenirs for visitors to Edo.

Yet just as the foreigner was both destroyer and creator, so the vision of Yokohama that we see here is as much closed as open. To the left are five “black ships,” one for each of the five nations with which commercial treaties had just been concluded. The

small, white sails of the native craft protectively dot the waters around those menacing hulks. The city itself is shown as open, with a broad central avenue, but also as closed, an island joined to the mainland by a single bridge in the upper right (although in fact there were five bridges). This sense of containment and isolation is a clear carryover from the island of Dejima on which the Dutch were confined in Nagasaki. Yokohama, of course, was larger and cohabited by Japanese. But it was still something set apart, as we sense in the protective gods that stand guard: in the right foreground, near the water, a red Ben-ten Shrine and in the far distance the sacred peak of Mount Fuji.

This anonymous folk painting suggests that rather than seeing Japan as a small and isolated country at last “opened” to the West, we should understand it as pursuing an unchanged policy of what might be called “controlled openness.” Faced with outsiders who could be, as was the nature of outsiders, at times bountiful and at times threatening, it only made sense to be both more open and closed. This double ambivalence, of visitors who are at once good and bad, approached by a policy at once open and closed, helps explain the strange and complex appeal of the art of Yokohama.

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Henry D. Smith II is a professor at Columbia University, specializing in the cultural history of modern Japan. Recent publications on Japanese art include *Hiroshige: One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (George Braziller, 1986), *Kiyochika: Artist of Meiji Japan* (Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1986), and “World without Walls: Kuwagata Keisai’s Panoramic Vision of Japan,” in *Japan and the World* (Macmillan Press, 1988).

## Notes

1. Cornelius Ouwehand, *Namazu-e and Their Themes* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), p. 79.
2. Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
3. Engelbert Kaempfer, *The History of Japan, Together with a Description of the Kingdom of Siam, 1690–92*, trans. J. G. Scheuchzer (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1906).
4. *Doro-e* remain largely unstudied. The best source is *Edo no doro-e ten*, a catalogue of an exhibition of the Watanabe Shin’ichiro Collection at the Kanagawa Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in Kamakura, December 1976–January 1977. The volume is published by the Japan Museum’s Planning Council.