“Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Aristocratic and the Common in Early Edo Arts”

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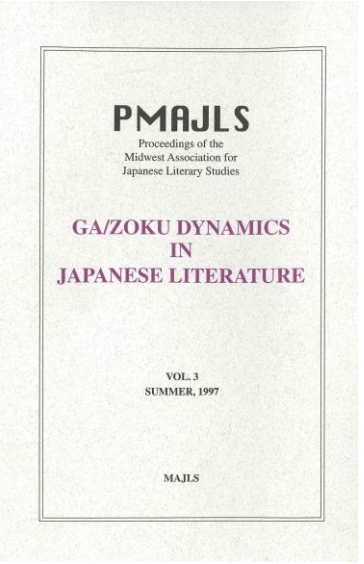

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Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Aristocratic and the Common in Early Edo Arts

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In this paper, I look at 17th-century aristocratic culture from the perspective of "high and low," or more specifically, I explore art and poetry of the early Edo court in terms of socio-political issues. I consider the period from 1611 to 1680, from the time Emperor Gomizunoo (1596-1680; reigned 1611-1629) ascended the throne until his death, what is often referred to as the Kan'ei cultural era. The imperial family was a significant force in shaping 17th-century culture, particularly that of Kyoto. Gomizunoo, his imperial consort Tōfukumon'in (1607-78),and his many children sponsored construction and decoration at temples across the ancient capital; they were devoted students of classical poetry; and they themselves produced art and poetry.[1] A number of cultural projects sponsored by the imperial family integrate the "high and low." In sponsoring art and poetry that incorporate elements of "low" culture, the Kan'ei royalty followed in the footsteps of their ancestors; however, what I find interesting is the particular manner in which 17th-century aristocrats embraced the "low." In this study, I contextualize the Kan'ei aristocratic interest in commoner culture, interpreting it as a statement of protest against bakufu encroachments. Before elaborating, I will define my use of terms.

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1 Elsewhere, I examine in greater detail sponsorship of art by Gomizunoo and his family. Elizabeth Lillehoj, 57-69.

I equate *ga/zoku* with "high and low," admitting that difficulties can result. The Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature defines *ga/zoku* as:

> Ga: The elegant, truly artistic, as *gabun* is such writing. Although at first the term was simply one of approbation, it came to be used in contrast to *zoku*. The polar terms more or less divided various kinds of literature into the true (or official) on the one hand and the common (or not worth considering) on the other. In practice, that which deserved being termed *ga* was that with ample precedent, particularly *waka* and other literature written entirely or mostly in *wabun* (or Chinese), or as time passed and precedents became more numerous (and older literature was revalued), also *monogatari*. . . .
>
> Zoku: Common, low, not true art. A polar term with *ga*, designating kinds of writing that were not thought to measure up to standards of genuine art because of inappropriate subject matter, audience, or diction. . . .[2]

These definitions suggest that *ga* and *zoku* are primarily aesthetic terms, which differentiate writing that is refined from that which is not. While I accept these definitions, I contend that *ga* and *zoku* can not be separated from the socio-political realm, that the *ga/zoku* paradigm was employed in order to discriminate elite arts (those practiced by and made for the aristocratic and ruling warrior families) from the commoner arts (those practiced by and made for peasants, artisans, and merchants).

I have used the word "arts" in my title, but what I refer to is primarily visual art and poetry. Certainly, the conditions at court governing the production of visual art were not the same as those governing the production of verse, and problems can arise from lumping together sponsorship of art and poetry. On the other hand, I think that very interesting results emerge from pairing the two. Poetry certainly was considered more significant than

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2 Earl Miner, Hiroko Odagiri, and Robert Morrell, 274, 304-5.

visual art by Kan'ei aristocrats. One of many sources that asserts the primacy of poetry at court is the *Kinchō narabi ni kuge shohatto* (*Regulations for the Palace and Nobility*). Article One of the regulations, issued by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616) in 1615, exhorts the emperor to write *waka*, stating:

> The composing of *waka* began with Emperor Kōkō (830-887) and continues to this day. Though it consists merely of beautiful expressions, it is our country's art; it should not be abandoned. As written in the *Kinpishō* [A Selection of Palace Secrets], [the emperor's] primary efforts should be directed to the arts [and here I think the authors mean mainly literary arts].[3]

While acknowledging that 17th-century emperors and *kuge* (aristocrats) emphasized poetry over visual art, I turn back to visual art to bracket some points about *ga/zoku*. The concept of "high and low" employed by most art historians (the majority being Western art historians) is imbedded in a particular Western distinction between "fine" and "applied" arts, which grew out of Italian Renaissance art theory and which relegated the applied arts to a secondary or minor status. According to this model, painters and sculptors could be "high minded," but potters or woodworkers were lowly craftspeople.[4] This ranking of the arts

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[3] Lee Butler, 532-33. Butler argues that the *Kinchū narabi ni kuge shohatto* do not show Ieyasu's intention to dominate the court or to isolate the emperor from political power, as many historians previously maintained. Rather, Butler sees these codes as Ieyasu's attempt to affirm the emperor's political rights and responsibilities. Butler, 536-37. Butler's argument is convincing, but things changed under Ieyasu's successor, Tokugawa Hidetada (1579-1632), who made clear his intentions to dominate the court.

[4] One problem that emerges from equating *ga/zoku* with "high and low" is that "high" art in the West is seen as the more creative and innovative, while in Japan, *ga* is often, or even typically, seen as orthodox. The implications of this distinction vary from period to

was not followed in Japan, explaining, in part, the high regard for craft traditions and craftsmanship in Japan to this day.

The Western dichotomy of "high and low" art brings with it--necessarily, I think--issues of social class. In early modern Western discourse, high = aristocratic; low = commoner. Although we should not expect precisely the same meanings to apply to *ga/zoku*, I suggest there is much to be learned from an examination of Kan'ei culture and class, taking care to avoid a seepage of our own late 20th-century notions into the discussion of 17th-century Japan.

Factors that characterize late 20th-century society, such as the separation of the "public and private" spheres, the commodification of culture, the association of the artistic vocation with secularized entertainment, and the valorization of the artist-hero do not characterize 17th-century Japan, and all of these threaten to distort our understanding of "high and low" in Kan'ei culture. For us, I would suggest, "low" brings immediately to mind aspects of modern, commercialized, mass culture, or popular culture. Thomas Crow, a Marxist art historian who discusses "high and low" in terms of modernist art of the West, sees "low" as central to modern art, synonymous with mass culture.[5] Crow posits that for the modern artist "low" culture furnishes the "only apparent grasp on modernity" and that "the advanced artist is necessarily allied with the lower classes in

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period, but do cause problems for the conflation of *ga/zoku* and "high and low." I thank Roger Thomas for pointing out this problem to me.

[5] In Crow's view, for the modern artist, "the identification with the social practices of mass diversion--whether uncritically reproduced, caricatured, or transformed into abstract Arcadias--remains a durable constant . . ." See Thomas Crow, 233-66.

their struggle for political recognition."[6] Here, class struggle is key.

A significant question arises from this discussion: what does the term "class" mean in terms of early Edo society? The Tokugawa bakufu supposedly "established four classes"--warrior, peasant, artisan, and merchant--but, the functioning of class in early Edo Japan was much more complex than this simplistic four-part categorization would suggest.

It is not merely modern Western conceptions that can distort our understanding of "high and low" in Edo Japan, but also modern Japanese attitudes toward elements of Japanese tradition, such as the role of the emperor. In examining the 20th-century discourse on the imperial system, Bob Wakabayashi reveals that misconceptions have resulted from Japanese Marxist historians' assertions that emperors did not actually rule and commoners did not revere them as deities.[7] Gomizunoo reportedly lamented his plight as emperor, stating, "In antiquity, imperial edicts commanded obedience in all matters; now Our words have no effect. . . . That is appalling, but it can't be helped in this degenerate age."[8] Yet, emperors were not powerless in Gomizunoo's day. Wakabayashi convincingly shows that the court performed an important legitimizing role in Edo society and that people viewed the emperor as a source of sacred authority. Herschel Webb characterizes the Edo imperial institution as "a kind of state church," explaining, "There is evidence . . . that the shogunal authorities actually fostered a

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6 Ibid. 236. Crow refers here to an essay by Mallarmé, "The Impressionists and Edouard Manet," from *Art Monthly Review* (September 30, 1876).

7 See Bob Wakabayashi, 25-57.

8 From Miura Tōsaku, 198-9; quoted in Wakabayashi, 29.

species of emperor worship in order to instill feelings of reverence and awe toward their own government."[9]

Applying the cautions elaborated above, I turn to the historical subjects: the imperial family of the Kan'ei era. A number of artistic projects associated with the Kan'ei court integrate "high and low," reflecting the taste of courtly tradition on the one hand and, on the other, commoner taste, or more specifically, the taste of newly affluent urban merchants. It is evident that involvement with art and poetry encoded a socially prestigious position for those Kan'ei individuals wealthy enough to sponsor them, and the Kan'ei imperial family deployed artistic and literary products for the sake of marking political and social terrain. In the Kan'ei era, as in other periods and places, sponsorship of art was an integral aspect of establishing the elite personage. As Pierre Bourdieu writes,

> To appropriate a work of art is to assert oneself as the exclusive possessor of the object and the authentic taste for that object, which is thereby converted into the reified negation of all those who are unworthy of possessing it . . .[10]

Why then would the imperial family of the early Edo period have blurred social boundaries by sponsoring art associated with the lower classes? There certainly are numerous earlier instances of *kuge* interest in plebeian life, and parallels can be drawn to these earlier instances; however, I propose that the Kan'ei

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[9] Herschel Webb, 4, 136. The evidence to which Webb refers here is shogunal support for popular worship at Iwashimizu Shrine, a sacred site for both the imperial and shogunal parties. According to Webb, the Tokugawa intended this support to foster a sense of the divinity of the government. Webb, 136-7.

[10] Pierre Bourdieu, 280.

aristocratic interest in commoner culture relates to the particular social and political circumstances faced by the court at this time.

Gomizunoo came to the throne at a transitional point in Japanese history, as the newly triumphant Tokugawa clan was consolidating power. The first two Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu and his son Hidetada, encouraged the emperor and *kuge* to pursue cultural activities, but under Hidetada, the bakufu increasingly curtailed the emperor's civil authority. The court was honored culturally, but hampered financially and politically. Court interest in commoner culture can be seen as a reaction to the constraints placed upon it, an attempt to reach out to other influential social groups restricted by the bakufu--in particular, the wealthy townspeople--as well as an attempt to reestablish the ancient belief in the emperor's sacred role in maintaining order in the world.[11]

The Kan'ei cultural era is often referred to, correctly or not, as a period of classical revival, and in terms of the nobility, revival efforts were both thrust upon them by the bakufu and exploited by them to protest bakufu encroachments. The Tokugawa regime decreed that the emperor and courtiers should take as their main task preservation of traditional scholarship and court culture. Gomizunoo complied with the government's wishes in a number of ways. He revived old imperial rites that had not been performed in centuries. He designated certain days for scholarly, antiquarian activities at court. He recited and commented on the *Genji monogatari* (*Tale of Genji*) and other

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11 Gomizunoo conveyed his sense of responsibility for the well being of the country in poems such as the waka:

Matsu ni fuku mo	I hope the country will be safe
yawaraku kuni no	like the soft wind
kaze nare ya	blowing through the pines,
yasuku tanoshimu	like the voice of wind in the pines--
koe ni kayoite	calm and enjoyable.

courtly romances. He commissioned works of poetry and art with connections to the classical past, such as the *Nenjū gyōji emaki* (*Narrative Handscrolls of Annual Rites and Ceremonies of the Court*), an illustrated calendar of events at court.[12]

Despite such creditable accomplishments, Gomizunoo's reign was marked by difficulty with the Edo government, and finally, in 1629, when the bakufu stripped him of the right to appoint monks to the rank of "Purple Robe," he abdicated. His seven-year-old daughter, Meishō (also the great-granddaughter of Tokugawa Ieyasu), then ascended the throne. Gomizunoo's sudden decision to abdicate suggests a frustration with the bakufu that bordered on anger. A poem by Gomizunoo records his feelings:

Kono haru ni	Now spring has come,
semete odoroku	What an unexpected place
mi tomo kana	I find myself in.
haji ōshi chō	Though dishonor hangs heavy
inochi nagasa o	May I be granted long life.[13]

After abdicating, Gomizunoo established an active aristocratic salon at Sentō Gosho in Kyoto, where he held gatherings for composing *waka* and *renga*, along with other

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12 Sumiyoshi Jokei (1599-1670) and Gukei (1631-1705) copied the *Nenjū gyōji* scrolls from an original 12th-century set.

13 Translated by John Carpenter, in Money L. Hickman, et al., 190. This is a *shigo* (a poem composed in celebration of the New Year), and while *shigo* typically rejoice in the festive season, Gomizunoo expresses unhappiness with the circumstances of his life, presumably due to his feelings of having been dishonored by the ruling warrior regime. Although it is not known precisely when Gomizunoo composed this *shigo*, Carpenter concludes that Gomizunoo wrote it around the time of his abdication.

artistic activities.[14] Gomizunoo participated at these events, at times composing poems, many compiled in two anthologies, the *Ōsōshū* (*The Sea Gull Rookery Collection*) and the *Gomizunoo-in goshū* (*The Collection of Retired Emperor Gomizunoo*).

Gomizunoo learned the denju ("secret traditions") of poetry from his uncle, Prince Tomohito (1579-1629), who had been initiated into these traditions by Hosokawa Yūsai (1534-1610). Although the secret traditions of poetry were being disseminated more widely in the early modern era, *waka* still held a preeminent, perhaps we can even say sacred status. A comment by Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen on the nature of early *waka* is significant in this regard:

> Is anyone in doubt, after reading the *Genji*, that *waka* constituted an aristocratic (read, godly) ritual institution, one of whose effects (it is too much to speak of "function") was to keep the provincials mystified?[15]

The secularized character of *waka* may have waned by the early Edo period, but some of its mystifying nature must have inhered still, and certainly *waka* was associated with *ga* in the early Edo period.[16]

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[14] In many respects the Tanabata Party of 1633 at the Sentō Gosho is representative; at the party, participants wrote waka and enjoyed various other arts such as *rikka* (a form of flower arrangement), *kōawase* (incense smelling), music, and *banjō* (games such as *go* and *sugoroku*). See Takeda Tsuneo, 22.

[15] From Ramirez-Christensen's review of the book, Figures of Resistance, by Richard Okada. See Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen, 207.

[16] Although I equate *waka* with *ga*, but I do not mean to suggest that *zoku* elements do not appear in early Edo aristocratic verse; I simply have not had the chance to examine the poems for *zoku*. Of course, the *kuge* wrote both *waka* and *renga*, but *renga* was also composed by poets from a wider social background, and on that basis alone, *renga*

In analyzing Gomizunoo's poems, we need to consider not only the verse, but also the visual effects of calligraphic flourish. Gomizunoo's *waka* and *renga* scrolls reveal refined script, while his Zen-style *bokuseki* ("ink traces") reveal his expressive strength, and in this, he adhered to traditions of aristocratic and Zen calligraphy, both of which were also practiced by earlier emperors. (Zen calligraphy was appropriated by and elevated to the status of *ga* by the court.) Testimony to Gomizunoo's appreciation for calligraphy is his collection of samples of writing by famous calligraphers from the past. Among his treasures was a calligraphy scroll by Fujiwara Sadaie (Teika; 1162-1241), one of the early figures of Japanese literature much admired in Kan'ei court circles.

Gomizunoo drew extensively from courtly traditions. In many respects, he was a revivalist at heart. Yet, he and other participants at aristocratic salons were also subject to new influences emerging from the thriving urban centers of the day, particularly Kyoto. Gomizunoo supported the craftspeople and artisans of Kyoto, and he frequently sponsored the very artistic activities that were popular among commoners in Kyoto, such as tea ceremony and *rikka*.[17]

Sugimoto Mari, analyzing the approach of cultural historian Kumakura Isao, makes a relevant point in regard to Gomizunoo, tea, and commoner culture.[18] Sugimoto criticizes Kumakura's construction of the Kan'ei cultural era as a unique phase that witnessed a free exchange between a variety of classes, eschewing the class barriers of medieval society and not yet restricted by the

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might be said to integrate elements of *zoku*. This issue deserves closer scrutiny.

17 Among the utensils that Gomizunoo introduced into his tea service were pieces made by contemporary Kyoto craftsmen; he took a particular interest in Shugakuin pottery.

18 Sugimoto Mari, 34-42.

social hierarchies present later in the Edo period.[19] Kumakura concludes that it was the wealthy townspeople connected with the court who reveal the distinctive nature of Kan'ei culture, and he bases much of his assessment on developments in the tea ceremony.

Sugimoto concurs that Gomizunoo invited people from a variety of backgrounds to his palace gatherings, but she sees nothing unique about this aspect of Kan'ei court activities. She compares court poetry parties of 1498 and 1636-7, observing that members of a variety of classes were present at each, and she establishes real doubt that the tea ceremony was a site for the breakdown of class barriers. Sugimoto maintains, in opposition to Kumakura, that the warrior elite were the key formulators of a new Edo culture. She makes a good point; however, this does not rule out the evidence that Gomizunoo and Kan'ei aristocrats were interested in "low" culture. As mentioned above, entertainers invited by Gomizunoo to Sentō Gosho included performers of *misemono* (puppet theater, acrobatics, etc.) that were then drawing large crowds at Shijōgawara. Young men from Wakashū Kabuki troops also performed at the Sentō Palace.

Further proof of Gomizunoo's interest in contemporary arts that fell outside aristocratic traditions is his adoption of a new style of flowering arranging known as *rikka* ("standing flowers"). In 1629, Gomizunoo sponsored more than thirty palace exhibitions of "standing flowers." At these exhibits commoners mingled with nobles and commented on their *rikka* arrangements, an unprecedented waving of rules against those of lower class fraternizing with elites, presumably tolerated here because this was an environment dedicated to aesthetic enjoyments. Generally speaking, Gomizunoo--like other

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19 Kumakura Isao has contributed extensively to the discourse on aristocratic salon culture of the early Edo period. See Kumakura.

emperors--did not interact with commoners, and access to the palace was forbidden for lower class individuals without a license. As Ebb notes:

> The physical isolation of the emperor and the court worked both to veil their activities from those outside and to limit their opportunity of obtaining direct experience of life in other classes of society. One result of this was to prevent the emperor and *kuge* from having the slightest influence over public affairs. Another was to increase the mystery and awe with which contemporary society invested the persons of the court and their works.[20]

Even at court, access to the emperor was limited; Gomizunoo often communicated through female attendants, speaking as though to his finger puppet in order to convey his wishes.

So, why did Gomizunoo invite commoners to the palace for *rikka* gatherings? Why did he transgress such proscribed social boundaries? While emperors of the past may have been intrigued by the quaint ways of the lowly peoples of their realm, Gomizunoo's interest seems less patronizing, and given the problems that he encountered with the bakufu, I suspect that his affiliation with commoners was actually a rebellious gesture, a reaction against the controlling hand of the Tokugawa.

There are many similarities between Gomizunoo's involvement with art and poetry and the involvement of his empress-consort, Tōfukumon'in, who was the granddaughter of Tokugawa Ieyasu. The Tokugawa shoguns made repeated attempts to align themselves with the court, and for Gomizunoo personally, the most intrusive instance of this was his forced

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20 Webb, 129.

marriage to Tōfukumon'in, a marriage that solidified the tie between the bakufu and the imperial family.[21]

Although born and raised in a warrior clan, Tōfukumon'in--like other women from the shogun's family-- learned the traditions of court culture, including composing poetry. After marrying, records relate that she held poetry parties in the women's quarters of the palace, attended by ladies-in-waiting as well as ranking noblemen. A number of Tōfukumon'in's poem scrolls and *shikishi* survive, written in a refined, flowing hand, with long, thin brushstrokes. Tōfukumon'in's love of poetry and classical court culture is immortalized in numerous works of art, including a pair of screens painted by Tosa Mitsuoki (1617-91) entitled *Poetry Slips Attached to Cherry and Maple Trees.*[22] Hanging from the trees in these screens are 60-some poem slips, each inscribed by a 17th-century courtier with a verse from 12th- and 13th-century anthologies. The scene recalls the aristocratic pastime of composing poems and tying them to overhanging branches. In addition, when Tōfukumon'in made art works of her own, including images of famous classical poets, she revealed her admiration for court culture.

Although Tōfukumon'in was clearly inspired by court traditions, certain art works that decorated her private chambers suggest that she also appreciated aspects of commoner culture. One example is found in a palace building designed for Tōfukumon'in, the Okeshō-den ("toilette palace" or dressing

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21 Gomizunoo married the 14-year-old Tokugawa Masako, who later came to known as Tōfukumon'in, in 1620.

22 These screens, from the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, are thought to have been made for the empress or presented to her after their completion between 1654 and 1685.

chambers), which originally stood at Sentō Gosho.[23] Among the surviving works of art here are the set of doors with paintings of *Gion Floats*. These portrayals of the Gion festival, which had become a major event in Kyoto by the early Edo period, are rendered in bright colors with lively details. One of the *Gion Floats* has a central post resembling the mast of a trading ship, reflecting the townspeople's pride in the mercantile wealth fueling Kyoto's prosperity, and leading us to wonder whether Tōfukumon'in asked the painter to render this theme, or whether the painter took it upon himself to depict the subject. In bringing up this question, I should acknowledge that the particular perspective of this study--an examination of social and political dimensions of art--tends, by its nature, to obscure the artist as an independent agent, which is not my purpose. With a minimum of verifiable historical data for us to rely on, it is inevitable perhaps that the role of the early modern Japanese artist remains uncertain. Nevertheless, I concur with T. J. Clark when he states,

> . . . the encounter with history and its specific determinations is made by the artist himself. The social history of art sets out to discover the general nature of the structures that he encounters willy-nilly; but it also wants to locate the specific conditions of one such meeting. . . .[24]

No evidence has been uncovered to answer the question of original intention behind the *Gion Floats*, but the choice of subject and the bold, colorful rendering do seem to reflect, or even endorse, the lively spirit of contemporary urban culture. Of course, a variety of genre paintings had decorated earlier

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[23] After Tōfukumon'in's death, the Okeshō-den was moved from Sentō Gosho to its present site, later being incorporated into the Shugakuin villa-and-garden complex as the Guest Hall of the Middle Garden.

[24] T. J. Clark, 13.

aristocratic residences; however, it seems to me that the *Gion Floats* from Tōfukumon'in's Okeshō-den are more vivid and more closely associated with contemporary urban developments.

Turning to the paintings on the other set of doors from the Okeshō-den--carp in golden nets--we have to wonder, what is the connection between *Gion Floats* and carp? At the risk of reading in too much, I wonder if the artist--perhaps even at the patron's request--was referring in veiled terms to the imperial family; the royalty were trapped in gorgeous surroundings, with no freedom to move, unable to exercise real power, like fish in a golden net. Is it possible that the pairing of netted fish and *Gion Floats* conveys Tōfukumon'in's own outlook, turning toward the thriving commoner culture in rejection of her birth family, the Tokugawa, who had encroached so egregiously on the authority of the court? While perhaps ultimately unanswerable, I think that such questions are significant to the study of "high and low" culture, at least as seen from the eyes of the Kan'ei aristocrats.

Class certainly affected art in the early Edo period. In this age of conflict between shogunate and court, Japan witnessed an expansion of urbanization and a concomitant secularization and commodification of cultural forms. Urban marketplaces swelled with activity, and sacred shrine dances emerged as popular entertainment. This paper examines only the court's interest in commoner culture, and admittedly treats only a few works of art and poetry from Kan'ei court circles. What was more widespread and of more pressing concern to "high and low" in early Edo Japan was the adoption of aristocratic subjects by "plebeian" artists, such as print makers, and cases in which commoners attempted to blur social boundaries by acquiring "courtly" art and writing "classical" poetry. There is a fascinating give-and-take between "high and low" in the 17th-century arts. While we must be careful to avoid misconceptions that result from

confusion over terminology and theoretical concepts, discussion of issues of class can greatly enhance the study of early Edo culture.

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