



# AKITA RANGA

AND ITS

## INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS

A SHORT TOUR  
BY  
KUNIKO ABE

Institute for Asian Studies and Regional Collaboration  
Akita International University, Japan

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Akita Ranga and Its International Dimensions:  
A Short Tour

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## Foreword/Acknowledgements

This is a booklet that, regardless of its modest size, aims to honor Akita Ranga for its pioneering spirit, noble qualities, and suave elegance of its painting style, attempting to also offer a testimonial page to “our” art history in the world context. The initial objective was to produce a volume on the Akita Ranga School that would be both an easily understandable historical monograph and a concrete, short, introductory guide, in conjunction with the panel exhibition “Akita Ranga and Its International Dimensions”, held at the Nakajima Library, Akita International University, from November 8, 2017 to January 12, 2018. Equal attention had to be paid to the topicality of the basic scientific information, clarity of the description, and visual impact of the illustrations. My goal was to meet the demands of students and art lovers as well as those of the expert, although this seemed an almost impossible feat. Footnotes were intentionally omitted from the text to facilitate its reading, as the famous art historian Ernst Gombrich did for his *The Story of Art*.

In seeing the realization of this tiny but precious booklet, I can only express my gratitude to all institutions and anonymous private collectors who have kindly provided us with images to be reproduced. Special thanks are due to Ms. Yuka Matsuo, curator of the Akita Senshu Museum of Art, and Prof. William Lee, director of the Asian Studies Centre of the University of Manitoba (Canada), for their help and advice from the beginning to the final stages of this booklet’s creation. My thanks also go to my colleagues for their help in proof-reading and their encouragement, especially Prof. Patrick Dougherty, Prof. Tetsuya Toyoda, and Prof. Takeshi Akiba. I would also like to acknowledge the Institute for Asian Studies and Regional Collaboration (IASRC), which has funded my research on the Akita Ranga School since 2016. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the support given by Prof. Yoshitaka Kumagai, director of the IASRC, and also the administrative assistance lent by Ms. Yukiko Kon. Lastly, I must mention that I am grateful to Mr. Takuto Nishida, my talented research assistant, who unfailingly pursued his creative instincts and achieved an excellent design for this booklet.

March 2018, in Akita

Kuniko Abe (Ph.D. in History of Art)

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## Introduction

Akita Ranga, the first important Western-influenced painting school in Japan, was formed by young samurai painters from the Akita domain. Ranga is considered a by-product of Rangaku (Dutch learning), which flourished during the eighteenth century, through the mediation of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Two years of investigation on the iconography of these artworks within a broader cultural and intellectual context has convinced me that the study of Akita Ranga should not be limited to its place within Japanese art history. Akita Ranga is not peripheral and ephemeral art; it is a product of the “Age of Exploration,” which not only coincided with the development of the natural sciences but also facilitated a global diffusion of knowledge, accompanied by a rich array of travelling images. This analytical study, thus, has been carried out from the perspective of visual culture in global history, first by inquiring into the international dimensions of Akita Ranga, and second by establishing a new narrative of this school through the re-situation of each artwork of the school into the broader context of world art history. The research seeks to connect the school’s artworks to several relevant sites in time and space, from, among others, the Chambord castle’s double spiral staircase designed by Leonardo da Vinci, in France, the Flemish engraving *Good Samaritan* by Jan Brueghel, to the Shinobazu Pond in Tokyo. I propose a new narrative for the highly sophisticated images of Akita Ranga that demonstrate the school’s inventive composition as the consequence of its interaction with European models, as well as explain how Akita Ranga’s history of travelling images comes full circle with their eventual return to Europe.

Note: In the text, Japanese names are cited in Japanese word order: the surname appears first, followed by the personal name.

1 ODANO NAOTAKE

HAWK

PRIVATE COLLECTION



## *What is Akita Ranga?*

Akita Ranga literally means “Dutch paintings [Ranga] of Akita.” It was a new style of painting employing Japanese media (Japanese pigments on silk/paper) by samurai painters of the Akita domain who formed the earliest Western-style pictorial school in the late 18th century in the Edo period. It is also called the Akita School. There are two major painters: Satake Shozan (1748-1785), the domain’s lord, and Odano Naotake (1749-1780), a retainer of Satake. Akita Ranga is characterized by its naturalistic detail and Western-type illusionism, influenced by imported European books of science and applied to traditional subjects, such as birds and flowers. Compositions stressed a large foreground subject, modelled in light and shade, often juxtaposed with a low and distant landscape in the background.

### Genesis of Akita Ranga

In 1773, Satake Shozan, lord of the Akita domain, invited Hiraga Gennai (1729-1779), a geologist, to give advice on the Akita domain’s copper mines. As a scholar of Rangaku, Gennai also imparted his knowledge of Western artistic concepts and methods. On this occasion, Naotake met Gennai, who explained to the former the use of highlights and shading. Later, Shozan sent Naotake to Edo, where he stayed at Gennai’s house for five years. Naotake not only learned about painting and Western book illustration from Gennai but he also may have come into contact with Sō Shiseki (1712-1786), one of the leading painters of the Nanpin school. Much admired by the intelligentsia and members of the samurai class, the Nanpin school is characterized by its realistic depiction of birds and flowers.



## Visual Wonders in the Edo Era and Akita Ranga

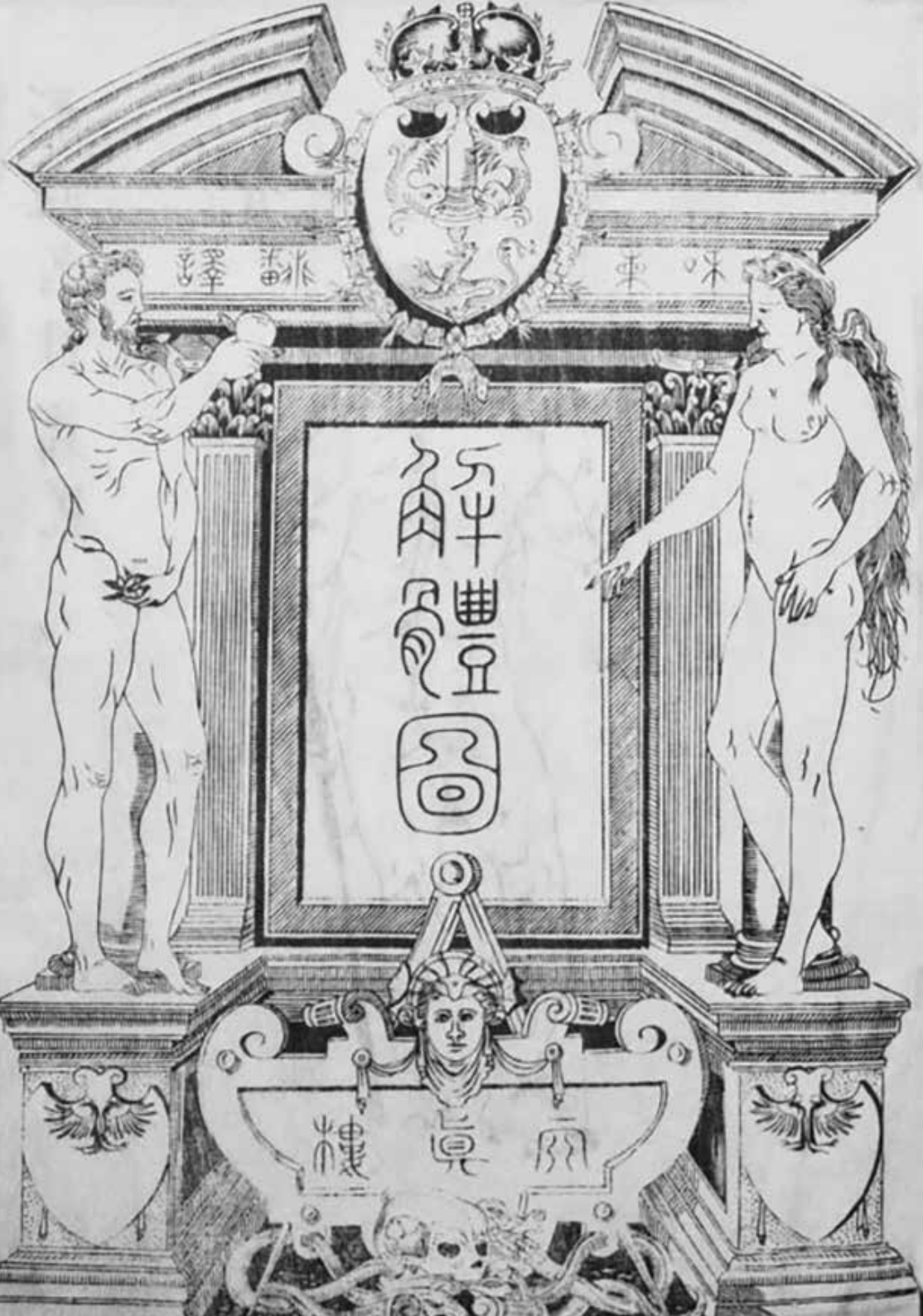
During the isolationism of the Edo period, restrictions on the import of Western books were temporarily relaxed by Tokugawa Yoshimune in 1720 (except for Christian-related materials). Henceforth, Rangaku, the study of Western science, technology, and culture blossomed. This fever for Western learning was accompanied by the introduction of optical instruments from abroad, such as the telescope and the *camera obscura*, which drastically transformed conventional understanding of the sense of sight. A new visual culture was born, flourishing in the latter half of the Edo period. With knowledge acquired through the Western study of natural history, Japanese artists attempted to render their subjects from a scientific perspective while creating a great number of sketches on nature. Although the techniques of Western linear perspective and of depicting scenes from a bird's eye view had already been introduced to Japan via China, Rangaku provided Japanese artists with more accurate and direct information at the time, leading to the rapid improvement of these techniques. The Akita Ranga school, pioneers of Westernized Japanese painting, was born in this context.

SUZUKI HARUNOBU

DETAIL OF TAMAGAWA IN KŌYA

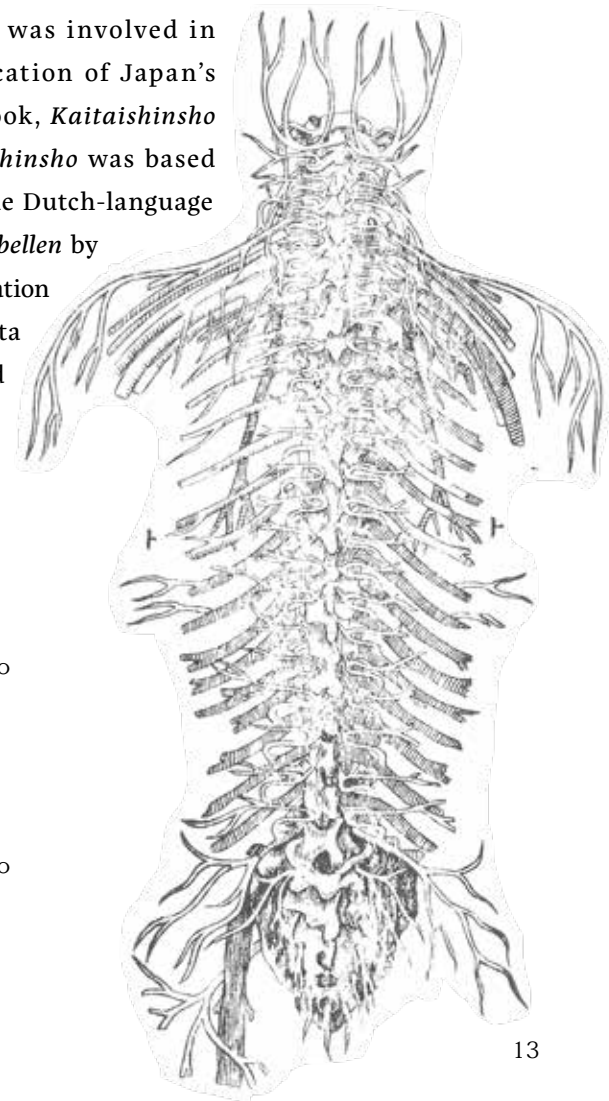
OPTIQUE DIFFUSED AND KNOWN IN EUROPE AS A "DIAGONAL VIEWING MACHINE"

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NY



## *Kaitaishinsho: New Anatomy Book*

As an illustrator, Naotake was involved in the translation and publication of Japan's first translated anatomy book, *Kaitaishinsho* (published in 1774). *Kaitaishinsho* was based on *Ontleedkundige Tafelen*, the Dutch-language translation of *Anatomische Tabellen* by Johann Adam Kulmus. Translation to Japanese was done by Sugita Genpaku, Maeno Ryotaku, and their peers. The cover page was inspired by Valverde's *Anatomie oft Levende*.



2 LEFT: ODANO NAOTAKE  
DETAIL OF  
ILLUSTRATIONS FOR KAITAISHINSHO  
AKITA SENSU MUSEUM OF ART

3 RIGHT: ODANO NAOTAKE  
DETAIL OF  
ILLUSTRATIONS FOR KAITAISHINSHO  
AKITA PREFECTURAL LIBRARY



4 SATAKE SHOZAN  
PINE TREE AND PARROT  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

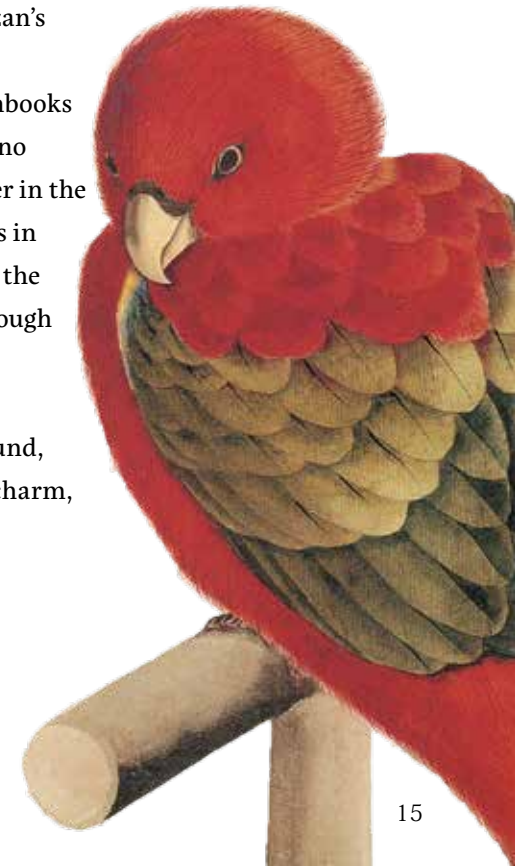


## *Pine Tree and Parrot by Satake Shozan*

Placed diagonally in the foreground, the impressive large trunk of a pine tree resting on its thick roots dominates the scenery of this painting, which is in the hanging scroll format. The imagery adopts the typical composition of Kano school screen paintings. The pine tree, however, modeled with light and shade, is naturalistically depicted in three dimensionality. On this traditional Japanese pine tree is perched a striking red and green parrot, supposedly from a southern island. The association of this traditional Japanese motif with an exotic one is rather surreal.

The drawing of this parrot found in Shozan's sketchbook proves that Shozan carefully composed several motifs from his sketchbooks and notes he made beforehand. There is no middle ground. The landscape with water in the background is depicted with hatching, as in western landscape etchings. The boat on the water is a typical Japanese sail boat. Through the emphasis on the foreground using a large object, which appears to be simply affixed in collage fashion to the background, the composition has a certain eccentric charm, which enhances its pictorial value.

5 SATAKE SHOZAN  
DETAIL OF  
PARROT FROM SATAKE SHOZAN SKETCH BOOKS  
AKITA SENSU MUSEUM OF ART





### *Mitsumata by Odano Naotake*

The setting of this landscape is Mitsumata, originally a sandbar in the Sumida River near Nihonbashi that, for a time in the Edo period, became a flourishing amusement quarter. An Uki-e optic painting of the same place was also created by Naotake. Neither reflects the bustle of the location; both instead express a serene atmosphere. This landscape painting was shown in the 1891 Exhibition of the Japan Art Association (Nihon Bijutsu

Kyōkai) and later exported to France, where it came into the possession of Louis Gonse, the famous Japanese art collector and editor of *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, which was a driving force behind the trend of Japonisme. After Gonse's death, the painting came into the hands of a Berlin gallery before finally being returned to Japan. The precise history of its owners and travels, however, is not known.

# Scenery by the Lake

In composing this landscape painting Shozan was largely inspired by the Dutch etching *Good Samaritan* by Jan Brueghel, a copy of which was in the possession of Odano Naotake. In the sequence of foreground, middle ground, and background, Shozan succeeded in achieving a naturalistic treatment of space, depicted with light and shadow, while transforming the Western model into a Japanese scene. In the sky in the background is stamped an awkwardly large Dutch seal (Segotter vol Beminnen = Great Sea-God) that Shozan had specially ordered for his artworks. The exact meaning of this Dutch word is not known. Shozan also used three other original Dutch seals that he had ordered.



7 SATAKE SHOZAN  
SCENERY BY THE LAKE  
AKITA SENSU MUSEUM OF ART



## *Shinobazu Pond/Peony in a Basket*



Rediscovered after WWII and designated an Important Cultural Asset in Japan, the painting *Shinobazu Pond* with its flower motifs has been the central subject of scholarly discussion among Akita Ranga specialists. Having provided the illustrations for the *Kaitaishinsho: New Anatomy Book*, Naotake was close to Hiraga Gennai, who studied medical herbs (phytology), both Eastern and Western. Recent studies of illustrated flower motifs show probable allusion to the virtues of these flowers as medicinal plants (namely, the peony, *salvia officinalis*, and *calendula*), revealing an aspect of the cultural background of Akita Ranga in the heart of Edo culture. Naotake may have consulted imported Western herbal books.

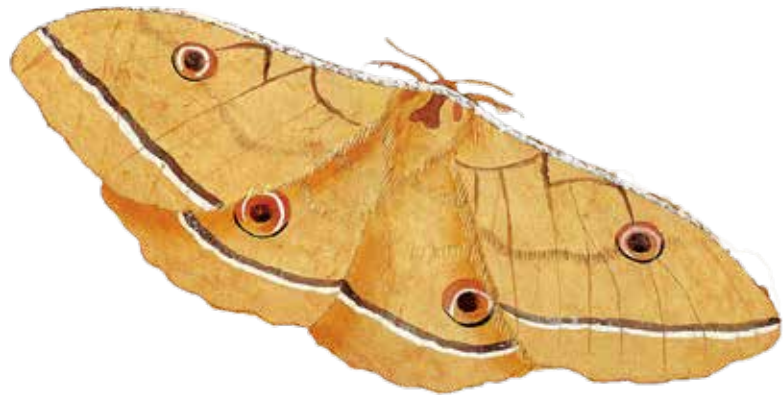
8 LEFT: ODANO NAOTAKE  
SHINOBAZU POND  
AKITA MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

9 RIGHT: ODANO NAOTAKE  
PEONY IN A BASKET  
AKITA MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



## Akita Ranga Sketch Books

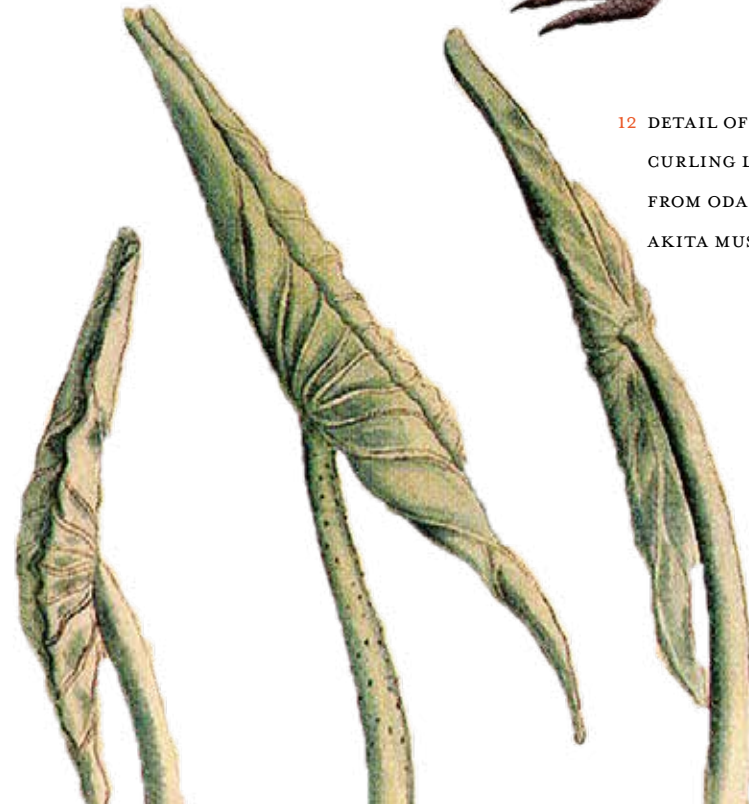
Akita Ranga is notable for its reliance on sketchbooks with detailed studies of flowers, birds, and insects drawn from life and then used for finished paintings. From these sketchbooks, the Akita Ranga school artists created many inventive compositions, bound only by a stylistic approach. As the Akita Ranga artists were not dependent on painting for a living, their distinctive works generally were not sold on the open market.



10 DETAIL OF  
MOTHS FROM SATAKE SHOZAN SKETCH BOOKS  
AKITA SENSU MUSEUM OF ART



11 DETAIL OF  
OSTRICH FROM SATAKE SHOZAN SKETCH BOOKS  
AKITA SENSU MUSEUM OF ART



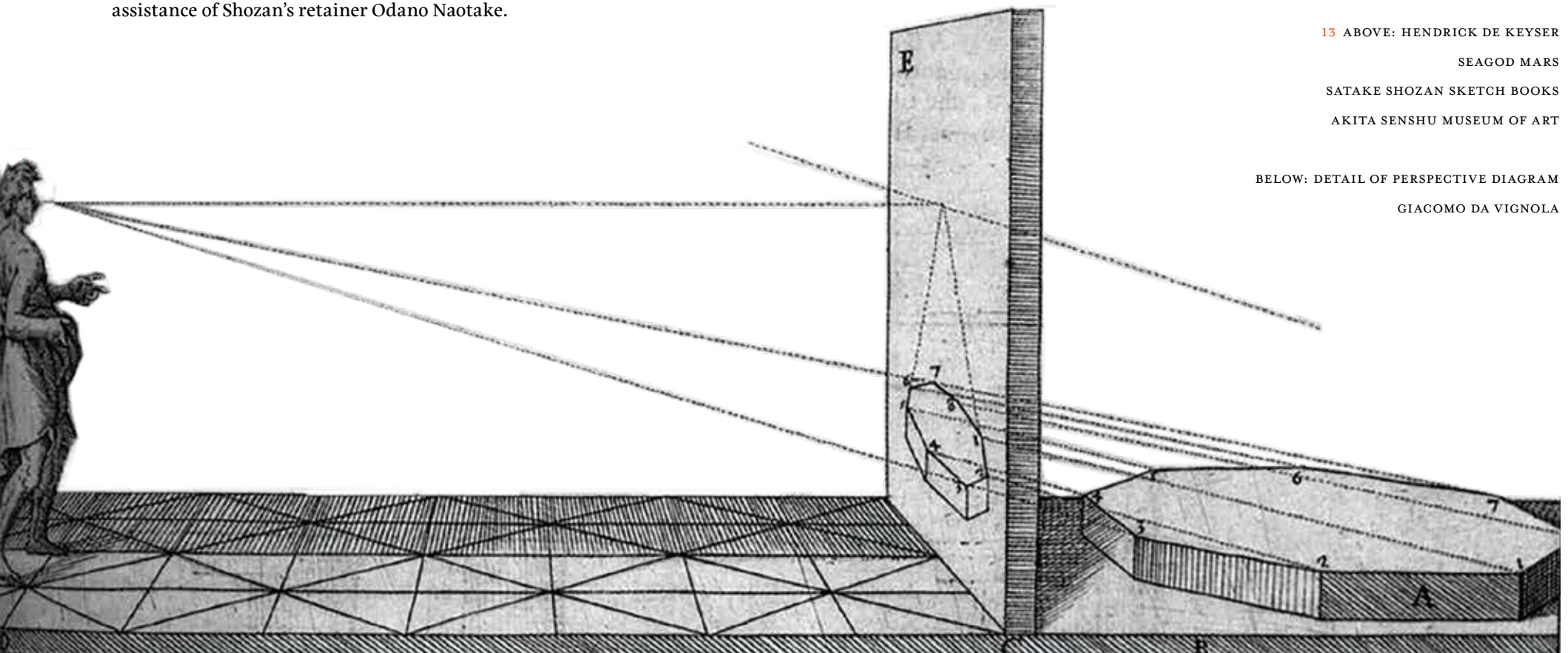
12 DETAIL OF  
CURLING LOTUS LEAVES  
FROM ODANO NAOTAKE SKETCH BOOKS  
AKITA MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

## Development of Akita Ranga

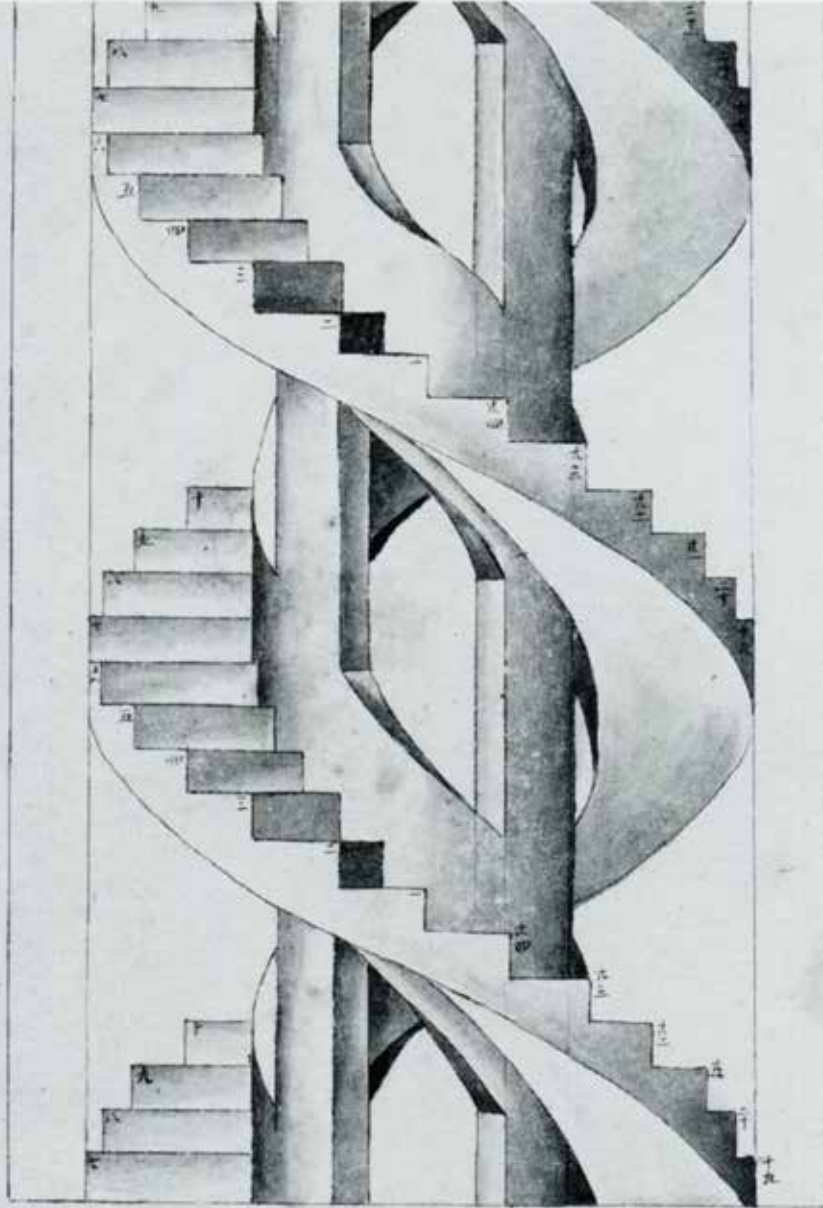
In 1778, Satake Shozan wrote three essays: *Gahō Kōryō* (Summary of the Laws of Painting), *Gato Rikai* (Understanding Painting), and *Tanseibu* (Colours). As the first Japanese theoretical texts on Western painting, these essays discuss and illustrate the methods of linear perspective, drawing figures, shading, and combining pigments. Shozan praises the naturalism of European art for its utilitarianism. Reflecting in part the ideas of Dutch learning scholar Hiraga Gennai, Shozan's theories were compiled with the assistance of Shozan's retainer Odano Naotake.



13 ABOVE: HENDRICK DE KEYSER  
SEAGOD MARS  
SATAKE SHOZAN SKETCH BOOKS  
AKITA SENSU MUSEUM OF ART



BELOW: DETAIL OF PERSPECTIVE DIAGRAM  
GIACOMO DA VIGNOLA



## Double Spiral Staircase

The third volume of Shozan's sketchbook contains the first theoretical essay on Western painting in Japan. This book is accompanied by his drawings depicting linear perspective, *chiaroscuro*, and other concepts, as well as the famed Double Spiral Staircase. The most famous example of a double spiral staircase in Europe is seen in the Chambord castle, conceived by Leonardo da Vinci. The double spiral staircase was extensively known, however, through its inclusion in Giacomo da Vignola's *Le due regole della prospettiva pratica* (1583), which spread throughout Europe. Shozan might have copied the version made by the English engineer and publisher Joseph Moxon in *Practical Perspective* (1670). It is a mystery why Shozan included the Double Spiral Staircase in his theoretical essay on Western painting.

14 SATAKE SHOZAN

DETAIL OF DOUBLE SPIRAL STAIRCASE  
FROM SATAKE SHOZAN SKETCH BOOKS  
AKITA SENSU MUSEUM OF ART

## Akita Ranga Tragedy: Sudden Demise

Emerging during the late Edo period, at the heart of the expanding Rangaku, Akita Ranga was known for its unique style of expression through applying Western pictorial technique to Eastern painting: one point perspective and *chiaroscuro*.

Naotake had established his reputation in both Akita and Edo, but a tragedy struck in 1779. His mentor, Gennai, was sent to prison, where he died, and the disgrace swept over all his close associates. Naotake was dismissed from his official position, and during the following spring, he died suddenly in Kakunodate, his hometown in Akita. Five years later, in 1785, Shozan, daimyō of the Akita domain, died. This succession of misfortunes resulted in the short life of the Akita school, as it lacked direct disciples for the next generation. Nevertheless, the Akita school had an influence on artists of the time, such as Shiba Kōkan (1747-1818), who learned the Western style from Naotake in Edo. Shiba Kōkan was greatly inspired by Shozan's *Gahō Kōryō* for his own *Seiyō Gadan* (Dissertation on Western Painting), which expands on many of Shozan's ideas.



A hundred years later, in the 1900s, Akita Ranga was rediscovered, and artworks of Akita Ranga were compiled by Hirafuku Hyakusui, a painter born in Kakunodate. He published in 1930 the first specialized book on Akita Ranga, *Nihon Yōga Shokō* (Dawn of Western Painting), which remains the fundamental resource for specialists of Akita Ranga even today.

15 SATAKE SHOZAN  
DETAIL OF IRISES AND KNIFE  
AKITA SENSU MUSEUM OF ART







## *Influence on European Art and Akita Ranga Today*

The original visual approach of the Akita Ranga school might have indirectly influenced European Impressionist painters, such as Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh, via Hokusai's or Hiroshige's ukiyo-e, Japanese woodblock prints.

Epitomized in the outstanding artistic talents of Odano Naotake and Satake Shozan, Akita Ranga paintings remain fresh, pure, and full of surprises, with their unusual treatment of space, emphatically enlarged foreground with effectively rendered backdrop in recession, and naturalistic yet elegant depictions of beautiful flowers and other figures.

LEFT: VINCENT VAN GOGH  
SOWER AT SUNSET  
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

16 RIGHT: SATAKE SHOZAN  
DETAIL OF PINE TREE AND PARROT  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



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PRIVATE COLLECTION
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FRONT COVER: FROM SATAKE SHOZAN SKETCH BOOKS  
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P.4: FROM SATAKE SHOZAN SKETCH BOOKS  
P.6: DETAIL OF PINE TREE AND PARROT BY SATAKE SHOZAN  
BACK COVER: FROM SATAKE SHOZAN SKETCH BOOKS



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