Introduction

This study focuses on the contributions of the talented and flamboyant high-ranking aristocrat Konoe Nobutada (1565–1614). Nobutada is celebrated as among the most skilled calligraphers in Japanese history, yet his importance extends significantly beyond his creation of a unique writing style. His involvement in politics is a recurring theme in this book. I believe that Nobutada used works of art to create a new image for the court. This supports the notion – often hinted at, but rarely discussed directly – that politics played a role in the development of new styles of art during Nobutada's lifetime.

Conclusively proving such a theory is problematic. It is unlikely that Nobutada or any of his contemporaries left written documents explaining their artistic motives. What documentary evidence does show, however, is that Nobutada was deeply concerned about the political events that shaped his world. Among other things, he wrote letters, literally on his deathbed, to keep abreast of events unfolding between Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) and Toyotomi Hideyori (1593–1615). While scholars today tend to ignore or treat casually the confrontation between the experienced warhorse Ieyasu and the youthful Hideyori, the threat to the Tokugawa was serious. This critical juncture in Japanese history deserves closer examination, and we need to seriously reconsider the roles played by Nobutada and his contemporaries.

To discuss the role of art in politics during Nobutada's life we must first describe the political and cultural world from the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth century, which is a challenge because these years fall within an academic no-man's land. Scholars have never clearly defined when the era of Tokugawa rule began, dating it to accomplishments of the founder Tokugawa Ieyasu, varying between his 1600 success at the Battle of Sekigahara, his 1603 assumption of the title of shogun, and his final triumph over the Toyotomi clan in 1615. Using the term *bunka* or 'culture', many historians extend the Momoyama well into the seventeenth century.[1] Thus, the years of Nobutada's greatest artistic production are treated as 'Momoyama' in some sources, while elsewhere they mysteriously become part of 'Edo'. To confuse the issue even further, other scholars, including the prominent historian Kumakura Isao, consider 'Momoyama' to end with the death of pivotal figures such as the tea master Sen Rikyū (1522–91) and the painter Kano Eitoku (1543–90) and refer to the art thereafter as a phase of 'Kan'ei culture', named after the Kan'ei era (1624–44) dominated by the art of the court of Emperor Go-Mizunoo (1596-1680).[2]

Art produced during the Keichō era, which lasted from autumn 1596 to the summer of 1615, has thus been seen as either a dessert of the Momoyama feast or as an appetizer for the Kan'ei era banquet, never as a central item on the menu. Neither course does justice to a period that, while brief, includes peak periods in the careers of Nobutada and his fellow calligrapher Hon'ami Kōetsu (1558–1637), as well as prominent figures such as the tea master Furuta Oribe (1543–1615), and the painters Kano Sanraku (1559–1635) and Kaihō Yūshō (1533–1615), to name a few. Here, I propose that we examine these years within context. Toyotomi Hideyoshi's death two years after this era began triggered a complex series of events that resulted in a period of confusion, anticipation, flux, and political posturing. Under the circumstances, it is only logical to assume that the anticipation of the inevitable confrontation between Hideyoshi's son Hideyori and Ieyasu was foremost on people's minds. They knew, after all, that the outcome of their contest would affect the situation in Japan, and particularly, in Kyoto, for generations to come. Artists were certainly not immune to the stresses of such an environment.[3]

The description of Nobutada's life, art and times is the focus of this study, yet it also looks beyond Nobutada. Thus the second, broader, goal of this book is to begin a much-needed re-examination of the role the court played as a whole in Japanese art history. Studies of fifteenth-, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Japanese art have centred far too long on the patronage of the military elite and the wealthy artisans and merchants known as the *machishū*, and paid scant attention to the aristocracy. Ironically, many authors mine aristocratic diaries for data on warriors without reflecting on the significance of the writers of these works. We need to address the question: 'If aristocrats were so outdated, impoverished and powerless, why *are* they such a vital source of information?' Naturally, aristocrats left rare documentation of the events that occurred around them, so their writing itself is valuable, but surely these accounts also demonstrate their extensive connections with their military contemporaries? If the court was truly redundant, there would have been no reason for shoguns and daimyo to include aristocrats in their lives at all.

The contributions of aristocrats after 1615 are more visible in scholarly discourse, although rarely with an eye toward the contemporary political scene. The cultured society surrounding the popular Emperor Go-Mizunoo, with key roles played in the tea world by Nobutada's adopted son Nobuhiro (also known as Ōzan; 1599–1649) and the much later Konoe Iehiro (also known as Yorakuin; 1667–1736) have at least been noted frequently.[4] However, here also scholars seem to describe isolated pockets of creativity that developed from tea culture, rather than chapters in the history of court involvement in the arts and politics.[5] And in recent years a number of exhibitions with catalogues have been produced by a group known as the Kasumi Kaikan Foundation, which reveal fascinating glimpses of the relationship between the court and the shogunate during the period of Tokugawa predominance.[6] Though these are certainly signs of an awakening awareness, the court's importance in both art and politics after the thirteenth century is still underestimated.

Power and Politics

For the purpose of this book, I have used the terms 'power' and 'politics' in their broader connotations. The often-quoted work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines, among other things, various types of capital – cultural, symbolic and economic – and has significant applications in the studies of Japan's aristocracy.[7] Though perhaps lacking in economic capital, the court was unrivalled in cultural and symbolic wealth. This gave them considerable power in terms of being able to provide or reject social acceptance, i.e., supreme mastery over the 'humiliation sword'. In Japan, historically the competition on intellectual and artistic levels was just as brutal as any battlefield. The pitfalls there were more daunting, because many of these men would surely choose losing their head in battle to public embarrassment in a poetry gathering or court ceremony.

My definition of what can be considered 'political' is very flexible. For instance, sending a poem pleading for peace to someone bound for battle is a political act, and potentially a very powerful one. Creating art that sends a subliminal yet politically loaded message is another way of influencing people. Propagandistic messages of art in Japan are typically deeply hidden – for protection in case the 'wrong side' won – and thus difficult to define with certainty. However, we can at least reasonably postulate that Nobutada and his contemporaries were keenly aware that the future of their families and their livelihoods depended on the outcome of a highly volatile political contest. It is logical that all possible weapons would be used to shore up one's defence when facing what could become a life-or-death situation. To the cultured elite of the Kyoto area, poetry and the visual arts were clearly media through which one could express and disseminate political views while smiling innocently beneath the umbrella of tradition.

It is also important to realise that politics have a strong and practical 'covering all eventualities' aspect. Unlike in a Hollywood movie, where everyone has a firm stance and will nobly die protecting the one, stable 'good' cause, real life is rarely so clear-cut. While many a noble warrior probably did die protecting his master, Japanese history is full of examples of rapid political about-face at the highest levels. Alliances were made and broken regularly, and marriages were used to create buffer relationships. In addition, a fierce instinct to protect one's family means that data concerning any individual or family can contain misleading messages concerning political stance. For instance, the Konoe family was divided during the years when the imperial court was split into two camps, the Northern and Southern courts. While on the surface that seems to indicate a rift in the family, this may well have been a protective measure, insurance that the family would survive no matter which party would finally prevail. Closer to Nobutada's own time is a famous portrait where the painter Kaihō Yūshō's wife is dressed in a robe with a Tokugawa family crest, which had been a gift. This would appear to be a clear sign of their support of the shogunal family, but all other evidence indicates that Yūshō's sympathies lay firmly in Kyoto. Obviously, the family had much to gain from Tokugawa patronage and it was an honour to receive such a robe, but this does not mean that the members of this school were necessarily Tokugawa supporters. Handscrolls and other materials written by aristocrats for the Tokugawa should also be carefully scrutinized and not assumed to represent the blanket statements of approval of this military family that first glance would suggest.

We should also be careful not to make too many assumptions when reading diaries. Omissions do not necessarily indicate a lack of knowledge, interest or emotion about a subject. A good example of this is seen when Ijūin Tadamune (?-1599) was killed in 1599. As noted in Chapter Two, Nobutada's diary records gifts he received from Tadamune just days before this murder, yet he makes no mention of the actual event. Surely Nobutada knew about, and was shocked by, the sudden death of someone with whom he had had such recent contact. Perhaps he felt the subject inappropriate for prudent commentary, or too politically sensitive. This could well be the case in many other instances when 'no one even bothered to record' some event or dictum received in their diary. In letters, too, Nobutada often includes a note that makes it clear that he is relying on those how delivered them to relay additional information. Thus, although it is wonderful that such first-hand materials still exist, they should not be read too literally. Given this, it is probably best to leave John Wayne behind and examine documents and works of art with a critical eye, taking into account these aspects.

Aristocrats

To understand Nobutada, we must first look at the historical role of the imperial court. A monarchy – here understood as the body of individuals most closely related to a long-established hereditary head of state – can lack direct governing rule and even significant economic power while still playing a significant role in history. Despite their substantial decline in income and prestige after the thirteenth century, the emperor and the nobility of Japan maintained an important, if at times insecure, place in elite society.

Studies of the aristocracy clearly indicate that the court cannot be seen as a single, unified body. [8] It was instead composed of several groups, with conflicting interests. Historically, the most powerful contenders were the main line of the Fujiwara family and the imperial family. Marriage was the weapon of choice in their skirmishes. [9] One primary goal was to have a grandson become emperor. Thus, the Fujiwara family strove constantly to manoeuvre their daughters into the imperial family, while the imperial family did its best to evade them. Such a history is not easily forgotten in a society where precedent and family pride are paramount, and I have worked on the presumption that the power struggle between the imperial and Fujiwara lines continued even after aristocratic financial power waned. While admittedly the study of Nobutada as a single figure cannot conclusively confirm this, this is the working hypothesis here.

Beginning in the twelfth century, the main line of the Fujiwara family was divided into five lineages known as the *go-sekke*, from which the imperial regent (*sesshō*) and chancellor (*kanpaku*) were chosen. Nobutada's family, the Konoe, was the senior of these regent branches.[10] Although the Fujiwara are generally considered to have become impotent with the coming of warrior rule, if we take a closer look at the facts, it is clear that the Konoe line gained considerable power and influence through politically arranged marriages during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The story of such marriages and the offspring they produced provides a roadmap to the relationships between this influential aristocratic family and both the military elite and the imperial family. The Konoe family was thus neither quiescent nor defenceless; rather, they successfully negotiated at the highest level of contemporary society.

Marriage was important to the court in another way. Powerful military families prized the high status provided by aristocratic brides, whose offspring would grace the family through the sophistication of their bloodlines and upbringing. Thus, the daughters of these families ensured the lasting appeal of the court. These women would, in turn, bring personal belongings of artistic merit to their new homes. The aesthetic of Kyoto's courtly culture proliferated in this way, taking on new life far away from the historical capital.[11]

Besides underestimating the importance of court marriages, a number of erroneous assumptions cloud our judgment concerning the role of the aristocracy after its 'glory days'. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The court was essentially 'dead' as a political and cultural force after warrior governments took power.
- Courtiers lived in a world of their own, having little contact with non-aristocrats.

Further, in terms of their role in art history, the following inaccurate assumptions seem prevalent:

- The court was only interested in *yamato-e* arts – those of native Japanese inspiration. Thus, Chinese-inspired ink painting, an art form favoured during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, has been presumed to reflect warrior taste and not that of the contemporary court. Underlying this is the assumption that the 'manly' art of ink painting would not interest the 'effete' court.
- 'Patronage' necessarily meant that one had one's own funds to purchase art.
- 'Patronage' always took the form of monetary support. That it might be non-financial – for example, in the form of introductions, or verbal and written appreciation of an artist's capabilities – is a possibility that has remained under-explored. Such a recommendation from a well-placed aristocrat would greatly enhance an artist's reputation and earning capacity.

These assumptions will be addressed at greater length in Chapter 1. Naturally, few modern scholars maintain such a determinedly myopic view of the court – there are definite signs that the role of the court is starting to be reassessed and ideas about what one can consider 'patronage' are rapidly changing.[12] Scholars are also examining the relationships between the court and warriors and art and power.[13] Nevertheless, the court is still generally seen as powerless and taken for granted.

Calligraphy

After considering Nobutada's own time and an examination of areas where the court had retained it's strengths, a third goal of this study is to focus attention upon calligraphy, the primary art form of Japanese aristocrats and an integral part of Japanese art history. In Japan, as in China and Korea, calligraphy was traditionally considered the ultimate means of artistic expression for a scholar-gentleman, and written inscriptions were an integral part of art objects. Calligraphy was, in general, more highly regarded than painting.[14] While traditional calligraphy is still appreciated in Japan today – as can be easily demonstrated by the numerous exhibitions and books devoted to the subject and the large number of amateur and professional practitioners – it has come to be viewed with mixed emotions. While admiring the beauty of classical script, many Japanese are no longer comfortable writing with a brush and as a result must struggle to produce a suitable card at New Year. The ambiguous feelings toward calligraphy are explained, to a certain extent, by changes that occurred in Japan during the nineteenth century. At that time a number of 'innovations' were introduced, including a standardisation of script and a Westernisation of writing materials and printing techniques.[15] As part of this 'standardisation' the government denounced many of the traditional calligraphic abbreviations of Chinese characters, characterising a number of popular forms as *hentai*, 'anomalous,' 'abnormal,' or even 'perverted'. These characters were removed from schoolbooks and except for scholars specialising in classical history and calligraphy, only the oldest Japanese citizens maintain familiarity with them. Consequently, exhibitions of calligraphy in Japan are invariably filled with viewers struggling to read what is written in a state of determined perplexity. The effort needed to decipher the text inevitably detracts from the viewer's aesthetic appreciation of the work as a whole. The trend away from handwritten language has been rapidly accelerated in Japan, as elsewhere, by the use of computers.

In modern Japan calligraphy is often treated as a separate entity.[16] Western influence and the urge to divide subjects into neat categories were at least partially responsible for the tendency to segregate painting and calligraphy, and other fields that had traditionally been entwined.[17] Few scholars study the history of calligraphy or palaeography, and there are hardly any centres devoted to these fields. Museums rather than universities employ most Japanese specialists in this field, thus significantly diminishing the degree to which the knowledge of calligraphy is transmitted to budding art historians. And, while a section on calligraphy still remains obligatory in most general exhibitions of Japanese art, pieces of calligraphy are sometimes selected for their connection with famous historical figures rather than for their significance as art.[18] While documents written by famous people like Oda Nobunaga or Toyotomi Hideyoshi may be interesting from a historical perspective, they rarely can be said to be great works of art. Such objects can obviously be included in exhibitions and do help to set the stage for other works, but they are perhaps better treated as supporting documents or materials providing background rather than works of artistic calligraphy. That said, admittedly the line between 'calligraphic work of art' and 'document written with a skilled hand' can be difficult to distinguish at times. For instance, although informal works were not originally considered as objects for display, letters of prominent people are often hung on the wall in Japan during tea gatherings and are considered by many to be works of art. It is thus not surprising that the divisions get blurred.

Nevertheless, there is no excuse for neglecting the calligraphy that is integral to many works, particularly since historically in Japan, viewers were supposed to appreciate the text and painting as a whole. In fact, the text was traditionally the senior partner of the two for much of the medieval era and well into the early modern era. Furthermore, identifying the written text and the name of the calligrapher often provides important clues to its provenance. For instance, such an author might have chronicled details of the work's production in his diary.

In addition to its art historical importance, calligraphy has implications for historians as well. Handwriting styles can be an indication of a close connection between two parties or even of political affiliation. It is thus vital to look at the calligraphy style of letters and edicts and investigate the scribes who were employed to write them.[19]

Sources

Biographical material on Nobutada presently available in English is almost exclusively confined to exhibition catalogue entries, notes concerning his relationship with the military ruler Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98) and essays on ink painting.[20] While these are a beginning, their coverage is very limited. Japanese sources are somewhat more expansive but these often focus on Nobutada's period of exile (1593–96), with the last nineteen years of his life often being ignored or summarised by a list of the court titles he acquired.[21] Thankfully, Hashimoto Masanobu of the University of Tokyo has recently published research based upon documents in the Konoe family archive, the Yōmei Bunko.[22] This work provides more detailed information concerning Nobutada's later life. These include an article concerning a will that Nobutada wrote in 1613, an important document that is translated in Appendix 3.

Nobutada's diary, known as the *Sanmyakuin ki*, was published in 1975.[23] It provides some relevant information, though it is often no more than a dry account of the gifts he gave and received, the visitors he entertained, and the trips he made. Aristocratic diaries were copied and read throughout the ages, particularly by family members. They rarely contain the type of private reflection that Westerners associate with personal journals. In addition, there are large gaps – if Nobutada wrote a continuous record, it has not survived. Nevertheless, through the regularity with which names are cited and events noted, the *Sanmyakuin ki* provides an insight into Nobutada's activities and those of his closest associates. Other essays that Nobutada wrote are published together with his diary and these give vital first-hand accounts of key historical events. This material from Nobutada himself is augmented by data gathered from other diaries and contemporary sources. A number of otherwise unpublished texts are cited in the extensive coverage of Nobutada in *Dai Nihon shiryō*.[24] Nobutada's published correspondence also provides insight into his life. His letters are discussed in a number of different sources, including the *Kan'ei no sanpitsu* issue of *Nihon no bijutsu* and the catalogue of the 1990 exhibition at the Osaka Municipal Museum entitled *'Kōetsu no sho' Keichō, Genna, Kan'ei no meihitsu*.[25]

In addition to utilising these sources, I compiled a detailed chronology of key events in Nobutada's life and the period in which he lived, which brought important information to light. Given the extremely sophisticated, efficient, and rapid communications system in Japan at the time, and the active social calendar of the cultural elite – gossip was a primary method of information exchange – we can assume that Nobutada knew about events that occurred in Edo within a week and perhaps even sooner.[26] He had information concerning events in nearby Osaka within a day.[27] Therefore, in order to gain a more rounded view of the contemporary situation, I have placed events in a single, lineal timeline – rather than in separate categories divided according to geography or particular themes, as is often the practice in Japan. This chronology appears in Appendix 2 and includes important anniversaries such as the third, seventh and thirteenth anniversaries of prominent figures' deaths.[28] Observing such dates was critical to the family and close associates of the deceased. Edicts from the shogun and directed to the court, or having an impact on them, that were announced during such a period of mourning had significance that reached far beyond the literal meaning of the pronouncements themselves.

Structure of this book

Chapter 1 discusses aristocratic contributions to Japanese art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Historians have uncovered documentary evidence showing that a number of aristocrats were active, extroverted, and politically astute.[29] Art historians have further dealt with certain aspects of aristocratic contributions.[30] This chapter will address in broader terms the involvement of aristocrats in both the visual arts and the political struggles of the time. A last section highlights the Konoe family.

Chapter 2 describes Nobutada's life. His biography is so intimately entwined with the political and cultural happenings of his time that I found it both impractical and undesirable to divide them here. Even some events in which Nobutada had no direct involvement are mentioned, because, for example, in choosing *not* to attend a major social event, Nobutada, as a high-ranking aristocrat, may well have been making a statement.

Nobutada's biography deserves a monograph of its own. While this study provides a broader and deeper treatment of Nobutada's life than any other work to date, many of the subjects introduced here demand more extensive treatment. One problem is the vast number of surviving manuscripts and letters written by or concerning Nobutada. The letters and other documents ascribed to Nobutada alone in the Yōmei Bunko number in the hundreds, most of which remain unpublished.[31] This tempting but at present insurmountable mass of material will require decades of research before it can be assimilated. Accordingly, I have limited myself here to information available in published form.

The politics and art in Nobutada's Kyoto are discussed in Chapter 3. A thorough investigation of the extent and content of Nobutada's political ambitions, fascinating though it might be, is beyond the scope of this study. One does not need to scratch the surface very deeply, however, to find evidence that Nobutada was directly involved in the power struggles of his era. This chapter focuses on Nobutada's interactions with Tokugawa Ieyasu and Toyotomi Hideyori. In addition, I note clues that suggest political involvement on the part of famous artists living in Kyoto.

After the historical/political focus of Chapters 1, 2 and 3, Nobutada's works of art are evaluated in Chapters 4 to 6, beginning with his calligraphy. Calligraphy was a particular speciality of the Konoe family. Nobutada established one of the most unusual writing styles in the history of Japanese art, and describing this style is the main goal of this chapter. Although his prominence as a calligrapher is well established, he has been pigeonholed as one of the *Kan'ei no sanpitsu*, the 'three master calligraphers of the Kan'ei era' (1622–44). Nobutada, and his contemporaries Hon'ami Kōetsu and Shōkadō Shōjō (1585–1639) are commonly referred to by this catchy but misleading sobriquet.[32] Nobutada died eight years before the Kan'ei era began and Kōetsu's most famous works date to the Keichō era (1596–1615), so clearly the connection with the Kan'ei era is erroneous.

Chapter 5 discusses the ways in which Nobutada revised themes that had a long association with the aristocracy's 'courtly tradition'. This includes "portrayals" of the famous *Thirty-six Immortal Poets*, themes from *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*, early eleventh century), and calligraphy works with poems selected from several prominent poetry anthologies. The last part of this chapter discusses Nobutada's paintings of Tenjin, or the deified Sugawara Michizane (845–903). These works that are generally categorised as Zen painting or *zenga*, and Nobutada is considered one of the founders of the genre.[34]

Nobutada's role in creating 'new' courtly traditions in art is examined in Chapter 6, beginning with his *Eight Views of Ōmi* screens. These screens were discussed as examples of early works on this theme in Judith Stubbs' dissertation, but which otherwise have received little notice.[35] Thereafter I discuss Nobutada's screens with large-scale calligraphy, some of the most unusual, and most impressive, works of art that he produced.

Chapter 7 concerns art and politics in Kyoto after Nobutada's death. The scene changed significantly after the defeat of Toyotomi Hideyori in the summer of 1615 and Oribe's subsequent forced suicide. Kōetsu also apparently moved to the area north of Kyoto known as Takagamine at this time.[36] The end of this chapter will return to a more historical treatment, examining the relations between the court and the shogunate in Kyoto in the post-Nobutada period, focusing upon the Konoe family. As noted here, the Konoe maintained close ties to both the emperor and later, to the Tokugawa shogunate, and their role in politics is certainly worthy of scholarly attention.

In summary, if we revise the notion that men such as Nobutada were elegant fossils who sat back passively and allowed the military rulers to determine their destiny, it is clear that many courtiers did what they could to wield influence. Their victories are not as impressively substantiated as those of warriors, since no heads were gathered nor territories conquered. Nevertheless, the weapons of the aristocracy were more effective than scholars have historically acknowledged.

Moreover, when we erase the boundary lines between the studies of calligraphy and painting and consider works of art from the perspective of both history and art history, we find that aristocratic contributions were both varied and significant. We need to move beyond conventional ideas of aristocrats and court art – starting, perhaps, by eliminating the image of aristocrats as ethereal beings who never looked beyond native Japanese culture – to see a diverse group of individuals with a vested interest in maintaining or improving the status of their families. Studying Nobutada, one of the most creative talents in the history of Japanese visual arts, is an ideal place to begin this journey.