In 1626 Emperor Go-Mizunoo and Empress Tōfukumon'in marked their sixth year as a married couple, the emperor being thirty-one years old and the empress twenty. Although still young Go-Mizunoo strove to sustain and build on the cultural legacy left behind by his father, Emperor Go-Yōzei, and thereby enhance the mystique and aura of grandeur associated with the royal institution. The Tokugawa continued their attempts to bolster the symbolic inheritance of the dairi while simultaneously constricting the actual reach of the imperial leaders, but Go-Mizunoo and Tōfukumon'in were able to operate within that coercive environment and emerge as energetic leaders of Kyoto culture.

In addition to their many ceremonial and religious activities, the emperor and empress hosted gatherings at the palace for cultural pastimes, including most notably poetry competitions, tea gatherings, and theatrical performances. Their sponsorship of and participation in such events ensured that an impressive array of cultural and political luminaries of the capital was in attendance. Beyond their interest in performance arts, Go-Mizunoo and Tōfukumon'in also commissioned paintings in various formats, along with finely made objects for devotional, ornamental, and workaday use, many of them pictorial in their decoration. Some of these were for themselves, others were originally intended or later decided to be presented as official gifts. Go-Mizunoo and Tōfukumon'in did not commission all the pieces in their collections, however; some were recent gifts and others had been passed down for generations at the palace. Their collections included centuries-old masterpieces as well as contemporary crafts. This chapter focuses on the relationships between these royal bastions of Kyoto culture and the artists they supported as patrons. Also treated here are artistic pursuits of Go-Mizunoo and Tōfukumon'in, several of which were popular among wealthy warriors and townspeople. Go-Mizunoo’s sustained interaction with various strata of Kyoto elite society was remarkable for an occupant of the Chrysanthemum Throne at the beginning of the early modern period.

Here I adopt several different perspectives to examine the wide-ranging social contacts that Go-Mizunoo and Tōfukumon'in formed in the course of their artistic sponsorship. The imperial couple’s patronage of the painter and painting-shop proprietor Tawaraya Sōtatsu is relevant in this regard, as Sōtatsu was a commoner and is now associated with an imperial revivalist movement. Also relevant is Go-Mizunoo’s commission of a copy of the illustrated handscroll, Poetry Competition between Artisans, which represents commoners. Poetry competitions had been a canonical theme in the literary arts of the court, tied to the religious practices of the nobility, but artists also created a variation on this theme in which tradespeople replaced the aris-
tocratic poets, and Go-Mizunoo’s adoption of tradespeople-poets imagery might be interpreted in social-political as well as artistic-thematic terms. Similarly, the monarch’s participation in flower-arranging events and tea gatherings at court might indicate his intention to reach out to influential members of the townsman community in Kyoto.

This chapter thus studies artistic evidence of connections between the court and wealthy townspeople, or the “upper bourgeoisie” (machishū). Some cultural historians see alliances between the two as central to a revival in Kyoto culture at the outset of the early modern era. The machishū had emerged in the fifteenth century and rose to prominence in Kyoto in the sixteenth century. The Momoyama-period machishū, comprising merchants, artisans, and moneylenders, is recognized by certain historians as a cohesive group that was well educated and affiliated with aristocrats in cultural settings. These scholars propose that members of the court sponsored cultural events attended by individuals from the machishū and other backgrounds and that Go-Mizunoo hosted a salon at which members had comparatively free exchanges, unencumbered by the social hierarchies that would prevail in years to come.

Groups of different status had co-mingled in the past, but from all evidence Go-Mizunoo’s sponsorship of such events was unparalleled for a Japanese emperor in this era. Although his cultural activities differed from those of his father, they were consistent with Go-Yōzei’s attempts to revive the ancient belief in a uniquely imperial responsibility to secure divine blessings for the land, and thus the unique leadership role of the court. Furthermore, Go-Mizunoo’s engagement with cultural pursuits can be interpreted as a gesture of self-determinacy—perhaps even a reaction against the controlling hand of the Tokugawa. Whether Go-Mizunoo also took advantage of artistic and cultural activities to form alliances with influential members of Kyoto’s commoner community to resist authoritarian Tokugawa tendencies is unclear. Such actions would have threatened to erode the emperor’s special relationship with the Tokugawa, his financial supporters, and thus it seems unlikely that they occurred.

As elaborated in this chapter, Go-Mizunoo and Tōfukumon’in were major patrons of painting within Kyoto. They provided sponsorship across leading workshops, including painters from ateliers traditionally patronized by the court and painters from at least one newly created independent workshop. The former group included members of the Kano and Tosa studios, while the latter group included artists employed by the “Tawara shop,” one of the numerous painting shops (eya) and illustrated-book shops (ezōshiya) found in the townsman community of Kyoto. Artists at these shops tended to work more independently than the Kano and Tosa painters, whose studios were hierarchical in organization and often traditional in methods. Town shops hired painters of varying backgrounds, a number of whom had been displaced from elite ateliers during the tumultuous Age of the Country at War. Even the elite artists integrated a variety of methods and subjects into their work, bringing a new vitality to painting.

THE ROYAL COUPLE’S SPONSORSHIP OF KANO PAINTERS

The emperor and empress were familiar with a number of painters from the Kano workshop, appreciated by members of noble and warrior society for decades. From his youth, when he could have seen Takanobu paint expanses of sliding-door panels in the Keichō Palace, Go-Mizunoo had experienced many opportunities to view works by Kano artists. After Takanobu’s death in 1618, his nephew Sadanobu managed the next major project of painting at court, decoration of the Empress’s Palace for Tōfukumon’in.

In addition to producing large-scale paintings for palace buildings and temples affiliated with the court, some Kano painters created smaller works for the private delectation of emperor and empress. In 1616, for example, Kano Kōi (ca. 1569–1636) received a commission from Go-Mizunoo to paint