Hanabusa Itchō, who lived from 1652 to 1724, lived on as an inspiring presence throughout the remainder of the Edo period (1603–1868). Painter, singer-songwriter, and poet, he articulated the tensions of his times by bringing literary themes into the visual realm, and his humorous original designs circulated broadly. Sent into exile for almost a dozen years, he became a social transgressor who had triumphed over his banishment in the legends that arose over time. As the fictional realms of theater, novels, and prints figured him as a symbol of the artist-rebel, the first objective artists’ biographies preserved the details of his complicated life for posterity. Indeed, in his afterlives more than in his lifetime, Itchō was an enigmatic anti-hero who stood for the subtly subversive potential of art.

Itchō’s themes range from the overtly comical, provoking delighted laughter, to the quietly reverent, invoking spiritual reflection. The best of his works elicit a mixture of these responses. His paintings that show the everyday humor of accidental social encounters were frequently emulated, and ensured his popular renown. His erudite references in text and image to ancient Asian figures of the recluses drew the veneration of generations of learned aficionados. During his lifetime, followers perpetuated Itchō’s motifs, sometimes spuriously adding his name to their own paintings and craftwork.

Nineteenth-century artists, especially members of the Utagawa school of ukiyo-e, complimented Itchō by imitation, and his images circulated broadly in woodblock prints, paintings, craftwork, books, and even the popular theatre of Kabuki.

Originally trained by Kanō Yasunobu (1613–85), a leading official painter of the realm, Itchō became the head of his own thriving studio by the end of his life. Later he was recognized as the founder of a new lineage, the Hanabusa school. In fact, the standard compendium of Japanese artists compiled in the early nineteenth century, Koga bikō (Notes and References on Old Paintings), devotes much more space to Itchō, as the founder of the Hanabusa lineage, than to his now more famous contemporary Ōgata Kōrin (1658–1716). The first history of ukiyo-e, Ukiyo-e ruiķō (Kinds of Ukiyo-e), begun in the late eighteenth century, celebrates Itchō as one of the founding fathers of the genre. Around the same time, the printed collection of his designs, Itchō gafu (Itchō Pictorial Album), one of the first monographic art books published in Japan, helped define the emerging genre of giga (playful images).

Yet, if many households knew the name of Hanabusa Itchō during the Edo period, it was because of the allure of scandal. For reasons that are now unclear, in 1698 Tokugawa Tsunayoshi (1646–1709), a shogun whom later generations loved to hate, banished Itchō from the city of Edo (now Tokyo) and sent him to the distant island of Miyake. Itchō survived the harsh conditions there by sending his paintings to Edo and some of the nearby is-