Buson earned most of his income from painting rather than writing, so a good way to start exploration of his work is with a brief consideration his work as a painter. As a painter he was at the center of a development that was to have a powerful impact on his haikai and the discourse of the Bashō Revival as a whole. This development was the rise of the ideal of the cultivated amateur, or bunjin, which allowed artists to simultaneously work as professionals yet appear to transcend the corrupting influences of profit. In Buson’s case, the ideal of the cultivated amateur was useful in his efforts to build a persona that would enable an outsider like himself to gain support and patronage from wealthy patrons.

Indeed, Buson was an outsider, especially as an artist. He learned by studying examples in the collections of his wealthy patrons in the northeast, Tango, Kyoto, and Shikoku, rather than from teachers. In other words, he was not a member of any of the established ateliers or artistic lineages like the Tosa, Kanō, and Rimpa schools that were influential in the world of Japanese painting. Modern art historians place him in the category of nanga or bunjin-ga (literati painting) artists—which also includes painters like Sakaki Hyakusen 彭城百川 (1697–1752), Ike no Taiga 池大雅 (1723–1776), and Maruyama Okyo 円山応挙 (1733–1795).

Buson’s dual identities as painter and poet were not contradictory. Painting and poetry have always had close ties in Japan, and the contemporary demand for work that reflected the ideals of the Chinese literati painters created an especially hospitable climate for someone like Buson, who had competence in all the arts of the brush, i.e., painting, calligraphy, and poetry.

Both the words nanga and bunjin-ga indicate an affinity with the Chinese wenren 文人 (literati; Japanese: bunjin) artists that were active in the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties. In its most idealized form, the Chinese term wenren referred to scholar-officials who—either through misfortune or because of some political conviction—withdraw from circles of power, and spent their time writing poetry, practicing
calligraphy and painting, and enjoying the company of like-minded friends.\(^1\) Wenren did not sell their work, but used it as a means of contemplation and self-cultivation.

This ideal was immensely appealing to the Japanese, and the word *bunjin* that derived from it has a long history in Japan, as does the emulation of the practices with which it is associated. While use of the word itself dates back to the Nara period (710–794), it has a more specific meaning in Buson’s time; it describes a person who—aside from being learned in poetry, Confucian philosophy, and the arts—lived an eccentric, unconventional lifestyle removed from political and economic striving. In its earliest forms, *bunjin* came from the upper classes, but by the early modern period this ideal began to attract followers among prosperous commoners as well.\(^2\)

Several factors precipitated the rise of widespread fascination with the *bunjin* in this period. First, the social restrictions imposed by the *bakufu* (military government), particularly during the reign of the shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684–1751, r. 1716–1745), led to a general mood of disillusionment among intellectuals. The response to this disillusionment was withdrawal into intellectual reclusion, i.e., into the kind of life practiced by the *bunjin*. Second, Chinese-style products increasingly became available. Many of these came directly from China, like ceramics, furniture, books, and paintings, despite the tight limits the *bakufu* placed on imports; but there was also a thriving market for Chinese-inspired goods produced domestically. People of means with an interest in the *bunjin* ideal were able to furnish themselves with the accoutrements that allowed them to create a setting they imagined was conducive to this kind of lifestyle. Finally, eighteenth-century culture, already saturated with Chinese influence due to the *bakufu*’s endorsement of Confucian philosophy, experienced a blossoming of scholarly and intellectual energy devoted to Chinese studies.\(^3\)

Indeed, the *bakufu* took an active part in promoting such scholarship, particularly among samurai. In this age of peace, many samurai were able to devote themselves to the study and teaching of Chinese philosophy,

---