

The Beginnings of Modern Japanese Art

By Masaaki Iseki



Sake, Takahashi Yuichi, ca. 1877, collection of the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music.



高橋海六 二十一年
 田中重行 二十一年
 関見十吉郎 二十一年
 望月俊雄 二十一年
 志富光千 二十一年
 永井直二 二十一年
 廣津大十九 二十一年
 全陽正次 二十一年
 近田鶴三 二十一年
 山口芳二 二十一年
 大島圭介
 宇佐野重三 二十一年
 藤野五 二十一年
 川山五郎
 松岡孝 二十一年
 浅井忠 二十一年
 千葉重昭 二十一年
 川路新三郎 二十一年
 竹村平太郎 二十一年
 駒岩忠三 二十一年
 西野三三 二十一年
 多田四郎 二十一年
 越谷厚三 二十一年
 酒井三郎 二十一年
 市川敬三郎 二十一年
 中丸熊十郎 二十一年

A farewell commemorative photo of Antonio Fontanesi surrounded by his young Japanese students.

After nearly three centuries of self-imposed isolation, the leaders of the new Meiji era (1868–1912) were eager to assimilate everything Western, including the arts. But the primary aim in this area was not to mimic Western aesthetics but to master Western artistic techniques and traditions in the same way the Japanese sought to master Western architecture, city planning, civil engineering, mapmaking and military science—all perceived as part and parcel of a more advanced and hence “better” civilization.

In 1876, the Meiji government decided to establish the Technical Fine Arts School as part of the Ministry of Public Works and hire two Italian artists, Antonio Fontanesi (1818–1882), a painter, and Vincenzo Ragusa (1841–1928), a sculptor, to teach there. The Ministry of Public Works and been founded in October 1870. The fact that Japan’s first national arts academy was placed under this ministry rather than the Ministry of Education, for example, says something about Japan’s priorities at the time.

Fontanesi was already well-known in Europe as a master landscape artist in the style of 19th-century realism. He was con-

tracted by the Meiji government to teach young Japanese artists the fundamentals of oil painting. His stay in Tokyo lasted only two years, cut short by illness, but Fontanesi nevertheless had a profound effect on the emerging genre of modern Japanese art.

Western painting styles and techniques were not totally new to the Japanese, of course. Even during the long decades of isolation, they had plenty of opportunity to view and mimic Western-style works of art, particularly lithographs and the like, brought into Japan by the Dutch, who enjoyed special access to Japan through their trade base in Nagasaki. Western-style realism fascinated the Japanese, but formal education in the kind of Western oil painting techniques they sought to emulate was not available to them until Fontanesi’s arrival.

Prior to the opening of the national arts academy, Japanese aspiring to master Western-style painting attended small ateliers where they struggled together to create copies of those few Western works of art that they had seen. The arts academy was the answer to their dreams and they flocked to the school in droves from all over the country. Fortunately for Ja-

pan’s early modern artists, Fontanesi was an excellent and dedicated teacher.

For his part, Fontanesi had the good fortune to be dealing with artists already well-versed in their own native painting techniques and traditions. The Eastern aesthetic of “painting to reveal the subject’s spirit as well as physical attributes” was deeply ingrained in their consciousness. Western-style realism, the young Japanese artists of the day believed, would provide an added dimension of objectivity to their work. Realistic depiction brought to life with spiritual essence: what the Japanese student of Western painting and sculpture sought was quite different from the practical motives of the Meiji government.

An avid student of Western-style painting, even before Fontanesi’s arrival, was Takahashi Yuichi (1828–1894). After much trial and error Takahashi learned to mix his own paints, creating such masterpieces as *Sake* (Salmon) and *Oiran*. As these works fully demonstrate, Takahashi’s realism went beyond a naturalist mimicking of reality. Already 48 when the national arts academy was founded, Takahashi never actually studied there, but his work shows an apparent influence of Fontanesi.

Fontanesi’s students were much younger, ranging in age between 15 and 18. Many were later to lay the foundations of modern Japanese art, among them Koyama Shotaro (1857–1916), Asai Chu (1856–1907) and Matsuoka Hisashi (1862–1944). The Meiji government intended no more than to provide an opportunity for young Japanese artists to master Western-style painting and sculpturing techniques, and Fontanesi and Ragusa abided faithfully by their contracts in doing just that. They were, however, artists, not technicians, and their young students, too, were artists, not technicians. Quite unintentionally, the Meiji government provided the impetus to an exciting and vigorous genre—modern Japanese art.

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