

The Introduction of Impressionism

By Masaaki Iseki

Following the Meiji Restoration, Western painting, or more precisely, oil painting was introduced into Japan's art scene relatively early. Gradually, the Western "view of things" took root. This was, in part, due to the contribution of the Italian painter Antonio Fontanesi who came to Japan in 1876 to work at the first art school, Kōbu Art School.

Basically this Western view of things was directly related to the naturalism and realism of the Barbizon School of France. Yet before this school of painting was allowed to really mature in Japan, due to the introduction of French Impressionism, a great amount of confusion existed within Japan's art circles. Suddenly artists were confronted with dramatic changes.

The drama began with the return of two painters, Seiki Kuroda and Kei'ichiro Kume, who had been studying in France. Seiki Kuroda (1866 to 1924) was a bright artist whose skills matured during his 10 year-study abroad, starting in 1884. After studying under Rafaël Collin (1850 to 1916) in France, Kuroda returned home, bringing with him the style of painting the outdoors in light colors. Although Collin was not an Impressionist painter, the mere proving of the existence of such bright paintings by Kuroda was enough of a revolution for Japan's art circles.

To put it differently Japan's art circles, obviously not having the same long tradition as European ones, were forced to make superficial changes in the European arts as a requirement of the times. Between the old realists (Barbizon School) and the new realists (Impressionists), a keen debate evoked.

In the process of modernization and in gradually mimicking the Western world, it became neces-

sary for Japanese society to adopt Western things. But when imported culture changes its quality, in a climate totally foreign to its land of origin, it naturally cannot be helped if people should have different opinions about its value.

The two groups of realists were also called the old and new schools. So keen was the debate on the legitimacy of the two schools that even some press circles, such as Ogai Mori and Chogyu Takayama, both great writers and thinkers of the time, and other prominent figures became involved. This was the greatest East-West cultural debate that Japan had ever seen. In the end the debate closed with the Mori-supported Impressionists claiming victory. But to put it in Kuroda's words, painting is not something you render with what you see, but something you render with what you feel. It has nothing to do with the so-called old or new school.

It was only much later that late Impressionists, like Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh, were introduced into Japan. In early Meiji, naturalism and realism were explored by central figures, like

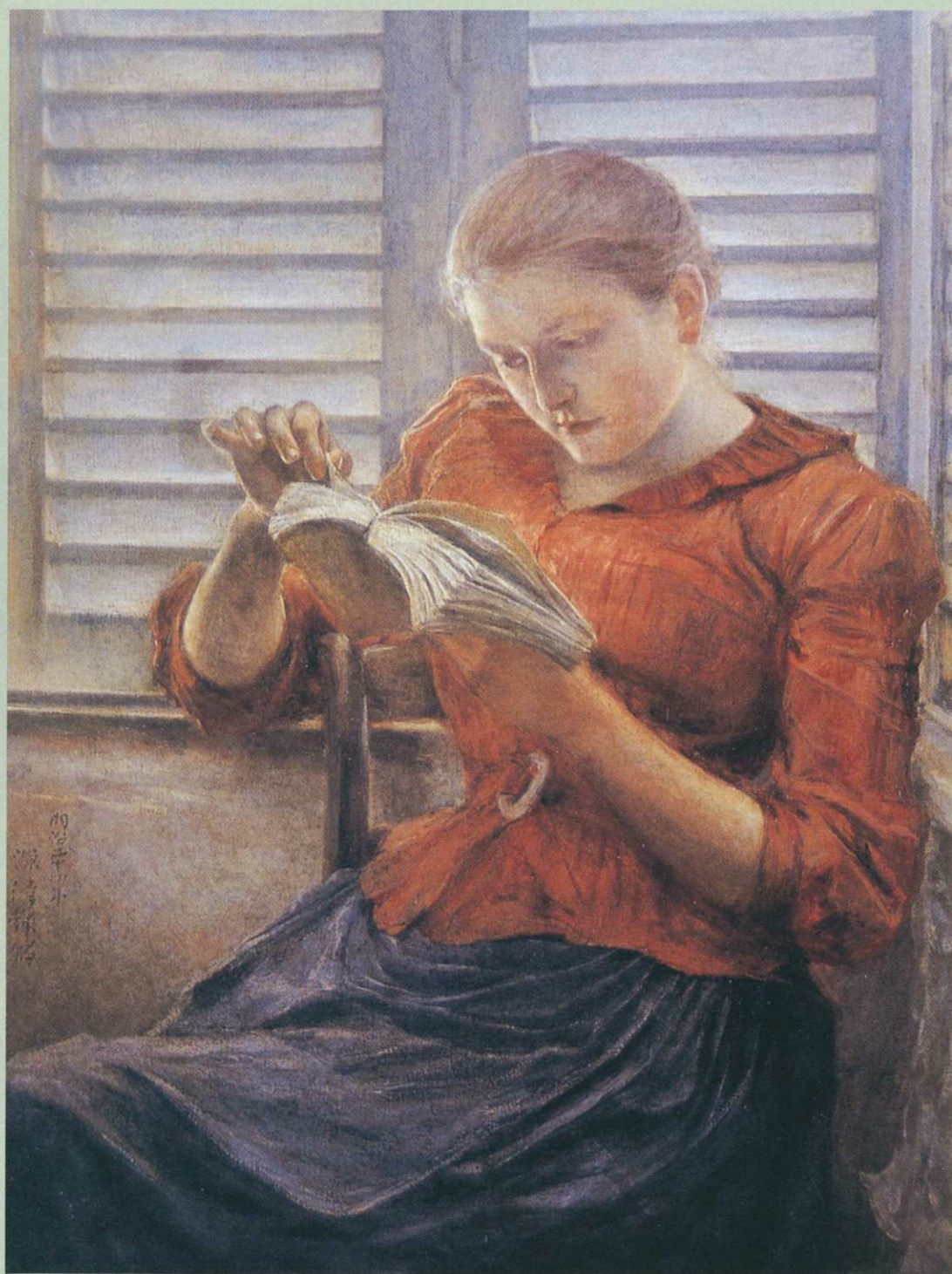
Yuichi Takahashi, who used Western techniques of realism in Japanese oil paintings. While this idea itself was a shock, due to the perception that nature changes according to who is viewing it, it wasn't until Kuroda and Kume, who used light colors, that the folks of Meiji were able to liberate themselves from their feudalist past. For the first time they went to wild fields and experienced the fresh sensation of basking in bright, natural light.

Seiki Kuroda, with his Impressionistic style of painting as seen in *Dokusho (Reading)*, painted during his student days in France, and his most important works *Maiko (Dancers)*, *Kohan (Lakes)*, and others, was able for the first time to achieve in Japan's adoption of Western painting a sense of freedom and independence. Japan's road to modern art began after Kuroda and in this sense he was a painter who deserves special mention. ■

Masaaki Iseki, who specializes in the history of Japanese and Western modern art, is curator at the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art.



Kohan, Seiki Kuroda, 1897, Tokyo National Research Institute of Cultural Properties



Dokusho, Seiki Kuroda, 1891, Tokyo National Museum