

Honoring the Edo Artist

By Joe Price

Photos: Etsuko & Joe Price Collection



Cranes drawn on a folding screen, each with a single, flawless brush stroke



A pair of ducks in a snowy pond

Some believe he may be the greatest artist the world has ever seen. His skill is incomprehensible. His talent

seems to defy the realms of possibility. Despite all this, until recently, very few people even knew his name.

His name is Ito Jakuchu. Born almost 300 years ago, he is an artist who could paint with meticulous detail. At the same time, he could create the body of a crane with a single, flawless brush stroke. With amazing accuracy, he played with a variety of colors and shapes without seeming to overlap a single line. Jakuchu commanded a love and admiration of nature that enabled him to capture what seems to be the essence of life. It almost seems like he was driven by something much more than just skill. He possessed an intense knowledge and understanding of his subjects.

Jakuchu could paint a rooster with every feather perfectly in place, with eyes that are alert

and focused, and with feet that are firmly planted under the weight of the body. He could paint a duck with its head buried under water and still give it life and expression. He could paint a screen composed of 46,000 squares and create animals composed of these squares within squares, while still giving each character a distinct personality.

Jakuchu died in 1800, but much, much more seemed to die with him that year because from that moment on, a void was left in the art field. But this is just my opinion – the opinion of a simple-minded engineer from Bartlesville, Oklahoma, with absolutely no formal training in art.

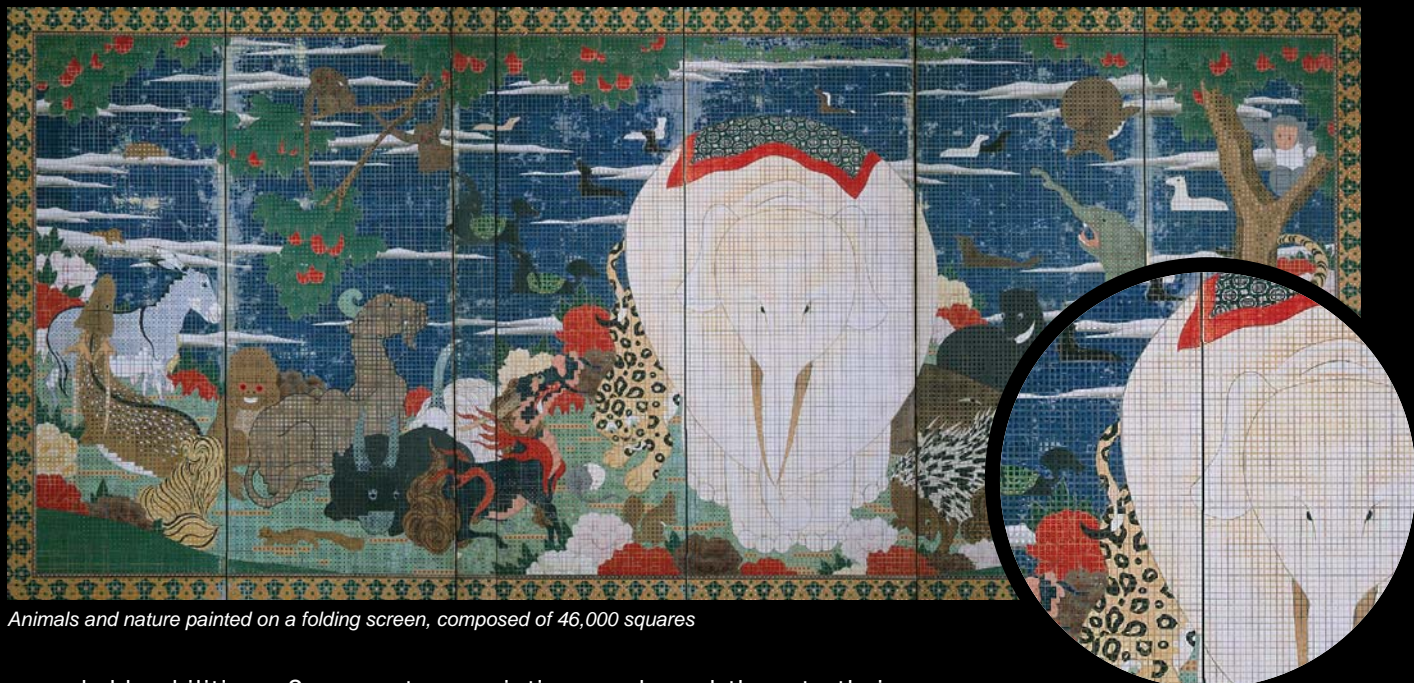
My love of Japanese Edo Period art, however, is not limited to just Jakuchu. My admiration stems from the extraordinary and unique genius expressed in the works of this period. Maruyama Okyo, Nagasawa Rosetsu, Soga Shohaku, Mori Sosen, Sakai Hoitsu, and Suzuki Kiitsu are just some of the artists that deserve international attention for their



A rooster with every feather perfectly in place



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Animals and nature painted on a folding screen, composed of 46,000 squares

remarkable abilities. One way to showcase their extraordinary talents is to make a comparison to a legendary Western artist. Claude Monet painted many individual masterpieces of haystacks – some haystacks in the fresh light of morning and some in the faint light of evening. Each work illustrated opposing and distinct reflections of light. Monet was fascinated by these differences and painted each painting to showcase different variations.

On the other hand, the Edo Period artist learned to capture these diverse sensations of light within one painting. When a cloud covers the sun, casting a shadow across the room, a painting can appear to transition from morning to afternoon to dusk. Japanese artists were very aware of these effects upon their

paintings and used them to their advantage.

The irony today is that these artists created their works to be seen under varying sources of light, except for the one source they had never seen or experienced for themselves and the only source universally used today in museums around the world – fixed electric light. These harsh lights hinder the ability to see these amazing variations in Edo paintings. To truly enjoy this art at its best, see it the way the artist intended. See the art illuminated by soft, natural changing light without obstruction from protective glass.

These masterpieces are some of the best in the world, and should be seen at their finest. These magnificent artists should have their voices heard, and the people should listen. **JS**



A temple painting in daylight and moonlight: Japanese artists were very aware of the effects of light.

Joe Price, a graduate of the Oklahoma University School of Engineering, worked in the construction industry until 1980, when he moved to California and formed the Shin'enKan Foundation in Los Angeles, focused mainly on the education and appreciation of Edo Period Japanese paintings. An exhibition titled "Jakuchu and the Age of Imagination" was staged at the Tokyo National Museum in July-August 2006, drawing 317,000 visitors. On October 3, 2006, Price received the Japan Award from the Japan Foundation.