

## The World of the Akita Ranga : Western-influenced paintings in the mid Edo period from *Kaitai Shinsho* (New Book of Anatomy) to *Shinobazu Pond*



Odano Naotake *Shinobazu pond* 18th Century  
Akita Museum of Modern Art

### Foreword

"Akita Ranga" is the common name for paintings by samurai from the Akita domain during the mid-Edo period. It is characterized by its depiction of a unique aesthetic world fusing both Western and Eastern concepts of beauty.

During the Edo period, Japan was undergoing a policy of isolationism. However, when these works were painted, the eighth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune, eased restrictions on imports, opening the doors to Western culture. *Rangaku* (Dutch studies) thrived in Edo, along with the learning of European culture, which some intellectuals actively embraced, aiming for innovation in technology and industry.

The birth of Akita Ranga starts with the herbalist Hiraga Gennai (1728-79), one of these intellectuals, who visited Akita in 1773, and Odano Naotake (1749-80), a samurai from the town of Kakunodate in the Akita domain, who was sent to Edo on the orders of the domain. Naotake learned the techniques of realism from foreign paintings and passed them on to the eighth lord of the Akita domain, Satake Yoshiatsu - Shozan being his artist's name - (1748-85), and other samurai. Thus was created this fascinating group of paintings.

The exhibition introduces Akita Ranga's fresh and realistic world through its masterpieces and follows in the artists' steps of visual innovation.

Akita Ranga is one of the most representative groups of works of Japanese early modern art. It is also a cultural asset that teaches us today that what unites communities beyond closed national borders is understanding of our own culture and that of others, along with mutual respect. We hope that many people will take this opportunity to enjoy the works of art created by Akita's samurai.

Lastly, we would like to express our sincerest gratitude to all the collectors who have kindly agreed to display their priceless works of art to the public, and to everyone else whose indispensable cooperation and support have made this exhibition possible.

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Akita Ranga Exhibition Executive Committee  
(Akita Museum of Modern Art, Akita Sakigake Shimpo, ABS Akita Broadcasting System)

## Section 1: What is "Akita Ranga"?

"Akita Ranga" is a term for Western-style paintings created by Akita's samurai class during the reign of Satake Yoshiatsu (1748-1785), the 8th lord of the Akita domain. The character 蘭(Ran) in the name 秋田蘭画(Akita Ranga) is taken from 阿蘭陀 (Holland).

The person who played the most central role is Odano Naotake, Yoshiatsu's retainer, while Yoshiatsu himself painted using his artist name Shozan (曙山).

## Section 2: Before Akita Ranga - Culture of the Akita domain in the 18th century

Japanese samurai had four favorite cultural activities: *Kinkishoga* (Koto, Go, calligraphy, and painting). Among these pursuits, samurai greatly appreciated painting, which was considered valuable not only for its visual properties but also for the inherent value of the creative process by the painters themselves. In Japan there are paintings by the great swordsman Miyamoto Musashi and successive Tokugawa shoguns. Some samurai produced excellent paintings and their work was considered to be like that of professional artists.

This section introduces the kinds of paintings Naotake and others produced before Akita Ranga.

## Section 3: *Kaitai Shinsho*: New Knowledge giving birth to Akita Ranga

In 1773, the Akita domain experienced a stagnation in the mining industry, its major industry, so a consultant was invited to come: Hiraga Gennai (1728-79), an herbalist also familiar with mining.

In December 1773, after Gennai's return to Edo, Odano Naotake was sent to Edo. It is believed that the domain, counting on Gennai's knowledge of natural history, probably assigned Naotake to learn about this with him and to acquire the skills to illustrate it. This was the opportunity that gave birth to Akita Ranga.

Soon after his arrival in Edo, Naotake was selected as the illustrator for the historical Japanese medical textbook *Kaitai Shinsho* (*New Book of Anatomy*). In order to illustrate this book, Naotake used Western anatomical drawings as models. The encounter with these drawings of the real human body appears to have greatly impacted Naotake.

While Gennai owned the latest Western books and copper engravings, he also interacted with many intellectuals, including Sugita Genpaku, the author of the *Kaitai Shinsho*. Naotake's expression methods dramatically changed through his encounter with this new knowledge in Edo at that time.

This section explores the historical documents describing the background of Gennai's visit to the domain, and the foreign works that transformed Naotake's view of painting.

## Section 4: Demonstration of *Oranda-e*: Western-style paintings: Masterpieces of Akita Ranga

In Edo, Naotake continued to explore new forms of realistic expression and created the paintings we today call "Akita Ranga". His new style was to replace the thick lines conventionally used by artists with thin lines like those used in copper engravings, to add linear perspective, aerial perspective and chiaroscuro, as well as to use the Nanpin school's style of textural expression. This enabled him to express depth and include the presence of new motifs in his paintings.

Naotake's painting method was passed on to Yoshiatsu (Shozan), the lord, Satake Yoshimi, Tashiro Tadakuni, a retainer of Shozan, and Tōshi Kenshō, seemingly a samurai of the Akita domain. Each one left behind their own unique artworks. Shozan is known to have studied painting so intensely that in

September 1778 he wrote Japan's first theoretical essays on Western-style painting, the "*Gahō kōryō*" (Summary of the laws of painting) and the "*Gato rikai*" (Understanding of painting).

This section exhibits the masterpieces of Akita Ranga created by these artists.

### **Section 5: Transformation of Akita Ranga**

The samurai of the Akita domain found a new form of beauty by fusing Eastern and Western expressions, and were fascinated by this. However, Western-style painting supposedly ceased to be practiced within the Akita domain after the death of Naotake, the central figure of this movement, in 1780, and the successive death of Lord Yoshiatsu in 1785.

It is known that Naotake's style of painting was inherited by Shiba Kōkan in Edo, so the question arises, is it possible to accept that Naotake's influence did not remain at all within the Akita domain?

This section will show how Akita Ranga changed after Naotake's death and the kind of works that replaced earlier Western-style paintings.

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