

# ARTISTIC LICENSE

*Esoragoto* (1802)

by Ishino Hiromichi

Introduced and Translated by  
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## INTRODUCTION

*an episodic festschrift for Howard Hibbett*

Japanese literature  
of the Edo period (1600-1868)  
rendered into English  
by his former students  
of which this is  
the thirteenth volume

Ishino Hiromichi (1718-1800) completed this work in 1797, as can be told from a reference in the text. However it remained among the author's unpublished papers until discovered in 1802, when it was put into print, two years posthumously, by a person identified only as Iga-dô ('studio of painterly resemblances'), probably a student.

The work eludes categorisation and cannot be readily fitted into any of the very numerous genres of Edo literature. The most authoritative

bibliography of early-modern Japanese writing, *Kokusho sômokuroku* (Iwanami Shoten, 1991), apparently in desperation, lists it as a painting treatise. Well yes, but it is a decidedly odd one. Hiromichi in fact wrote a mock-treatise, decrying the contemporary state of art in similar vein with the many real jeremiads of the period, but with more than a twist of witty absurdity. He has it that he was simply the recorder of the jaded opinions of others, of those people, indeed, who *appear* in the offending latter-day artistic aberrations. The book thus purports to transcribe what images told Hiromichi when they came to life and addressed him, quite bluntly, during the course of a fantastical all-night crab-in that occurred when our amanuensis slept away from home at a shrine, surrounded by the typical array of images that would grace such a place. As he tossed between dreaming and waking, the multitude descended from their frames, and spoke. Acting on the command of their leader, Tenji tennô (626-71; tennô = 'emperor'), Hiromichi transcribed their complaints for posterity.

One after another the motley assembly of worthies try to correct errors that have, over the

generations, vitiated their iconographies. The tone is deliberately pedantic, augmented by liberal citation of obscure texts, but all is lightly undercut by bathos.

The title, '*Esoragoto*', is a rare word and one difficult to translate. It means something like 'pictorial illusion', and is formed from a triple combination of *e* (picture), and the more frequently-encountered portmanteau word *soragoto* (*sora*, emptiness; *koto*, things). The proposal is, therefore, that representation is inevitably false. This inescapable fact, though, to Hiromichi, is painting's principal joy, so that all logical criticism sublimes from problem into pleasure. This translation opts for a paraphrase with 'Artistic License'. The license is twofold: the inherent falsity of representation, and the way in which the pictures breeze out of their encadrated space, and deem themselves entitled to offer verdicts on their representations. Hiromichi professes to find this something of a cheek.

Shrine pictures (*gaku*), while generally votives, covered a very wide range of theme. This allowed Hiromichi to offer, in his book, a pretty

comprehensive analysis of the state of painting, although only the figural could be dealt with, since nothing else could be imagined to speak up, and argue its case. But votives were, on the whole, portraits, so the conceit is effective. Hiromichi does apologise for absences, such as *ôtsu-e* (cheap pilgrimage pictures), *imaga* (pictures of modern common life), and pictures of recent historical personages; interestingly, works by the Ogata brothers Kôrin (1658-1716) and Kenzan (1663-1743), whom, he says, painted *moyôga* (decorative images), not figures, and cannot accordingly come forth to protest the manner of their depiction.

Important among shrine images were depictions of the ancient poets of the vernacular court *waka* tradition. Their verses were variously collected, but Hiromichi refers to the most popular anthology, *One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets* (*Hyakunin isshû*), attributed to the peerless versifier and critic, Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241). That collection, which was usually illustrated, opens with a verse by Tenji tennô, composed while he meditated on a humble hut. This is why the tennô appears first and serves as master-of-ceremonies for the night-time séance.

Other votives include Fujiwara no Kamatari (614-69), Tenji tennô's great minister, who saved the throne from an uprising by the Soga clan, and was rewarded with the honorific title Taishokan ('crown of high office'). Figures from the historical and martial classics appear, and the cast includes people from the *Record of the Great Pacification* (*Taiheiki*, c. 1400), the *Tale of Yoshitsune* (*Giheiki*, early 15c) as well as authors of court classics, such as Murasaki Shikibu (fl. early 11c) of *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*, c. 1000) fame. The notable cleric, Saigyô (1118-90) has a rant, and assorted Chinese personages and a large number of Daoist wizards (*senjin*) strut in to round things off. Finally, the Seven Lucky Gods disembark from their Treasure Ship, and invoke the spirit of New Year, suggesting Hiromichi composed this work in celebration of that festival. How Hiromichi came to write such an original and amusing tale, at the very end of his life, is unclear. However, he had a long-standing interest in the history of waka and more generally of the Japanese court.

Hiromichi had embarked on the way of waka as a young man, and in 1746, as a measure of

seriousness, had entered the school of Reizei Tamemura (1712-74), a Kyoto noble, presumably studying by correspondence. He later associated with the elegant Dôjô ('courtly') waka circle of Kyôgyoku Takakado (1658-1721), like him a shogunal official. Hiromichi put the first Dôjô compilation together, *Anthology of the Misty Barrier* (*Kakan-shû*), published in 1790. He wrote or edited some thirty-five works during his seventy-year lifetime. He was born into a family of bannermen (*hatamoto*) in the shogunate bureaucracy, and lived and worked in Edo. He closed his career at the Junior Fifth Rank Lower Grade, quite a high level, on a more-than-respectable salary of 300 *koku*; he had served as steward of the prince-inheritor's palace (*Nishinomaru orusui*), a notable appointment, although that prince, Tokugawa Iemoto (1763-79), would never become shogun as he was killed in a riding accident - with disastrous results for the ruling family - at the age of sixteen. By the time of writing, Hiromichi was in gentlemanly retirement, devoting himself to literature.

Given the breadth of Hiromichi's learning, it is to be expected that the humour he parades is of

a common-room variety, for which prior knowledge is distinctly necessary. I hope readers of the present translation will be suitably equipped, although the text can be approached on many levels, and there is sure to be a sliding scale of grasp over the manifold allusions, as there would have been at the time of writing too. Many of the references and citations are for the sake of over-blown (thus self-deflating) pomposity of a Swiftian sort which it is not important to recognise. My decision has therefore been not to belabour the text with explanatory footnotes. Where names are given in abbreviated form, this is expanded in parentheses; dates are given only for rulers (*tennô* and shoguns). In the Edo Period the title *tennô* was only used for rulers of high antiquity, the other being referred to as *in*.

This translation follows the text contained in the *Shûko jusshû*, as edited by Mori Senzô, et al.; vol. 6, pp. 254-75 (Chûô Kôronsha, 1980).

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