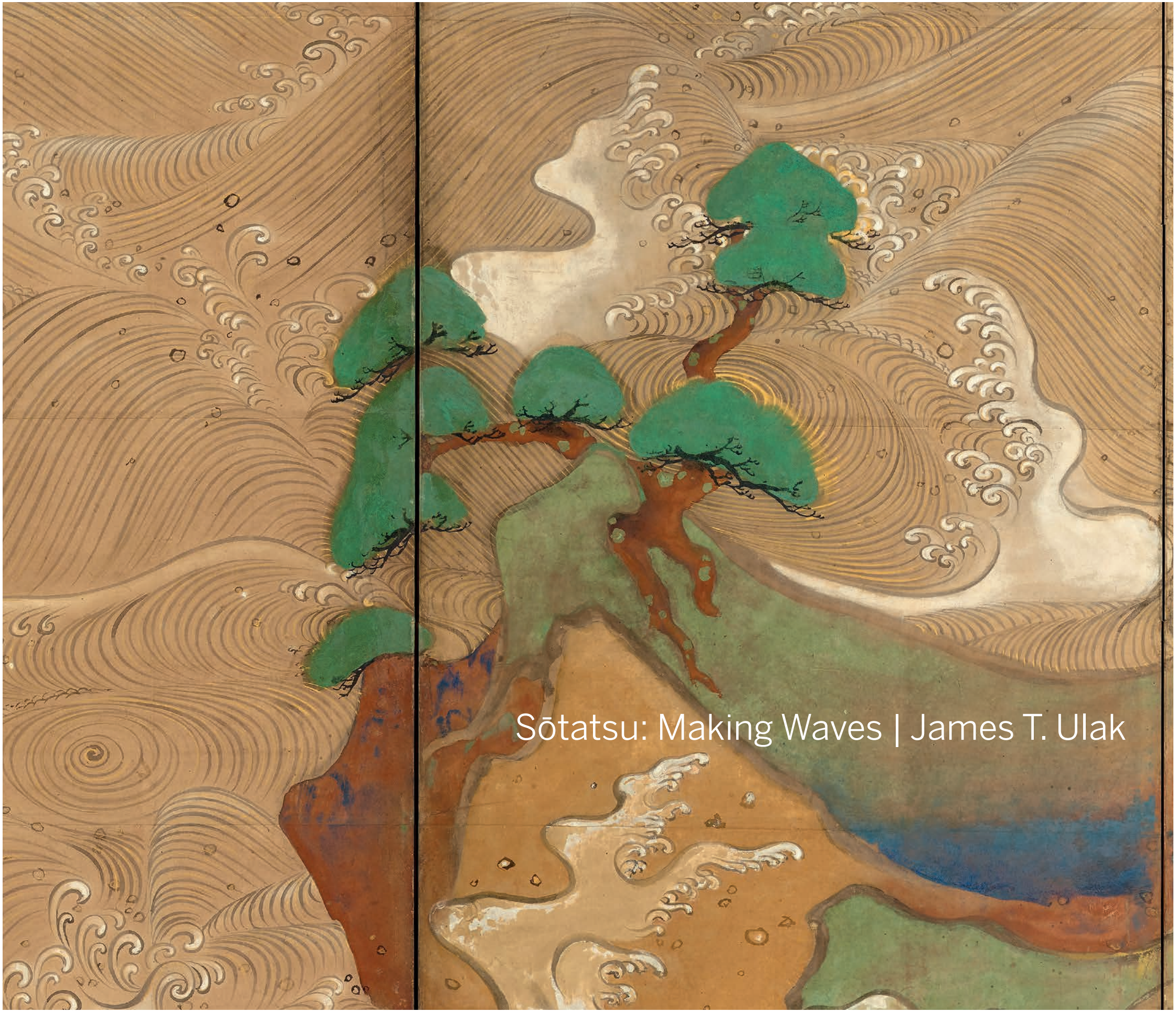

Sōtatsu: Making Waves | James T. Ulak

In the last decades of the sixteenth century, the ravaged city of Kyoto, Japan's capital since the early ninth century, began its recovery from nearly 150 years of brutal and destructive armed conflict. The complex elimination game among regional warring feudal lords was drawing to a close. From 1582 through 1615, three powerful hegemons—Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu—formed an increasingly united polity.

The city's rebirth was celebrated in folding-screen paintings that depicted bird's-eye views of Kyoto—the *rakuchū rakugai zu* (Scenes in and around the capital). Partially documentary and occasionally aspirational, these paintings could reflect prominence and positioning based on a patron's desires. But they primarily told the truth about the big picture: beyond the grand temples and redoubts, perhaps the most striking and charming features were the wonderfully detailed shop fronts and occasional glimpses into their interiors. The inescapable message: mercantile strength. Not indicated on any known painting of this genre was the specific shop called Tawaraya, where folding fans were designed, made, and sold. Inventory was available for purchase and custom orders were taken too. The Tawaraya is mentioned in a piece of contemporaneous fiction and was said to be located on Gojō-dōri (Fifth Street or Avenue), an east–west road in the central city, nestled in an area dense with commercial activity.

The folding fan was more than an attractively functional accoutrement. As a gift, it might bear subtle or oblique messages. It could indicate the owner's social status. It could display images or calligraphy, or both. Carried in a sleeve, tucked in a sash, folded or open, it was a hand-held indicator of an internal state, a social tool of remarkable simplicity and sophistication. Thanks to a series of charming legends, it also was imbued with an aura of ephemerality, fleeting beauty, and wordless emotions within a rigid social hierarchy. Sōtatsu, master of the Tawaraya studio, produced these vehicles of material discourse to great acclaim. The fan, in a very real sense, was the implement that formed his aesthetic sensibilities.

On a challenging curved format of alternating planes, the artist and his associates extracted myriad visual quotations from paintings that depicted tales of classical literature and legend—narratives of war, romance, and the founding of temples. In this way, he sent once-sequestered and little-seen imagery into the streets.

In the early twenty-first century, we speak with a degree of hard-earned fluency about this man and his milieu. Sōtatsu frustrates the modern appetite for biographical explanations of artistic development. The paucity of information about his life, combined with his artisan status, requires us to see him through the techniques and styles found in his attributable works (a painstaking process) and refracted off better-known figures—most notably, the multitalented Hon'ami Kōetsu, the connoisseur of blades, potter, master calligrapher, formidable devotee of the Lotus Sutra; or Karasumaru Mitsuhiro, aristocrat, calligrapher, aesthetic impresario, and consummate networker. Sōtatsu prepared the physical foundations for the talents of these men and others, i.e., the background papers and designs for their notable calligraphic talents. He gained their respect and ultimately the intimacy of productive co-creativity. Through them, he gained access to the most secluded chambers of the court, where he produced works of grand scale.

Sōtatsu's access to that past and his remarkable adaptations of it are recounted in the essays that follow and in the exhibition *Sōtatsu: Making Waves*.

In his essay "Sōtatsu: Five Perspectives," Yukio Lippit stages the overall discussion by offering categories for understanding the artist's oeuvre. Proprietorship of the fan shop and close links to socially elite partners placed the artist at the crossroads of court and street. His movement between the two rejuvenated visual tradition. As an artisan/technician, he was keenly aware of the shift from a singular manuscript and the possibilities opened by production of multiples through block and type printing techniques. He challenged the "sameness" of printed and stamped images with a random inking style that made each use of the same form unique. Lippit designates Sōtatsu as the "interregional" artist par excellence. He is associated with a renewal of indigenous Japanese court images, but Sōtatsu's mining of Korean and Chinese sources for both subject matter and technique—*tarashikomi*, the manipulation of layers of damp pooled ink, is one example—is often overlooked (see *Dragons and Clouds*, fig. 1.4, cat. 38). Lippit also examines the social circumstances that afforded court access, for which Sōtatsu had a specific interlocutor. That court artists were needed at all, however, reflected the fact that painters from the Tosa atelier, which had served the court for centuries, had decamped to Sakai after disputes about succession. This led to commissions not only for Sōtatsu but for other talented artists not associated with a royal patron.

Our first sighting of Sōtatsu comes with his repairs and additions to the venerable sutra *Heike nōkyō* in the very early years of the seventeenth century. The next period of immensely successful production takes place in collaboration with Hon'ami Kōetsu in the form of elegantly decorated handscrolls, Kōetsu's calligraphy accented and supported by Sōtatsu's paintings and designs, their joint work on the Saga-bon publications underwritten by Suminokura Soan, and an array of individual *shikishi* (poetry cards). These collaborations are thought to have occurred in roughly

1.2

1.1
Waves at Matsushima, detail. Japan, early 1600s. Tawaraya Sōtatsu (act. ca. 1600–40). Freer Gallery of Art, F1906.231-232. (See fig. 1.4, cat. 1.)

1.2
Screen with Scattered Fans, folded screen. Japan, early 1600s. Tawaraya Sōtatsu (act. ca. 1600–40). Freer Gallery of Art, F1900.24 (cat. 2).

the fifteen years leading up to Kōetsu's establishment of the Takagamine artist's village in 1615. Okudaira Shunroku alerts our attention to the notion of performance collaboration. His close readings of several handscrolls thought to be collaborations between Kōetsu and Sōtatsu, or Kōetsu and others, suggest the possibility of an animated sitting in which both calligrapher and designer performed in syncopation. He directs our attention to research on the person known only as Kamiya Sōji, a papermaker and resident of Kōetsu's Takagamine, whose seal was pressed on works such as the famous *Crane Scroll* (Kyoto National Museum, fig. 3.1). Okudaira's analysis underscores the difficulty of associating particular individuals with these works, and he suggests that numerous, unheralded, anonymous artisans made contributions to such productions. He describes Sōtatsu as a figure who was adept at raising the level of his craft in collaboration with a master. If the resultant product is read sensitively, each party—papermaker, designer, calligrapher—gained manifest pleasure from the activity. This is the record of a new kind of artistic personality—generous, inventive, and publicly playful.

1.3

1.3
Waves at Matsushima,
folded screens. Japan, early 1600s.
Tawaraya Sōtatsu (act. ca. 1600–40).
Freer Gallery of Art, F1906.231-232
(cat. 1).

Notions of collaboration and studio continue in Ōta Aya's detailed analysis of a work widely acknowledged as a Sōtatsu masterpiece. Possibly commissioned around 1630, *Painted Fans Mounted on a Screen* (cat. 3), or the "Floating Fans" screens, are beautifully executed and unrivaled in the precision of their provenance, for they have been documented in the imperial holdings virtually from the time of their creation. A complex conservation treatment of the screens in 1989 revealed another hand besides Sōtatsu, Tawaraya Tōshichirō, whose specialty seems to have been war-themed handscrolls. This discovery highlights the density of collaboration within a studio and the dangers of the predilection to attribute a single authorship. In addition, evidence of several strong talents in the Tawaraya atelier may account for the continuation of a strong style after Sōtatsu's passing (circa 1640).

Nakamachi Keiko summarizes the results of her research of Sōtatsu's *Waves at Matsushima* screens (figs. 1.1, 1.3 , cat. 1) in "Miraculous Waters." Her survey of the occasions and contexts

for water, waves, and shore depictions in earlier Japanese paintings, the precedents for Sōtatsu's magnificent work, suggests that a literal reading of the image as indicative of a specific place is misguided. The Matsushima identification is the accretion of a much later time and use. The two key features of the screens are grandly worked, stylized waves and pine-studded beaches or shores. Nakamachi notes that Sōtatsu ingeniously combined these historically separate themes—miraculous events that occur on roiling waters and the safe harbor implicit in the pine-lined sandy beach—to produce a unified celebratory image. The man being celebrated, she posits, is Tani Shōan, a wealthy merchant active in sea commerce. Her logic is clear: *Waves at Matsushima* celebrated Shōan's patronage of Shōunji, a new temple in Sakai (home of the screens from their creation until the early twentieth century), his friendship with Karasumaru Mitsuhiro (who likely introduced him to Sōtatsu), and a fortune earned on the high seas. Nakamachi also makes an intriguing connection with Sōtatsu's *Dragons and Clouds* screens, situating

production of these ink-monochrome works slightly before *Waves at Matsushima*. The auspicious appearance of dragons in watery clouds—the essence of life and fecundity—may have inspired Sōtatsu to treat the theme of "miraculous waters" using a completely different vocabulary.

The I'nen seal was impressed on various works attributed to Sōtatsu—some produced by him during his lifetime, some under the authorship of his studio, and others that carried on his style posthumously. There are three categories of paintings with the I'nen seal. In his essay " A Garden View: The Origins of I'nen Seal Grass-and-Flower Paintings," Noguchi Takeshi presents salient information on the evolving use of that seal on paintings featuring flowers and plants. He points out that the I'nen imprint was pressed on works featuring nontraditional plant types, showcasing a wide variety, exotica, and vegetables. From the late 1500s until well into the mid-1600s, multiple societal influences drove the passion for these images. Noguchi documents an increased interest in planting and tending to gardens, the emergence of the custom of "plants as gifts," attention to formal flower arrangement, and an interest in medicinal plants and botanical categorization. Throughout the seventeenth century, Sōtatsu's studio was particularly attuned to this new interest and audience. Noguchi also points to convincing evidence of an influence from Chinese painting. Flowers and plants, never high on the list of socially approved or elegant subjects previously, were turned to with considerable vigor.

The detailed studies cited thus far owe much to the deep interest and thorough research of several generations of scholars in the post–World War II period. But the emergence of a corpus of identifiable Sōtatsu works available for scholarly consideration was a lengthy, almost century-long process. In my essay, "Charles Lang Freer and the 'Discovery' of Sōtatsu," I examine Freer's evolution as a collector of Japanese art at a time when Japan's cultural establishment was seeking to create a canon of indigenous art for the attention of the world. Neither the distinguished Western collector nor Japanese dealer-collectors were aware of Sōtatsu's work in any comprehensive way. Freer learned about the artist as an outgrowth of his original attraction to Ogata Kōrin and pottery attributed to Hon'ami Kōetsu. From the mid- to the late nineteenth century, Western interest in Kōrin or Kōrin-like works was seeded in the wider craze for Japonisme, which made it possible for Freer, the neophyte collector, to identify a visually compelling style that he ultimately would trace back to Sōtatsu. With a well-documented life, manifest talent, and social prominence, Kōetsu is frequently put forth as the artist of many works. But my essay documents Freer's interest in teasing out Sōtatsu's hand. He may have been the first Westerner to take on such a detailed connoisseurial interest in Sōtatsu. His passion for what could be works by Sōtatsu led astute dealers to present him with several acknowledged masterpieces by the artist. Freer's prescience predated the "Sōtatsu boom" in Japan by at least a decade.

That "boom" and what followed is largely the subject of "Sōtatsu in the 20th Century" by Furuta Ryō. While it is unclear what led the Japan Art Association to feature Sōtatsu's art in its fiftieth anniversary exhibition in 1913, that show did focus enthusiastic critical attention on works attributed to the artist. Almost as if such an array of artworks demanded a fully described creator, people attempted to form a life narrative for Sōtatsu, which included the "discovery" of his grave in the city of Kanazawa. The notion of the artist as individual was inspired in part by the zeitgeist of the Taishō era (1912–23)—a pervasive interest in the individual and in freedom of expression. Sōtatsu—a talented commoner who was able to orchestrate the interests, resources, and skills of players from all levels of society, tradesman to aristocrat—was an appropriate personality for the twentieth century's new age of democracy. His paintings and design caught the attention of an emerging generation of Japanese painters seeking a vocabulary that combined allusive abstraction and a link with tradition. His style also traveled well internationally. In 1947 the Tokyo National Museum produced parallel exhibitions, one featuring Matisse and the other the combined works of Sōtatsu and Kōrin. If nothing else, the visual similarities were compelling. Furuta quotes the critic Clement Greenberg's description of flatness and bold color fields as modernism's revolt against artificial dimensionality, suggesting that the eye of the mid-twentieth century found Sōtatsu and his followers especially sympathetic.

These essays move, the authors hope, in a rhythmic modulation of broad ideas and granular investigation. Few things reward the eye so consistently as the attention given to Sōtatsu's works. As we learned from the especially collegial exchanges that resulted in these texts, there are few rewards greater than the sparks that fly at the moments of mutual discovery.