The Boston College Eagle: Kano Antecedents and Modern Meanings

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From 11 February until 2 June 2019, Boston College’s McMullen Museum is presenting an exhibition of Japanese raptors in multiple fine art mediums. The purpose of the exhibition is to celebrate and study Boston College’s monumental bronze eagle, which recently completed full conservation treatment (Figure 1). Boston College acquired the eagle sculpture in 1955 from the estate of Larz and Isabel Anderson; the Andersons purchased it in 1897 in Japan. If the Andersons knew who the artist was, they never shared the information. By the time the eagle arrived at Boston College, even its origins as Japanese was lost. It is only now, after its restoration, that Boston College has learned that the sculpture was Japanese and over a century old. The exhibition, titled “Eaglemania: Collecting Japanese Art in Gilded Age America,” seeks to understand the sculpture’s authorship, form, and meaning by studying Japanese hawk and eagle imagery in the Edo and Meiji Periods.

This article will focus on understanding the composition of the Anderson/Boston College sculpture (hereafter, “BC”). As developed below, depictions of both hawks and eagles must be considered together due to their treatment in Asian art as a single subject category. Drawing primarily on objects from the McMullen Museum exhibition, this article will propose a chain of development that highlights the role of Edo-period Kano school painters in the formation of Meiji-period eagle imagery. Much as Edo modernized in the international environment of the Meiji period, Kano staples of raptor imagery evolved to address new priorities.
The Anderson/BC eagle is monumental. Were it possible for the eagle to spread its wings, the span would approximate nine feet. The eagle stands on a sharply-carved rock, its claws firmly grasping the projecting edges. Its wings are lifted, tail feathers stiff and straightened, and its head is turned, eyes focused on something beyond the viewer. Its pedestal is now only a quarter of its original size, which was broad at the bottom and rose in two pinnacles, the taller one being the eagle’s perch (Figure 2). Careful details emphasize the eagle’s facial features: a thick beak with “s”-curve edges; a pair of deep, oblong nostrils; large, rimmed eyes; and protruding heavy eyebrows. These facial features are strongly modeled, no doubt to make them legible when viewed from a distance. At the same time, very fine lines below the eyes describe light hairs or feathering that are only visible upon close inspection. Feathers graduate from low relief at the top of the head to higher relief with increasing separation towards the neck. The overall treatment of the body is sensitive and naturalistic, following bird form. For a figure of this scale, the eagle is a superb example of the bronze caster’s art.

Eagles are a phenomenon of Meiji-period art, but their hawk relatives abounded in painted, printed, and sculpted form. Chinese art established the painting category “ying” (鷹) meaning “raptor,” and included eagles, hawks, falcons, and other hunting birds with little cultural distinction.2 Raptors were appreciated as apex predators of the air, much as tigers ruled the ground. Giving hawks additional cultural value was their amenability to training, which allowed their use in sport hunting. In Japan, this sport grew in cultural significance with the rise of samurai leadership. The Three Great Unifiers, Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu, all collected hawks and astringers and mounted great hawking expeditions. Ieyasu, an especially enthusiastic hawk collector, formalized hawks as attributes of status when he ruled that only samurai could own or fly them.3

Kano Painters

Painters of the Kano family-guild provided wealthy samurai with suitable art in painted and architectural form. Kano Masanobu (1434-1530) forged the first patronage relationship with samurai as a painter-in-attendance (goyō eshi) to the Ashikaga shoguns, and he worked for the kanrei Hosokawa Masamoto (1466-1507) as well. His grandson, Kano Eitoku (1543-1590), served two of the Three Great Unifiers, Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi. With Kano Tan’yū (1602-1674), the family aligned with the new Tokugawa shoguns and remained in their employ generationally throughout the Edo Period. Among the many appropriate themes for Tokugawa patrons were hawks and hawking, and Kano practice helped solidify basic compositional types for hawks and eagles.

As the Edo-period Kano organization grew, its leadership encouraged consistency of types through copying (funpon).4 Edo alone had four major Kano studios (oku eshi) in addition to second-ranked and
affiliated studios that created Kano-style art and trained painters. Kano leaders, especially Tan’yū, created a “canon” of endorsed compositions. These were perpetuated by student painters who copied them during their training and then used them as visual libraries in their own studio practice. In 1670, Tan’yū created a large album of paintings, *Studies of Ancient Masters* (*Gakko jō*), that essentially defined the history and stylistic purview of Kano painting. This was not his first comprehensive album, as legacy concerned him through his later years. In this album, Tan’yū modeled the work of sixty-five Chinese painters and thirteen Japanese painters. The very first leaf in *Studies of Ancient Masters* is Kano Tan’yu’s copy of a hawk painting by Song Dynasty Emperor Huizong (1082-1135).

Emperor Huizong was a prestigious painter in Japan because of his status, his antiquity, and the very high quality of his work. Huizong was renowned as a painter of birds in particular, but he also encouraged court painters in developing bird and flower themes. While no painting of a hawk or eagle by Huizong survives, he is associated with them in two ways. First, he was thought to have painted them, and from the Ming Dynasty onward, the number of hawk paintings attributed to Huizong grew. One of these, in the Musée Cernushi, Paris, shows a hawk on a strange rock, surrounded by rough waves in the form of rounded peaks and fingers of waves. Second, during his reign, the sighting of a white hawk was reported to court. White coloration in creatures was an auspicious sign signaling support for the current government. Over time, the story became that Emperor Huizong, a hawk painter, was so impressed that he himself painted it. From then on, the subject of white hawks was linked to the name of Huizong.

In his *Studies of Ancient Masters*, Kano Tan’yū represented Huizong with *White Hawk*. This album painting presents a white hawk standing on a rock surrounded by high waves, thus combing both aspects of Huizong’s purported hawk paintings. Kano Tsunenobu (1636-1713), Tan’yū’s nephew and successor, contributed his own version of Tan’yū’s album, which also began with a copy of Emperor Huizong’s *White Hawk* (Figure 3). In both versions of the painting, the rock “reads” as Chinese through its strange form and perforations. This pair of Kano paintings thus draws on the hawk, rock and waves composition and the white coloration, both features connecting to the famous Song Dynasty emperor.

Diplomatic relations with Korea reflect the importance of Huizong hawk painting in Japan. In diplomatic exchanges, specific high-value goods could be requested, and Japanese leaders valued specific breeds of Korean hawks for which they asked. By the early sixteenth century, Japanese envoys had even begun requesting white hawks from Korea.
Additionally, Japanese elites valued continental paintings of fine hawks. At some point, the daimyo of Tsushima managed to acquire a white hawk painting by Huizong. The painting is now not known, though it might well have been among the many made in the Ming Dynasty. Thanks to official Korean records, we know that Korean diplomatic envoys in Tsushima were shown the white hawk painting in 1589. Two more embassies reported being shown the painting in 1607 and 1636. The painting was thus in daimyo possession over an extended period of time and valued as an important treasure. Japanese painters copied important works to perpetuate them as models, particularly in the Kano school of painting. It is reasonable to imagine that the Tsushima painting, especially with its white-plumed hawk, was the original work from which Kano Tan’yū and Kano Tsunenobu made their Huizong copies.

The composition of the two Kano paintings reflects a type developed by Ming-dynasty painter Lü Ji (ca. 1420s-1505). Lü used bird-and-flower paintings as means for expressing political concerns. He did this through homonyms, playing with two very different words that shared the same pronunciation. One of Lü’s moralizing compositions was of a hawk standing on an ocean rock. The homonym was “chao”: with one character, it means “tides” but with another it means “[imperial] court.” Thus, pictures of lone hawks on ocean rocks are titled “Standing Alone in Clean Tides.” But, knowing the homonym, the title becomes “Standing Alone in a Clean Court,” which was a moralizing theme encouraging government officials to stand firm against corruption. The hawk paintings associated with Huizong in Japan plus the Ming example in Paris and attributed to the emperor use this composition.

Kano Tan’yū’s, Kano Tsunenobu’s and the Ming Dynasty “Huizong” hawk paintings all show crested raptors with feathering extending back from the crown of the head. In Japan, this is the form of Japanese hawk-eagles, *kumataka* (*Nisaetus nipalensis*), which are also found in China. Chinese painting established one main word for raptors, “ying” /鳶, which in Japan was the character for hawk, “taka” /鷹. But, in the Edo Period, a second word circulated in popular culture: “washi” /鷹, or eagle. At this time, the publication industry was growing, and more people were reading more books, both reprints of Chinese and Japanese classics and contemporary works. These sources augmented the vocabulary of references and phrases, which crossed over into popular art. *Washi/eagles* appear in woodblock prints as distinct birds thanks to two adages describing human haughtiness: “the eagle who never looks up” and “like an eagle with a baby monkey.” Explicitly named “washi” on prints that reproduce these phrases, the birds shown are crested like *kumataka* and not like imperial eagles as understood in the West. In Chinese art, the single character for raptors makes no distinctions among the various types; in Japan, commoner art established *kumataka* as eagles, *washi*. In both cases, these ying/raptors are depicted in landscapes as wild birds, versus the domesticated goshawks of sport hunting. In the Meiji Period, when imperial eagles emerge as important subjects, they supplanted *kumataka* and become the principle owners of the name “washi.”

Kano painters provided samurai patrons with images of hawks in both wild and domesticated form. Hawks in the wild were frequently shown perched in trees, especially wintry pines, but also standing on rocks. The *Eaglemania* exhibition includes a superb album by Kano Tsunenobu descriptively titled *Hawks and Calligraphy* (Figure 4 and 5). Ten leaves of Confucian text pair with ten paintings of hawks to teach hawk culture and samurai values. Six hawks stand on
tree branches, three stand on rocks, and one attacks prey against a blank background. They are all individuals and none of the scenes include large bodies of water, thus the compositions do not relate to the Chinese theme of “standing alone.”

Of the ten hawks in Kano Tsunenobu’s album, two of them compete for priority. The only image of attack is also the only scene with no background setting (Figure 4). Where every other hawk has some element of nature that fixes its scene in season and place, this one is timeless. But, this hawk is pinkish brown, not white. A different hawk is white, one of the three birds standing on rocks (Figure 5). White plumage was by this point well established as a superior characteristic, and in any painted collection of hawks by the Kano, only one bird is ever distinguished with this coloring. The album thus features two important ideas: the attack is eternal, but the white plumage is magisterial. This white hawk is attended by autumn, seen in the coloring ivy draping his rock and connecting him with poetic seasonal imagery.

The Imperial Eagle of the Meiji Period

Depictions of raptors in the Edo Period set a vocabulary for Meiji-period artists looking to update Japanese art. For some artists, the transition between periods flowed in an organic manner with the fundamentals of style and patronage left in place. For those dependent on the feudal system, regime change was a rupture. Artists traditionally catering to Buddhist temples, too, suffered as the government ordered the separation of Buddhism from Shintō and state financial support ceased. Artists working in metals had relied principally on samurai and Buddhism for patronage; these people had to find new ways to re-enter the art market. In the Meiji Period, that market included foreign collectors. Foreigners eagerly purchased decorative arts for use and for display in the home.
Western collectors valued sculpture alongside painting as first among fine arts and so looked to Japan for these things, too.

In the West, elites expressed status in part by collecting fine art. Homes were large and they accommodated displaying art collections, which included painting, sculpture, fine objects, tapestries and more. In Japan, status was also expressed through the home, but displays changed with seasons and interests, much of the collection resting in storage. The use of interior tatami matting discouraged placing heavy items on the floor, and pedestals for display did not develop. *Tokonoma* emerged for art display, but these accommodated smaller paintings and *okimono*. Any desire for large painting was satisfied by the architecture of walls, *fusuma*, and folding screens. Large objects had no natural place in the display regimes of wealthy Japanese. As a result, sculpture was not an important art medium in pre-Meiji Japan.

But, sculpture saved metals artists. Japan had an enviable tradition of fine metal work that included a palette of metal colors using unique alloys. In the words of British designer and critic Christopher Dresser, “The Japanese are the only perfect metal-workers which the world has yet produced.” Artists reared to make armor and sword fittings or Buddhist chimes and candlesticks turned to the Western market by making vases and sculpture. In this transition period, mainstream Western taste favored naturalism and narrative. Natural sciences excited everyday people with new discoveries, and naturalism was a style that anyone could understand. This was the age of bird studies by John James Audubon (1785-1851) (Figure 6), bronze figures of horses and cowboys by Frederic Remington (1861-1909) and much more in easily understood naturalism.

Japanese metals artists translated many human and animal subjects into three-dimensional form. Often, their subjects were redolent of “old” Japan. Cranes, samurai, and shellfish abound in the Meiji Period, frequently at or approaching life size. Even whole scenes were cast in bronze, as examples in the Khalili Collection, London, amply show. Among the favored topics rendered into sculptural form were raptors. Two basic types, established by Chinese precedent, continued: domesticated or wild raptors. Bronze hawks tethered to simple lacquered stands are plentiful in the Meiji Period, the subject evoking feudal Japan while also appealing to hawk sportsmen in the West (Figure 7). Sculpted wild hawks yielded a greater range of bird types, metals, and compositional overtones (Figure 8). Importantly, in the Meiji Period, representations of wild raptors expanded beyond goshawks to include other hawks and true eagles.

![Figure 6. John James Audubon (1785-1851), “Goshawk,” *The Birds of America*, 1824-38. Etching and aquatint, hand coloring, 40 x 28 inches, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.](image)
Whether sculptures of tamed or wild birds, all of them strove for naturalism, down to their bases.

International trends impacted Japanese eagle sculpture. The naturalism of the period in quite strong, but Japanese sculptors did not choose to depict kumataka. As discussed above, kumataka in the Edo Period had been used as “washi.” The emergence of eagles as important subjects in the Meiji Period owes to Western art and symbolism that used them to symbolize nations. In bird type, Meiji-period eagles conform to the imperial eagles that had been a part of Western art since Roman times. In addition, eagles are large birds, and eagle sculptures are likewise often quite large. This contrasts with hawks, which appear in nature and in art in a range of sizes. While sculpted tethered hawks could

Figure 7. Nakano Bikai (Yoshiumi), Hawk Perched on a Lacquer Stand, ca. 1890. Silver, lacquer, shakudō, shibuichi, gold, 10 x 3.8 x 6.3 inches (hawk), 19.6 x 9.5 x 7.9 inches (stand), private collection.

Figure 8. Shoami Katsuyoshi (1832-1908), Silver Hawk, 1904. Silver, shakudō, shibuichi, gold, wood, 10 x 27.5 x 21.5 inches (hawk), 32x33x15 inches (stand), private collection.
fit neatly into elite Japanese interiors, the size of the eagles makes display in a tokonoma or elsewhere on the tatami flooring nonsensical. By virtue of size and symbolism, then, Japanese sculpted eagles were objects aimed at Western collectors.

Two Meiji eagle sculptures are the centerpieces for the Eaglemania exhibition at the McMullen Museum, Boston College. The first is BC’s newly conserved monumental eagle described at the beginning of the essay. The second is an iron eagle perched on natural wood that is owned by the Metropolitan Museum, New York (Figure 9). Together, the two sculptures demonstrate fundamental approaches to Japanese sculpted eagles in terms of style, mounts, and meaning.

The Metropolitan’s Eagle with Outstretched Wings is, in most respects, typical of extant Meiji eagle sculptures. The figure is life size: were its wings fully spread, the span would be roughly six feet. The style of the sculpture is entirely naturalistic and expertly rendered. The eagle is shown alert: the wings are raised, the head turns to observe something, and the body’s muscles are engaged. The eagle stands on top of a broken tree trunk, its body weight shifted with the uneven positioning of its feet. Most striking here is the feathering of the bird. By making this figure in iron, the artist could forge feathers individually and rivet them to an underlying iron skin. Separating the feathers in this way follows nature and allows for the play of light to create highlights and inner shadows. This eagle was purchased by an American, James R. Steers, in 1903; American patriotism was high in this period, and the eagle was the country’s symbol. The Metropolitan’s Eagle, argued to be the work of Suzuki Chōkichi (1848-1919), is as naturalistic as a bird drawn by John James Audubon and suited to popular American taste.

Boston College’s monumental eagle, too, had American buyers: Larz and Isabel Anderson, who purchased it in 1897 during their honeymoon in Japan. Larz Anderson descended from an officer in the American Revolution and made a career in the American diplomatic corps. He even served briefly as America’s ambassador to Japan in 1912-3. For Anderson, the eagle very much signified his country and his ardent patriotism. At the same time, Anderson loved Japan, visiting it four times and declaring it “wonderland of the world” after his first visit in 1888. When the Andersons unpacked their enormous eagle, they placed it in one of the United States’ earliest Japanese gardens. The sculpture, for its first owners,
embodied their patriotism and their feeling for Japan.

The specific form of BC’s eagle makes it suited to the weighty symbolism of nationhood. Considering how very large it is, the BC eagle still shows the careful attention to naturalism typical of Meiji sculpture. But, in specific elements of its composition, this eagle also reflects values developed by elite Kano painters of the Edo-period. Smaller eagles such as the Metropolitan’s were primarily naturalistic studies of birds placed on wooden bases. The size of the BC eagle required a very sturdy base to support its weight, so its base had to be represented in metal. This base describes rock, not wood. The BC eagle is one of four Meiji eagles of this size in Western collections, and they all have bronze bases shaped as rocks. It is these bases that recall Kano paintings of raptors on rocks and the Chinese “standing alone” composition.

As outlined above, Kano paintings of eagles connected to multiple meanings. Hawks were proprietary property of samurai elites; top Kano painters created hawk paintings for these patrons. Hawk painting derived from China and several markers of prestige came with this model: white plumage, which connected to Emperor Huizong, and the “standing alone” composition, which admonished virtue in government. Kano Tsunenobu’s white hawk in Album of Hawks and Calligraphy shows hawks in natural settings and its prestigious white hawk reflects the elite seasonal association with autumn through the red ivy draping its rock perch. Kano stylistic roots were Chinese, and this included the convention that rugged, sharply cut rocks and mountains were characteristic of China. The monumental eagle sculptures of the Meiji Period thus incorporate multiple expressions of prestige and national government. The word “washi” transformed from the commoner’s kumataka to the imperial eagles of the nineteenth century. Boston College’s eagle thus descends from imperial ancestors and admonitions government to virtue in a distinctly Meiji expression of nationhood.

Note

(6) Reproduced in Sung, Decoded Messages, p. 34.
(7) Reproduced in Lippit, Painting of the Realm, p. 109

Painting in a private collection, Japan.


(9) As Sung discusses in *Decoded Messages*, p. 33. She reproduces *Eagle* (figure 21, page 34), Ming Dynasty, hanging scroll, Musée Cernuschi, Paris, as an example.


(13) See Joe Earle, *Splendors of Meiji: Treasures of Imperial Japan, Masterpieces from the Khalili Collection* (St. Petersburg, Florida: Broughton International Publications, 1999.)

(14) Joe Earle discusses this eagle, its composition, and its possible connections to the workshop of metals artist Suzuki Chōkichi in his “Suzuki Chōkichi: Master of Metal Raptors,” in *Eaglemania*, pp. 25-30 (28-9). Earle’s article also discusses the Boston College eagle in relationship to Suzuki as its possible artist.


(16) The other three are: *Figure of an Eagle*, Khalili Collection, reproduced in Joe Earle’s *Splendors of Meiji*, p. 243; Eagle, Kansas City’s Country Club District (outdoors); and Eagle, Regent’s Park, London (outdoors).