View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by KnowledgeBank at OSU

Lee Bruschke-Johnson, *Dismissed as Elegant Fossils: Konoe Nobutada and the Role of Aristocrats in Early Modern Japan*, Japonica Neerlandica 9 (Leiden: Hotei, 2004).

©**Melissa McCormick,** Harvard University

Among the longest-enduring families of the Japanese nobility is the Konoe, a branch of the Northern Fujiwara family that traces its origins back to Fujiwara Motozane (1143–1166). For centuries the Konoe family stood at the head of the *gosekke*, the five lineages of the Fujiwara family from which imperial regents (*sesshō*) and chancellors (*kanpaku*) were selected during the premodern period. This stature gave them close proximity to the imperial line, even during the medieval period when the Konoe had no direct blood ties to the throne, and ensured that its members would be active in politics and the transmission of courtly cultural traditions in almost every generation. This remained true well into the modern period. The twenty-sixth family head Konoe Atsumaro (1863–1904) was appointed *kōshaku* (duke or prince), served as president of the House of Peers, and helped establish the aristocratic Gakushūin University. His oldest son and the twenty-seventh family head, the ill-fated Konoe Fumimaro (1891–1945), served three times as prime minister, oversaw the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and after the end of World War II committed suicide under suspicion of war crimes. Fumimaro was said to be on such intimate terms with the Shōwa Emperor that he was one of very few people allowed to sit in a chair in the Emperor’s company. The current family head, Konoe Michitaka, was a longtime history professor at the University of Tokyo and is currently the director of the Yōmei Bunko in Kyoto, a library of Konoe family treasures that is methodically publishing the most important of its some 200,000 documents related to family history. These figures were only the latest in a long line of culturally influential and politically active family members that counted such famous figures as Hisamichi (1472–1544), Sakihisa (1536–1612), and Iehiro (1667–1736) among them. The most celebrated Konoe of all, however, is undoubtedly Nobutada (1565–1614), a master calligrapher and central figure in the aristocratic community during the uneasy and oftentimes violent transition to Tokugawa rule. Nobutada is the subject of a new monograph by Lee Bruschke-Johnson, *Dismissed as Elegant Fossils: Konoe Nobutada and the Role of Aristocrats in Early Modern Japan*.

As the title makes clear, Bruschke-Johnson's book is intended as a corrective to the majority of English-language studies of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that focus on the "three unifiers"—the warlords Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu—while neglecting the political, social, and cultural significance of the imperial court and its network of aristocratic families. As such the book echoes the work of recent publications such as Lee Butler's *Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan, 1467–1680: Resilience and Renewal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002) and the articles collected in Elizabeth Lillehoj, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Classicism in Japanese Painting, 1600–1700* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004). Furthermore, its general attention to the resistance to Tokugawa rule after the death of Hideyoshi parallels the concerns of Andrew Watsky's *Chikubushima: Deploying the Sacred Arts in Momoyama Japan* (University of Washington Press, 2003), which, among other things, addresses Toyotomi sponsorship of religious monuments after the passing of Hideyoshi. The focus of Bruschke-Johnson's study on Konoe Nobutada provides an opportunity for a reassessment of the court's significance in this period from fresh perspectives, both because of its approach as a case study of a single aristocrat and its subject's prolific and innovative output as a calligrapher.

The book's first six chapters divide into two parts, with three chapters offering historical background, and a subsequent three focusing on Nobutada's artistic output. All six are linked, however, by the underlying goal of the book, to recast Nobutada as a proactive participant in both political and aesthetic realms. The final chapter of the book surveys the fate of the Konoe in the century following Nobutada's death, giving an overview of the lives of Go-Mizunoo and Nobutada's descendents in terms of their tense and ever changing relations with the Tokugawa shogunate. Thus Bruschke-Johnson casts her net wide in covering a lengthy period of history and a large body of material. She begins with the century preceding Nobutada in chapter 1, "Politics and Art in Kyoto, 1450–1596," which introduces members of the Konoe family from the late Muromachi period, paying particular attention to Nobutada's father Sakihisa. This chapter provides a context for understanding the significance of the Konoe family within Japan's early modern political order by demonstrating the extent to which the Konoe utilized intermarriage with the Ashikaga and the imperial court to maintain their prominence over several generations. Such strategic matrimonial ties culminated in the accession of the highly influential emperor Go-Mizunoo (1596–1680) in 1611, establishing Sakihisa as "the first Konoe grandfather of an emperor since the late thirteenth century" (35).

Nobutada's biography is the subject of chapter 2, the first extended historical sketch of this individual in English. Details of each phase of his life are given with continual reference to primary sources, from his youth to his attempt in 1585 to become *kanpaku* that had been the birthright of his ancestors (but that was foiled by Hideyoshi's own assumption of the title), to his exile in Kyushu from 1593 to 1596, to the last decade of his life back in Kyoto, when he bore witness to both the accession of Go-Mizunoo and the looming threat of Tokugawa hegemony. Chapter 2 not only traces the major events in Nobutada's life and the historical and political events of the day, but also suggests his role in shaping many of them. The most notable example of Nobutada's political intervention is the infamous incident involving the inscription on a temple bell for the monastery Hōkōji, established by Toyotomi Hideyori (1593–1615). A purposeful misprision of the inscription gave the Tokugawa a justification to launch the Osaka campaign of 1614 that ultimately led to the eradication of the Toyotomi. Bruschke-Johnson demonstrates the possibility of the court's role in the composition of the text and of Nobutada's involvement, given his close relationship to the monk charged with composing the inscription (47). These and other analyses establish a pattern of subtle behavior suggesting that Nobutada and his fellow courtiers were doing everything within their circumscribed political reach to support a Toyotomi return to power under Hideyori, which would have provided the best environment for a political regeneration of the court.

Chapter 3, "Politics and Art in Kyoto During the Keichō Era (1596–1615)," broadens the discussion to encompass the cultural and artistic community surrounding Nobutada. As the previous chapter asserts, Nobutada (as all members of the aristocratic community) had a vested interest in supporting the Toyotomi regime. This chapter expands the circle of anti-Tokugawa agitators to include Hon'ami Kōetsu and Shōkadō Shōjō, who along with Nobutada would later on be canonized as the "Three Brushes of the Kan'ei Period," as well as the painter Kano Sanraku, who fled Kyoto after Hideyori's fall, and the tea master Furuta Oribe, who was forced to commit ritual suicide because of his connection to Hideyori. Bruschke-Johnson explains in this chapter why certain cultural figures had reason to support the Toyotomi, and goes into more detail about Nobutada's agenda in holding out for a Toyotomi regime. She documents Nobutada's likely allegiances to the monk Dōchō (d. 1608), his uncle, as well as to one of Hideyori's scribes who studied calligraphy with Nobutada and practiced the "Sanmyakuin style," named after his posthumous title.

In chapter 4, "Nobutada and Calligraphy," Bruschke-Johnson provides a context for a discussion of Nobutada's works by describing new developments in calligraphy and its appreciation in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, such as the mania for accumulating samples of calligraphy in ancient hands into albums (*tekagami*), as well as the establishment of the Kohitsu family of calligraphy connoisseurs, who happened to be on close terms with the Konoe family. The practice of hanging calligraphies at tea gatherings is also reviewed before the chapter proceeds to a discussion of Nobutada's training and stylistic development. Here the analysis would have been buoyed by an awareness of the importance of calligraphic style as a transmission of family lineage, as a sort of genealogical signature. By Nobutada's time the Konoe family boasted a distinguished pedigree of accomplished calligraphers, including Hisamichi and Sakihisa, and Nobutada was not so much attempting to break with or radically transform received brush habits so much as add his own inflections to a highly developed lineal practice. For that matter, more context is necessary to situate Nobutada's work within the social history of elite Japanese writing, not only that of the Konoe family but of other aristocrats of his day; after all, the late medieval period witnessed the emergence of no less than seventeen new calligraphic lineages.[1] Instead, the reader is left with the impression that there was little else besides the dominant Shōren'in school. Nevertheless, Bruschke-Johnson's relatively in-depth discussion of Nobutada's stylistic tendencies, calligraphic compositions, and use of paper help the reader unfamiliar with calligraphic practice.

Chapter 5, "Nobutada and the Courtly Tradition," provides a useful introduction to a wide array of art works by Nobutada and his contemporaries on subjects such as the *Wakan Roeishū*, *The Thirty-Six Poets*, *The Tale of Genji* and works in ink, namely scrolls of *Tenjin Crossing the Sea* (*Totō Tenjin*). The primary aim of the chapter is to demonstrate that Nobutada did more than simply continue the tradition of his forebears, but actively experimented with new formats and approaches as he produced works associated with the literary cannon. Bruschke-Johnson suggests that these efforts were not only artistic, but went hand-in-hand with Nobutada's political engagement and a desire to reinvigorate the court. One does get the sense that Nobutada broke new ground with his calligraphy for paintings such as *The Thirty-Six Poets* and the *Hyakunin isshu* poets, dramatically enlarged for the surfaces of large-scale folding screens. Yet the nature of Nobutada's involvement in the creation of these screens is unknown, leaving open the possibility that a patron, artist, or some combination of individuals motivated the new approach. Only through more focused contextual and formal studies of individual works can Nobutada's reinterpretation of age-old courtly themes be properly fleshed out. While the production contexts of many works are unknowable, one opportunity for carrying out such an analysis is a *Tale of Genji* album in the Kyoto National Museum, mentioned only briefly in the book, with calligraphy by 23 high-ranking aristocrats including Nobutada and other Konoe family members, and signed by the artist Tosa Mitsuyoshi. One scholar has argued that Nobutada commissioned this album as a gift for his sister Sakiko, a consort of Go-Yōzei.[2] With Nobutada as the likely patron, the inner workings of the album, the selection of its texts and images, the social networks of calligraphers involved, and how the album compares to previous examples, hold great promise for understanding the extent to which Nobutada reinterpreted courtly classics.

Much attention in this chapter on the courtly tradition is devoted to Nobutada's images of *Tenjin Crossing the Sea*, Nobutada's signature subject. According to later legend, Nobutada executed one thousand *Tenjin* paintings, and virtually dozens of these images, not all authenticated, survive. The author catalogues thirty examples attributed to Nobutada in an appendix. While scholars have suggested that religious devotion may have inspired Nobutada's efforts, Bruschke-Johnson posits that the *Tenjin* paintings possessed talismanic value for their creator related to events in the years Keichō 14 or 15 (1608–1609), the only dates found on the extant works. This was around the time when Nobutada's nephew, the future Go-Mizunoo (r. 1611–1629) was about to become emperor, which was by no means a foregone conclusion, and it seems Nobutada may have brushed the *Tenjin* images as a personal prayer for a Konoe emperor. Slightly different interpretations are also possible when the subject is viewed within the long durée of its production in the sphere of Zen monks. Bruschke-Johnson does note that Nobutada studied Zen Buddhism with Daitokuji and Shōkokuji monks, and a further exploration of his relationship to this community might have strengthened the validity of her assertions. These works might also be analyzed from the perspective of Nobutada's poetic activities and their use at *waka* and *renga* gatherings. The preferred forms of *Tenjin* paintings to display at poetry gatherings were first and foremost "name scroll" (*myōgo*) calligraphy hangings, and then paintings of "Tenjin in court dress" (*sokutai*); *Totō Tenjin* images showing Michizane in Chinese garb crossing the China Sea with a Chinese poem usually inscribed overhead were apparently deemed inappropriate for *waka* or *renga* events. Interestingly, several of Nobutada's innovations in this theme could be interpreted as ways of transforming the *Tenjin Crossing the Sea* into a suitable poetic icon. Nobutada in effect turns the figural Tenjin image into a "name scroll" by embedding the characters for "Tenjin" in the body of the brushed figure, while he emulates the "court-dress Tenjin" paintings by tending to inscribe his works with *waka* as opposed to Chinese poems. And we know that by the Edo period, *Tenjin Crossing the Sea* paintings were displayed at *renga* gatherings.[3]

---

[1] Shimatani Hiroyuki, "Sanjōnishi Sanetaka to Sanjō ryū," *Tokyo Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan kiyō* 26 (1990): 7–191.

[2] Inamoto Mariko, "Kyoto Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan hokan 'Genji monogatari gajō' no kansuru ichikōsatsu," *Kokka* 1223 (1997): 7–19.

In chapter 6, "Establishing New Conventions," Bruschke-Johnson treats Nobutada's large-scale calligraphy screens. These works are famous screens, but the author succeeds in defamiliarizing them for her reader and demonstrating their innovative qualities. Large-scale calligraphy screens are rare in Japan; a handful survive in the Shōsōin collection from the time of Emperor Shōmu (701–756), but the medieval period is virtually devoid of examples. Nobutada's innovation is all the more dramatic when one realizes how he radically enlarged stylistic patterns developed originally for small formats without losing the charge—the kinetic tension—of the writing. These screens would have operated within architectural settings that demanded different types of relationships to viewers and their surroundings, making them virtually impervious to traditional analyses that are brought to bear on Japanese works of writing. A telling comparison to screens brushed by Prince Hachijōnomiya Toshihito with diminutive characters and a restrained compositional style set Nobutada's forceful aesthetic in high relief. Viewing works such as the *Hatsuseyama Poem Screen* in the Zenrinji collection, or his *Poetry Screens* in Hōki'in on Mt. Kōya, one senses that they embody Bruschke-Johnson's vision of Nobutada that permeates her entire study, that of a proud scion of a prestigious aristocratic family, bristling with self-confidence, and unlikely to take a passive role in the art or politics of his day.

Bruschke-Johnson's study is rich in details and makes responsible and reliable use of primary source material and secondary literature. The author is honest about the many structural limitations to the historical study of Nobutada—especially concerning the large number of documents in the Konoe family archives at the Yōmei Bunko Library that remain untranscribed —and compensates ably through an emphasis on the cultural and political contexts in which Nobutada's deeds and writings acquire meaning. The presentation of these contexts are framed and motivated by a perceived lack of scholarly attention to Nobutada and the courtly culture of his era, but one wonders if this characterization of the historiography of the period is not misleading. In the English-language sphere, because of a lack of a critical mass of cultural historians of premodern Japan, all too many worthy subjects have not yet been given their due. Among Japanese scholars, however, Nobutada has benefited from his early canonization by the Kohitsu family of connoisseurs, and at the very least one has to consider the possibility that his calligraphy has been canonized all out of proportion to its relative merits vis-à-vis other forms of aesthetic writing in his day. Furthermore, courtly culture of the Momoyama period has indirectly been the focus of a modern historiographical tradition that tends to group Kyoto aristocrats and urbanites (*machishū*) of this period together as working in uniform resistance to Tokugawa hegemony. The postwar dean of this tradition, the historian Hayashi Tatsusaburō, was so influential that a small cottage industry of studies emerged in his wake that viewed cultural figures of this period as members of a heroic, anti-shogunal *résistance* movement based in Kyoto. Needless to say, this characterization of the political affiliations of this period is overly simplistic and should be treated with suspicion.

---

[3] Kanō Hiroyuki, "Teinai yūrakuzu no seiritsu katei ni kansuru shiron," *Gakusō* 8 (1986), cited by Yamamoto Hideo, "Kano-ha no totō Tenjin zō," in Imaizumi Yoshio and Shimao Arata eds., *Zen to Tenjin* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2000), p. 188.

Although Bruschke-Johnson is careful not to employ such a schematic framework, perhaps she could have done more to articulate the complexity of the politics and social networks that underwrote the cultural production of a figure such as Nobutada. From the Ōnin War onward, Japan's political landscape was thoroughly decentralized into fragments of the early *kenmon* ("gates of power") order—namely the imperial court, aristocracy, and traditional Buddhist sects, a weakened shogunate, national networks of Zen and Pure Land monasteries, and a whole host of traditional and newly risen warrior houses. These entities were in constant flux, rallying around one node at a given moment, whether it be the shogunate, court, or one of the unifying hegemons, only to disperse and reconfigure in different allegiances around a different node. The dynamism of this decentralized politics had lost considerable momentum by Nobutada's day, but had by no means settled into stasis, especially at the time of Nobutada's death in 1614. A future sequel to this study may excavate the unsettledness of the nobility and Nobutada's ambivalences toward not just the Tokugawa but other institutions and peoples of the polity.

A nuanced awareness of the sociopolitical culture of this period would then animate Nobutada's extant calligraphic works with new meaning. Ultimately, however, the significance of individual works will rely upon a recovery of the contingencies of the production context of each individual work: who the recipient was; what the expectations were for certain types of texts, formats, and occasional writings; whether money or gifts in kind or more abstract forms of compensation were given in return; and what types of human relationships were presupposed by calligraphic transactions. To answer these questions properly would admittedly require enormous labor, but provide nothing less than a social history of early Japanese calligraphy, something that has not been attempted in any language thus far. The greatest merit of Bruschke-Johnson's study is that it takes the first and most difficult steps in this direction.