

The *Bugaku* Scroll by Tosa Mitsunobu in the Tokyo National Museum Collection

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Introduction

Bugaku, a form of music now more commonly known as *gagaku*, was played at imperial and shogunate court rituals until the Edo era, and at Buddhist temple services. Its origins were in music that came from China and down through the Korean peninsula around the fifth century.¹

Bugaku-zu is a genre of painting that uses *bugaku* as its theme. It is often painted on scrolls, fans and folding screens. In the 17th century, encyclopedic *bugaku* screens were especially fashionable. They are generally considered to have first appeared in the time that the painter Tosa Mitsunobu (1434?-1525?) was active, however there are no extant works from that period.²

In this paper I'd like to look at Mitsunobu and *bugaku-zu*, present a hypothesis that Mitsunobu was responsible for the style of *bugaku* screens in the 17th century.

1. Encyclopedic *Bugaku* Screens in the 17th century

The most popular format of *bugaku* screens in the 17th century were pairs of six-panel folding screens. On the far left and right there are musicians' booths and filling the screens between them are twenty-four groups of *bugaku* dancers, painted on a gold-leaf background. In fact, this composition does not realistically portray an actual *bugaku* performance as it is usually performed by only one group at time. For this reason, these compositions are called decorative or encyclopedic.³

Encyclopedic *bugaku* screens from this period can be divided into three groups, according to the school of painting to which they belong. The Tosa school which started in the 14th century, followed the style of *Yamato-e*, the painting of things Japanese, the Kanō school which started in the 15th century, combined elements of ink-painting and *Yamato-e*, Tawaraya Sōtatsu (1570?-1641?) did not belong to any 'school' and developed his own style. While all three types have their own characteristics, the basic composition and the form of dancers are same.

2. *Bugaku-zu* up to the beginning of the 15th century

The oldest-known *bugaku-zu* is the ink-painting "*shinzei-kogakuzu*" from the 12th century. Beside *bugaku*

this scroll features illustrations of things such as musical instruments and acrobatics.⁴ An example from the 13th century is the single-panel screen "*bugaku-zu*" in the Kitano Tenmangū Shrine in Kyoto. We can see some musicians, three groups of child dancers and a lot of monks looking on as spectators.⁵ An example from the 14th century is the "*bu-zu*" of the Yachi Hachimangū Shrine in Yamagata prefecture. On this scroll there are some of the same pictorial elements that later appear in *bugaku* screens of the 17th century. As an example from the early 15th century, there is the "*bugaku scroll*" copied by a *bugaku* musician.⁶

Three of the four works are scroll paintings and have significance both as historical artifacts and as works of art. *Bugaku-zu* designs have been copied many times and some of the imagery was stylized.

3. Tosa Mitsunobu and *Bugaku-zu*

There are no known examples of *bugaku-zu* that show how they transitioned from the scroll format to encyclopedic *bugaku* screen. I'd like to look at the "*bugaku scroll*" by Tosa Mitsunobu in the Tokyo National Museum Collection.

Tosa Mitsunobu, a painter of the Tosa school, worked for the court for over fifty years after taking over as official head of imperial court artists in 1469. We can see in the scroll four musicians and thirty dancers, and at the end it says that Kanō Osanobu (1796-1846) copied in the scroll a version by Mitsunobu in 1838. This scroll has not been mentioned in detail to date, and it has been debated whether the so-called original is in fact by Mitsunobu at all. There is evidence that supports the idea that original was by Mitsunobu, and this comes in the form of some historical references about one element of the scroll, the character of Saisōrō. Saisōrō is an old man who wandered in search of a medicinal herb that would prolong his life and he is the titular subject of a *bugaku* performance.

Art historian Takagishi Akira has discussed the *bugaku-zu* by Mitsunobu with reference to some historical texts.⁷ According to these documents, in 1462 Mitsunobu painted the *bugaku-zu* on a sliding door in the residence of Ashikaga Yoshimasa, the eighth shogun in the Muromachi period. Mitsunobu consulted the records of previous *bugaku* performances, costumes, and choreography. However he couldn't paint the character "Saisōrō", as no one knew the part in its entirety. Therefore a dancer was sent to Osaka by

Yoshimasa to learn the dance of “Saisōrō”. After coming back the dancer performed the role and Mitsunobu was able to paint the character “Saisōrō” at Yoshimasa’s residence.⁸ Takagishi therefore suggests that the *bugaku-zu* design by Mitsunobu became the model of 17th century *bugaku-zu*.

What is particularly interesting here is that the addition of the character “Saisōrō” in *bugaku-zu* started with Mitsunobu. So, I would like to compare Mitsunobu’s Saisōrō with *bugaku-zu* up to the 15th century. Their depiction of characters differ from Mitsunobu’s. However, the 17th century Saisōrō is same as Mitsunobu’s. In other words, the Mitsunobu’s Saisōrō was used in 17th century *bugaku* screens. Since the existence of the Mitsunobu’s *bugaku* screen is recorded in historical material of the 19th century, his screen seems to have been known up to that time.

With these points in mind, it seems quite possible that elements of Mitsunobu’s rendition of *bugaku* at Yoshimasa’s residence were taken up by the Tosa school and used as a model when the encyclopedic *bugaku* screens of the 17th century were made.

Conclusion

From considering the depiction of the character “Saisōrō” in “*bugaku* scroll” painting by Tosa Mitsunobu, It can be hypothesized that Mitsunobu was responsible for changing the content of *bugaku-zu*. However it’s difficult to say that encyclopedic *bugaku* screens were an extension of *bugaku-zu* that had been painted up to the 15th century. This is because *bugaku-zu* up to the 15th century were used as a form of documentation, whereas encyclopedic *bugaku* screens in the 17th century were meant to be decorative and appreciated as art objects.

This suggests that there was a new kind of art patron in this period, shogun or feudal lords, who were interested in *bugaku-zu* being fashionable and not just following tradition.

gakusei ni tsuite”, *Gagaku kai*, no. 48 (1968): 14–27.

- 5 Izumi Takeo, “Kitano-Tenmangu-zo *bugaku-zu* tsuitate ni tsuite”, *Bijutsushi gaku*, no. 29 (Tōhoku Daigaku, 2008): 1–33.
- 6 Aizawa Masahiko, “Muromachi kyūtei shakai ni okeru *bu-e* seisaku to sono ichirei ni tsuite”, *Kobijutsu*, no. 58 (Sansai Shinsha, 1981): 42–63.
- 7 Takagishi Akira, “Ashikaga Yoshimasa Muromachi dono no *bu-e* seisaku to tosa Hirochika, Tosa Mitsunobu”, *Tokyo Daigaku Shiryo Hensan-jo kenkyū kiyō*, no.13, (2003): 23–40.
- 8 Endō Tamaki, Suda Makiko, Tanaka Naho, Momosaki Yūichirō, “Tsunamitsu kō ki kansei sannen reki ki”, *Tokyo Daigaku Shiryo Hensan-jo kenkyū kiyō*, no. 22, (2012): 161–176. Toyohara Muneaki, *Tai-gen-syo*, (Nihon Koten-zenshū kankōkai, 1933): 211.

1 Geinōshi Kenkyūkai,(ed.), *Nihon no koten geinō: gagaku, vol.2* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1970)

2 Tsuji Nobuo, “*Bugaku-zu* no keifu to Sōtatsu hitsu *Bugaku-zu byōbu*”, *Rimpa kaiga zenshū: Sōtatsu-ha 1* (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 1977): 69–80.

3 Tsuji, op.cit.: 74.

4 Hayashi Kenzō, “*Shinzei-kogaku-zu* to Heian-jidai no