CHAPTER 6

Pax Tokugawa

CLOSED BORDERS, OFFICIAL ORTHODOXY, AND THE INEXORABLE RISE OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE EDO PERIOD

The late sixteenth century and first decade or so of the seventeenth century had witnessed the consolidation of authority under a succession of dynamic leaders: Oda Nobunaga (1534–82), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98), and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616). In 1603, the last of the three, Ieyasu, established a shogunate centered on his fortress at Edo (present-day Tokyo) that was to last for two hundred and fifty years. Edo is therefore the name of the period (1615–1868), although it is also often referred to as the Tokugawa period. A key factor in this longevity was the success of Ieyasu's immediate heirs in transforming some 250 independently-minded daimyo and their samurai retainers from fighting machines into a unified bureaucracy capable of maintaining peace and order throughout the country under Tokugawa leadership. During the first four decades of the seventeenth century, the new bakufu *developed and promulgated a system of laws designed to ensure national political stability and the unquestioned rule of the Tokugawa shogun. As already described in Chapter 5, these measures included forbidding Japanese to travel abroad and foreigners freedom of movement in Japan, and, ultimately, the proscription of a new religion, Christianity. Equally important, however, was its reassertion of a rigidly defined class system and the development of codes of moral and ethical behavior on every stratum of society. The Tokugawa shoguns used their* bakufu *as a strong, central executive to oversee the regional authority asserted by each daimyo over his domain (*ryō *or* **han**), *and achieved a uniquely successful balance of power that modern historians have named the* **baku-han**.

Confucianism and Social Stability

Where Zen Buddhism had been the philosophical heart of the first *bakufus* of the medieval period, Confucianism played a significant role in the policies formulated by the Tokugawa. The Confucian classics had been the basis of the education of imperial officialdom from the seventh to twelfth centuries, and the Tokugawa's espousal of Confucianism reflected both their desire to identify themselves with ancient tradition and the renewed vigor of Confucian philosophies on the continent. Central to Confucianism is a firmly structured society in which the individual knows and feels secure in his or her place. In its Japanese interpretation, the emperor and his court were at the top of this structure, with the samurai just below, followed by the primary producers, the agricultural peasantry, and then by the secondary producers, the artisans and merchants or townsmen (*chōnin*). This hierarchy had been in place for over a thousand years, and the Tokugawa easily adapted it to suit their purposes. The emperor and his court retained their preeminent social position, but their role was to act as the cultural and spiritual heart of the nation. This they had gradually become accustomed to in the medieval period, and for the most part they continued in their acquiescence. When the outside world—that is, the European powers, the Qing empire of China (1644–1911), and the Choson kingdom of Korea (1392–1911)—had occasion to address themselves to the emperor of Japan, they meant, in fact, the Tokugawa shogun. The samurai class, which had now for many centuries held the real power, became under the Tokugawa a highly educated elite of scholar–soldier–officials. Within this new bureaucracy, the shogun and his *bakufu* formed a federal administration, with the two hundred and fifty or so *han* of the daimyo representing the regional authorities. The latter's samurai retainers, who previously had been military officers, functioned now primarily as officials of these regional governments.

Ironically, as the samurai left their warlike lifestyle further and further behind, many of them came to identify themselves even more intensely as warriors. Equally curiously, the old

imperial regional administration established in the seventh century also continued to live on as a series of titles and stipends to be given and taken away as favors by the shogun's *bakufu*. Although this administration had long been defunct, it meant that technically there were two parallel bureaucracies administering both the old provinces and the new *han*. However, the overall success of the *baku-han* system is proven by the longevity of the Tokugawa regime, and the relative peace and prosperity that large sections of the population enjoyed under it. The long period of peace and stability of the *baku-han* had certainly been the aim of the Minamoto and the Ashikaga governments, but it was the Tokugawa who achieved it.

The rebuilding of temples had begun as soon as the Sengoku Jidai (Age of the Country at War; c. 1480–1573) ended, and continued throughout the seventeenth century as one of the Tokugawa regime's primary tools of legitimization and consolidation. It also found accord with their antagonism toward Christianity, and one of their edicts required all Japanese to register as members of a specific religious institution—Buddhist, Shinto, or Confucian—and undergo annually an examination of their religious beliefs. In each *han*, schools for teaching the administration's favored Confucian doctrine and temples for Confucian worship were erected. A Shinto mausoleum was built for Ieyasu at Nikkō, north of Edo, and small-scale replicas of it were erected in each *han*. Tokugawa conservatism can be seen also in the paintings commissioned by the shoguns and their daimyo, works by established masters of the Kanō school depicting traditional themes from the Muromachi (1392–1573) and Momoyama (1573–1615) periods—Chinese subjects, such as the patriarchs of Confucianism and the *Teikan zu* (*Mirror of Emperors*); a popular treatise on good government), and such Japanese themes as birds and flowers of the four seasons. In contrast to the bold forms and gold backgrounds of the regimes of Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, Tokugawa imagery spoke to a solid, serious conservatism, invoking awe through tradition instead of glamor.

Below the samurai administrators and their elite culture were the peasants, and below them the townsmen, or *chōnin*. The latter was divided into the artisans who created the objects—the buildings, the clothing, the utensils—and the merchants and tradesmen who, according to Confucian thought, merely handled the fruits of others' labors. Throughout Japanese history, however, it has been in this lower part of the social hierarchy that appearances deceive. Although in a relatively exalted position, the Japanese peasant had always been obliged to work his land for one lord or another, whether court aristocrat or samurai, and this did not change under the Tokugawa. From the end of the Sengoku Jidai, however, the *chōnin* had been growing both in number, with the massive spate of urban construction that characterized the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and in wealth. Although they also had to pay the *bakufu*'s taxes, they did not bear the brunt of them, which were reserved for the peasantry and their main crop of rice—the primary currency by which the samurai officials were paid. Already in the sixteenth century, peasants had been abandoning the land in droves, turning to the cities to step down the social ladder and hopefully step into prosperous security. In the Edo period, as taxation became more and more crippling, this demographic shift continued unabated.

Therefore, although the Tokugawa intended to set the social classes in concrete, restricting movement between the levels entirely, the reality is that social mobility did still exist, but it is usually considered in negative terms. As already mentioned, technically, going from peasant to *chōnin* was a slip down the ladder, and samurai also could suffer a fall from social grace. *Rōnin*, or masterless servants, were samurai who had lost or forfeited their positions. In the tumultuous past this had frequently occurred when their lord had somehow disgraced himself and was forced to commit ritual suicide, and, although this could still occur in the Edo period, masterless samurai increasingly were individuals who wished to free themselves from the responsibilities and constraints of service to their daimyo and engage in the new life of the cities. Not a few such *rōnin* would become significant figures in the literary and artistic circles of the period. The older type of *rōnin* became a romantic fantasy figure in literature and folklore, a kind of pathetic hero. Still, one of the best ways to take oneself out of one's class remained either to become a Buddhist monk or enter the Shinto priesthood.

Mention here should also be made of the least desirable position within Japanese society, and that was to be outside it altogether. Since at least the thirteenth century, there had developed a whole array of such outcasts, although simply speaking they were divided between the *eta* (impure) and the *hinin* (non-human). These unfortunates could be peasants or townsmen who had lost their positions on the land or in the guild, but a large proportion of them were from ethnicities such as the Ainu, who were not considered properly Japanese, or the descendants of the many thousands of Korean captives taken during Hideyoshi's campaigns in the 1590s. The *kawaramono* of the medieval period were classified as *hinin* in the Edo period. They were allowed to work at jobs considered unclean in both Buddhism and Shinto, such as grave digging and leather tanning. Obliged to live in ghettos, the *hinin* also had a dress code which dictated that their robes were not allowed to descend below the knee. These outcast ranks and the restrictions upon them were officially abolished in 1871, but it would take the better part of another century to begin to wipe out the enormous stigma attached to these communities.

A Bourgeois Paradise

By the end of the seventeenth century, the prosperity of the cities, which had enjoyed almost a century of peace, had made the upper ranks of the *chōnin* some of the wealthiest families in the land. By contrast many of the samurai/officials were forced to subsist on fixed incomes paid primarily in rice, the

value of which not infrequently plummeted. Many were therefore on the verge of bankruptcy. The vitality of the *chōnin*, already witnessed in the arts of the Momoyama and early Edo periods, only increased with their affluence, and their exuberant enjoyment of life produced a climate in which the arts prospered. These people were astute and pragmatic businessmen, sensitive to minute political, social, and even climatic changes that could mean financial gain if they were assessed and handled correctly, or ruin if mismanaged. Their attention was focused on the world around them, and they cared little for the glories of the long-dead past. They were well educated and rich in worldly experience, and, although they indulged with abandon their fondness for saké, women, and the theater, they were extremely demanding about the quality of the entertainment for which they paid their hard-earned money.

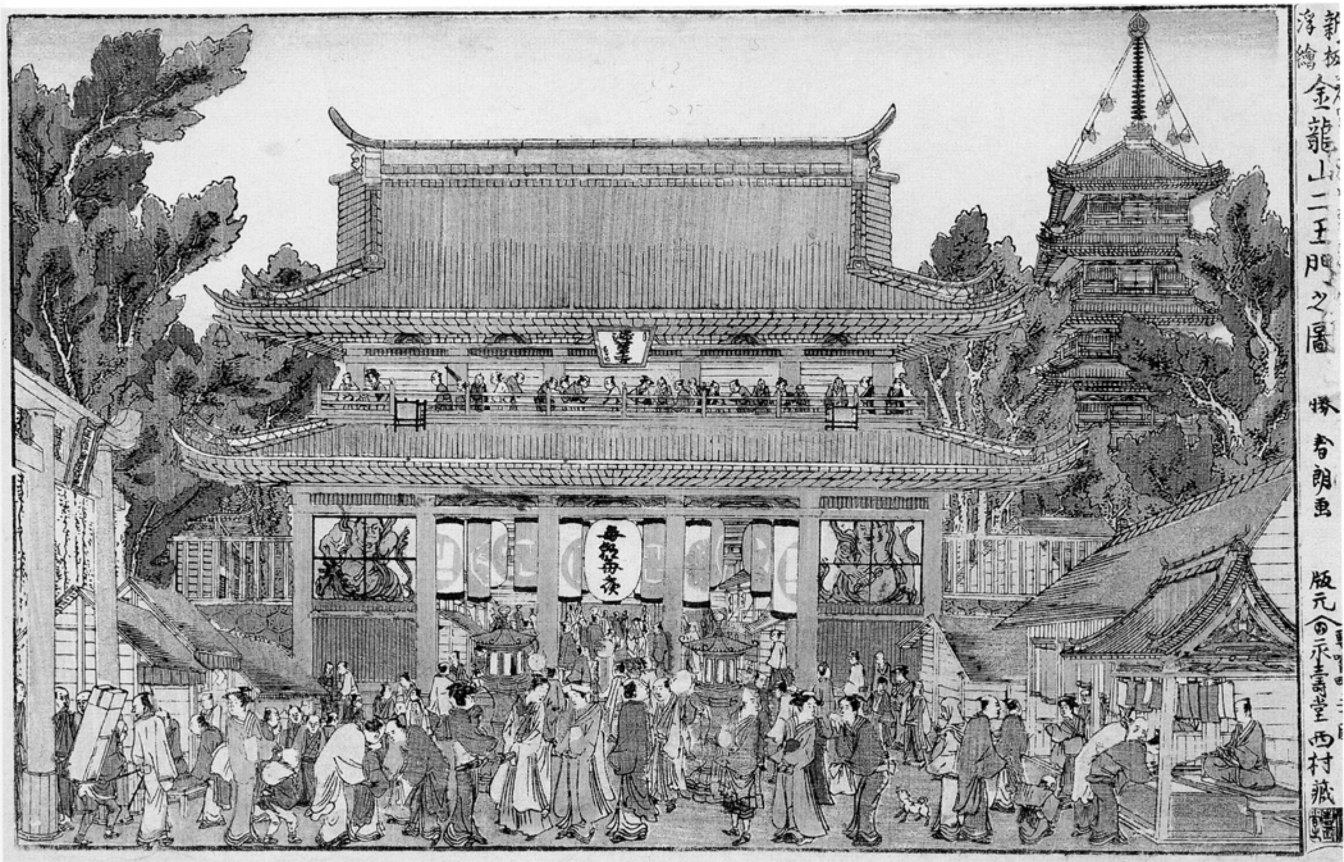
Their exacting standards served as a stimulus to a new breed of writer and artist; notable among the former were the novelist and poet Saikaku Ihara (1642–93) and the playwright of the puppet theater Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724). They looked to painting and to the developing art of the woodblock print for illustrations of scenes from their favorite plays and novels, and for a format of genre imagery known as ***ukiyo-e***—"pictures of the floating world," a reference to both the pleasures to be had in the theaters and teahouses of this new society as well as to their fleeting nature. The concept of art as a means of expressing philosophical or religious ideals or of capturing the essence of a great work of classical literature was of relative unimportance.

The first great artistic flowering following the Momoyama period occurred in the imperial reign era known as Genroku (1688–1703), but, even though the Edo period had its episodes of natural disaster and political instability, for the majority of the constantly expanding urban population life could be good, and fortunes could be made. At the higher end of this artistic milieu were the older *chōnin* families of Kyoto and Osaka, with their longstanding connections with the court aristocracy and the ancient Buddhist foundations. This is the world to which Takagamine, the artistic community established by Hon'ami Kōetsu (1558–1637), belonged. From it also would emerge the brothers Ōgata Kōrin (1658–1715) and Ōgata Kenzan (1663–1743), who would create a dynamic continuation of both Sōtatsu's concepts of painting and design, and Kōetsu's calligraphic excellence and interest in ceramics and the tea ceremony. However, in the newer cities such as Edo the artistic expression of choice was *ukiyo-e* with its depictions of famous male actors and female entertainers, and its illustrated guides to the local brothels and the activities that went on behind their closed doors.

The exuberant prosperity of this *chōnin* culture often gave the authorities pause for thought, especially as it reflected on the ranks of the samurai officials, who seemed to grow only more impoverished as the period progressed. The sumptuary edicts of the *bakufu* and the *han*, aimed at curbing displays of wealth by the newly rich merchants, should be seen in this context. For example, *chōnin* men and women could be limited in their dress to somber shades of brown and gray and only to certain varieties of very ordinary silk. The upper levels of the *chōnin*, whose culture looked much more to the subdued and understated aesthetics of the imperial court, made a virtue out of such restrictions, spending money on the refinement of the silk and its weave pattern, in addition to discovering deep and rich shades of what the authorities hoped were neutral, uninteresting colors. Another option was to spend lavishly on accessories such as the Edo-period version of the wallet—the ***inro*** box, which was suspended from the belt of a man's *kosode*, and the ivory or bone **netsuke** carving that hung from its cord. Objects such as these, which could be easily hidden from a government patrol's view, could be brought out in the company of one's peers and served as miniature canvases demonstrating one's wealth or culture. Finally, one could simply flout the laws, as not infrequently occurred amongst the courtesans of the pleasure districts, who depended on glamor to attract their customers. Once promulgated, many of these sumptuary edicts quickly fell into abeyance due to the effort it took simply to enforce them. Also as their enforcement was in the hands of local officials, the wealthier *chōnin*—or courtesans with wealthy patrons—could often fairly easily secure the blind eye of the law. Nevertheless, the existence of such laws was a significant factor in the forming of the period's aesthetic in the decorative and applied arts, keeping alive both craftsman's and client's creativity in their efforts to circumvent officially imposed limitations.

At the center of the new urban culture was the shogunal capital of Edo. Founded only after 1603, the city had blossomed with amazing rapidity. In 1657, it suffered a disastrous fire, but rebuilding began immediately, and, with an eye to preventing another such disaster, large open spaces were planned within the new city. At the heart of its floating world were the entertainment quarters such as Asakusa and Yoshiwara, and they became the natural settings of a great many of the *ukiyo-e*. Around 1800, the woodblock print master Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) made these districts the focus of a series of images entitled *Shinban Uki-e* (*New Images of the Floating World*). In one print from the series, a view of courtesans and other citizens bustling around a temple gate guarded by enormous Niō figures gives some sense of the vibrancy of the culture and its delight in its own vitality (Fig. 313). The hordes of people to be seen even on the gate's upper balcony point also to another social development of the Edo period—leisure tourism.

To be sure, tourism of a sort had long existed in Japan. There were the outings by groups of aristocrats to view the scenery of suburban temples or shrines in the Nara (710–94) and Heian (794–1185) periods, as well as the more devout pilgrimages to great Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines by all ranks of society throughout Japanese history. Yet, in the course of the Edo period, the prosperity-endowed leisure of the wealthier *chōnin* and the relative safety of the roads opened up the concept of travel for pleasure. Shinto or Buddhist pilgrimages remained an important feature, but a whole new group of

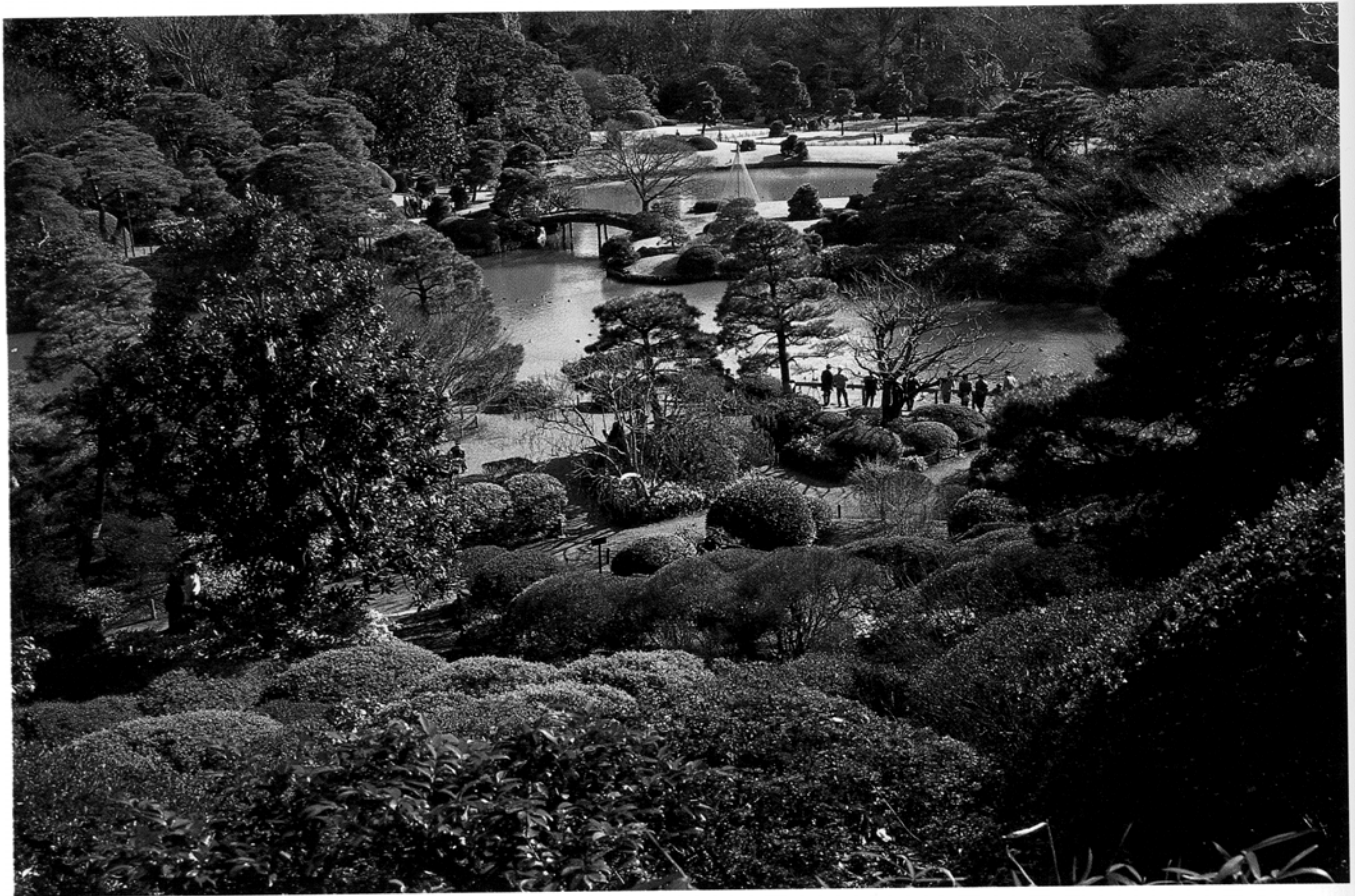


313 Scene in Asakusa, Tokyo from the series *The Niomon of Kinryuzan* (New Images of the Floating World), by Katsushika Hokusai. c. 1800s. (*Oban* format, after *Hokusai Katsushika Exhibition, 4–11 January 1984*, Seiji Nagata ed., Sansai Shinsha Pub. Co., Tokyo, 1984, Plate 8.) Katsushika Hokusai Museum, Tsuwano, Shimane.

attractions also developed, from places of great scenic, cultural, or historical significance to the wonders to be found in the modern, bustling metropolis. A large portion of the credit for promoting this new tourism belongs to informative printed guide books and also to woodblock print illustrations. Japan's poetic traditions had always lionized the Japanese scenery, but the woodblock print made it come to life for even the most prosaic of minds.

Another feature of this leisure was a democratization of the garden, previously the province of aristocratic, samurai, or abbatial residences. While wealthy *chōnin* families had doubtless built large houses and cultivated ornamental gardens throughout Japan's history, in the Edo period there was a growing eagerness to create within the new cities public garden spaces where one could enjoy nature and see and be seen. One of the first of these municipal parks was the Rikugien Gardens, established between 1699 and 1706 in Edo (Fig. 314). The project of a favorite of the shogun Tsunayoshi (1680–1709), Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu, it covers almost 25 acres (10 ha), featuring a lake and artificial hills laid out and planted like a traditional aristocratic or daimyo garden, but writ on a vast scale. It was in such spaces that the population of Edo could gather for festive holidays, not least of which would be viewing the changing of the leaves in the fall or the cherry blossoms in the spring. The Rikugien Gardens was also one of the important stages on which courtesans could display themselves outside the pleasure districts.

The entertainment, or pleasure, districts to be found in any Japanese city of decent size were in many ways the spiritual center of Edo-period popular culture. Although hardly the haunts of respectable citizens, and certainly not of ladies of good name, the entertainment districts are the single most popular topic of *ukiyo-e*, whether they illustrate the courtesans who lived and worked there, or the actors in the Kabuki theaters which also made their home in or near these areas. A key establishment within these districts was the teahouse, which served as a social forum for the Edo-period male, serving not only tea, but also saké and food of all descriptions. The teahouse was the proper place of business for the courtesan, who was often indentured to the proprietor, or at least gave them a percentage of their takings. The geisha, who had been trained in traditional singing, dancing, and playing of musical instruments, were the cream of the courtesans. They were (and are) hostesses and companions, providing company and conversation for men at the teahouses and at private parties. In the Edo period, geisha were the pinnacle of the pleasure



314 View of the Rikugien gardens, Tokyo. Established 1699–1706.
Tokyo Metropolitan Park Association Department.

district's society of indentured women—which included servants and various levels of prostitutes—and they were the trendsetters for women's styles in general. Some of these women even became noted connoisseurs of poetry, painting, and of the theater.

The image by Utagawa Toyoharu of a snow-viewing entertainment at a teahouse (Fig. 315) gives some idea of the atmosphere of relaxed enjoyment such places were supposed to provide. In a series of tatami-covered rooms open to the snow-covered garden, groups of people are served food and drink by comely young ladies. Many of the figures are engaged in games of Japanese checkers or in conversation, while one makes a gigantic snowball. The entire scene is one of of quiet leisure. This same spirit of leisure and entertainment—or *asobi* (literally "play")—infuses a great deal of *ukiyo* imagery and literature, as well as the more refined aesthetics of the Rinpa school, based in Kyoto, and indeed in all the design of the decorative and applied arts of the period—from ceramics to lacquer and metalware to textiles.

In the course of the eighteenth century, leadership in cultural affairs passed from the power brokers to the intellectuals within the samurai class and the elite among the *chōnin*. The samurai, encouraged by the tenets of Confucianism, embarked on a quest for knowledge that led them far beyond the boundaries of conventional philosophy. This spirit of inquiry was encouraged in particular by shogun Yoshimune (1716–45), who lifted many of the restrictions on the importation of foreign books, thus opening up new sources of information and ideas, both Chinese and European, to which the cultural leaders of the period turned with enthusiasm. The works that excited the greatest interest on the part of the intelligentsia were—and still are—those associated with Confucianism, Chinese **literati painting** (*bunjinga* or *nanga*), pictures in Western styles, called ***yōfuga***, and paintings by the ***Maruyama–Shijō* school** of Japanese realism.

An Eclipse Long Deferred

In the nineteenth century, the Tokugawa *bakufu*'s grip on Japanese society began to slip. The dependence on rice as the sole agricultural crop had bankrupted the lower orders of the samurai, and only further oppressed the peasantry. Many more peasants abandoned their land and moved to the cities, and by 1840 those remaining on the land were in revolt against the central government. Merchants were also tired of

315 *A Perspective Picture of Viewing the Snow and Drinking Saké (Uki-e Yukimi Shuen no zu)*, Utagawa Toyoharu.
Color woodblock print; 10 x 15¼ in. (25.5 x 39 cm).
The Art Institute of Chicago. Clarence Buckingham Collection. (1925.3184).

being lowest in the social hierarchy although the nation's wealthiest citizens. Furthermore, when the shogunate ran short of funds, it would exert levies on the merchants living in cities such as Osaka, Edo, and Nagasaki which were under the direct control of the Tokugawa *bakufu*. On other occasions the *bakufu* would "invite" the merchants to lend money, which it then often refused to repay, issuing Acts of Grace that amounted to repudiations of all or part of the debt. Although aware of the rising discontent at every level of society, the Tokugawa *bakufu*, terrified to alter too much the structure established in the seventeenth century, seemed to have no solutions.

Another contributing factor to the government's instability was the growing presence of the European powers in East Asia. By the early nineteenth century Britain had already gained control of much of India, and the Dutch of Southeast Asia, and the British were about to trigger the century-long collapse of the Qing empire through the agency of the Opium War and enforced trade concessions in the main Chinese ports. Perhaps wisely, considering the colonization of the rest of East Asia by the European powers, the Tokugawa government dealt harshly with any foreign interlopers trespassing on their domain outside the Dutch concession on Deshima Island. However, feeling increasingly besieged on all fronts, the regime vacillated between the hard-line policy it had instituted in 1825, which ordered daimyo with coastal lands to drive off foreign vessels by force and to kill any crew members who came ashore, and the softer policy of 1842 that instructed local authorities to supply foreign ships with food and fuel and urge them to go away. But the trend of international events was moving against the policy of isolation. In 1842, the English defeated the Chinese in the Opium War and forced the opening of Canton and other ports to trade. Finally, in 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Uraga harbor at the mouth of Edo Bay with four warships and a letter from the president of the United States urging that American mariners be given good treatment by the Japanese. The following year the government formally ended its isolationist policy.

There had also been increasing awareness throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Western technology far surpassed that of the Japanese. Of great interest were advances in weaponry and, as visits from Western ships became more numerous and more threatening, many factions within Japan began to push for open access to Western technology. Others realized that trade with the West could provide an alternative to the one-crop dependence of the Japanese economy, the source of perennial economic problems. Both of