Excerpts from "The Miracle of Edo Painting" by Kobayashi Tadashi, *The Flowering of Edo Period Painting: Japanese Masterworks from the Feinberg Collection,* The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2013. Pages 27–31

During the Edo era, two strata of society patronized Japanese painting. There was the ruling warrior class, who, along with the imperial court and major temples and shrines continued their traditional hold on cultural authority. These institutions commissioned exclusive painting studios to majestically adorn their authority and privilege. On the other hand, were the urban commoners and rural farmers who accumulated wealth through business and agriculture. They supported and cultivated independent artists, unaffiliated with the official studios, who reflected the open-hearted aesthetics and tastes of the common people. Throughout the era, these painters competed with each other to freely develop their own artistic styles.

In the past, throughout the world, the ownership and appreciation of painting was limited to those who held secular power, such as royalty, and members of the aristocracy and religious authorities in the service of the divine. Japan was no exception and for commoners with no links to power or authority, viewing paintings for relaxation or pleasure was an inconceivable luxury.

These conditions began to shift during the Warring States era (1467–1573), a century of rebellion and chaos when some members of lower status groups rose up and overpowered those of higher rank through brute force. In the urban centers of Kyoto and Osaka, *eya* shops, selling works of art as products to anyone who could buy them, began to appear. The painters employed by these shops needed to create "readymade" art to appeal to the tastes of a general market that was spawning a new demand for painting, rather than commissioned by a specific patron. As a result, and by necessity, the world of art painting was fundamentally transformed, as these painters turned away from conservative, classical themes, to depict prose narratives based on folktales, shrine and temple mandalas for folk religions and genre paintings that depicted changing social customs.

After the Warring States era was brought to an end and the advent of peace during the Edo era, there was a sudden spike in Japan's population. At the beginning of the Edo era in the early seventeenth century, Japan's population is estimated to have been around twelve million people. By the early eighteenth century, it had grown to thirty million. This explosive increase and the long-term economic surge that sustained it greatly expanded the number of wealthy commoners with a healthy appetite for the arts.

In contrast to the studio painters who were mostly born into the profession by family lineage, painters from the commoner class became professional artists through sheer talent. They were able to establish their practices based on stylistic innovation and a creative approach that rejected imitations of classical paintings. Their patrons expanded their own tastes by purchasing various types of paintings which they displayed in their homes every month or season, or on celebratory occasions. As the Edo era progressed, the number of painters kept growing, resulting in the cultivation of diverse painterly styles and an expansion of pictorial themes. This was how a "modern" mode of experiencing painting developed among urban

commoners, well before the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the event that is typically associated with the advent of the “modern era” in Japan. This is the miracle brought about by the commoner culture of the Edo era.