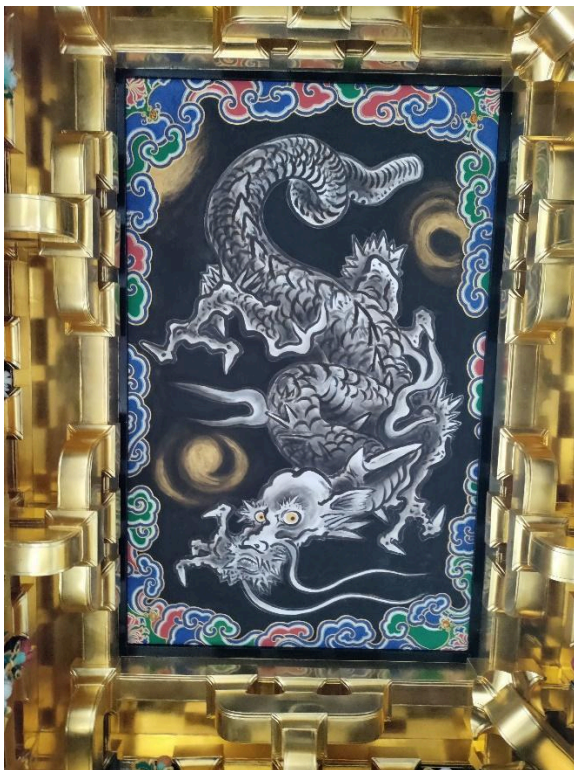


An Investigation of Power and its Influence on Detail in the Edo Period
2) Reflect on an experience from your time in Japan that you found a connection with the art covered in this course.

On a CIEE-sponsored trip to Nikko, the feature of the excursion was the Tōshōgū shrine. The natural beauty of the surrounding area flourishes cohesively with the presence of a decorated enshrinement of a prominent figure of Japanese modern history, Tokugawa Ieyasu. The guide who was leading us shared many historical and artistic facts about the shrine from the intricate details of the carvings along the trims of the buildings, to the very architecture itself. Many of these facts would not be interesting had I not learned about the art in historical context; For instance, it was interesting to be able to connect overzealousness of the site with the defeat of the



Toyotomi clan and the subsequent desire for the Tokugawa shogunate to be established as the divine ruling power of Japan. The guide also elaborated on the *nemuri neko* carving to the east of the shrine which could be taken for granted as just a beautiful decoration on a gate. Overall, the site is at odds with the general trend of the art from the Edo period. Everything was decorated which is characteristic of the period's overall wealth, but the contrast between the art showcased in the Tōshōgū shrine and other

art forms such as *nishiki-e*, *ukiyo-e*, screen art, even popular architecture styles all have simpler designs. However, the depth of the messages behind each seemingly less

An Investigation of Power and its Influence on Detail in the Edo Period visually rich work demonstrates that simplicity should be appreciated just as much as the ornate carvings and decorations that could be found at Tōshōgū shrine. Simplicity and detail may both add artistic value to a piece in unique ways.

The first striking art feature of Tōshōgū shrine which contrasts with the other art from this period is the painting on the interior Yōmeimon Gate (Figure 1) by Kanō Tan'yū. The bold, vibrant colors on the borders showcase the majesty of this creature which adds to the divinity of Tokugawa Ieyasu's enshrinement. Its presence at Yōmeimon Gate, the entrance into the mausoleum, instantiates the role of this entity as a guardian which indicates that Tokugawa and the divine are at the very least on allied terms. Therefore, the purpose of this painting is political; more precisely, it adds honor to the enshrined Tokugawa by asserting that the surrounding area needs protection against evil.

A similar work would be the sliding door painting *Plum Tree, Bamboo, and Birds in the Snow* (Figure 2).



Figure 2: *Plum Tree, Bamboo, and Birds in the Snow* by Kanō Tan'yū

This painting features a high contrast to the work in Figure 1 due to the lack of space the main subject occupies on the screen. This difference is especially significant because it

An Investigation of Power and its Influence on Detail in the Edo Period was produced by the same Kanou Tan'yuu who designed the ceiling painting of the dragon on Yomeimon gate. The simplicity of this work compared to the style that can be seen in his work at Yomeimon Gate shows his versatility and artistic dexterity. The boldness encourages the viewer to admire the entire work whereas there is a limited amount to admire for the latter figure in comparison. This forces the viewer to focus on and appreciate the beauty of something mundane which is characteristic of this period. This theme can be seen in other works such as Moronobu's *2 Bijin-zu* which features two women clad in decorated kimono, the hint of a tree in bloom, and again primarily negative space. Here the lack of other subjects in the work inherently draws attention to the subjects in the work where the details contribute deep meaning on a personal level whereas the large, bold painting on the ceiling of Yomeimon Gate advertises its intent outwardly.



The contrast between how attention is demanded is reflective of the intent of the piece itself. We may consider that the hiring of Kanou Tan'yuu must have been politically motivated at its core since the audaciously gaudy enshrinement of the first Tokugawa shogun boasts an almost royal status. Despite the reassertion of their power, the state of affairs in Japan was peaceful under the Tokugawa shogunate which means that Iemitsu's enshrinement of his grandfather must have also been an expression of the Tokugawa family's wealth. This differs significantly from the softness and subtlety of the

An Investigation of Power and its Influence on Detail in the Edo Period painted screen in Figure 2 since the castle served a purpose where the intent was not necessarily to enshrine someone to promote them to a god-like status. Therefore, it is only an expression of wealth that the Kano school was enlisted to help with the artistic decoration of the castle as opposed to an expression of wealth and power.

Finally, with just one more work (Figure 4) it becomes obvious that there is a cause for the change in style from simple to detailed for works produced in this period. This portrait of Ieyasu was created by Kanou Tan'yuu, though we see that it lacks the negative space produced on the screen in Figure 2. This particular work does not emphasize the work itself; while it does use detail to showcase some of Ieyasu's glory, we notice that there are subjects in this work where there would have been negative space otherwise. We see mountains in the far distance, a raised structure reminiscent of a nobility's residence, some kind of body of water evidenced by a sailing ship off the coast of simpler structures we could imagine are where lower-class people may reside, and distinct banner bearing the Tokugawa family crest. All of these added details symbolize Tokugawa's influential reach. From this, we may infer that Tan'yuu's style is motivated heavily by political interest.



The glaring conclusion is that political power directly contributed to the resplendence of the Tōshōgū shrine in Nikkō and explains the divergence in style

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that is prominently observed throughout the Edo period. When there are few subjects to fill a medium, attention is fixed to specific points to allow the viewer to appreciate the beauty of simple, ordinary things. I would regard this style of art a bit more respectable than the addition of detail mostly to flaunt or assert political power. Art has a lot more artistic value if the motivation stems from more than just titleship or domination. With works like flamboyant, extravagant shrines and portraits of high-ranking officials in government, there is little left to interpret since the entire point of the piece is to deliver one message: "I'm in charge."