

Pictures of Pictures

Peter Suart

When mention is made of painting pictures of snuff bottles or inro, it is not uncommon for an interlocutor to raise an eyebrow, hesitate, and ask why one would do such a thing.

First, a note on the word 'painting'. Fine artists paint, commercial artists draw, even when they use paint, chiefly because water-based paint is considered to be for amateurs, for dabblers, for workers and for minor works. This judgement is so nonsensical as scarcely to merit dismantling. In Persia, in China, in Japan: water. Pure, limpid water. One can seek refuge in the word 'picture', though 'picturing' is silly and 'picture-making' overblown. So, let us use 'painting'. The inro pictures in this article are watercolour paintings of objects. They have a function, they have been commissioned, and they are works of art.

Where the images on each side of an object are independent, for example portraits of two people, a roll-out painting of that object is a portrait of portraits. Where the image is continuous, as in a landscape, a roll-out painting offers a view not seen since the maker of the object, or another artist, first sketched a design. If the object is parallel-sided, as are cylinders, it is possible to rotate a camera around the object, or to rotate the object before the camera, to produce a continuous image. If the object is heart-shaped, round, vase-like or otherwise irregular in profile, such a photograph distorts the image greatly. Enter the artist. A painter or illustrator or—the shame of it!—graphic artist is able to roll out, to fan, and selectively to adjust, lengthen, shorten. As in all mapping projections of the earth, however, some distortion is inescapable: the surface of a sphere cannot be flattened. Inro are generally parallel-sided, so distortion only arises around the edges. The artist

unwraps, unfolds, rolls out, with care, with craft, with delicacy, a willing and admiring servant of the inro maker's art.

When successful, such a painting is an aesthetic adjunct to the object, as well as an independent work of art. The viewer's understanding and appreciation of the object are enhanced, and two views, linked but separate, are made one. Some tribal peoples have different names for different sides of a mountain without the understanding that the mountain is one. I have experienced this circumstance in the labyrinths of the Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway: I would recognize a passageway travelling in both directions, at different times, without the understanding that it was a single place.

In addition to offering a deepened understanding of an object, a roll-out painting is also a new link in a chain: room, friends, box, inro, bottle, wine, box, picture.

There are miniature traditions around the world and across history. Humans like very small images and objects. The miniature (etymologically related to 'vermilion', the red of 'rubric' headings in medieval European manuscripts) allows us to hold a world in our hands: a doll's house, a toy soldier, a postage stamp, a snow globe. This world is silent, and thus speaks eternally. Open-mouthed expression in the human face is for the comic strip, the advertisement, the cinema. The blank face of painted and sculpted figures is eloquent, particularly when small. The one-legged, steadfast tin soldier is expressionless; he endures. (To be stoical has, today, fallen out of fashion; it is bad for our health.)

Cuteness can be a dimension of the miniature, its products usually inexpensive and aimed at children, or adults who have retained a child's taste inside

their mature one. The developed world has shown a marked tendency towards infantilism since the Second World War, a development which may be considered a downward path to decadence or a branching one to pleasures. Japan has a penchant for cuteness (*kawaii*): translucent, fragrant, lime-green or dusty-pink rubbers and pens; doe-eyed cartoon characters; Hello Kitty, with her own credit card and aircraft, preposterous to the pre-war generation, which perforce left childhood behind early. (It is arguable that childhood was invented by the Edwardians. Before them, children were little adults.) In high-level inros, cuteness is eclipsed by the majesty of adult craft.

Miniature art is light, portable, showable, concealable. Large bronze sculpture, installations, Ai Wei Wei's pile of steel rods from an earthquake school at the Royal Academy in London, all require organized transport and considerable cost. Much contemporary art thrives on this big-budgetness; miniature art, though its value may be high, does not. It can be pocketed and strolled, which fact appeals to those who would walk lightly on Mother Earth.

Some miniature art is so small that lenses are needed to make it and to view it. The object is a code that can only be deciphered through lenses. Some artists who work on this scale do so without lenses,

indeed without seeing clearly what the hand makes: there is mind, there is hand, there are tools and surface. But no eye.

In the past there were pictures, and pictures of pictures. Now we have a relay chain: inro, digital photograph, roll-out painting, scan, print, photograph of print, the internet, and on and out.

Copying art, making pictures of pictures, was long considered a valuable and necessary road to being able to paint. Today it is uncommon, as a painting of the world is considered to have solved problems of representation, whilst a painting of a painting merely copies the surface of that solution. For many artists the pictured picture is not an exercise, nor is it frowned upon; it is an art form: Picasso's many versions of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*; Van Gogh's *Japonaiserie: Bridge in the Rain*, after Hiroshige's *Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi Bridge and Atake*; the countless copies in Chinese art, considered *homage*, 'in the spirit of', or forgery. If an entire picture is painted, the result is an interpretation. If it appears small within a painting, it is a quote. If it is stamp-size, it is an approximate quote, as in the fragmentary renderings of Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514), William Blake's frontispiece from *Europe a Prophecy* (1794) and Samuel Palmer's *Early Morning* (1825) illustrated here (Figs 1, 2 and 3).



Fig. 1 Painting after *Melencolia I* (1514) by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)
By Peter Suart (b. 1962), 2008
Watercolour and pen on paper, 33 x 26 mm
(From *The Folio Society Diary* 2008 © Peter Suart 2008; www.foliosociety.com)



Fig. 2 Painting after the frontispiece to *Europe a Prophecy* (1794) by William Blake (1757–1827)
By Peter Suart (b. 1962), 2008
Watercolour and pen on paper, 35 x 26 mm
(From *The Folio Society Diary* 2008 © Peter Suart 2008; www.foliosociety.com)



Fig. 3 Painting after *Early Morning* (1825) by Samuel Palmer (1805–81)
By Peter Suart (b. 1962), 2008
Watercolour and pen on paper, 19 x 25 mm
(From *The Folio Society Diary* 2008 © Peter Suart 2008; www.foliosociety.com)

In general there are two kinds of painting: paintings of the world and paintings of minds, although the two interpenetrate. Paintings of paintings are a special category. The intro of gibbons by Hara Yoyusai (1769–1845) in the Franz Collection is a copy of a painting by Kanō Tan'yū (1602–74) of the later 17th century, which is thought lost. The roll-out illustration in this article is thus a picture of a picture of a picture.

An aside on global canons in art. They are impermanent, they are built by the influential and by accidents of history, they are self-reinforcing, they



Fig. 4 Flea, from *Micrographia*, London, 1665
By Robert Hooke (1635–1703)
Copperplate engraving, 33.5 x 4.2 cm
The National Library of Wales

are ridden by commerce. There are unknown legions of artists—women, the poor, the retiring, those who had to conceal, the unfashionable—of whom we do not hear, and never will. We should by all means involve ourselves in the global taste discussion, and learn from others, but we should also maintain independence. Lovers of the arts: build your own canon.

Most men do not own a magnifying mirror. They encounter them in hotels, when the face is revealed as an alien landscape whose blemishes, craters and excrescences prompt horror, the lifelong cost of which should, in all fairness, be deducted from the bill. An act of will is required to hold to the understanding that no one sees like that. When once the bar is raised by magnification there is doublethink: billiard ball; Sea of Tranquility.

For all but the last blink of history the best light was the sun, and there were no good lenses. Antonie van Leeuwenhoek and Jan Swammerdam of the 17th century Dutch Republic, and Robert Hooke of republican and Restoration England, produced simple glass lenses at the time of the rise of Western science. Little beads of glass mounted in brass offered unprecedented views of the tiny, as is shown in the engraving of a flea in Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665) (Fig. 4).



Painting of an intro by
Ryukosai Jugyoku, c. 1860–80
By Peter Suart (b. 1962), 2018
Watercolour on paper, height 8.5 cm
(Intro: Franz Collection)



Painting of an intro by Hara Yoyusai (1769–1845), 1838
By Peter Suart (b. 1962), 2018
Watercolour on paper, height 9 cm
(Intro: Franz Collection)

China had been ahead of the world in science and technology for centuries, in some fields for millennia, and yet modern science arose in Europe. The Needham Question: why?

Some humans have eyes for the very small, and hands to match, and they take joy in living in a square inch. But without artificial light, and without lenses, a working life must have been short. Perhaps the Dutch lenses found their way to the intro makers in Japan through the criss-crossing routes of technological and cultural exchange of the sort that saw ancient Greek texts translated into Arabic in 9th century Baghdad at the court of al-Ma'mun and thence into Latin in Cordoba. The use of microscopy declined in 18th century Europe, its utility doubted, and rose again in the 19th with technical improvement and the development of germ science. The unimaginably distant and the inconceivably tiny were brought into the human world by the 20th century, and humanity's journey in and out continues, the bulk of our lives passed in the middle ground where a stone can be kicked, a nail hammered, a shoelace tied. The stars have disappeared from the lives of many in the

developed world, but when we do see them we feel an intimation of the sublime, without permitting that sense to engulf us. We dally with a tinge of fear, but protect ourselves with the sense of the night sky as an upturned bowl, dodging the sucking maelstrom of endless space, bowing our heads, and going back into our roofed homes to read of the Tokugawa shogunate, of Gormenghast, of the double-slit experiment.

A figure the size of a grain of rice eludes us, though we can discern a human form. A lens is brought to bear, and the tiny creature lives and breathes, the single marks of the eyes and the lines of the nose, the mouth and the chin shorthand for a face shaped by experience. (Had we made different choices through the course of our lives our faces would be different.) The lens is removed, and human becomes ant once more, waiting patiently for a visitor and a roof of curved glass.

Gold pigment is commonly used in the making of intro. Gold is valuable to humans, but this value is arbitrary, conventional. Gold is soft, and has limited technological uses. Its great power, and the source of its pre-eminent position in the global economy, aside from its rarity and its association with the sun, is the fact that it does not rust. All things break, weaken, wither, die. But gold doesn't change, and thus signifies timelessness to humans, an idea, an experience, for which we thirst profoundly. The gold background of religious painting casts the figures before it into eternity, and eternity is timelessness, not unending time. In intro, the gold is more usually painted or moulded on blackness. It appears out of darkness. Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, in *In Praise of Shadows* (1933), talks of such objects being best viewed at night by candlelight. An object that might appear vulgar in the full light of day becomes mysterious, evocative, magical, glinting and hinting.

Painting pictures of gold objects is difficult. One can suggest the multiple colours of reflective gold with watercolour; one can use gold paint or ink; one can use gold leaf. The viewer of the painting can tilt it this way and that to catch the glitter, but the reflective quality of gold is not picked up fully by a scanner. Paradoxically, gold objects are best viewed through motion, which is time.

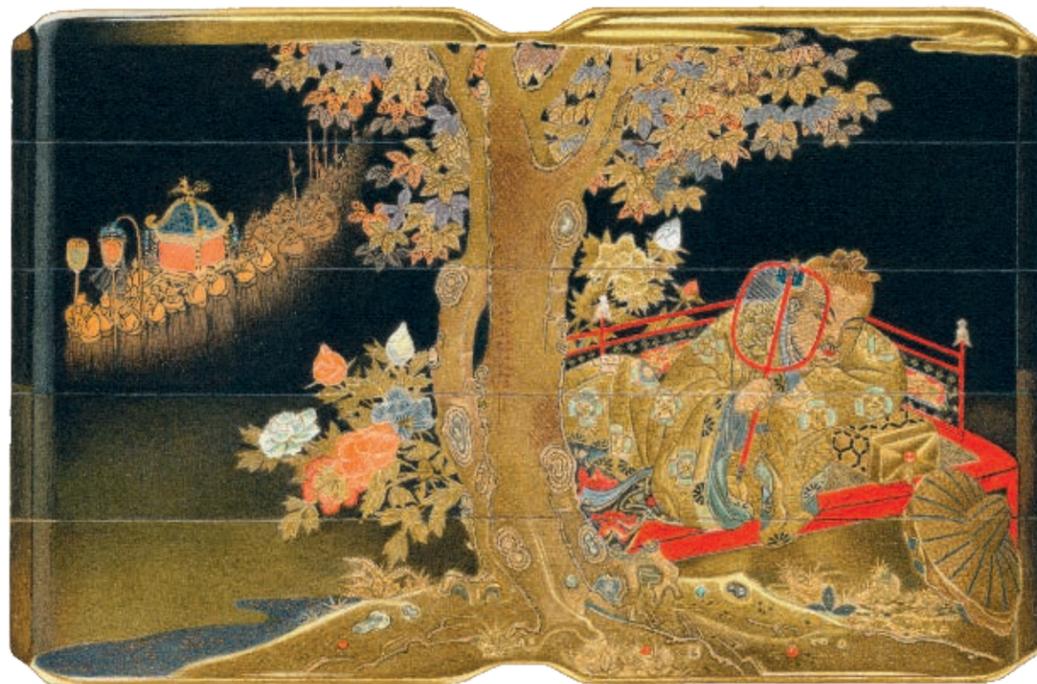
At one end, the practice of high craft is sublime: it elicits awe. At the other, it is a circus monkey juggling fire: it is showing off, it is rarity, it is difficulty. And when we come to decide where on this spectrum an object lies, we have our own taste, we have the taste of others, and we can talk.

At a time when a great deal of art prompts derision or incomprehension, a refuge is found in craft. Craft is honest, craft is humble, craft is a day's good work. Craft has its boots on the ground, starting clean, becoming dusty and sprinkled with

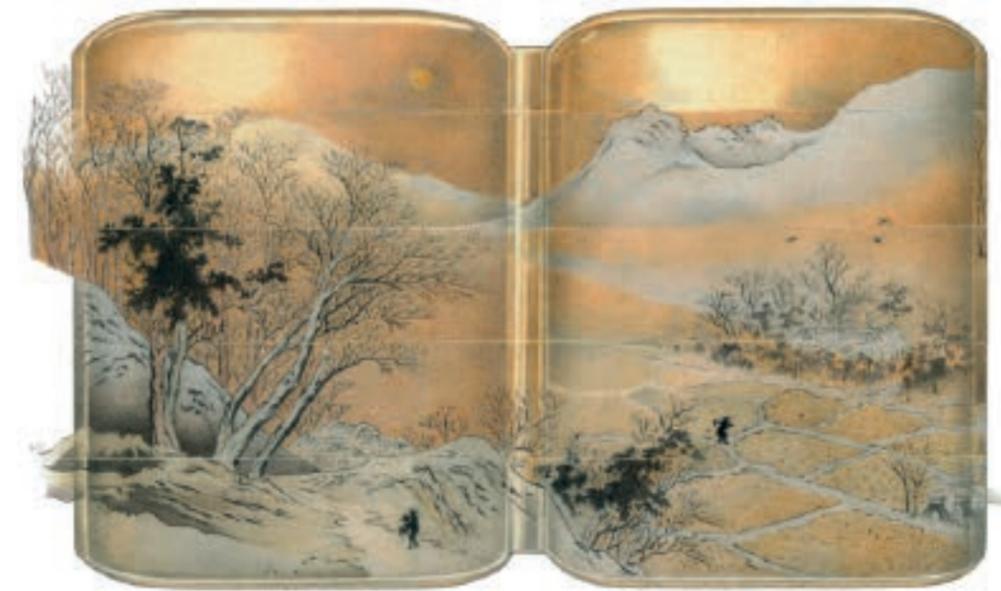
shavings, made clean once more at the close of day in preparation for the following morning's start. Craft cares for its tools. Craft shakes hands with the plougher and the miner, the plumber and the cook.

Craft is not just the hand; craft is also the mind and the heart. Learn how to do. Over a lifetime, learn how to do. To bake bread, to save the drowning, to speak a foreign tongue, to change a tyre, to throw a ball, to sleep, to grow an apple tree, to sing, to dig a ditch, to draw, to teach. And all this by bringing to bear the mighty powers of the hand, the mind and the heart. We fail repeatedly; some continue to fail, some give up, some learn and enter the golden meadows of good craft.

In a cheap commando comic a platoon of greenhorns is transformed over thirty pages from know-nothing, scaredy-cat freak-outs into battle-hardened, knowledgeable, crafty soldiers, tight-knit, knowing that they can rely on each other. On



Painting of an intro by Kanshosai Toju, c. 1800
By Peter Suart (b. 1962), 2018
Watercolour on paper, height 8.4 cm
(Intro: Franz Collection)



Painting of an intro by Koma Kansai I (d. 1835)
By Peter Suart (b. 1962), 2018
Watercolour on paper, height 8 cm
(Intro: Franz Collection)

their return home (not all make it) they are held in awe by the new cohort, the halo of active service, of distinguished service, glowing about them. They have become gods, like Robert Redford's Jeremiah Johnson, who learned to be a mountain man in Utah, and never died. Youngsters love to read such things. Yet a truth holds. This is one of the paths of joy open to humans: the path to good craft. To know what you are doing, to know how to do it, to be able to do it well, and to be able to sustain the doing. And we do this not only to live, but also for its own sake. (Whilst proofreading a book for the tenth time, I am told that no one will notice the effort that has been made, which thought I counter by being mindful of the backs of Shaker cupboards.) Acquiring craft takes time, but much of the learning comes free. The world is full of people who pass on their knowledge for nothing, especially when they encounter the thirsty, or when they begin to discern the profile of

their end. It is said that watercolour is one of the most difficult of mediums, because the concealment and correction of error are limited. That is so, but you may take a scalpel to the paper and scrape error away, carefully, then take a rubber and smooth the roughened paper, then take the butt of your sable brush and roll it gently over the paper to and fro to make it smoother still, the surface renewed and ready for paint. And no one but those armed with lenses will ever know that error had squatted there.

The making of lacquerwork is hazardous to humans, by inhalation and by ingestion. The small shiny object in your palm has traversed danger, though it is now inert and holds fingerprints harmlessly.

The hatter is mad because mercuric nitrate was used in the treating of furs for the making of hats. The shepherd is bandy-legged because he lives in



Painting of an inro by Shiomi Masanari (1647?–1723?)
By Peter Suart (b. 1962), 2018
Watercolour on paper, height 7.3 cm
(Inro: Franz Collection)



Painting of an inro by Yamamoto Shunsho, c. 1800
By Peter Suart (b. 1962), 2018
Watercolour on paper, height 9.7 cm
(Inro: Franz Collection)

a hilly place whose steep ascents have splayed his limbs over decades. The lacquerer is covered in a rash because urushiol, a substance found in the sap of the urushi tree or Japanese sumac (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*) and in poison ivy, is a toxic irritant.

All craft entails hazard: cuts, bangs, scrapes, pokes, inhaled or brushed or swallowed toxins. Indeed, most activities entail hazard; sitting at desks in comfortable rooms manipulating keyboards and mice has caused back pain and frozen shoulders around the world. And for the miniature painter there is a cost to the lenses in the head, miniature and indispensable, wonders of natural selection. The nature of this cost will show in time, when we can no longer see the door to the room that holds the little treasures we used to paint.

Let us put commerce to one side. Inro are objects of a craft which is a kind of devotion, their making the walking of a difficult and hazardous path. Yet the images are independent of this difficulty. They are pictures, as are a stencilled red silhouette of a prehistoric hand on rock, Bada Shanren's

cormorants and floating rocks, Behzad's *Harun al-Rashid in a Bathhouse*, Bosch's *Ship of Fools*, Palmer's *A Hilly Scene*, Blake's *The Ghost of a Flea*, Ernest H. Shepard's Badger dozing by the fire with a handkerchief over his snout. We have the world, and the self in the world, both knowable only through a glass, darkly, and we have pictures of the world, and of the mind, pictures from which issues unending delight.

The making of an inro may take weeks or months. Come the day when the work is done, it begins its journeying from house to house, collector to collector, now silent in a drawer for decades, now shown to friends, now touring the world for crowds of interested and admiring people, now painted in a magazine. And its silent, ever-speaking art can be shared, today more widely and more readily than in all history, when we say: 'Come—look at this.'

Peter Suart is a writer, an illustrator, a musician and a theatrical performer.