A NOTE ON JAPANESE PAINTING

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The history of Japanese painting as we know it dates from the Asuka period (522-646), when the Japanese first came into close contact with the continent. In the sixth century they took up Buddhism with enthusiasm and with it many of the outward appearances of Chinese civilization. During succeeding centuries they were conscious of changes on the mainland and often were affected by them. But the importance of the mainland influence has been exaggerated by both Western and Eastern scholars. Neither in thought nor in painting did the Japanese slavishly imitate the Chinese. They had already in the sixth century a pattern of culture which they had developed over hundreds of years, and they did not discard it for a new one but rather selected and adapted what they found good or attractive in Korea and China. It is true that the course of religious painting in Japan from the sixth to the fourteenth centuries follows in a general way Buddhist painting in China. The monochrome landscape school as brought to Japan by Zen Buddhism is derived from Sung landscape but becomes quite a different thing in Japan.

In the sixth century, when Buddhism reached Japan, temples and temple paintings were modeled on those of the mainland, but even in the very beginning they were adapted and modified. They become a new and beautiful thing in their own right.

Buddhist painting in Japan was hieratic and didactic, as was the art of Byzantium and the Middle Ages in the West. It was not individualistic and was very rarely signed. Just as many of the medieval monks of the West were skilled draftsmen and illuminators, so were many Buddhist monks in the Orient. An extraordinary number of early Buddhist paintings have survived in the temples of Japan. The quality of the paintings varies but the standard is high.

Japanese religious painting included a wonderful tradition of portraiture, and in the details of the Buddhist paradises and scenes of the life of Buddha there are intimations of what we call genre; landscape in backgrounds very early takes on a local character.

In the twelfth century (Kamakura period, 1185-1333) a new thing appears in Japanese art—the horizontal story-telling scroll. The form is not new, but the content is and the way of presenting it is. Sometimes the story is based on history, as in the Tomo-no-Dainagon, in which the Dainagon set fire to an imperial gate and accused his Minamoto rival, and in the Tenjin Engi, in which the statesman Michizane, unjustly exiled, dies and is posthumously vindicated and deified. These are capsule descriptions indeed. Ban Dainagon's story is painted on three scrolls, each twenty-seven feet long; the version of Tenjin on loan consists of no less than eight scrolls, each twenty-two feet long. The Metropolitan's version of Tenjin (cover and p. 217) has only three scrolls and is not complete, but it makes a most interesting comparison. Both these scrolls and the Heiji Monogatari are full of scenes of lively and violent action. In contrast are the scrolls showing the quieter activities of the priest Ippen and the priest Saigyo, the latter especially being an account of the priest's travels through lovely landscapes. The Toba Sojo animal scroll, which depicts bunnies and frogs behaving like samurai on a picnic and monkeys and frogs dressed as priests and Buddhas, is much more than humorous caricature. Not only is it a sympathetic study of animals and humans but the exquisite detail of rocks and grasses makes it a great nature painting.

The most notable development in the Ashikaga or Muromachi period (1333-1568) was the monochrome ink painting inspired by the Zen Buddhists. Zen was a form of Bud-
dhism which stressed the virtues of contempla-

tion. The most famous master of this school
in Japan was Sesshu (1420-1506), and there
were many others who painted ink landscapes.
They are usually landscapes with trees or

temples done in detailed brushwork and
masses of mountains in the background done
in ink washes. They manage with compara-
tively little detail to give a suggestion of
depth, distance, and great grandeur. This
school did not confine itself to landscapes but
also painted birds, plants, priests, and holy
men. It had a tremendous effect on painting
in its day, and its influence has carried on
down to the present time.

In the Momoyama period (1568-1615) the
powerful shoguns and war lords encouraged
the gorgeous form of decoration for their
palaces which is reflected in the present day
in the decorative screens with gold back-
ground, a type with which most foreigners
are familiar.

As an example take the four panels of
peonies from the Imperial Hall in the guest
quarters of Daigakuji in Kyoto. These panels
are part of a group which are virtually the
whole room. With the rest they cover three
walls of a hollow square, the fourth wall being
wooden doors which can be opened upon a
veranda and a garden. This room is one of
a series, each decorated by important painters,
each a complete and consistent entity, some
in color, some in monochrome. Daigakuji is a
very large and grand temple with courtyards
and pavilions connected by covered verandas,
but here as in many temples the visitor is
aware of the friendly intimacy between the
gods and human beings. Quite often in mon-
asteries the grandest guest quarters are just
next door to the main shrine. Indeed this is
a very sweet and gracious thing. At the Koya
San, which is the Japanese Buddhist equiva-
 lent of Rome, for instance, Kongo buji, the
chief of eighteen temples, was founded by
Kobo Daishi. He lived there. His shrine is a
mile and a half away at the end of a paved
roadway in a grove of gigantic cryptomerias.
Through the centuries another man-made
forest has been built—the gray stone lantern-
shaped memorials of many of Japan’s greatest
families.

Down to the present day new memorials
have been added. Swiftly come lichens on
the gray stone. Sunlight filters through the
great trees, birds, long-tailed magpies, find it
sanctuary. If you are lucky and go late you
may see a scampering wood mouse or a tiny
black serpent when the pilgrims have gone
back to their inns or guest temples.

Kobo Daishi has his shrine and his me-
orial temple here aglow with hundreds of
suspended lanterns. Hideyoshi and his de-
cendants are here. Both Kobo Daishi and
Hideyoshi lived in the temple rooms close
to the main shrine—rooms with panels like
those you see.

In the Tokugawa or Edo period (1650-
1867) there were several developments within
the framework of the main current of Japa-
nese art. A school of decorative painters in-
cluding Korin (1658-1716), Sotatsu (early Edo
period, seventeenth century), Koetsu (1558-
1637), and others is greatly admired and
rightly so. A popular school called Ukiyo-e
"pictures of the floating world," may be
traced back to Matapei. Out of this school
came the woodblock prints which were one
of the first forms of Japanese art to become
popular in the West.

All through Japanese pictorial art from the
early religious painting, portrait painting,
the story-telling scrolls, the monochromes, the
richly gilded screens, and even the Ukiyo-e
there appear certain principles which set
Japanese painting apart from all other paint-
ing. From the very beginning when the Japa-
nese took over continental Buddhist art they
kept the Japanese version rigorously simple,
simple in the matters of line, of color and
composition. It is not a chance nor a naïve
simplicity, it is a matter of deliberate choice,
of disciplined taste, and it is the one thing
you will find in all Japanese pictorial art,
whether it be a spray of bamboo in ink or a
series of peonies against gold leaf. This in-
sistence on simplicity, of course, encourages
experiments of color and composition—sim-
plicity can be spectacular.
Yellow Fudo, chief of the Five Great Kings of Buddhism.
Painting on silk, Heian period, XII century. 
Cat. no. 3
ABOVE: The priest Gonzo, teacher of Kobo Daishi. OPPOSITE PAGE: Shaka Nyorai, or Shakamuni. Paintings on silk, Heian period, xii century.  Cat. nos. 5 and 6
Kobo Daishi as a child. Painting on silk, Kamakura period, late XIII century.

Cat. no. 14
Details from the Kako Genzai Inga-kyo scroll, showing the life of Shakamuni, founder of Buddhism. Above, the young prince Gautama practicing archery; below, the prince seeing his first sick man. Painting on paper, Nara period, VIII century.

Cat. no. 18
ABOVE AND FOLLOWING PAGES: Details from the scroll of Choju Giga, or “animals at play.” Traditionally ascribed to Toba Sojo. Painting on paper, Heian period, xii century. Cat. no. 19
The scroll shows the lively gambols of animals on a picnic. Opposite page, bathing scene; the target at archery practice. Above, a rabbit pursuing a monkey priest; and a defeated frog.
ABOVE: Picnickers, with a hagi bush in the background. BELOW: Frogs gloating over a rabbit
ABOVE: A frog Buddha receiving homage. BELOW: A monkey priest receiving gifts from a rabbit
ON THESE PAGES: Details from the Tomo-no-Dainagon Ekotoba, the story of the courtier Tomo-no-Dainagon. Ascribed to Tokiwa Mitsunaga, Heian period, xii century. Cat. no. 20
The scenes show: the burning of the Imperial Oten Gate; onlookers at the fire; excited people hurrying to the fire; and Tomo-no-Dainagon being questioned about the origin of the fire.
Details from the Kitano Tenjin Engi scroll. Traditionally ascribed to Fujiwara-no-Nobuzane. Above, Michizane on a mountaintop protesting against false accusations. Below, the priest Son-i hastening to pacify Michizane’s spirit. Kamakura period, xiii century. Cat. no. 22
Details from the Tenjin Engi scroll in the Metropolitan Museum. Above, digging the grave of Michizane, who died in exile. His body, transported in an ox-cart, was buried where the ox stopped. Below, distinguished visitors paying homage at his grave. Fletcher Fund, 1925
Details from the Heiji Monogatari Emaki scroll, showing a feudal war in Japan. These scenes illustrate the emperor’s escape. Painting on silk, Kamakura period, xiii century. Cat. no. 23
Details from the Jigoku-Zoshi, or Scroll of Hells. Above, the “hell of mortars,” for thieves; below, the “hell of cocks,” for cruel men. Painting on paper, Heian period.  
Cat. no. 21
Details from the Tengu-Zoshi scroll. Above, a goblin (tengu) fleeing with his nose broken. Below, a tengu waiting for the executioner. Kamakura period, late 13th century. Cat. no. 24
Details from the Ippen Shonin E-den scroll, by En-i. The scenes show enthusiastic crowds listening to the missionary priest Ippen. Painting on silk, Kamakura period, 1299. Cat. no. 25
ON THESE PAGES: Details from the Saigyo Monogatari scroll, the travels of the priest Saigyo through delicate landscapes. Painting on paper, Kamakura period, 13th century. Cat. no. 26
The scenes above show the snowy slopes of Mount Yoshino, with Saigyo making his way along a path (right); those below, the beach at Chisato, where he stayed in a fisherman's cottage.
Minamoto-no-Yoritomo, founder of the military government at Kamakura. Ascribed to Fujiwara-no-Takanobu. Painting on silk, Kamakura period, late 12th century. Cat. no. 30
The priest Myo-e Shonin, detail of a hanging scroll showing the priest meditating in a forest near the Kozanji monastery, which he founded. Kamakura period, xiii century.  Cat. no. 32
Detail from one of a pair of screens of flowers and birds, shown on the facing page. Traditionally ascribed to Sesshu (1420-1506). Painted on paper, Muromachi period. Cat. no. 43
Autumn and winter landscapes, by Sesshu (1420-1506). Paintings on paper, Muromachi period.

Cat. no. 41
Wind and Waves, by Sesson. Painting on paper, late Muromachi period, xvi century.

Cat. no. 48
Training horses, by an artist of the Kano school, one of a pair of screens (detail on the facing page). Momoyama period. Cat. no. 50
ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE: A pair of six-fold screens showing Westerners in Japan. Early Edo period, xvii century.  Cat. no. 51
Facing page, Europeans unloading a ship, and above, entering a church. The screens are lent by His Majesty the Emperor of Japan.
Detail of the screen shown on the opposite page, Monkeys in the Bamboo Grove, one of a pair by Hasegawa Tohaku (1539-1610). Momoyama period, early XVII century. Cat. no. 53
Detail from a scroll with poems. Painting in gold and silver attributed to Tawaraya Sotatsu (early xvii century); calligraphy by Hon-ami Koetsu (1558-1637).

Cat. no. 60

Sketch by Ogata Korin (1658-1716), from one of two albums. Edo period.

Cat. no. 63

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The wind god and the thunder god, by Tawaraya Sotatsu. Pair of screens, Edo period, early xvii century.  Cat. no. 59

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Women of the “gay quarters”—bathhouse attendants. Painting on paper, originally part of a sliding door. Early Edo period, about 1650.

Cat. no. 73