

# **NIHONGA**

## **Historical background**

Nihonga literally means "Japanese painting". It is not, however, until the Meiji era (1868-1912) that this art was referred to in such a way for the simple reason that it was the only style of painting practiced throughout Japan.

The history of Japanese painting goes back hundreds of years before it was officially called Nihonga. Its origin dates back to the introduction of Buddhism around the year 600 A.D. when the art of painting was used to preserve the sacred icons within the religion.

Along with the art came the introduction of the artistic tools: paper, silk, brushes, ink and pigments. The colours, whose origins were found in minerals, included red (a product from ocre, clay, iron oxide, manganese, mercury sulfur, and red lead), yellow from yellow clay, green from an ore of copper called malachite, and blue from the mineral azurite. The colour purple, introduced during the Heian era (794-1185), was extracted from the murasaki plant (*Lithospermum officinale* or gromwell).

Though the art of painting was introduced to the Japanese by Chinese Buddhists and Korean followers, it soon evolved in a unique Japanese manner. The sense of beauty already prevalent in Japanese society under the terms *miyabi* (refined elegance), *mono-no-aware* (aesthetic sensibility), *wabi* (calmness) and *sabi* (simplicity), greatly influenced the evolution of what was soon referred to as Nihonga.