

The Meeting of Two Civilisations:

The Baptism of Nihonga

It was during the era of the samurai (1604-1868) that Japan pursued political isolationism, with very limited external relations in the area of trade. One of the only contacts with the outside world took place in Nagasaki where merchants from China and Holland came to exchange goods. It was not until the end of this era, at the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912), that Japan opened its doors to the culture of the West.

Although Japan was visibly far behind in the industrial revolution, its arts, including Nihonga, had evolved from within its walls of isolation to a point of refinement unmatched in the outside world. It was an art, however, that was soon to take on a new direction.

In Kyoto, the capital of traditional art, styles were revolutionized by the introduction of artistic techniques of Western realists. It was a period which saw the baptism of these two art forms: Yôga (painting from the West) and Nihonga (traditional Japanese painting). It was also a time when dark forces in Japan were attempting to radically bring the country out of its provincial lethargy by forcing it to adopt but one religion, Shinto, and for the artists to drop their traditional techniques and adopt the "Ways of the West". Their attempt consisted of the systematic burning of Buddhist temples and their valuable art treasures.

Much of the treasures might have been lost had it not been for the timely appointment of Dr. Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908) as Professor of Philosophy at the Imperial University of Tokyo. Dr. Fenollosa, an historian of American Art from Harvard University, created the theme entitled **Orientalism**: a movement combining the technique of the West with the traditions of classical Japanese painting before the Edo period (1604-1868).

Orientalism gradually evolved in a unique way, materialising in romantic paintings inspired by history. The result was a combination of the totality and subjectivity of the traditional art with the visual expression of the modern techniques. It was the flourishing of neoclassicism of Japanese paintings.

Nihonga's Traditional Themes

Traditional Japanese influences and styles in Nihonga painting include pure ink landscapes, colour-wash styles and thick impasto screens with coloured designs and gold leaves. Although originally painted on screens or in hanging scroll format, Nihonga paintings today are usually framed in Western style since mineral pigments are easily damaged by repeated rolling and unrolling.

Themes now include standard Eastern figures and landscape compositions, as well as Western motifs and near-abstract designs; the mode is unified by the materials (writing brush and ink or mineral pigment, on silk or paper).

The word *Yûgen* which translates as "mysterious and profound" is often applied to Nihonga painting. *Mono-no-aware*, or pathos, represented in cherry blossoms, cosy paddy fields, flowers, the seashore, spring rains, spring moon and spring mists represent the world of Japanese imagery which combines lushness and a sense of intimacy typical of Japanese landscapes. In this sense, Nihonga derives directly from an older style of painting called *Yamato-e* in which simplicity emanated from the sophisticated paintings.

The Techniques of Nihonga

The colours used by Nihonga artists are extracted through the process of grinding rocks, shells, and gems to the consistency of a thick powder. The powder is then mixed under heat with resin from the grinded bone of a stag and water. The very nature of the animal resin allows the final product to adhere to the artist's surface, be it paper, cloth or silk.

Using the ends of the fingers the artist combines the three products in a porcelain cup until each grain is absorbed in the resin and water. The resulting colours used by the artist resemble an array of watercolours, with the density of the colours toned down by the adding of water to the palette. The Nihonga artist also incorporates the use of ink, or sumi, in the application along with the use of leaves from the metal compounds of gold, silver and alloy. Being extremely sensitive to time, humidity, and the acid from the artist's fingers, the colours are always unique and never again duplicated. Like in the art of pottery, the final product represents a kind of equilibrium between the will of man and the virtues of nature.