

Art & Culture

Strokes of genius

More than just black ink on white paper, calligraphy art is the aesthetic embodiment of Zen in Japanese culture, as *Julie Anne Sjaastad* discovers



Twilight Cherry Blossoms, 2018, Aoi Yamaguchi x Arthouse

ART IN JAPAN often comes from a philosophical standpoint, where the process is equally important as the result. This is particularly true when it comes to the Japanese calligraphy art of *shodo*. On the surface, this Eastern form of high art is revered for its striking characters and ideograms made with sweeping brush strokes. However, its beauty lies not just in its composition but also in its ability to capture the artist's state of mind.

Calligraphy is part of everyday life in Japan. People learn how to write beautifully in their early childhood, and some even take extra courses. For professional calligraphers, it is more than just writing with a bamboo brush and sumi-ink; it is a life-long commitment.

As an art form, calligraphy demands not only physical but mental preparation. The paper gives you only one chance. There is no room for correction as soon as the ink touches the paper; the slightest hesitation risks ruining the work. The angle at which the brush is held, and the pressure and speed with which one applies the first stroke, define the shape of the character. The subtle variations in the thickness of and between the lines are said to be reflections of the artist's state of mind. This approach to art is influenced by Zen Buddhism as it captures the spirit of the calligrapher in that moment in time.

The main principle of the composition is balance, for which the interplay between the black line and white space is essential. As the artist moves the brush through the white paper, the lines must have fluidity, depth and strength. Rather than writing a letter, the brush strokes draw the space. The space, in turn, defines the

form. If both line and space are in balance, this aesthetic principle has been achieved. This act becomes a performance, where the artist engages with body and mind.

Japanese artist Aoi Yamaguchi began learning calligraphy at the age of six under the tutelage of Zuiho Sato, a traditional calligraphy master. Yamaguchi's training involved not only perfecting her own calligraphic skill by imitating the techniques of the great masters of the past, but also studying their works in order to reflect on their spirit and philosophy.

As Yamaguchi says, 'It is a challenge for anyone to embody their spirit in handwritten words. Meditate, prepare the brush, focus on the moment, pick up the brush and write the steady strokes in a smooth, continuous flow without hesitation. Your body and mind have to be aligned. You will make lots of discoveries about yourself, and will go through moments of struggle and self-fulfilment.'

'Rather than writing a letter, the brush strokes draw the space'

Chinese and Japanese calligraphy

Like many of its art forms, Japan inherited brush writing from China. They therefore share many similarities. However, there are slight differences in writing and aesthetic expressions, especially between traditional and contemporary calligraphy.

Chinese calligraphy is more complex as it employs a greater number of characters. The use of *kanji* in Japanese calligraphy, however, has been simplified over the years. Additionally, Japanese calligraphy uses the combination of *kanji*, characters originally from Chinese writing, and *kana*, a syllabic script that was developed from *kanji*. Today, Japanese calligraphy seeks to discover new forms while respecting its own roots and tradition.

Traditional and contemporary calligraphy

Despite the strict rules of classical Chinese aesthetics, Chinese calligraphy art is open to experimentation: Xu Bing's art installation 'Book from the Sky' (1988), which consists of 604 pages of meaningless glyphs; or Gu Wenda's 'Forest of Stone Steles: Retranslation and Rewriting Tang Poetry' (1993-ongoing), in which Gu carved rewritten Tang poems on stone steles. By pushing these boundaries, Chinese calligraphy has become more accessible to a wider audience.

Yasuo Kitai, founder of Gallery Kitai, has been presenting Japanese calligraphy at art expositions in Europe and America. He says that Japanese calligraphy is so steeped in tradition that it becomes difficult for the artist to move beyond boundaries. This, however,

does not mean that there are no new stories to tell. For Kitai, the emergence of great contemporary calligraphers breathes life into such traditions.

Yamaguchi is one such calligrapher. She believes there are no boundaries in terms of what and how to write: 'You have to extensively and bravely experiment and understand the brush, ink and paper, and what these three could express through your mind and body. You can focus on the movement of strokes, playfulness of sumi-ink, depth in the shades of the ink, or unique placement of words following the rhythm. I've been listening to my inner voice, following my vision, and through much trial and



Within Your Palm, 2018, Aoi Yamaguchi



3.11 REQUIEM AND REVIVAL (DETAIL), 2012, SOGEM CHIBA SOGEM

error, exploring my balance in my work.'

Japanese calligraphy has gained international attention in recent years through art fairs and landmark exhibitions. In celebrating 150 years of diplomatic relations, the Embassy of Japan in Belgium recently organised a special exhibition titled 'Calligraphy Mission' featuring works by Kunisada Sanmu. La Maison Rouge, an art foundation in Paris, also presented works by Yuichi Saito in its final 2018 exhibition titled L'Envol (Flight).

Appreciating calligraphy art

The world at large is predisposed to believe that art normally contains a meaning. Thus, when faced with calligraphy, we assume that we need to understand the text in order to appreciate the art. However, Kitai states that it's important to admire the art from our own personal perspective; we shouldn't feel bound by any rules.

Yamaguchi, on the other hand, believes that it's ideal to have a fair understanding of calligraphy and the text. 'Calligraphy, even in the most abstract form, is characters written

with artistic expression. If you follow the movement of the brushstroke closely, you might be able to guess what is written – but knowing the meaning would deepen the understanding of the artist's intention and inspiration.

'However, just like anyone can enjoy music without the knowledge of music theory, anyone can enjoy the beauty of calligraphy. The key is to just breathe and feel the energy, be curious, and embrace the moment with the art.'

LINE ART

Where to see Japanese calligraphy art in Tokyo

Tokyo National Museum

Tokyo's foremost cultural institution boasts some of the largest and best collections of art and archaeological artefacts in Japan. The Honkan (main building) displays the permanent collection of Japanese art, which includes ink paintings and calligraphy, while the Heiseikan (behind the Honkan) is used for special exhibitions.

→ 13-9 Ueno Park, Taito (Ueno Station). tinyurl.com/TOTnm. Tue-Thu & Sun 9.30am-5pm (last entry 4.30pm), Fri-Sat 9.30am-9pm (8.30pm), closed Mon (Tue if Mon is hols). ¥1,600, uni students ¥1,200, high school students ¥900, FREE for junior high school students and under.

Taito City Calligraphy Museum

This specialist museum holds important collections of Chinese and Japanese calligraphy histories, which were collected by Western-style painter and calligrapher Fusetsu Nakamura. Expect 16,000 pieces of Chinese and Japanese fine art: bones and tortoise-shells containing inscriptions from the Yin period, clay seals, stone seals, stone sutras, stone inscriptions, gravestone epitaphs, stationery, rubbed copies of stone inscription, and calligraphy textbooks.

→ 2-10-4 Negishi, Taito (Uguisudani Station). 03 3872 2645. www.taitocity.net/zaidan/shodou. Tue-Sun 9.30am-4.30pm (last entry 4pm), closed Mon (Tue if Mon is hols) & Dec 29-Jan 3. ¥500, primary/junior/senior high school students ¥250.

Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum

The museum's calligraphy collection contains 36 pieces by 30 calligraphers, which were acquired between 1963 and 1978. The museum also holds an annual exhibition called the 'Ueno Artist Project' series, which started in 2017. The first instalment introduced Japanese contemporary artists whose works are explored through fine arts. The second instalment focuses on calligraphy and features six artists who are currently active, titled 'Contemporary SHO – See, Know and Feel Today's Calligraphy' (ends Jan 6).

→ 8-36 Ueno Park, Taito (Ueno Station). tinyurl.com/TOTmetropolitan. Mon-Thu, Sat-Sun 9.30am-5.30pm (last entry 5pm), Fri 9.30am-8pm (7.30pm), closed Dec 3, 17, 25, 31, Jan 1. ¥500, senior 65+ ¥300.

Gallery Kitai

Founded in 1998 by Yasuo Kitai, his namesake gallery has been dealing with contemporary calligraphy for a long time. The gallery represents several artists, including Sogem Chiba, whose works were displayed at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum's 'Ueno Artist Project' series.

→ 3-1 Hayabusacho, Chiyoda (Hanzomon Station). kitaikikaku.co.jp. Tue-Sat 12pm-7pm.