

Continental Style: Chinese Influence in Japanese Paintings

Since the inception of Japanese painting, Japanese artists have looked to the Asian continent, particularly China, for inspiration. Evidence of continental influence is already present in the earliest paintings to survive in Japan, tomb murals from the 6th and 7th centuries. In the Heian period (794-1185), paintings were imported directly from China. By this time, the term *kara-e*, or “Chinese painting,” had already come into use to distinguish a separate tradition in Japan from *yamato-e*, literally “Japanese (style) painting.”

As soon as Chinese painting styles were introduced into Japan, they quickly changed into distinctive native traditions that emphasized different aesthetic principles than their continental sources. At the same time, as new schools of painting developed in China, they provided Japanese artists with fresh sources of inspiration, causing periodic revolutions in the Japanese art world. One of the most important of these revolutions happened in the 15th century, when the monk-painter Sesshū (1420-1506) and his student Shūgetsu (c. 1427-c. 1510) traveled to China. In China, a century of Mongol invasion had recently come to an end, and the establishment of a new native Chinese dynasty, the Ming (1368-1644), brought about a revival of earlier court painting styles. Sesshū and Shūgetsu introduced this revival to Japan, setting a new standard for landscape painting that lasted into the early modern period. One of the rarest paintings in the Academy’s collection, a landscape painting in handscroll format by Shūgetsu, is included in this exhibition; this painting has not been on display in over a decade.

In the middle of the 17th century, just as the Tokugawa shogunate (1615-1868) was being established in Edo (modern Tokyo), the Ming collapsed, marking the end of the last native Chinese dynasty as Manchu invaders from the northeast took control of the nation. Many Chinese fled their war-torn homeland, particularly a group of Buddhist monks from the southern province of Fujian, a hotbed of Ming loyalist resistance. Highly literate and trained in the arts, these monks first came to the Japanese port city of Nagasaki, but eventually were allowed to establish the temple of Manpukuji near Kyoto, where they promoted a unique brand of Buddhism known as the Ōbaku sect. As the Edo shogunate closed off its borders, the Chinese monks at Manpukuji provided almost the only exposure to the outside world for Japanese artists of the mid-late 17th century. Ōbaku monks brought with them not only new Chinese painting and calligraphy styles, but also actual paintings, notably from the Wu School tradition codified by Wen Zhengming (1470-1559) and his students. The monumental handscroll *Clearing After Snowfall Along the River*, traditionally attributed to the 8th century but almost certainly done by an artist in Wen Zhengming’s circle, is one of the most historically important paintings in this exhibition.

The 18th-19th centuries saw the rise of yet another Chinese tradition that would once again transform the Japanese art world: literati painting (*bunjinga*). This tradition emphasized scholar-amateur painting that served most importantly as a means for self-cultivation, as opposed to painting by professional artists that was done for profit. Japanese advocates for literati painting like Nakabayashi Chikutō (1776-1853) and his student Ōkura Ryūzan (1784-1850) criticized the professional quality of some earlier Chinese styles, and proposed instead adherence to the scholarly ideal of painting for personal expression of one’s inner character. Of special note in this exhibition is a superb landscape by Ōkura Ryūzan that is

a promised gift from Griffith Way. This painting, done in the manner of Wen Zhengming, makes for a fascinating comparison with *Clearing After Snowfall Along the River*.