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MAKING ART IN THE JAPANESE WAY: *NIHONGA* AS A PROCESS AND SYMBOLIC ACTION

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The aim of the present paper is to show how the school of nihonga *is produced institutionally by superimposing features of the traditional paradigm of art-making onto a modern art form in order to "naturalise" it in the Japanese context. It is based on the personal experience of the author as a researcher at the* nihonga *department of the Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku (National University of Arts and Music) in 1995–97 and has in part been motivated by the conviction that it is far too early to proclaim the problem of "the distinctive "feel" of Japanese culture" a false problem, that the search for national identity in painting and analyzing "the incompatibility of imported styles and domestic sensibility" is still a point at stake among the Japanese artists and art- critics. This conviction is rather vividly supported by public statements of practicing artists on what the Japanese-style painting is, by the exhibitions focusing on the indigenous elements in Japanese art and by the many hours of communication with* nihonga *artists and students, especially with the well-known Japanese-style painter Okamura Keizaburo whose creative work is a good testimony to the meaningfulness of the problem raised. As the position of the author of this article was swinging from the critical stare of the outside observer to the empathic participation of nearly an insider, this experience will be treated as a sort of a field-work, though the author was not conscious of his activity as of a kind of "anthropology of art" back then.*

They don't speak foreign languages, they do not mingle with the students from other departments, they adhere to the traditional Japanese subjects and, if possible, to the traditional way of life, they are admired as "very Japanese" by one, and are laughed at as too *dentôteki* by the others. They are the teachers and the students of *nihonga* – the Japanese-style painting.

If you belong to the *nihonga* guild in one way or another, it is not impossible, however, to be asked a question like "What is *nihonga*?" or "Is *nihonga* something like *ukiyo-e*?" not only by the unenlightened foreigners but also by the Japanese themselves. It would seem that this trend of art, with its history of more than a century, dating back to early Meiji, and with thousands of paintings created in those years, still has to explain itself even on its native soil. The usual information on the subject of *nihonga* in such Western sourcebooks on Japan as *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Japan* says this trend of art to have emerged as the opposition to *yôga*, the Western style painting, in

the face of threat to national identity, which has started to haunt Japan with the influx of Western art in the second half of the 19th century. Whether this is, in fact, the way the Japanese themselves understand the origin of *nihonga* is beyond the scope of this article, for it would require a careful sociohistorical study. Yet, from its very beginning in 1888, when the Tokyo School of Fine Arts was founded, the instruction in painting in Japan was plagued by a basic paradox: the "traditionalist school" of painting was regarded in the West as the most avant-gardist, and vice versa – the "Western school", though was revered as avant-gardist and antitraditionalist in Japan, was regarded in the West as simple reproductions and was not credited with any value[1]. In the West, traditional Japanese art was discovered and readily accepted by Westerners who were trying to "overcome" Western modernity. As a result of this mix-up, the art of *nihonga* gradually came to be governed by basically the same canons that regulate Western painting (which has changed a lot itself), and today their differences are mostly institutional. However, it would be too early to assert, with Samuel C. Morse, that "it cannot be long before the old, artificially maintained division between "Western" and "Japanese" [painting] will either wither away or be bypassed by younger generations"[2]. While it well can be that the *nihonga* departments in Japanese art universities and the *nihonga* groups of artists are indeed artificially supported and already doomed laboratories kept for distilling the essence of Japanese culture (which is, if we are to believe Karatani Kōjin, a Western construct), it would, nevertheless, be interesting to examine whether or not there is something substantially different in it, and whether the "Japanese" construct is actually capable of generating productive cultural phenomena – thereby providing enough basis to maintain that the division between "Western" and "Japanese" is still alive and well. As soon as we perceive an aspect of a structurally different culture to be meaningful for us, there is always a big temptation to assert that "they have become more or less like us". In case of *nihonga* such an assertion would be possible at the cost of many, if not of all, nuances.

The aim of the present article is to show how the school of *nihonga* is produced institutionally by superimposing the features of the traditional paradigm of art-making onto a modern art form in order to "naturalise" it into the Japanese context. It is based on my personal experience as a researcher at the *nihonga* department of the Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku (National University of Arts and Music) in 1995–97 and has in part been motivated by the conviction that it is far too early to proclaim the problem of "the distinctive "feel" of Japanese culture"[3] a false problem, that the search for national identity in painting and analyzing "the incompatibility of imported styles and domestic sensibility"[4] is still a point at stake among the Japanese artists and art- critics. This

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[1] Cf. Karatani Kōjin, "Japan as Art Museum: Okakura Tenshin and Fenollosa", in *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Michael F. Marra, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001, 44 and 45.

[2] *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Japan*, ed. R. Bowring and P. Kornicki, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 196.

[3] Brian Bocking, "The Origins of Japanese Philosophy", in *Companion Encyclopaedia of Asian Philosophy*, ed. Brian Carr and Indira Mahalingam, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, 711.

[4] Kenichiro Makino, *The Reversion to Things Japanese*, in *Circulating Currents – Japanese and Korean Contemporary Art* (Catalogue of the Exhibition held in Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art and Nagoya City Art Museum in 1995), 118.

conviction is rather vividly supported by the public statements of practicing artists on what Japanese-style painting is, by the exhibitions focusing on the indigenous elements in Japanese art and by the many hours of communication with *nihonga* artists and students, especially with the well-known Japanese-style painter Okamura Keizaburo whose own creative work is a good testimony to the meaningfulness of the problem raised. As my own position was swinging from the critical stare of the outside observer to the empathic participation of nearly an insider, I will treat my experience as a sort of a field-work, though I was not conscious of my activities as of a kind of "anthropology of art" back then.

In the pages to follow I shall attempt to analyze *nihonga* not from the standpoint of its iconography, but will engage into its phenomenological description. That is, instead of letting the images of *nihonga* "speak for themselves" and thus taking for granted that what is "heard" is to be trusted when examining its meaning, I will try to treat *nihonga* as a social practice and a specific form of symbolic action. For this purpose, it will be necessary to see it not only as a set of objects offered for the national or international art markets, but also as a process with a rich variety of the cultural elements that the "object-biased strategy" would leave (and usually leaves) unnoticed. The questions that will be attempted to ask are: "could it be "more Japanese" to practice *nihonga* than oil painting?" and, if yes, in what way, if any, can this be recognized by the outsider? This, hopefully, will lead to a more fundamental question, namely: what are the modes of contemporary Japanese artistic self-identity?

The phenomenology of the subject: *nihonga* and *yôga*

By phenomenology here I will mean a comparative description of the creative process in *nihonga* and in *yôga*: the differences in tools and their usage, the stages of their learning processes and the resulting ways of social performances, and the perceptive qualities of the finished works of art.

The usual western way of comparison between the two would probably ignore the stage of technical execution as a merely technical matter. Thus the comparison would be solely among the ready-made objects of art, among the pictures presented by the artist for the judgement of the viewer. In a way, such an approach is fully justified, for sometimes it is only the "final dot" of the artist which decides the quality of the piece and makes it art. It would seem meaningless to attempt to compare something less than finished entities, for it is taken for granted that iconographical analysis can go beyond "art" and can reach as far as the network of cultural and social meanings which are revealed through careful analysis. The convincing part of such an argument notwithstanding, I would insist this is not the case with *nihonga*. The practitioners of it would hardly agree that the technique is unimportant, for it is precisely around technique that the many-layered practice of this art is structured. For them, it is not "just a technique" – such a sharp division between the art of *nihonga* and the process of creating a piece of *nihonga* is, in fact, very Western. We need not be reminded here of the well-known fact that the Japanese word for art, *bijutsu*, was coined only in the beginning of Meiji when the concept of art was transplanted from the West. In this process the

technique and the craft were separated from the "high art" and were started to be regarded as something lower in the hierarchy.[5] Thus, we are by no means entitled to skip the technical stage if we are to understand what is so Japanese about Japanese art.

Two things without which *nihonga* is virtually unthinkable are *iwa enogu* and *washi*. The first is the mineral pigment paint or simply various kinds of rock ground into powder, and the second is Japanese hand-made paper. The combination of these is the technical core of *nihonga*. It is the rough character of the mineral pigment that creates the difference in the surface between Japanese style painting and oil painting. In contrast to oil painting, the surface of *nihonga* painting is always mat and contains a more or less clearly discernible texture comparable to that of sandpaper. In some cases the grain is made deliberately very rough by the artist and then it comes to look a lot like the surface of a real rock. Otherwise it can bear a far semblance of the watercolor texture. Now, how do tools relate to the practitioners of *nihonga*? The first way, and the one usually ignored by the "insiders", the professionals, is to go to buy these tools in the big art-goods stores. The second way, the most widespread, is to buy these goods in small family-run stores specializing in *nihonga* tools only. The third way is to make them yourself. As the latter is the archetypal procedure and belongs to the education of every *nihonga* painter, I would like to start from here the description of the processual and social character of *nihonga*.

It was called the *iwaenogu-tsuki-ken* – a trip for making a mineral pigment paint. The group was formed of professors, assistants and students of the *nihonga* department of the university. The destination of the trip was the art-studio in Fukushima-ken affiliated to Geidai. It was there that the mineral pigment was to be produced from the various kinds of rocks gathered in the mountains around the area. Before we left I was given a notice that the only and fundamental requirement was to cooperate with the other members of the group, for the success of the trip depended very heavily on the smoothness of teamwork. The work had to proceed in several stages, from dividing the members of the trip into smaller groups, through composing the schedule of activities, to planning the most important part – the selection of rocks regarding their color and softness, the methods of grinding them into powder and, finally, the sifting of the powder through different sieves to sort out the pigment of various coarseness. Everything was planned to the minutest detail already in Tōkyō and was started to be carried out as soon as we left our backpacks in the rooms of the studio-house. We were divided into several groups of three to five persons, each team in possession of a radio-transmitter not to lose contact during the "expedition". The groups spread in different directions, as the character of surrounding rocks differed and this allowed for a greater variety of pigments. Needless to say, enjoying the scenery and expressing the amazement with it in a very emotional manner was as inseparable a part of the project as the careful selection of the stones themselves. My Japanese counterparts knew the names of each kind of rock we discovered and could immediately appreciate the quality of the pigment it was going to make. When we came back on the appointed time, each team brought along an abundance of rocks of different colours. In the studio, big metal

[5] Yamawaki Kazuo, "Indigenous versus Modern Elements in Art", in *Circulating Currents*, 106,

pestles were prepared for crushing the stones and grinding them into the powder. Hard physical work began. We all ground the rocks in turn for it was not easy to keep on doing it for a long time. All the powder produced was sieved with sieves of different mesh by the female part of our group. Female students also prepared food for the tired gatherers and grinders in the kitchen of the studio-house. After all the stones had been crushed into powder of various colors and shades of colors, after the pigment had been sorted out into small plastic bags indicating the name of the mineral and the number of the coarseness of the powder, we had our meals and *sake*. This was also the time for remembering the successes and the failures of the day and making jokes about them, this was the time for listening to the stories told by the elder professors concerning their similar experiences and the nuances of the selection of the rocks and making the mineral pigments. The day ended with the ritual bath, which in that house was designed with an exceptional taste: the bath itself was made of wood and the room had sliding windows opening to the view of the surrounding garden. The nature and the culture were all there. The next day began with all of us assembling in the biggest Japanese-style room of the house for summarizing our trip. After we had *soba* noodles from a big bowl in the centre of the room, the professor and the teaching assistants expressed their delight with the trip and the gratitude to all participants.

Now, against the background of *yôga*, the Western oil-painting, let us examine the structural points in this seemingly idealized description. In oil painting, everybody knows, paint comes in tubes or in cans. This kind of paint is of an indisputably high quality. Why one should waste time in trying to produce it oneself? Is it not much better instead to concentrate on creative activities? Is not the ready-made paint intended for saving the artist's time and energy for the *real* work he or she has to do? Is it not true that in the process of artistic creation the technique and the craft is never the final issue? In many ways our inability to answer these questions in other way but positive reveals the fundamental difficulty in understanding "things Japanese". The abstraction and reification typical of the Western paradigm of the materials stress the discontinuity between "a work of art" and the stuff it is made of. In my mind, this relates to the more general problem of Western individualism and the intimately connected habits of abstract thinking – first of all the abstract concept of time. We would rather not bother with trying to articulate meaningfully all the network of people and processes that participate in *Nihonga* and would rather attach the exceptional merit to the individual creator. In most cases we would also tend to skip all the path of dialectical emergence of the piece of art sticking to its "meaning" itself and thus transcending the real time in favour of a very fast move of thought. True, the author remains important also in Japan, but along with it we find a much wider context and the sensitivity to the realm of social interaction. Let us try to summarize the description of the university trip. The pivotal points in it would seemingly be the following ones:

a) the stress on a group rather than on an individual in the "guild" so individualistically oriented as artists;
b) the importance of the [collective] physical work and craft;
c) the readiness to conduct every stage of the work slowly and meticulously;
d) the meaningful structuring of the relationship between man and nature (mineral pigment being both part of nature and part of art);

e) the procedures that saturate the hierarchically structured relationships and patterns of cooperation between different generations and sexes with experienced meaning.

The description of *iwaenogutsukiken* is by far not the only, though perhaps the most impressive, example how the art-materials can become a "binding element" in social artistic practices in contemporary Japan. Workshops on making pigments or paper are quite widespread among *nihonga* artists and students. Moreover, every stage of preparation for painting with mineral pigments – constructing the board for mounting the paper, mounting and sizing the paper, applying mineral pigments and *ginpaku* or *kinpaku* (silver-leaves or golden-leaves) – is carried out by the *nihonga* artist with a speed, mastery, and enjoyment difficult to imagine in the workshop of an oil-painter. Though it would be quite risky to capitalize on the technical aspect alone, I would nevertheless assert that such technical performances reveal something very essential in the Japanese paradigm of the art practice and the position of "art" in the whole network of human activities. It is quite possible that what is generally considered to be the exceptionally Japanese traits of culture belong to a much wider East-Asian context[6], but it seems to me that this way to handle things stands out as a contrast to the teaching and thinking methods brought about by "Westernization". The western tendency to separate the element of "good craft" and the increasing importance of the conceptual in art can hardly be observed in *nihonga*. The rarity of attempts to revive the interest in the Renaissance oil-painting techniques and the corresponding social practices in the West cannot be more than the symptoms of the prevalence of the opposite tendency. On the other hand, the natural enjoyment with which the Japanese artist gets involved in the "craft-part" of the work, to my mind, is not something generated by the outside pressures of modernization (or by the outside pressures of any kind) but constitutes a persistent pattern of Japanese culture.

There is another point to be made with regard to the issue of the search of something "truly Japanese" in Japanese art. When we discover the importance of this "processual" character of Japanese artistic performances against the description of ready-made objects of art, there is an obvious difference in the kind of analysis to be made considering both. If finished works lend themselves to reproduction and can be included in travelling shows and thus appreciated directly, the processes of their production remain important on their native soil only and can hardly be replaced by description. Without direct participation and active involvement in them it is impossible to understand their dialectical character and thus the true "flavour" of the works that result from them.[7] Pointing to something that remains uncovered, "behind" the work of art, may seem to

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[6] In many cases it is the fault of Japanese intellectuals themselves "who looked up to the West exclusively, bypassing Korea, their nearest neighbor, as a comparative reference" Takie Sugiyama Lebra, William P. Lebra, "Introduction", in *Japanese Culture and Behavior. Selected Readings*, ed. Takie Sugiyama Lebra and William P. Lebra, Revised Edition, Honolulu: University of Hawai Press, 1986, xiii.

[7] For this reason it would seem to be a very smart solution the decision of Kabuki actors to reveal at least part of the technical secrets of their art to the non-Japanese audience. During the recent tour of the Ichimura Manjiro's Kabuki Theatre in Europe, the performance was divided into two parts, first of them being a show of some important aspects of Kabuki technique, such as the differences in the bodily movements of male and female characters, the ways makeup is applied, the way of producing sounds and the related tools, etc. To my mind, directing attention to these aspects of performance is no less important than understanding the symbolism of the play.

be pretentious esoterics, but it is precisely this participation element and the being-immersed in lived time that makes sense in the Japanese art-learning and art-performing practices.

In his article "Intimacy: a General Orientation in Japanese Religious Values" Thomas Kasulis remarks with good reason that "understanding goes beyond knowing" and that it necessarily includes the *Einfühlung* and the ability "to imagine at least for a fleeting moment what it is like to be Japanese". He is also right to observe that at the core of Japanese culture lies what is called by him "intimacy" – "something like to make known (*intimare*) to a close friend (*intimo*) what is innermost (*intima*)"[8]. This term seems to be productive for the purposes of the present article. The five structural aspects that I have pointed out in the description of *iwaenogutsukiken* can well be reinterpreted along the lines of "intimacy": a) and e) close, intimate, family-like ties within the group (*kokoro ga aru, giri, amae*) rather than being individualistic and self-absorbed (*wagamama*); b) showing intimate [bodily] involvement with materials and tools rather than having a purely outwardly relationship (for instance, buying them in the big store *vs.* an intimate, personal relationship with the family that runs a small store); c) intimacy requires time and attention instead of quick acquaintance; d) intimacy between man and nature (aesthetic pathos – *mono no aware* and the characteristic *chijimi* (in treating stones as "small cute things"[9])).

When we ignore the "craft-aspect" of Japanese art we deprive it of a very essential feature unobserved anywhere else. Thus when such radical "reversions to things Japanese" (as the *Mono-ha* movement in the end of the seventies) occur, one is tempted to ask: what are the actual things their adherents want to revert to? Is it not an overly sophisticated intellectualist reductionism and a very individualistic attitude instead of "making use of the issues of local culture and national heritage"[10]? The insistence of the *Mono-ha* ideologists on the need of seeing "the world as it is, everything in its naked state, without attaching symbolic meanings that are human in origin and turning it into an object of human action" and thus denying creation and advocating "presenting natural rocks and pieces of untreated wood and iron" for the direct interaction of the viewers (much as some Western conceptual artists do) skips all the elements that the "craft-aspect" of *nihonga* allowed. If such standpoint is taken, the entire network of teachers and craftsmen looses its functions and meaning. The neo-taoist ideas of *Mono-ha* could and did seem very Asian as a discourse, but one might well ask whether they in fact corresponded to the Japanese tradition of artistic practice.

Okamura Keizaburo, a contemporary *Nihonga* artist, with whom I have had numerous conversations regarding the identity of Japanese art, maintains art in Japan to be characteristically animistic, the *kami* to live in every well executed piece of painting or ceramics or metalware. It is

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[8] Thomas Kasulis, "Intimacy: a General Orientation in Japanese Religious Values", *Philosophy East & West*, 40, 4 (October 1990): 433 and 435.

[9] Cf. passage in Suzuki: "Perhaps one most egregious Japanese characteristic is to take notice of the small things of nature and tenderly take care of them". (Teitaro Daisetz Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1994, 231). Also see the note on *chijimi* in Lebra&Lebra (ed.), xiii.

[10] Endo Toshikatsu, "A Paradox for the Coming-of-Age of Modern Japanese Art", quoted in Makino, 117.

mostly and first of all *a thing well done* which is a *conditio sine qua non* for appearing of a *kami* in it. Okamura himself, at a time when I happened to meet him, was in a serious search for the motives and the modes of expression that would be recognized as Japanese at the same time bearing an evident mark of contemporary sensibility. His works are presented by the art-critics (and, to a lesser or greater extent, conceived by the artist himself) as "today's religious fantasies, based on Buddhism but expressed with the aesthetics of folk culture", bearing an intention "to restore the primordial religious awe to contemporary space and painting".[11] Okamura was very conscious about his efforts to make "use of the issues of local culture and national heritage", and in this respect his case can be treated as somewhat exemplary. When visiting his studio I always had the feeling that there was something ritualistic in the way he approached his creative work. Mysticism apart, there was something in his movements themselves that seemed to me hard to recognize and difficult to compare with the ways how my Lithuanian and Western colleagues normally work. His movements were somehow more precise and better articulated, there was something more vividly expressed about them.

Here I have to present another description that will have to do with one more point I want to make about *nihonga* as a symbolic action – the description of *keiko*, the lessons of *nihonga* art and techniques. All these always proceeded according to the same pattern – with the roles of the participants clearly articulated. Such a lesson is unthinkable without a "guest star", some famous *sensei*, a well-known specialist in a particular area, who is invited to lead the event, to be the actual teacher; then there are local assistants having some degree of competence in the area instructed, but acting only as "staff in help", and, finally, there are those who assemble to learn. I have participated in many such *keiko* of which the lessons of applying golden leaves (*kinpaku*) and a particular kind of *washi, hosokawa-shi,* for *urauchi* (forming a softer layer on the panel on which the *washi* for the actual painting is mounted) were the most impressive.

Their first main feature to be mentioned is the fact that most of the lessons were almost wordless. The sequence of the *kinpaku* lesson ran approximately as follows. The action took place in one of the big studios of the university, allowing quite a big number of students (twenty to thirty) to assemble for learning. They were all siting in half-circle around the "stage" of several low tables with tools and materials on them. Behind these tables was a much respected teacher of *kinpaku* techniques. After naming the necessary tools and materials that were prepared in a suitable way by the young assistants of the *Nihonga* department who, standing behind, were reacting very quickly to the needs of the teacher in different stages of the teaching process, *sensei* started a very careful exposition of the steps in which the work had to proceed. Each step had a very definite beginning and end, every stage of work involved a strictly defined bodily posture and trajectory of its movement. The silent murmuring of the teacher helped to structure different points and to name aims in the process to the students who were taking notes. As all the procedure was repeated at least three

[11] Presentation of Okamura Keizaburo by Haito Masahiko, in *Circulating Currents,* 68.

times, everyone had the possibility to observe and to memorize. *Kinpaku* – thin leaves of real gold – is an expensive material; this circumstance provided all the ceremony with the atmosphere of greater importance: every step performed in a wrong way could be fatal and could damage such leaf irretrievably. After the stage of observation came the stage of repetition. The boldest and the most willing had the chance to "replay" all the steps under the guidance of the teacher. This was performed twice. The lesson ended with the well-orchestrated thanking and farewell ritual.

The structure of this teaching/learning process immediately reminds one of the concepts of *michi* or *dô*, which is as well-known as it is implicit in the Sino-Japanese culture. *Dô* is associated with the concept of "training as shaping one's body into a form (*katachi*)"[12] and with the cultural practices stemming from Zen[13]. This concept is usually associated with traditional artistic practices, such as poetry, drama, chado or kendo, but it is all the more significant that nihonga, essentially an art form to have emerged as an adaptive reaction to the modern influences, has adopted the same patterns for its institutional transmission in a framework of a modern, public arts university (as opposed to the traditional *iemoto* system based on private master–disciple relationships). Rupert Cox defines this way of training as follows: "In *kata*, the repeated imitation of standardized patterns of movement is a physical and visual substantiation of a tradition, connecting the practitioner to aesthetic qualities, as well as to all the others, past and present, who also practice."[14] If we are to use Western painting as a contrast here, it is quite easy to notice that in oil painting similar craft-learning practices, while prominent in the medieval paradigm, became extinct with the rise of modern Western individualism and technology during the past several hundreds of years. The social aspect of learning as imitation of what the teacher does is neglected here absolutely, because the technique is regarded to be much lower in importance than the "idea", the conceptual part of the work. Thus, the teaching methods are mostly limited to the verbal ones, to conversations and to discussions. The stage of learning that is called in Japanese *minari kikan*, observation of form, would be hard to find in western art-learning practices. To observe and to imitate forms, we first of all have to unquestionably trust the tradition that has produced them. Needless to say, this is not the case with the experimental spirit in art, for experiment trusts in fast progress, the "politics of novelties", and not in repetition and thus perpetuation of the traditional shapes or of the indigenous pattern "as it appeared *ab origine, in illo tempore*"[15].

It is possible, I have to admit, to treat the above descriptions of the craft rituals as part of a more general tendency in contemporary Japan of "the growing interest ... in materials as substances and not as media for expression".[16] This phenomenon owes much to the above-mentioned *Mono-ha* movement and has to do with a drive to get rid of the "despotism of human meanings" and to return

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[12] Yuasa quoted in Kasulis.

[13] These trends of culture are called "Zen Arts" by Rupert Cox.

[14] Rupert Cox, *Zen Arts*, Curzon Press, 2001, 26.

[15] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, trans. from French Willard R. Trask, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959.

[16] Kenichiro Makino, *The Reversion to Things Japanese*, in *Circulating Currents*, 119.

to the primordial unity of man and nature. In my mind, this question is best considered in the context of the problems of "originality".

Nihonga as a process and the problem of "originality"

The concept of "originality" is usually maintained to be alien to Japanese aesthetics[17]. True, its most widespread meaning of "ability to think or express oneself in an independent and individual manner" or as "freshness and novelty"[18] would mean nothing but the essential characteristics of the western *kojinshugi* conceived as the direct opposite to Japanese *kokoro*. However, if we read into the etymology of the word it can be found to be closer to the "Japanese perspective" than expected. In Cicero and Apuleius the Latin word for "original"(*originalis*) is used in the sense of "belonging or pertaining to the origin or beginning of something" or "a primary form or type from which varieties are derived"[19]. The paradoxical character of the double usage of the term in the contemporary context leads us away from the concept of originality as the relation with the archetype or pattern to its understanding as a "journalistic novelty" in George Steiner's sense. Steiner asserts all the meaningful art to be archaic in its connection to the primordial archetypal pattern, in its allowing us to feel the "pulse of the origins".[20] Such a standpoint is close to the ideas of *Mono-ha*. Consider two quotations from the writings of its proponents:

> The world exists without our creating it. How then can I dare to attempt to create? All I can do is to be myself in the world that is itself, and show it in a striking way[21]. (Sekine Nobuo)

> We need to learn to see the world as it is, everything in its naked state, without attaching symbolic meanings that are human in origin and turning it into an object of human action. *Everything has been there since the time immemorial*, and the world is already open to us. There is no way for us to create in any significant way in this world[22]. (Lee U-Fan) (my emphasis)

It is hard not to notice the intertextual resonance between the above statements and the Eliadean passages on "the eternal return" to the origins. To my mind, the important circumstance here is the essential difference that lies between the western Judeo-Christian concept of creation "out of nothing" and the creation as "shaping of primordial material" peculiar to many other civilizations, Sino-Japanese included. That is, the difference lies between "God the Creator" and the "Divine Craftsman". Needless to say, the Japanese follow the latter pattern – that of craftsmanship. The authors of the above statements have to cope somehow with the Western notion of creation *ex*

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[17] Brian Moeran, "Individual, Group, and *Seishin*: Japan's Internal Cultural Debate", in ed. Lebra & Lebra, 74.

[18] Meanings No 2 and No 3 of the entry for "Originality", in *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, New York: Gramercy Books, 1996, 1366.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Cf. Steiner's arguments on "originality" in the "Secondary city", Chapter 6, in George Steiner, *Real Presences*, Faber&Faber, 1991.

[21] Notes by Sekine Nobuo quoted in Makino, 118.

[22] U-Fan Lee, "The World and the Structure", *Design Hihyo Quaterly* 9 (June 1969), quoted in Makino, 118–119.

nihilo, the artist himself or herself creating the original, the origin in itself, and setting the pattern. For the Japanese such *hubris* of the divine genius is hard to understand for at least two reasons: first, "the world exists without our creating it" (thus the motive of nature is ever present in Japanese art[23]) and, second, the stance of the divine genius negates and ridicules the smooth functioning of the network of social interdependence. When examining the phenomenon of copying in Japanese architecture, Yamaguchi Masao observes that the eternal connection to the origins in Japan is ensured not in the duration of the same materials (as in the West), but by the permanence of the same patterns – models, images, and forms. There exists in Japan "the tendency to redundancy, copy, and repetition as related to the conservation of technologies, ideas, and styles", he says.[24] It is from this point of view that we can consider *nihonga* to emerge out of the application of the Japanese pattern of artistic practice to the imported Western ideas of painting.

In the beginning of this article I attempted to ask: can it be "more Japanese" to practice *nihonga* than to practice *yôga*? And, if yes, can through examination of that practice "the distinctive "feel" of Japanese culture be revealed? We have thus seen how various technological and learning practices in *nihonga* allow for a meaningful articulation of Japanese "domestic sensibilities" such as the love of nature and the context-sensitive social behavior. Against the background of *yôga* we have analyzed the multi-layered structure of the university-trip of *nihonga* department and the symbolic character of its technological workshop. However different the modes of expression are, it is nevertheless difficult not to feel the similar pattern of Japanese cultural practices as imitation of forms, as *kata* practices. It is probably easier to recognise this model in performing arts than in painting, but as soon as we dare to treat *nihonga* primarily as a context-sensitive process (*koto*) and not simply as sets of pictures (*mono*)[25], the *kata* aspect of *nihonga* inevitably comes to the fore.

The concern of the present article lies beyond the considerations on how "post-modern" and eclectic the Japanese art scene as every other art scene in the world is and how the consumerism and the streams of internationally available information are undermining the Japanese tradition. My aim was to describe *nihonga* as one of the contemporary Japanese art practices and to try to analyze it as enmeshed in the complex and subtle network of Japanese culture. My purpose was also to try to lift the veil behind the *nihonga* images that reach us mostly in the form of reproductions and to try to show them rather as a *stage* in the rich and multi-layered cultural practice different from our own than to see them as art-objects more or less similar to the ones we are capable of producing ourselves.

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[23] Some "statistical data" may be instructive here: from the eighty graduation pieces that were created by *Nihonga* students (both B. A. and M. A.) in the years 1996–1997 in Tōkyō Geidai, more than fifty deal with the subject of nature and only a very insignificant part of them is dedicated to industrial or other motives, from which only five works or so bear a strong mark of what could be called "western individualism".

[24] Yamaguchi Masao, "The Concept of the Copy in Japanese Culture" (the handout of the keynote speech given at the conference "History and Practice of Copying in Japan", Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK, 2–5 September 2001).

[25] For a recent in-depth treatment of the distinction between *mono* and *koto* see Rein Raud, "Languages, events and things"(forthcoming in *Asian Philosophy*).

JAPONIŠKASIS MENO KŪRIMO BŪDAS:
***NIHONGA* KAIP PROCESAS IR SIMBOLINIS VEIKSMAS**

Arūnas Gelūnas

Santrauka

Straipsnyje keliamas dvejopas tikslas: aprašyti ir analizuoti šiuolaikines japoniškojo meno institucionalizavimo formas pasitelkus „japonų stiliaus tapybos" (*nihonga*) pavyzdį; remiantis šio pavyzdžio analize ir jos skirtumais nuo Vakarų meno mokymo praktikos pabandyti suvokti gelmines tradicinės japonų kultūros struktūras sykiu keliant klausimą, ar pernelyg anksti paskelbti, kaip tai daro daugelis šiuolaikinės japonų kultūros tyrinėtojų, japoniškosios tradicinės kultūros pabaigą? Pateikiama keletas išvadų, susijusių su aktualiomis japoniškosios kultūrinės tapatybės dabartinės būklės problemomis. Straipsnyje pateikiamas aprašymas grįstas autoriaus asmenine patirtimi, interviu su šiuolaikiniais *nihonga* menininkais ir įtakingų Japonijos tyrinėtojų darbais.

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