

Higashiyama Kii – His Works

What do the works of Higashiyama Kii, internationally renowned contemporary artist Takashi Murakami, and the digital collective TeamLab have in common? All of them have elements of Japanese-style painting, called Nihonga. They all have different modes of expression and subject matter, but many of their works express an Oriental perspective like the ones seen in Chinese ink paintings, and look almost flat-like.

Western paintings, or Seiyoga in Japanese, are the opposite of Nihonga paintings. They are mostly made from the perspective of an individual viewer standing in front of the painting, but Oriental paintings are made to be viewed by many people, and from different perspectives. This gives the viewer the feeling of being immersed in the artwork itself.

Fenollosa, an Oriental art historian who evaluated and introduced Japanese art to the Western world during the Meiji era, described the characteristics of Nihonga painting as follows: “It does not chase realism like photographs, there is no shadow, there are outlines, the colour tone is subdued, and the expression is concise.”

How many of these criteria apply to Higashiyama Kii’s artworks?

What is expressed in Nihonga paintings is not the appearance of the object, but the essence of the object and the artist’s mental image of it. Within the framework of contemporary art, Nihonga is produced by various modes of expression, but the traditional mode of Nihonga painting uses natural materials such as ink, mineral pigments, whitewash, and dye. Animal glue is also mixed in as an adhesive when painted on Japanese Washi paper, silk, wood or plaster.

Such traditional materials are difficult to handle, and a lot of patience is required to master them. Currently, Nihonga painting is taught only as a part of a module at universities. Even now, this style is not obsolete and has been re-examined and incorporated into contemporary art. This may be due to the fact that Nihonga paintings reflect culture, aesthetic sense, and spirituality that is quintessentially Japanese.

Japanese nature changes its expression through spring, summer, autumn and winter.

Kaiti aspired to be a landscape painter to capture such an ever-changing scene, and his lifelong mentor, renowned artist Somei Yuki, encouraged him to “look at nature with your heart like a mirror.”

As a viewer stands in front of Kaiti’s artworks that feature nature, what comes to mind is the pure tranquillity of nature rather than its “movement”, such as the rustling of trees, the vibrations in the air and the cries of animals. Even if you have never been to the place depicted in the artwork, there is a sense of *déjà vu*, as if his artwork is calling on our desire to be in nature, a desire which may be deep within us.

Born in Yokohama and raised in Kobe, Kaiti intensively studied the Japanese perspective of nature in the mountains of Nagano, which he visited frequently during his time as a student in the Tokyo Fine Arts School. He continued to visit even after his graduation, describing the mountains as “the hometown that raised my work.”

The sensitive young Kaiti felt more comfortable in nature rather than in the company of people. It was not the glittering parts of nature that boasted of vitality with its brilliantly shining sun, but rather the grave, solemn and quiet parts of nature that he was attracted to. This may have been why he chose to study in Berlin in the north of Europe, instead of Paris, a city where many other artists of that time longed to visit. Subsequently, he was influenced by Western art and took inspiration from the scenery that he encountered during his travels in Europe.

In 1962 when Kaiti was 54, he travelled around Northern Europe, ending up in the small town of Ribe in the Jutland region of Denmark. There, he felt the idea of the landscape that he had been looking for came into being and appeared in front of him. He said, “I found something that resonated with my roots.”

Kaii was the kind of artist who was always on the road when he made paintings, and once said “Sometimes you may be a foreigner in your heart even in your hometown. But I came to this Scandinavian forest and found peace and calm.”

Where is the hometown where you feel a sense of peace and calm?

As time passed and the Meiji era turned into the Heisei era, Kaii often expressed a sad resentment towards modern civilisation. In his late 50s, he produced a series of works on Kyoto. This came from the desperation to preserve the scenes in their state at the time. Kaii felt that if he did not capture the scene at the time, it would soon be marred by a line-up of cheap buildings, blocking out the view of the mountains, and old Kyoto would disappear.

Long after Kaii’s death in 1999, the destruction of nature and global warming has continued all over the world, and the landscape of the city of Kyoto has gradually changed. How would he feel about this if he were still alive today?

Kaii had a deep knowledge of literary works and music, and often quoted the following statement by Goethe: “Those who have never eaten bread in tears, those who have never cried in bed for nights full of hardship, you do not know the powers of heaven.”

In his adolescence, he experienced both his parents’ deaths, as well as the horrors of war. As he possessed a sensitive nature, this may have resulted in a conflict in his relationships. Perhaps it was because he overcame so many hardships before creating these artworks, that we find a sense of comfort in them, as if we are being wrapped up in something deeper and larger than all of us.

Kaii took a liking to the music of Beethoven and Schubert in his youth, but in his later years he moved on to Mozart. Why don't you try admiring Kaii's artworks while playing your favourite classical tune in your head, and thinking about the hometown where you can feel peaceful and calm?

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