

# Nihonga (Japanese Painting): How Can It Be Defined?

By Kurosawa Tsuneo

A debate is now firing up in Japanese art circles over the definition of *Nihonga* or Japanese painting. It is generally understood that *Nihonga* portrays beautiful scenery like Mt. Fuji, women in kimonos or historic scenes using traditional techniques. Lately, however, its definition is becoming less clear with an increasing number of artists using oils instead of traditional pigments to depict traditional Japanese motifs known as *kacho-fugetsu* or creating abstract pictures with traditional materials and techniques.

## Rigid Distinction

In Japan, painting is categorized into *Nihonga* and *Yoga* (Western painting). This distinction has long been taken for granted. Students of elementary and junior high schools are taught the distinction in art classes and art colleges have separate *Nihonga* and *Yoga* courses, teaching different techniques.

Nation-wide groups of artists make it a rule to hold exhibitions of their new works every spring and autumn, with *Nihonga* and *Yoga* exhibited separately.

Why is painting distinguished into *Nihonga* and *Yoga* in this country? In fact, there is no clear definition between them. However, it has been the general understanding in the art world that whereas *Yoga* are oil-on-canvas paintings, *Nihonga* are painted on Japanese *washi*-paper or silk cloth with traditional pigments known as *iwaenogu* or with black ink.

## Various Methods

Several years ago, there was an incident which confused the art world regarding the definition of *Nihonga*. At an exhibition, works painted with acrylic colors or oil were nominated for a prestigious art prize considered as the gateway to success for young artists in their career. The use of such materials runs counter to the tradition of using *iwaenogu*; can we really call them *Nihonga*?

Things are not so simple. In the world of *Nihonga* these days, the use of artificial *iwaenogu* or crushed colored glass, instead of costly natural *iwaenogu*, has become a mainstream practice. If these new colors are recognized as a *Nihonga* painting material, why not acrylic colors? This question left the selectors of the exhibition at a loss. There had already been *Nihonga* artists who painted on canvas, not on paper or silk cloth, with authentic natural *iwaenogu*, and categorizing these works is a complicated task. Are they *Nihonga*, *Yoga* or contemporary art?

## Are Nihonga's Days Numbered?

The incident prompted exhibitions in various museums and symposiums to rethink the definition of *Nihonga*, which revealed the fact that the word "Nihonga" did not exist before the Meiji era and was a new concept introduced to counter Western arts.

Japanese culture was strongly influenced by Western culture during the abrupt modernization after the Meiji Restoration, and art was no exception. When Japanese artists, who studied Western painting in France and other European countries, returned and started disseminating their techniques, those who stuck with traditional techniques found themselves on the verge of oblivion and established the *Nihonga* school to forestall Western influence.

Lately, art specialists note that painting techniques using natural *iwaenogu* on paper or silk cloth, which had been considered the key element of *Nihonga*, are not particular to Japan: in fact, they originated in China and spread to Japan and other East Asian countries. Some experts now argue that the term *Nihonga* should be abandoned and that all paintings should be treated in the same way.

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Photo: Yamatane Museum of Art



Senju Hiroshi, a famous painter's modern *Nihonga* "Nampo (The South)," 1989

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