

Invisible air: How it is made visible in Japanese art

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abstract

The creation of a sense of air surrounding nature motifs is the essential point of view in Japanese art. This paper deals with the visibility of air in Japanese landscape paintings, both in the past and in contemporary times.

Hasegawa Tōhaku (1539-1610) in the Momoyama period and Maruyama Ōkyo (1733-1795) in the Edo period are not exceptions to this trend. Tōhaku's *Seasonal Willow* inspires the viewers to feel that the actual theme of the painting is the invisible wind swaying the leaves. Ōkyo's ink screen painting of *Bamboo in Wind and Rain* attempts to visualize the windy and rainy flow of air through the depiction of bamboos.

This artistic urge for visible-invisible pictorial space is reflected in contemporary art. Naitō Rei (1961-), an artist who describes herself as a "space" artist, also speaks of the beauty of wind in movement. Her masterpiece entitled *Matrix* is the image of spring with moving water drops and pools of water on earth changing their form through the use of technologically created wind. Senju Hiroshi (1958-) concentrates on his series of waterfalls, the beloved motifs seen traditionally. The dynamic splitting of water as a mythological mist of divinity, simultaneously appealing to the viewer's physical senses, is created by the interactivity of visible and invisible worlds that Japanese artists sought for generations.

My research lies in the traditional feature in Japanese art particularly on the sensibility and senses introduced to the pictorial space. In this article, I would like to focus on the invisible blankness—*yohaku* 余白 — as an important factor in Japanese paintings, both for expression and content.

The suggestive blankness has been a facet of Japanese ink painting for centuries, as can be observed in *Rainy-weather Bamboo and Windy-weather Bamboo* 雨竹風竹図 (1776) by Maruyama Ōkyo 円山応挙 (fig. 1) in the Edo period.



Fig. 1 Maruyama Ōkyo *Rainy-weather Bamboo and Windy-weather Bamboo*, 1776, pair of six panel screen, ink on paper, 160.5 x 354.0 cm each, Enkou-ji, Kyoto (Maruyama Ōkyo, 1996).

According to Hoshino Suzu,

[these painted bamboos are] unified by air not to be seen. To understand the painting, it is important to find what the invisible part of the painting describes. In the case of Ōkyo, as the subject of fullness of air is difficult to grasp by eyesight, it is expressed by rain and wind.¹

According to Hoshino's interpretation, *yohaku* is not only related to the lyrical or poetical sentiment, but relates to visualizing air.

As seen in Ōkyo's above-mentioned piece, this tradition is developed mainly by ink paintings. In the well-known screen paintings, *Pine Trees* 松林図 by Hasegawa Tōhaku 長谷川等伯 (fig. 2) or *Pine and Plum by Moonlight* 月下溪流図 by Kaihō

Yūshō 海北友松 (fig. 3) from the Momoyama period (1573–1615), both enshrouded in mist, we see the dim silhouette by pale morning or the moonlight over a stream. A cool touch of mist in *Pine Trees* or a faint fragrance from the white plum blossoms in the left wing of *Pine and Plum by Moonlight*: these poetic and lyrical expressions are considered as effects of *yohaku*, the blankness, the invisible margin.

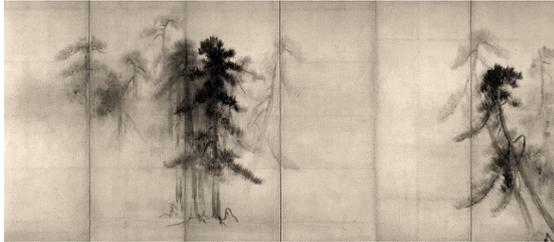


Fig. 2 Hasegawa Tōhaku *Pine Trees* (right-hand screen) 16th century, pair of six panel screen, ink on paper, 155.0 x 346.8 cm each, Tokyo National Museum (<http://www.emuseum.jp/>).

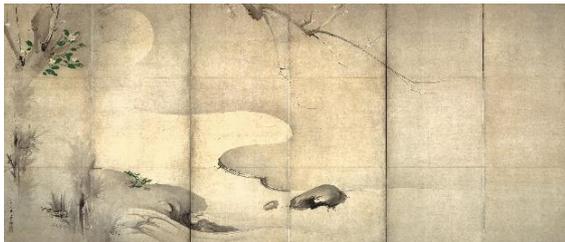


Fig. 3 Kaihō Yūshō *Pine and Plum by Moonlight* (left-hand screen) 16th century, pair of six panel screen, ink and slight color on paper, 168.91 x 353.06 cm each, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (<https://art.nelson-atkins.org/collections>).

Referring to the historical background of *yohaku*, the ink paintings of Chinese Zen monks of Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), particularly those of Muqi 牧谿 (fig. 4) and Yujian 玉澗 (fig. 5), were handled as the most valuable treasure. To



Fig. 4 Mu Qi *Fishing Village in the Evening Glow*, 13th century, ink on paper, 33.0 x 112.6 cm, Nezu Museum (<http://www.nezu-muse.or.jp/jp/collection/>).

own these paintings symbolized the high status of Daimyo, Japanese feudal lords during the Muromachi period (1338–1573) under Shogun Asikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義満 (1358–1408). They functioned as the model of Japanese ink paintings for

centuries, as seen in Yujian's splash ink technique, in Sesshū Tōyō's 雪舟等楊 *Splashed Ink Landscapes* (*Haboku Sansui*, 破墨山水, 1495, fig. 6).



Fig. 5 Yujian *Mountain Market in Clearing Mist* 13th century, ink on paper, 33.1 x 82.8 cm, Idemitsu Museum of Art (<http://idemitsu-museum.or.jp/collection/painting/>).



Fig. 6 Sesshū Tōyō *Splashed Ink Landscapes* (detail), 1495, ink on paper, 148.9 x 32.7cm, Tokyo National Museum (<http://www.emuseum.jp/>).

What is specific about the Japanese reception of Chinese ink painting was the preference of *yohaku*. Art historian Minamoto Toyomune points out:

The view of the world and life was dominated by Zen Buddhism during the Muromachi period, with the deepest spiritual roots in China. Art was, so to speak, in principally China. That is the reason, the ink painting during this period had the overwhelming power. Nevertheless, the appreciation in Japan did not just blindly accept imported artworks. For example the most highly valued Muqi and Yujian were largely ignored in China—in the inventory of prominent collectors listed in *Pei-wen-zhai-shu-hua-pu* 佩文齋書畫譜 (1705–1708, edited by imperial order of Kangxi Emperor, Qing

dynasty, 1644–1911) the name of Yujin was not mentioned and that of Muqi was mentioned only once or twice, that should tell the appreciation of our country did not lack originality.²

Japanese reception of *yohaku* was due to the natural phenomena of light and air, or the poetic sentiment and the lingering sensation it creates. This method of *yohaku* developed further as the principle style in the Momoyama period. In the book of Tōhaku's art theory, *Tōhaku gasetu* 等伯画説, written by a Buddhist priest Nittū 日通 in c.1592, the painter categorizes *Evening Bell from Mist-Shrouded Temple* (*Enji banshvō zu* 煙寺晚鐘 fig. 7) and *Night Rain* (*Shōshō ya'u* 瀟湘夜雨), the beloved Chinese landscape series of *The Eight Views of Xiaoxiang* (*Shōsho hakkei* 瀟湘八景), as 'tranquil painting, *shizuka naru e* しづかなる絵.' He further notes that the paintings with the depiction of rain and moon is also counted as such. Therefore, natural phenomena of rain, moon, snow, and wind were key motifs for his ideal painting that is shown as in *Pine Trees*.



Fig. 7 Mu Qi *Evening Bell from Mist-Shrouded Temple* [detail], 13th Century, ink on paper, 32.8 x 104.2 cm, Hatakeyama Memorial Museum of Fine Art (<https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/>).



Fig. 8 Hasegawa Tōhaku *Seasonal Willow*, 16th century, pair of six panel screens, ink and color on gold-foiled paper, each 149.0 x 344.0 cm, private collection (<http://www.odawara-af.com/ja/>)

If we recognize how these screen paintings were actually viewed, the depth into pictorial space is created through folding the screen in zigzag form, giving three-dimensional effect of inviting viewers. The mist in *Pine Trees* (fig. 2) and in *Seasonal Willow* (*Shiki yanagi zu* 四季柳図 fig. 8), the golden *yohaku* with a more decorative character, the spring wind is blowing through the willow gently, simultaneously touching the viewer.

It is no wonder that Tōhaku intentionally utilized the paulownia crest (*kirimon* 桐紋) of the already printed sliding screens, in his landscape painting (fig. 9) in Kōdai-ji Entoku-in 高台寺圓徳院. The snowfall gives us not only the poetic atmosphere, but also the depth of the pictorial space. The patterned crest, using mica subtracted from shells, glitters with the light's reflection, giving a vivid expression to the snow.



Fig. 9 Hasegawa Tōhaku *Landscape*, 16th Century, thirty-two sliding door panels, color on paper, 177.0 x 116.0 cm each, Entoku-in, Kyoto (Kuroda 2013, p. 17).

It is worth re-examining the Japanese aesthetics and appreciation of art. For the Buddha statues from the latter Heian period (794–1185), the perspective of the totality of air and atmosphere was considered, not only for the statues themselves but also for the beauty of the spaces where they are placed, particularly the moonlight and its reflection on the water. According to Musaka Akira's research on *kugyō nikki* 公卿日記 (the diaries of court nobles), in parallel to this appreciation style, the words such as *yūbi* 優美 (grace), *birei* 美麗 (beautiful) replaced the religious descriptions of Buddha statues from the mid-11th century.³

Eiga Monogatari 栄花（栄華）物語 (*The Tale of Flowering Fortune*), which consists of 40 volumes, whose principal part of 30 volumes were written ca. 1033, is one of the important texts of this time for the history of manners and customs, and for the appreciation of art. The tale is presumably written by a court lady, Akazomemon 赤染衛門, who served the wife of the man in power, Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1028).

In this tale, an aesthetic viewpoint is written; the beauty of the Buddha statue was concerned not only with the artwork itself, but also with natural phenomena.

The Buddha statue reflected on the pond reappears again as the figure of Buddha, unlimitedly noble. (Chapter *Tamonokazari* たまのかざり, vol. 29–10)

The moon shines all over, and the Buddha statue is lit by the votive light in the enshrinement hall. (Chapter *Omugaku* おむがく, vol. 17–20)

The divine figure of Buddha is reflected on water surface, so as the enshrinement hall, scripture house, and bell tower. It appears to us as a world of Buddha. (Chapter *Omugaku*, vol. 17–10)⁴

The sceneries were depicted based on the *Hōjōji* Temple 法成寺. The temple no longer exists; however, the *Byōdōin* 平等院 (fig. 10) constructed by his son Fujiwara no Yorimichi 藤原頼通 (992–1358) in 1052 reminds us exactly of these scenes. The *Amitabha* in the Phoenix Hall (1053) is the representative work of the sculptor *Jōchō* 定朝 (died 1057), who established the Japanese classic style of Buddha sculptures with the facial mildness

in spiritual quietness. The votive light and moonshine were definitely important here. There are eight mirrors of the canopy, and the mirrors hanging from the ceiling are as many as sixty-six. These give effective light to create the Buddha statue's reflection on the water. Also, it is known that the waves of the pond were generated by the spring water behind the temple. Its stream hits the stones of the artificial sand beach to create the wave design, similar to the pattern of imaginary flowers (*hōsōge* 宝相華, fig. 11) of Buddhist paradise. As we see from this example, the natural elements such as water and light functions as the medium to create such impressive artistic designs.



Fig. 10 *Byōdō-in*, 1052, Kyoto (<https://benesse.jp/contents/history/byoudouin/>).



Fig. 11 *Sultra Box decorated with Hōsōge arabesques*, 1031, line engraving, bronze, 29.0 x 11.8 x 8.0 cm, Enryaku-ji, Shiga (*Ōchō Emaki*, 2014, p.146)

Being present in the pictorial space, for an artist or viewer, seems important for expressing reality in Japanese paintings. This characteristic is also seen in the beloved motif of waterfalls. Great *Waterfall* (*Daibakufuzu* 大瀑布図) painted by Ōkyo in 1772 (fig. 12), measuring 3.63 m in height and 1.45 m in width has different viewpoints to make the eyes move, as if they are actually seeing the waterfall: the pine tree branches at the top is looked up from beneath, and the protruding rock is viewed horizontally while the basin at the bottom is viewed from above.



Fig. 12, 13 Maruyama Ōkyo
Great Waterfall
1772, ink and slight
color on paper, 362.8
x 144.5 cm,
Shokoku-ji, Kyoto
(*Maruyama Ōkyo*, 1996; *Water in Life*, 2007, p.48)



Green Maple and Waterfall
1787, color on paper,
177.7 x 92.0 cm,
Suntory Museum of Art
Tokyo

The *Green Maple and Waterfall* (*Seifū bakufuzu* 青楓瀑布図, 1787, fig. 13) also painted by Ōkyo gives us not only the close look at the object, but also the physical reality of the moistness and coolness. Katsushika Hokusai (葛飾北斎 1760–1849)'s *Yōrō Waterfall in Mino Province* (*Mino no kuni Yōrō no taki* 美濃ノ国養老ノ瀧 fig. 14) the splash of water hitting the ground, shows that people

are not only amazed by the dynamism of the waterfall, but also by feeling the air that reaches viewers through the integration of people with the pictorial space. This transition between senses is common to the ink painting, whose invisible blankness functions in a similar context.



Fig. 14 Katsushika Hokusai *Yōrō Falls in Mino Province*, c.1833, color woodblock print, 37.0 x 26.0 cm (*Shikaku no Majutsushi Hokusai* 2016, p. 20).

Senju Hiroshi 千住博 painted a series of 77 falls on the *fusuma* 襖, sliding doors for the Jukōin-betsuin of the Daitoku-ji temple 大徳寺 in 2002. Daitoku-ji was established at the end of the Kamakura period (1185–1333), in 14th century, and was known as one of the major Zen temples in Kyoto and also as the treasure house of ink paintings from the Muromachi to the Edo period (1605–1968)

Senju's *Waterfall* (*Taki* 滝, 2002, fig. 15) was painted in ink, dedicated to Daitoku-ji's historical

contribution to ink paintings. 440 years after *Flowers and Birds of Four Seasons* 四季花鳥図 (1566, fig. 16) of Kanō Eitoku 狩野永徳 in Jukōin 聚光院 sub temple of the Daitoku-ji, the contemporary ink painting was installed to recognize the continuity of Japanese tradition and the role it played in Japanese culture.

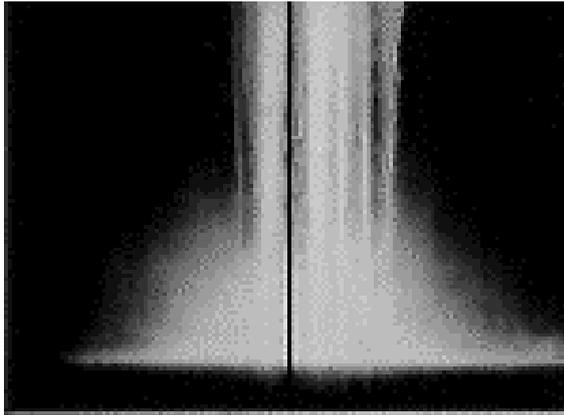


Fig. 15 Senju Hiroshi, *Waterfall*, 2003, ink and color on paper, Jukōin-Betsuin, Daitoku-ji, Ito (Senju Hiroshi 2007, p. 196).



Fig. 16 *Flowers and Birds of Four Seasons*, 1566, ink on paper, 175.5 x 142.5 cm each, Jukō-in, Daitoku-ji, Kyoto (<https://souda-kyoto.jp/other/jukoin.html>).

It is remarkable to point out that Senju also emphasizes *yohaku*:

It was the turnover of the space concept, that the blankness—*yohaku*—was most important in Japanese art, whereas in Western Europe it was merely the space not painted [...] ink painting is to face the natural phenomena [...] I began by listening carefully. I am trying to discover which way the waterfall wants to flow, which form it is trying to take.⁵

Senju's *Waterfall*, 1995 was awarded the Honorable Mention in the 48th Venice Biennale for expressing a “meditative world of nature and the fluctuations of Japan’s traditional culture.”⁶ This “fluctuation” of a waterfall by the dynamic splitting of water as a mythological mist of divinity, appealing to the viewer’s physical senses, is created by the interactivity of visible and invisible worlds that Japanese artists sought for generations. At the exhibition in Singapore, his *Waterfall* was commented as follows:

Evoking a deep sense of calm, his waterfalls conjure not just the appearance of rushing water, but also its sound, smell and feel.⁷

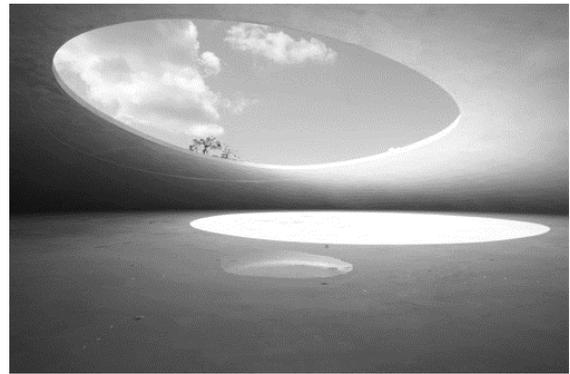


Fig. 17 Naitō Rei, Nishizawa Ryūe, *Matrix*, 2010, (<http://benesse-artsite.jp/art/teshima-artmuseum.html>); *Teshima Art Museum Handbook* 2011, p. 18).

Another Japanese contemporary artist connected to the same theme is Naitō Rei 内藤礼. In collaboration with the architect Nishizasa Ryūe

西沢立衛, Naitō created the installation of a cave-like space *Matrix* (*bokei* 母型, fig. 17), in 2010, in Teshima Island in the Seto Inland Sea. The water drops spring out from the ground water, slowly moving on the gentle slope, gather and separate to form and reform the various shapes, creating a spring at the end. It seems that the water drops have their own lives, growing and fading out. This movement is technically made possible by controlling the amount of water flowing in and out from almost 200 tiny holes and by the water repellent applied to the ground.

It is the artistic space of five senses. The flowing water drops make a subtle sound accompanied with the changing wind and light from the ceiling, with an opening to nature. Naitō reminds us that the essence of her work is:

[...] the movement of water and blow of wind, to feel anima in such water and wind, and see the people standing there as I am.⁸

She continues in another interview:

I have hanged the ribbons dyed with royal purple in the garden of Sakushima on a kite string as we hang laundries. The ribbon sways so freely in the wind. Ribbon is being dyed with purple extracted from shellfish for artistic process, however, how beautiful it is to see something swaying in the wind. Ununderstandable beauty.⁹

Naitō's above-cited installation titled *Sprit* (*Seirei* 精霊, 2006, fig. 18) expresses the spiritual attitude towards nature.



Fig. 18 Naitō Rei, *Spirit*, 2006, Ribbons dyed with royal purple, Sakujima Benten Salon, Aichi (Naitō, Nakamura 2002, p. 84).

Naitō creates the space of tranquility and spirituality, where light and wind is entrapped, unified with the people seeing and feeling the space. *Matrix*, the title she continues to use for her installation work, derives from her idea that,

[...] through feminality and maternity, or through wind and light, my thought concentrates on <the lives of earth>.¹⁰

Sasaki Kenichi points out in his book *Japanese Sensibility* (*Nihonteki kansei* 日本的感性),

What I noticed the difference between the West and Japan in appreciating flowers. Tulip or Rose that European people favor, or the bouquet in the flower vase, has the distinctive character of the object of seeing, thus becomes the subject of the still painting. However, cherry blossoms we favor, as an example of flower tunnel, it is not the object to see, but to sense the expanse that envelop us.¹¹

The fragmental features and approach of

Cherry Blossoms (Sakurazu 桜図, fig. 19) painted by Hasegawa Kyūzō 長谷川久蔵 in the temple Chishaku-in 智積院, Kyoto, is a visual image where this ‘expanse’ can be sensed with golden *yohaku*.



Fig. 19 Hasegawa Kyūzō *Cherry Blossoms*, 1592, color on gold-foiled paper, Chishaku-in, Kyoto (Kuroda, 2014, p.54)

Regarding his *Waterfall*, Senju mentions, By pouring paint from top to bottom, I have been painting not the illusion of the waterfall, but creating the waterfall itself.¹² I might be trying to recover the fundamental reality that contemporary art has left behind.¹³

This was the reality, the invisible air, that Japanese art has attempted to visualize for centuries.

Notes

- 1) *Maruyama Ōkyo* 1996.
- 2) *Tōhaku*, 1964.
- 3) Musaka 1994, p.181–187.
- 4) Matsumura 1987, vol. 4, p. 275, 310, vol. 6, p. 38.
- 5) Senju 2002.
- 6) Senju 2007, p. 232.
- 7) *Day falls/Night falls*, 2015
(http://www.hiroshisenju.com/exhibitions/day-falls-night-falls_1), 10/25/2019.
- 8) Naitō 2013, p. 184f.
- 9) Naitō/Nakamura 2002, p. 82.
- 10) Naitō 2013, p. 167.
- 11) Sasaki 2010, p. 253f.
- 12) *Out of Nature: Cliffs and Falling Water*, 2009
(<http://www.hiroshisenju.com/exhibitions/out-of-nature-cliffs-and-falling-water>), 10/25/2019
- 13) Senju 2002.

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Shikaku no Majutushi Hokusai, Tōkyō: Shōgakukan, 2016.

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Water in Life, exh. cat., Suntory Museum of Art, 2007.