
Modernism in *Sho* as Seen Through the Work of Shinoda Tōkō:

Avant-Garde Japanese Calligraphy as a Modern Artistic Endeavor

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abstract

Shinoda Tōkō is widely known for her abstract paintings, but she started her artistic career as a *sho* artist. This paper considers Shinoda's early work as manifestations of modernism in *sho* based on the concept of *shoga itchi*, which means "calligraphy and painting are one". The two art forms were equally respected under this concept before the Meiji government officially excluded *sho* from its newly adopted fine arts system modeled on that of the West. *Sho* has since remained marginalized within Japanese culture. However, as Japan modernized, some *sho* artists revisited *sho* and explored its potential as a modern art form. Their work came to be known as avant-garde *sho* after WWII. This paper focuses mainly on Shinoda's work and writings from the 1950s to examine how she incorporated traditional techniques and sensibilities in developing her modern *sho* and discusses how her work was received.

Introduction

Shinoda Tōkō (篠田桃紅, 1913–) is a Japanese artist who is widely recognized for her abstract ink-wash paintings (水墨画 *suibokuga*). Shinoda did not begin her career in the art field, however; she was originally a *sho* (書, calligraphy) artist. This paper offers an analysis of her early work while focusing on the concept of *shoga itchi* (書画一致), which means "calligraphy and painting are one". Under this concept, *sho* and *ga* (画, painting) were traditionally considered to be equal in the broad spectrum of the arts in East Asian cultures. However, in the late 19th century, Japan, despite being part of

the East Asian cultural sphere, implemented a policy that resulted in *shoga bunri* (書画分離), which means "the separation of calligraphy and painting". This has left *sho* marginalized within the official canon of Japanese culture to this day.

Modern art followed different paths of development in Japan and in the West. In the West, modern art began as a movement to reexplore the nature of painting by departing from the strict rules and conventions taught in the academies. In contrast, in Japan, it began when the government adopted a new fine arts system around the same time during the Meiji era (1868–1912) when it was introducing Western scientific technology with the aim of

transforming Japan into a modern state. “Modern art” in Japan was hence born from a policy reform implemented by the establishment at a time when the country was undergoing “modernization”, which was essentially synonymous with “Westernization”. The Meiji government selectively redefined the scope of what qualified as “art”, and it made the decision not to include *sho*. That marked the moment of *shoga bunri*, where the traditional artistic genre of *shoga* (書画, calligraphy painting) was split into *sho* and *ga*. *Ga* was placed at the center of the modern art system, but *sho*, having been dismissed as an artistic genre, was left out of the new art policies, and it found itself relegated to an undefined, marginal position. The critical study of *sho* today can help reveal characteristics of the things that were accepted as Japanese modern art and add to the discourse on things that were excluded from it. It should be noted that this research was conducted with a conscious awareness of the recent shift in world art history research, which is focusing on reevaluating the vital roles that artistic practices of non-Western contexts have played in the development of various strains of modernism.

As Japan continued to modernize into the early 20th century and printing technology became more widely available, *sho* brushes gradually fell out of everyday use. It was around that time that works of *sho* began to appear in exhibitions and a distinction came to be drawn between *sho* made for practical use and *sho* made for display. Some early Showa era *sho* artists, such as Ueda Sōkyū (上田桑鳩, 1899–1968), revisited *sho* as an art form, and a movement took shape to explore *sho*’s possibilities for modern artistic expression. Their work came to be recognized as avant-garde *sho* (前衛書 *zen’ei sho*) after the Second World War. Avant-garde *sho* was essentially a movement that questioned what

sho was and what it could be amidst the drastic societal changes brought on by modernization. Other avant-garde *sho* artists who were active during the postwar period include Morita Shiryū (森田子龍, 1912–1998), who published a magazine titled *Bokubi* (墨美, lit. “The Beauty of Ink”) and introduced *sho* overseas; Inoue Yūichi (井上有一, 1916–1985), who formed a group with Morita called the Bokujinkai (墨人会, lit. “The Ink-People Group”); and Hidai Nankoku (比田井南谷, 1912–1999), who, like Shinoda, is known in the art world for taking his activities overseas to the US.

The focus of this research has been on examining the activities of such avant-garde postwar *sho* artists as manifestations of modernism in *sho*, which questioned the meaning of *sho* and searched for new expressions appropriate for the times. The aim of this research is to contribute to the discourse on the as-yet unevaluated genre of avant-garde *sho* from a historical standpoint. For the purposes of this paper, “modernism in *sho*” can be loosely defined as “a movement to develop new expressions in *sho* appropriate for the age through critically examining classical conventions whilst being sensitive to the expressive properties of the medium, but not being overly concerned with the legibility and meaning of characters”. This paper examines this notion of modernism in *sho* through looking at Shinoda’s work and activities mainly from the 1950s while keeping in mind the concept of *shoga itchi* as a keyword.

1. Shinoda’s early incorporation of ink-wash painting techniques into *sho*: Reemergence of *shoga itchi* in a modernized Japan

Shinoda Tōkō was born in Dalian in 1913 and moved to Tokyo in the following year. She was

initially active in the *shodan* (書壇, the Japanese calligraphic society), and she even served on the juries of public competitions. However, she later distanced herself from the *shodan* and traveled to the US in 1956. When she returned to Japan, she became active in the art field as a painter mainly of abstract ink-wash paintings, and she also went on to collaborate on architectural projects and publications.

This section provides an analysis of her early work that was shown in the retrospective titled *Shinoda Tōkō: Things Transient—Colors of Sumi, Forms of the Mind* (篠田桃紅 とどめ得ぬもの 墨のいろ 心のかたち 展 *Shinoda Tōkō: Todomeenu mono—Sumi no iro, kokoro no katachi*), which was held at the Ueda City Museum of Art in 2018. Due to the fact that *sho* is seen as a separate and marginal field to art in Japan today, attention given to Shinoda's work tends to only be directed at her artistic work while her earlier work with *sho* is overlooked. However, by respecting the concept of *shoga itchi*, it becomes easier to appreciate the continuity in how Shinoda used the ink-wash painting technique of *nijimi* (滲み, bleeding) in her early work and later re-applied it to her work with abstraction.

The first piece (Fig. 1), titled *Anthology* (詩花 *shika*, lit. "Poem Flower"), is one of Shinoda's earliest works. It is composed of the characters *hana*

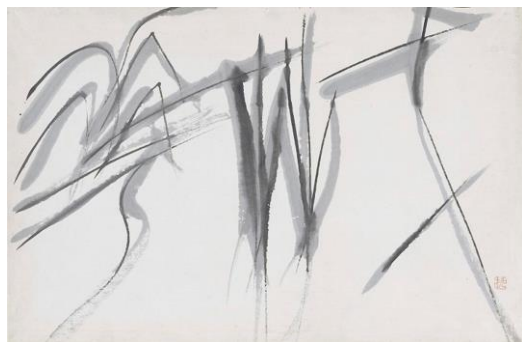


Figure 1. Shinoda Tōkō, *Anthology*, 1948. Ink on paper. 60×83 cm. Collection of Kōeki Zaidanhojin Gifu Gendaibijutsu Zaidan.

(華, flower), *kusa* (草, grass), and *hoko* (戈, dagger-axe), which are written with overlapping strokes of light and dark ink. *Nijimi* can be seen where the strokes overlap. In the first stroke of the character *hoko* written with the lighter ink, there is a large area of *nijimi* that flows to the right from where the stroke overlaps with the second stroke of the same character written in darker ink (Fig. 2). The extent of the *nijimi*



Figure 2. Detail of the character *hoko* in *Anthology*.

differs depending on the amount of light and dark ink used. For example, there is not much *nijimi* where the horizontal strokes of the character *hana* overlap (Fig. 3), but there is a lot of *nijimi* along the first stroke of the character *kusa* (Fig. 4). This piece can be described as a work of *sho* that incorporates the

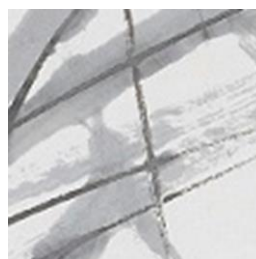


Figure 3. Detail of the character *hana* in *Anthology*.

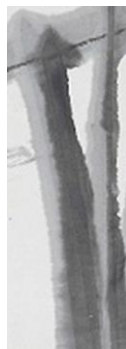


Figure 4. Detail of the character *kusa* in *Anthology*.

ink-wash painting technique of combining ink of different concentrations, and it breaks from both the conventions of classical *sho* and practical *sho*, where characters are written in an orderly and legible way. One can thus understand it as a visual study focused not on

writing the characters but on *drawing* them. In other words, the depicted characters have neither been written for the purpose of communicating semiotic content nor for practicing brushwork; rather, they have been drawn purely as graphical forms. As far as can be told by looking at the piece, the only break from traditional *sho* is made through the application of the ink-wash painting technique of *nijimi* that blurs the stroke edges, and no alterations appear to have been made to the characters themselves by, for example, adding extra strokes that should not be present.

The second piece (Fig. 5), titled *Bosom* (内側 *uchigawa*, lit. “Inner Side”), is another piece in which Shinoda makes use of different concentrations of ink and *nijimi*. While it is difficult to decipher any



Figure 5. Shinoda Tōkō, *Bosom*. Ink on paper. 70 × 45.6 cm. Collection of Nabeya Bi-tech Kaisha.

specific characters in it, the large areas of *nijimi* create a watery feel and give the impression that the piece is wet. These areas of *nijimi* have formed as a result of layering ink of different concentrations, and they have caused the stroke edges to become blurry

and ambiguous. For example, if one looks at the area where the strokes that begin at the middle right extend up toward the top center and start to loop back downward, one can see that there are three lines of different darkness. The bottom line, which has *nijimi* around it, is the darkest; the middle line is the lightest; and the top line is of medium darkness (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Detail of *Bosom*.

This merging of lines also occurs in the large area of *nijimi* that extends downward from the top left to the center of the piece. The lines have fused together through their *nijimi* to create a gradation of tones. This piece can therefore be understood as a study focused on how the *nijimi* created from overlapping lines of different darkness change and spread over time.

Nijimi occurs when ink comes into contact with paper. Tamechika Makoto (為近摩巨登), a *sho* expert who analyzed *nijimi*, inkstones, and paper using an electronic microscope, explains the phenomenon as follows:

Paper is made by laying down many layers of fine fibers, so there are countless imperceptible gaps between the fibers. Water that is dropped onto the paper's surface will therefore not only wet the surface fibers but also simultaneously penetrate these gaps and make its way into every nook and cranny inside the paper. The same is true if ink is used instead of water; ink will also spread across the paper's surface and seep into the

interior at the same time.¹⁾

Tamechika's experiments confirmed that ink concentration, paper type, and environmental temperature and humidity determine how *nijimi* occurs, and he observed how water that does not contain many ink particles, as in light ink, is particularly fluid. In other words, the degree to which *nijimi* spreads is determined not by how one handles their brush but by the ink and water's own temporal properties, which are affected by environmental factors such as temperature and humidity.

Traditionally, the use of *nijimi* in *sho* was considered unacceptable because it makes characters illegible. However, as Japan modernized and printing technology became more widely available, it became possible for anyone to represent characters clearly without any *nijimi*, and *sho* was released from its role as a means for writing neatly. That led value to be placed on the artistic aspects of *sho* once again. Shinoda's experiments with incorporating *nijimi* into *sho* can therefore be understood as attempts to reexamine *sho* under the concept of *shoga itchi* that was restored at that time.

2. Different receptions of *sho* in Japan and the US: Beyond categorizations of art

This section looks at documentary sources that shed light on how Shinoda thought about *sho* during the early period of her career when she made the previously discussed pieces and considers how her work was received. The following passage from her book from January 1954 offers insight into her thoughts:

In the same way that the present age seeks to

be liberated from the various outmoded conventions surrounding our lifestyle and spirit, the world of *shodō* (書道, lit. "the way of calligraphy"), too, is gaining acceptance as an art form fit for our times.²⁾

This confirms that Shinoda considered her new *sho* to be a modern art form of her time.

In her book, Shinoda discusses her new *sho* in relation to seasonal customs and modern living. For example, there is a photograph of her work used as décor in a Western-style room. She also incorporated her *sho* in everyday items such as tablecloths, handbags, and belts, applying the age-old Japanese aesthetic sensibility of seeing beauty in everyday things to the new modern lifestyle.

It should be noted, however, that Shinoda did not only advocate for new experimentation. In the book, she also emphasizes the importance of understanding the classical ways as a foundation for creating new expressions of beauty. In other words, her explorations with modern *sho* are grounded on a respect for classical practices.

Analyzing Shinoda's early work and writings based on the keyword of *shoga itchi* has revealed that, in the former, she drew characters as forms while using the traditional ink-wash painting technique of *nijimi*, and in the latter, she expressed an interest in applying traditional aesthetic sensibilities to modern life while also respecting classical *sho*. Shinoda thus achieved *shoga itchi* through reintroducing traditional aesthetic sensibilities into her time as a modern art form.

However, at the time when Shinoda was exploring this new *sho*, the *shodan* was growing more conservative, and it did not offer a setting for *sho* to be discussed as art.³⁾ This led Shinoda to leave Japan for the US, where she stayed to hold

exhibitions and develop work from 1956 to 1958. Though her US exhibitions were well received and shaped the foundations of the later phase of her career, she found the dry American climate to be ill-suited for making her work. She writes about this as follows:

The ground ink quickly becomes tacky, the lines dry up as soon as they are drawn, the dark ink becomes heavy like oil paint, and even the light ink dries faster than it can bleed. The sensitivity of the ink is considerably blunted, and its color is also dulled.

When the paper is rolled out, it makes a crackling sound, and even when laid down, it seems to float up and does not settle. The moisture needed to pull the ink was absent both in the paper and in the air.⁴⁾

Shinoda thus returned home, deciding that she should produce her work in Japan but show it in the US. While Japan had the humidity needed for her to make her work, the US offered a setting where she could present her work as art. The latter was the place where her artistic values that incorporated traditional aesthetic values but transcended the modern categorizations of art could thrive. After returning to Japan, Shinoda also expanded the scope of her activities domestically, such as by collaborating on architectural projects and producing pieces composed of letters and characters for newspapers and book covers. Such work can be seen as the fruits of Shinoda's sustained efforts to apply traditional aesthetic values to modern life. She managed to overcome the categorical divide that had placed *sho* outside the domain of art through taking an affirmative stance towards tradition.

Conclusion

How might Shinoda's modern *sho* be evaluated today based on our more diversified definition of "art" and the advancements that have been made in art research? The analysis of her work centered around the concept of *shoga itchi* confirms that Shinoda's stance of applying traditional aesthetic values to modern life should be understood as a critique of the Japanese modern art system that separated *sho* from art. When considering where Shinoda's work should be positioned within art history, one should recognize it as a body of artistic work that explored the art of her day and questioned the validity of the system even while being developed outside the Japanese art system.

Before ending, it is worth noting how art research is currently globalizing, as is apparent from the growing body of research on avant-garde *sho* being developed outside Japan. The modern period itself is being reevaluated in art history research around the world, and the art history landscape is undergoing a great transformation. Critique that has historically been biased towards Eurocentric perspectives is now shifting focus to the arts of the non-Western world, and genres that were previously marginalized in art research are also now being actively studied. Furthermore, the framework of art itself is being reconsidered to incorporate the viewpoints of the marginal arts. This emerging research, which is being referred to as "global art history", is premised on the understanding that different aesthetic sensibilities and art histories exist in different countries and regions, and it aims to rewrite art history through giving attention to the interactions and exchanges between different artistic cultures. The avant-garde *sho* that is discussed in this paper can also be considered as part of this work in

the sense that it, too, deals with the interaction and exchange of different artistic sensibilities. However, the current of academic research on world art history and global art history has still only just begun to gain momentum. How it will go on to be developed depends on the directions that researchers choose to take in the years ahead.

Notes

- 1) Tamechika, M. (2011) *Shodōyōshi to nijimi*. Mokujiisha, p. 16.
- 2) Shinoda, T. (1984) *Atarashii shodō jūnikagetsu*. Dogakusha, p. 2.
- 3) Mukai, A. (2018) Coming Closer and Coming Apart: Avant-garde Calligraphy and Abstract Painting in Postwar Japan—Through the Analysis of Morita Shiryu's Theory and Practice. In Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch and Annegret Bergmann (Ed.), *Transcultural Intertwinements in East Asian Art and Culture (1920s–1950s)* (pp.127-147). VDG als Imprint von arts + science Weimar GmbH.
- 4) Shinoda, T. (1976) *Iroha shijūhachimoji*. Yaraishoin, p. 111.

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