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**“Techniques of Japanese Traditional Art and
Possibilities of Painting in Contemporary Society”**

Tawaraya Sotatsu, Ogata Korin and Takashi Murakami

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This research is focused on the study of some particular characteristics of traditional Japanese painting, taking as a model, the painters Tawaraya Sotatsu and Ogata Korin. Both painters developed their painting into an aesthetic concept of decorativeness, which was a characteristic of the Rimpa School in Edo period (17th and 18th century) and their works will be examples to make an approximation of some distinctiveness of Japanese painting in general. Later, I will describe some of those “traditional elements” that we still find in the contemporary painter Takashi Murakami, who received a traditional instruction and today has the skill to work with a parallel vision, between tradition and innovation.

As the specialist in Japanese art Stephen Addis said: "*Words and explanations are not enough; arts comes alive through experience*"¹. I have included in this research a practice, in which I have proposed to incorporate some elements from traditional Japanese painting in my own work, as a way to understand “from inside” those compositional and thematic characteristics. I found in Japanese painting and mainly in Rimpa School a big interest and connection, even though this trend differs radically from the Western art I have learnt as a student of visual arts during the university in Chile. "...the new decorative school represented a return to native and more ancient traditions...now theme and handling proclaimed a taste in which foreign influence was almost forgotten and native sensibility was emphasized"²

It results interesting for me to study Sotatsu and Korin for many reasons, but mainly I would say that is because they were really eager to develop painting in many different ways and techniques, keeping the identity of Japanese art and creating works of such authority that generations of later artists relied on these artworks for instruction. In Korin's case, even the popularization of his designs and paintings through the inclusion of them in staff as kimonos, furniture, craftworks, etc, is admirable.

Japanese art has been influenced at various times by China, Korea and the West. However, the arts and crafts of Japan maintain a strong identity of their own. Some of its characteristics are found in: a particular way of composition; decorative elements; the use of few and specific colors; the representation of frequent themes; and the techniques that Japanese artists had use for their works of art. As an example of these particular elements that characterize Japanese traditional painting, we can observe the following works:



Fragment of *Poems of the 36 Immortal Poets over a painting of cranes*
By Tawaraya Sotatsu and Honami Koetsu. Handscroll (17th century) Edo period. Ink on decorated paper. Kyoto National Museum.

¹ Addiss, S. *How to look at Japanese art*. 1996. Published by Harry N. Abrams in New York, p.10.

² Treat Paine, R. and Soper, A. *The art and architecture of Japan*. 1981. Published by Yale University Press in New Haven; London, p. 213.

In this painting we have the combination of two different languages. On one hand, the representation of cranes through a grey-blue pigment (Sotatsu's work) and on the other, we have the calligraphy that contribute with a graphic element that grants contrast to the shades of the composition (Koetsu's work).

The composition of this piece can be divided in two parts. In the right middle, there is a big concentration of the figures that produce instability because it seems like the left side is lighter. The pattern in the representation of the cranes is repeated and also superimposed, but the direction of the cranes is always the same, so the energy of this painting is focused in an upward diagonal that gives the sense of movement. The calligraphy brings out a dynamic rhythm through the different gradations of the ink used in the text. *"Symmetry often implies rationality and timeless balance, while the asymmetry and open space of Japanese art can suggest emotion and sense of movement and change"*.³

Even though the background is not painted, the paper doesn't look like flat. Japanese painters simplified the models taken of the reality and used a few elements in their works to create a new universe in their paintings. With just some stains and the use of repeated flat figures they achieved to make a feeling of space. In this painting, the color of the paper is like the sky and we almost can feel the air that crosses the fly of those birds. This illusionism is completely different from the illusionism of western paintings. In these works we don't have a defined point of view or a volumetric representation of the figures but there is a construction of the space through levels that grants depth to the painting. In this work we can recognize three main levels. The first would be the calligraphy; the second would be the cranes, and the third, the color of the paper.

The use of a repeated pattern is associated with decoration. In decoration this repetition is necessary because most of the times the decorated object has another function, and we shouldn't lose the attention in this main function for looking the picture that is on it. So, we can say that the concept of decoration involves the search of beauty. In this case, a paper that serves to write a poem was decorated with cranes to make the work more beautiful.

With this example, we can realize that in Japanese art there isn't a big hierarchy in the artistic expressions as it is in western art, where the value of one or other work depends on the theme and the technique, and finally the function that this work has in the society. Decorativeness, craftworks or clothes designs have less prominence in the world of arts for "western way of thinking". In Japanese art *"there is a great respect for the natural material from which a work of art is created. In Japanese ceramics, the sense of the clay itself often determinates the beauty and character of the complete bowl, vase, or plate. In sculpture the quality of the wood, clay, or bronze is allowed to show through the carving or molding of the particular form. In painting, it remains clear that we are looking not only at the subject, but also at ink or colors on paper or silk"*.⁴ Every single creation of humans has a value and we should try to understand it in its own nature.

In Japan there is a strong conscience about the importance of nature. Japanese ancestors, with a traditional knowledge search to get a benefit from nature, but being very careful of not damaging it, and developed a way to have a reciprocal and dependent relation with it. With

³ Addiss, S. *How to look at Japanese art*. 1996. Published by Harry N. Abrams in New York, p.9.

⁴ *Ibíd.* p.10.

conscience of this value, Japanese people have developed a great respect for nature and nature has been inspiring Japanese art since the first paintings they produced, including in them: landscapes, flowers, animals, plants, rivers, mountains, trees in blossom, etc.

The following work is a good example of the important role that nature has in Japanese society. The painting is called Wind and Thunder Gods, and it was first painted by Tawaraya Sotatsu.



Wind and Thunder Gods.
By Tawaraya Sotatsu Edo Period (17th century). Pair of two fold screens, colors on gold, ground on paper. Ken'ninji, Kyoto.

But why is it so significant? There aren't flowers, trees or leaves like in most of Rimpa School paintings. Besides it, we have the representation of two powerful beings, but it is not less than the characterization of two natural phenomena that possess the power to cause terrible incidents and could be worse if they work together like in this painting.

*"Perhaps the earliest religion of a man consisted in the worship of those things which he feared and yet could not avert- as the wind, which, as tornado, overthrew his dwelling, uprooted the trees which gave him shelter, and destroyed his crops; the rain, which, when it fell in excessive quantities, produced floods and fire, which, when it got the mastery, became a veritable destroyer".*⁵ And Japanese people worshiped nature, too. They were in awe of its mysteries and appealed to its power and protection, believing that spirits or gods, called *kami*, were present in natural objects such as mountains, trees, rocks, and waterfalls. Many Japanese artists reflected their beliefs or religious tradition through this discipline that was considered spiritual and noble.

Turned circles of drums in Thunder god or a bag of wind in Wind god are elements taken from the Southeast Asia to characterize the abilities and powers of these natural phenomena. Sotatsu made his own creation of the gods incorporating these elements and giving to deities a sense of humour and a skilful representation. *"...humor and playfulness pervade much Japanese art". "...we are all regarded foolish and wise, good and bad, in equal measure, and Japanese art teaches us to laugh at ourselves so as not to feel superiors to all the other sentient beings with whom we share the earth".*⁶

Almost a century later, Ogata Korin, appears in the scenery of decorative painting. He descended from a samurai (warrior aristocrat) who had served under the Ashikaga rulers and

⁵ Dresser, C. *Traditional arts and crafts of Japan*. c. 1994. Edited by Dover Publications in New York, p. 327

⁶ Addiss, S. *How to look at Japanese art*. 1996. Published by Harry N. Abrams in New York, p. 8.

was related to a famous calligrapher and sword-smith, Hon`ami Kōetsu. Ogata family owned a number of objects made by Sotatsu and Koetsu, which Korin studied carefully and also influenced deeply his own works. As an example of this, we can see some similitude between Sotatsu's "Wind and Thunder Gods" and the following painting:



Red and White Plum Trees.
Ogata Korin. Edo period (18th century). Color, gold, and silver leaf on paper. MOA Museum of Art, Atami.

First, we can search some compositional elements. As Sotatsu's work, this painting has two main figures, one on the left and the other on the right. In this case, the figures are trees. The one on the right side has red flowers, a strong color in opposition to the white flowers of the left tree. In Sotatsu's painting, the color relation is marked on the skin color of the gods. Using gold on the background and dark ink and color on the figures, both artists provide a strong contrast to their paintings. But of course, those paintings have many other differences. Korin contributed to Japanese painting with sophisticated and decorative compositions. Again, the flatness of the background grants the illusion of deep space, even its flatness the curves and diagonal lines of the river create an atmosphere and distance between the trees and the end of the river.

Korin developed in his compositions a particular feature of Japanese painting: multiple perspectives and flatness. *"The trees seem to be viewed from the side, the water from above. The water recedes quickly into the middle-ground distance, suggesting depth, but the overlapping branches of the trees create sense of shallow space in the foreground"*.⁷

And today, in the 21st century, we still can find artists who had taken traditional Japanese concepts of composition and thematic. It's the case of one of the most prominent figures of contemporary Japanese art: Takashi Murakami, who had developed an interesting work that reveals singularities of Japanese society and at the same time accuse the direction of today's world culture. To reflect this, he invented the term "superflat", a concept that he explain as: *"the sensibility that has contribute to the construction of Japanese culture, as a world view, and show that it is an original concept that links the past with the present and the future"*⁸.

The valorization of nature in the Japanese culture which seems strongly developed in traditional paintings, is one of the aspects that has seemed to me most interesting because I think it is with no doubts, a great cultural value, furthermore, it's a cultural example of develop for other cultures to follow specially in nowadays, where the emphasis of societies is

⁷ Addiss, S. *How to look at Japanese art*. 1996. Published by Harry N. Abrams in New York, p. 70

⁸ Murakami, T. *Superflat (Catalogue)*. 2000. Published by MANDRA Publishing Co., Ltd. Tokyo, p. 5.

on industries, consumption and material goods, more than in keeping and appreciating natural goods. Let's take a look to the following works:



Tan Tan Bo Puking. By Takashi Murakami. 2002.
Acrylic on canvas, mounted on board.
Collection of Amalia Dayan and Adan Lindemann.



ZuZaZaZaZaZa. Takashi Murakami. 1994.
Acrylic on canvas, mounted on board.
Takahashi Collection.

The painting of the left could be analyzed as a critic of today's society, in which the big industry with its presentation of advertisements for publicity is covering our society of "flatness". Our environment that was one day surrounded by nature, is today upholstered by colorful and fluorescent propaganda. Nature is being replaced for the plastic, the artificial and the huge quantity of information. The objective of propaganda is that the observers can read as fast as possible the message, and what is useful for this is: colors, bright designs to capture our attention, big letters, etc. But what happens when the industry grows and grows and the competition between different products is everyday bigger? There it comes, the excess and the absurd. The first objective of catching the observer's attention is transformed in our blindness and obstruction. His work shows nostalgia for the loss of the environment that one day we started to destroy.

At the same time, the concept of "flatness" quotes Japanese traditional paintings in which it's a fundamental concept in the construction of them. Many of Murakami's works are also painted in screens alluding to the Japanese tradition of *nihonga* in which he was trained. Japanese traditional painting has reflected two opposite concepts of Japanese society: complexity and simplicity. This is why as an example, I put these Murakami's paintings together. The right painting with its red background can remind us to the flat gold backgrounds of Korin or Sotatsu's paintings, but now the flatness is absolute and the subject refers to the illustrations of Japanese cartoons.

The interest of Japanese society in nature is manifested in different activities, ceremonies, aesthetical values and even in being worried about the climate change that affects directly people's daily life. This valorization has influenced me strongly, making me be even more aware about the importance of nature for people and for the wellbeing of our planet. It seems to me that in nowadays society it becomes more and more difficult to place nature as the center of our concern, because economical interest has such a strong power that many times natural resources that our planet provides are not considered as a central priority, thus

destroying forests, hills or icebergs. This is how; I felt the need to locate nature as the theme of my painting and with it, reconsider nature as a topic of today's concern.

Besides, I used a technique that allow me to work in levels (like in Japanese compositions) but separating them physically, using three different surfaces. The first one is a transparent laminate surface in which I drew with a black marker part of the composition. Below it, there is a thin paper special for writing *shodo* (*kana*) in which I painted the second level using ink and water (like *suibokuga*). Later, the third level is made of a thick paper in which I made the main part of the composition using water color. At the same time, the three surfaces are slightly displaced, so that the different materials are easily recognizable and the composition turns confusing and more complex. After finishing every painting I matched them up to unify the different paintings in one big composition.

Many of the technical elements of these paintings has an origin in my last work at the University, in which I also separated my paintings in physical transparent levels using a combination between black lines and spontaneous stains of color painting. This is how it resulted coherent to me, to continue with this technique in the development of this research, in which I discovered a very similar construction in some Japanese paintings.



Nature`s Spectrum. By Valentina Arenas. 2008.
Ink, water color and marker on paper and laminate.

To understand Japanese painting in its fullness is probably a never-ending task, but I can arrive to the end of this year of research with the satisfaction of an approximation to the painting and culture of Japan and with a tremendous motivation to continue learning from the arts and society of such a rich country.

The works of Sotatsu, Korin and Murakami, in spite of the different periods of their activity, share a “Japanese touch”, a link between the artist's subjectivity and the strong context that surround them.

This year I have been immersed and touched by Japan through painting and people and I realized that there is one thing that we can never forget, the love for nature.