Higashiyama Kaii: The Gift of Landscapes

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What is scenery? We recognise scenery when we feel something pulling in our heart the moment a particular scene meets our eye.

—Higashiyama Kaii

Higashiyama Kaii dedicated his life to painting and referred to himself as a “landscape painter.” Kaii’s paintings, however, were more than mere depictions of scenery. As he had alluded to above, his works moved and won over people’s hearts. Known as the “people’s landscape painter,” Kaii is a renowned artist of important national and global acclaim.

Born in Yokohama city, Kaii showed great interest in art as a child and often spent his days drawing in his room. With the approval of his father in 1926, he enrolled at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (now Tokyo University of the Arts or Geidai) on the condition that he would specialise in nihonga.

Nihonga and the Crisis of Japanese Painting

Nihonga (日本画) or Japanese-style painting is a term that came to be in use during the Meiji period (1899–1912). Its literal translation means “pictures of Japan” and essentially refers to all painting based on Japan’s past pictorial traditions. Nihonga is a continuation of the techniques and conventions seen in opulent decorative folding screens, lyrical flower-and-bird hanging scrolls to monochromatic ink paintings. The term was conceived as the binary counterpart to yōga (洋画) or Western-style painting (primarily oil-painting) that was gaining popularity in Japan at the time.

2 His birth name was Higashiyama Shinkichi. He started using his artist name, Kaii, when he began graduate studies at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts.
Higashiyama Kaii sketching outdoors.
Denmark, 1978. Photo by Terashima Teruo.
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During the Meiji period, the government embarked on a series of modernising reforms in a bid to catch up with other countries that were ahead in the industrial revolution. Reforms swept across Japan rapidly, transforming not only the political and social aspects of Japanese life, but art and its institutions as well. Previously having closed its doors for more than 200 years in the Edo period (1603–1867), Japan now actively sought foreign knowledge and expertise to help modernise and transform the country. The endeavour to modernise created a crisis in painting and the introduction of oil painting to Japan was the tipping point. Oil paintings embodied the progressive hallmarks of modern art—their techniques were a display of the scientific advancements the Japanese so admired. In addition to taking up the new oil medium, Western art techniques like perspective, shading and the depiction of realistic three-dimensional forms were also incorporated. Conversely, traditional Japanese painting was less preoccupied with such details. They tended to emphasise the painted line while keeping compositions relatively flat.

This crisis in modern Japanese art created the bifurcation of painting into nihonga and yōga and further divisions in the art world. When nihonga artists submitted their works to the annual government-sponsored exhibitions, they were asked to choose between categories of the old and new factions of nihonga to exhibit in. Such measures effectively pigeonholed artists through the creation of labels and definitions.

The nihonga curriculum at Geidai supported the movement championed by the new faction of nihonga artists. Students under the tutelage of Kaii’s teachers were encouraged to innovate by synthesising Western techniques in their practice. This earlier generation caught at these crossroads shouldered enormous responsibilities of upholding Japan’s painting traditions in the face of modernisation and westernisation.

The popularity of nihonga and yōga would ebb and flow, and at times it seemed that one could cause the demise of the other. Yet almost more than a century later, neither would prove to dominate the Japanese painting scene as both continue to co-exist and thrive today.

The primary point of differentiation between nihonga and yōga is in the medium used. Colours in nihonga are derived from iwaenogu (岩絵具) or mineral pigments, which are then pulverised to their desired particle size for texture and hue—finer particles...
result in lighter colours and smoother textures. To this, a binder known as *nikawa* (膠) is added to help adhere the pigments onto painted surfaces which range from Japanese paper to silk, and wood (in the instance of architectural features in temples). Compositions can be presented either in a hanging scroll format or framed, just like oil paintings.

Today, *nihonga* is almost indistinguishable from *yōga* in terms of subject matter or style. *Nihonga* artists have long since experimented with the application of mineral pigments like oil paints and adapted styles that were then popular in the Western art domain such as surrealism and abstraction. *Yōga* artists on the other hand, have also borrowed and reworked visual motifs and symbolisms specific to Japanese painting in their artworks. Some practitioners today produce mixed media compositions that involve some pigments and other materials from *nihonga*. The painted subjects of *nihonga* are not fixed and reflect prevailing trends and artist preferences. Nature, however, remains a popular and enduring subject.

**Kaii’s Early Career**

Kaii has painted countless landscapes of mountains, forests, country paths, and seascapes in all four seasons. *Autumn in the Mountains Country* (1928), his debut at the annual government exhibition, featured Mount Yatsugatake on an idyllic autumn day with a few villagers working in their fields.

When Kaii was a freshman at Geidai, he embarked on an arduous hiking expedition in Nagano that spanned several hundred kilometres. Enduring all sorts of weather conditions including relentless torrential rain, the trip culminated in the successful ascent of Mount Ontake, the second highest volcano after Mount Fuji. On this trip, the artist’s first-hand experience of nature’s sublime beauty and power created a lasting impression on his work.

The early years of Kaii’s career were wrought with ups and downs. Many artists sought the recognition and acceptance of governmental exhibitions. In fact, it was not uncommon to spend years producing a work worthy of being exhibited and many poured their entire efforts into doing so. Seeing his peers succeed ahead of him, Kaii was anxious that he had not yet obtained the same achievements. In 1929, his hard work finally paid off when *Autumn in the Mountains Country* was accepted to the government exhibition. After graduating from Geidai, Kaii went to Germany to further his studies in Western art history in the years 1933 to 1935. He then returned to Japan after receiving news that his father had fallen ill. Upon his return, he was drafted to World War II.
War II and subsequently lost all his remaining family members; only he and his wife survived. Various memoirs chronicle these years as the hardest period in Kaii’s life—not only did he deal with such immense loss and financial difficulties after the war, he faced successive rejections from the government exhibitions. Despite this, he found resolve in landscape painting. Kaii persevered and travelled to many parts of Japan, seeking solace in nature to sketch and paint from.

**Kaii and Postwar Japanese Art**

The breakthrough for Kaii came when *Afterglow* (1947) and *Road* (1950) were exhibited and well-received by the public and art critics alike. Both works depict scenes based on the Japanese countryside—the Kanō mountains and a rural country road near Tanesashi coast respectively. Through a limited colour palette and the reduction of details, Kaii created simple landscapes of peace and tranquility.

A single country road takes centre stage in *Road*. Starting from the foreground, it traverses in a straight path up the composition, extending towards the top where the horizon lies. Lush greenery surrounds the path, bringing a sense of vitality to the painting complemented by clear skies in the background. The use of pale colours (white and off-white) for the road helps create a sense of empty space, a deliberate artistic interpretation by Kaii. The idea of the empty space in East Asian painting is highly valued for balance, beauty, and the potential for contemplating possibilities. The way Kaii crops the road in the foreground then trails it off inconclusively adds to the evocation of possibilities he intended for this work.

Created just five years after Japan’s defeat in the war, many who saw *Road* were encouraged by the sublime beauty and deeply reflective nature of this simple landscape. *Road* became one of the masterpieces of postwar Japanese art and was especially symbolic in encouraging people to contemplate their future and the re-building of Japan.

*Misty Ravine* (1989) depicts a lush mountainous scene enveloped in mist at its peaks. Using his favourite pigment *rokushō* (緑青), Kaii juxtaposed different shades of green for the foliage. *Rokushō* is obtained from the mineral malachite ground to varying particle sizes for different intended shades. When heated, it becomes black-green or even black. A range of greens can be seen in the treatment of the foliage, which Kaii achieved with his masterful handling of pigments and by painstakingly layering them until the desired outcome is obtained. The overlapping trees in this

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9 "Ma" ("間") literally means “gap” or “space.” The representation of ma can be literal, such as empty spaces left unpainted in landscape paintings or suggested, as seen here in this work. Originally a concept from Chinese painting, Zen Buddhist monks brought this philosophy back to Japan. It has since been accorded importance in various forms of Japanese art, from painting to calligraphy, ikebana and Japanese garden landscaping.
Higashiyama Kaii and Takahara Tomiyasu. 
undulating terrain endows the composition with a lyrical quality, enhanced further by the atmospheric mist that meanders through the ravine.

The work is dated 1989, the year Kaii held his solo exhibition, Landschaften, in Berlin, Hamburg, and Vienna. Mountain scenes like this have been a consistent theme for him. In fact, Misty Ravine brings to mind one of the panoramic murals (Mountain Clouds (1975)) at Toshodaiji temple which features a mountain shrouded with clouds.

Many of Kaii’s paintings are serene masterpieces, the result of his life-long dedication to understanding nature and his deep reverence for it. Compositions like Road and others centering on nature appeal to audiences because of their timelessness. Additionally, nibonga pigments endow these landscapes with an overall sense of soft refinement. One of the greatest experiences of viewing certain nibonga paintings is seeing them glitter discreetly under certain light conditions as if coming to life. This is due to the physical properties of the mineral pigments whereby each granule becomes a prism that traps and refracts light.

Kaii’s paintings are described as being deeply spiritual and this can be interpreted in a few ways. In the Shintō religion, there is a long-standing association of the presence of kami (神, gods or spirits) in elements of nature. The contemplative sentiment from these works, alongside Kaii’s own testimony to the paintings being his prayers, help further explain these spiritual aspects.

Nobel Prize-winning writer Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972) whom Kaii had a close friendship with, wrote:

People are able to feel the nature of Japan through his landscape paintings. They discover their Japanese identity and are soothed by the quiet comfort of the pictures... In future, even more than at present, his landscape paintings will represent the beautiful soul of Japan, and he will be respected as a landscape painter the Japanese people will treasure forever.

Kaii painted his landscapes from the heart, with a desire to soothe and inspire all who encounter them. He was awarded the Order of Cultural Merit in 1969, a recognition of his contributions to Japanese culture. Decades after his passing, Kaii’s popularity shows no signs of slowing down and his exhibitions continue to attract visitors far and wide, maintaining his important position in postwar Japanese art.
Korakrit Arunanondchai. *Painting with History: Burning the Universal 'I' in a Western narrative* is one way of looking at this painting, 2018. Inkjet print on canvas, gel medium, bleached denim and stretcher. 218.4 x 162.6 x 3.8 cm. Collection of MAI IAM Contemporary Art Museum.