

‘Living Heritage’ as a part of Japanese Painting Conservation: the Role of ‘Selected Traditional Conservation Techniques’

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Japanese paintings are mounted in various kinds of formats, for example a hanging scroll, hand scroll, folding screen, or book and so on. Most of these formats are constructed using auxiliary parts, such as paper for lining, decorative golden brocades, metal ornaments and lacquer frames. These mainly employ production techniques and materials that have been designated as ‘living heritage’ by the Japanese government.

In Japan, 158 paintings have been identified as national treasures and 1 969 paintings as important cultural properties. The primary concern of Japanese painting conservators and restorers is to preserve the painting itself, but at the same time, if the additional parts are also fine artworks or carry important historical meanings, these should also be preserved. However, sometimes during previous treatments certain components have been exchanged for others of inferior quality. In such situations, conservators try to select more appropriate replacement parts for mounting the paintings in consultation with curators or art historians. Consequently, there is an ongoing need for high quality traditional components made by skilled artisans for conservation treatments.

However, the changing lifestyle in Japan has resulted in a significant decrease in demand for these traditional materials, and as such their production is in decline. To preserve Japanese paintings as fine artworks using the correct mounting and auxiliary materials, conservators need to communicate with artisans in order also save these important components. The Japanese government, in cooperation with a number of conservators, is currently surveying the situation of this field to identify how best to preserve this ‘living heritage’. In this paper, the Japanese living heritage system and the current situation of this field is introduced and illustrated with case study examples.

Introduction: Japanese painting conservation

Most traditional Japanese paintings are executed on paper or silk using inorganic pigments, such as *sumi* (Japanese ink) and mineral substances which are applied with *nikawa* (animal skin glue) as the fixing agent, or organic dyes. The paper or silk is supported from the back with layers of lining paper. Starch paste is used to apply the lining papers, which are made from the bark of the *kozo* tree. The painting is then finished using a variety of mountings.

There are many kinds of mountings, for example hanging scrolls displayed in the *tokonoma* (the alcove in a traditional Japanese room), or simply hung from a hook attached to a beam on a wall. Hand scroll paintings are opened and rolled out from right to left so that a series of pictures telling a story can be viewed. Alternatively, paintings are also mounted as folding screens that are used as interior dividers to partition one space from another.

These various kinds of mountings enable the painting to be rolled and unrolled, or folded and unfolded, such that the painting is protected from direct exposure to light, air and hand contact.

However, this rolling and unrolling, folding and unfolding, inevitably causes wear to the object such that flaking pigments and horizontal creases, which together with wormholes, and other natural deterioration from ageing, at some point necessitate conservation treatment as a matter of course. Many of the preserved paintings have repair records of past treatments inscribed on their storage boxes or on documents stored with the preserved paintings. Close examination also reveals that quite a number of these paintings were made with the same types of lining papers and gluing techniques that are still in use today, indicating an unbroken tradition that has spanned several hundreds of years.

Today the conservation of paintings in Japan employs modern analytical instruments, such as microscopes, X-rays and infrared radiation. Even many of the hand tools currently employed, such as magnifying glasses and tweezers, were almost unavailable a century ago. Nevertheless, while utilising modern technology, it is important as