

When considering Japanese paintings, we tend to focus on the artisan, however for the conservation of these art works, various techniques, materials, and tools for traditional arts are indispensable in order to undertake necessary treatments in a correct manner.

With their complex and highly specialized mounting and auxiliary components, traditional Japanese paintings are in effect an aggregation of traditional arts that were originally centred in Kyoto. These various mounting and decorative components that surround the painting or the main aspect of the work of art, not only serve to protect but to complement and enhance its aesthetic properties. Although these parts do not stand out individually, as they were never intended to be the focus of the art work, each has its own distinctive quality, and is an integral component of the whole. As such it is no exaggeration to say that this is where the Japanese aesthetic feeling comes alive.

Crisis of traditional art works

Over the last 30 years, the decline in the number of artisans in these traditional fields and the shortage of successors has been significant. Economic development and the shifts in social structure and lifestyles in Japan have had profound impact on this situation. However, excellent creators of traditional arts are protected by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, and successors are being nurtured, although their number remains small.

A recent survey carried out by Japanese painting conservators revealed that the human resources that support the producers of such traditional arts are severely lacking. For example, while traditional paper-making techniques are being passed on, the techniques for making bamboo-woven duckboard which is used as part of the paper production process are not. At present, only three artisans in Japan are considered able to produce high quality duckboard and all three are more than seventy years old.

Also, only one specialist in Kyoto produces the traditional brush used to apply paste. Although he himself is a designated holder of selected conservation techniques, it has become clear that the hair used in the traditional brush will soon become difficult to obtain as the demand for traditional brushes has decreased.

Most of these specialists do not necessarily work full-time at their crafts and have other work to support themselves, having simply inherited their specialty at home or in their community while continuing to work in agriculture or forestry as their regular job. As such it is institutionally difficult to recognize their work as a selected conservation technique.

Recognizing this situation in December 2010, the Association for Conservation of National Treasures, a group of conservators