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| Nihonga |
| Japanese-style Painting | 日本画 |
| Nihonga refers to Japanese-style painting that uses mineral pigments, and occasionally ink, together with other organic pigments on silk or paper. It was a term coined during the Meiji Period (1868-1912) to differentiate it from its counterpart, known as Yôga [洋画] or Western-style painting. The term literally translates to ‘pictures of Japan,’ but refers to a particular style of Japanese painting that developed from the Meiji period. Nihonga has gone through many phases of development since the Meiji period. Critics differentiate between the Kyoto and Tokyo schools of Nihonga, and in particular their styles and subject matter, but both developments should be taken into consideration concurrently to give a comprehensive account of Nihonga. Furthermore, because Nihonga artists reference the myriad of styles from Japan’s rich pictorial heritage, such as the stylistic traditions from Nanga [南画], Rinpa [琳派] and Kano [狩野派] to Murayama-Shijio [円山四条] schools, it is no wonder that the term is confused further with other genres within Japanese art, such as Ukiyo-e [浮世絵] or Suibokuga [水墨画]. Confusion aside, Nihonga remains a relatively modern entry into Japanese painting history. |
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Together, the pair advocated a revivalist movement of traditional Japanese arts in the face of intense Westernisation, and instituted Nihonga as the main genre of painting taught at the school. Although there were classes on Chinese style painting, the introduction of oil painting (also commonly referred to as Yôga) came much later. Okakura Tenshin was a key figure in the development of Nihonga and he would later set up the Japan Art Institute, also known as the Nihon Bijutsuin [**日本美術院**] in 1898 to groom a generation of Nihonga masters. Hashimoto Gahô [橋本雅邦] (1835-1908), Yokoyama Taikan [横山大観] (1858-1958), Hishida Shunsô [菱田春草] (1874-1911) and Shimomura Kanzan [下村観山] (1873-1930) were among the notable artists associated with the Nihon Bijutsuin.  In 1907, the first national exhibition known as the Bunten was held under the administration and sponsorship of the Meiji government. The Bunten was modelled after the French art salons and was considered a stepping-stone for emerging artists to gain fame and reputation. Similar to the French salons, the Bunten drew its supporters and detractors, but artists had the choice of exhibiting at the Bunten or at the alternative known as the Inten, organised by the Nihon Bijutsuin, one of the biggest anti-mainstream (or anti-Bunten) groups. For many years, these two institutions would dominate the Nihonga scene, particularly in Tokyo. Although much of Nihonga’s published history and development revolves around these institutions and groups in the Tokyo area, there’s a saying that goes, ‘Taikan in the East and Seihô in the West’. Interests and developments in Nihonga were also taking place in Kyoto and Takeuchi Seihô [竹内栖鳳] (1864- 1942)**,** one of Kyoto’s most prolific artists was leading the way and mentoring a generation of Kyoto masters. Notable Kyoto Nihonga artists include Uemura Shôen [上村松園] (1875-1949), Tsuchida Bakusen [土田麦僊] (1887-1936), and Yamaguchi Kayo [山口華楊] (1889-1984).  Upon Tenshin’s passing in 1913, the Nihon Bijutsuin was revived by Yokoyama Taikan whose career would be indelibly tied to the association. Under the guidance of Taikan, the association advocated synthesising Western techniques with Japanese painting. Nihonga artists were encouraged to explore and incorporate techniques from Western-style painting such as shading and perspective, a radical departure from the conventionally flat perspectives of Japanese art. Taikan and fellow artist Hishida Shunsô innovated a new style known as *môrô-tai*, or ‘hazy style.’ This innovation, however, failed to garner support and instead drew much criticism for downplaying the importance of outlines in Nihonga in favour of shading. Nihonga was further divided into old and new school factions where the latter’s innovative styles would come under attack from the conservatives.  Despite these factional differences, Nihonga would continue to evolve in terms of style, format and the painted subject matter. In the prewar years, particularly during the Taishô period, many smaller groups were formed as a reaction to the Bunten and its later successor, the Teiten. During this time, avant-garde trends were observed and artists were extremely liberal in their experimentation, resulting in an interesting output of unrestrained experimentation never seen before in Nihonga.  However, during the war period, Nihonga artists turned to portraying patriotic images such as those of Taikan’s Mt. Fuji paintings, and romanticised images of Japan’s war expansion in Asia and the pacific. These artists did so in order to avoid persecution in the face of intense censorship on the arts, supplies and exhibitions. But when the war was over, these ultra-nationalistic connections slowly disappeared, and while comparably less experimental than that of the Taishô years, it is said that Nihonga reached its maturity in the postwar period. Contemporary Nihonga works today are almost indistinguishable from Western-style painting in terms of style or subject matter. While artists today delve into mixed media and some no longer paint on scrolls or screen dividers, the single most differentiating factor remains the treatment and adherence to the time-honored medium that defines Nihonga. |
| Further reading:  (Clark)  (Conant)  (Satô)  (Satô, Modern Japanese Art and the Meiji State: The Politics of Beauty)  (Weston) |