**Calligraphy in Japan**

Known as *sho* (書), *shodō* (書道), *shosha* (書写) or *shūji* (習字) in the twenty-first century, calligraphy held an ambiguous and complicated status as art in modern Japan. Practised by high society members and Buddhist monks in earlier periods, calligraphy gained public popularity during the Edo period (1603–1868). However, calligraphy’s status became contentious during the Meiji period (1868-1912) with the introduction of European concepts of art and the emphasis on calligraphy’s practical skill in the newly structured education system. New expressions in calligraphy emerged, not only because of European influences but also due to the discovery of Chinese calligraphy classics from the Six Dynasties period (third to sixth centuries). During the Taisho period (1912–1926) calligraphers participated in international expositions and public exhibitions, which led to the establishment of an independent role for professional calligraphers in the Shōwa period (1926–1989). The passing of a style from master to disciple became common among calligraphers. While calligraphy remains a social practice as much as an artistic one, *geijutsu-sho*, or artistic calligraphy, was established in the early twentieth century.

The dominant *oie-ryū* or *son’en-ryū* style—a strand of *wayō* or Japanese style calligraphy, taught in *terakoya* or private schools for commoners contributed to spreading literacy during the Edo period. However, Maki Ryōko (1777–1843), Ichikawa Beian (1779–1858) and Nukina Sūō (1778–1863), known as three calligraphers of the late Edo period, promoted *karayō* or Chinese style calligraphy and influenced the direction of the Meiji period calligraphers. The Chinese calligrapher/geographer Yang Shoujing (1839–1915) came to Japan in 1880 with the Chinese envoy and introduced early Chinese classics, mainly from the Six Dynasties period. Known as *rikuchō shodō*, this style was eagerly studied, notably by three calligraphers and elite intellectuals: Iwaya Ichiroku (1834–1905), Kusakabe Meikaku (1838–1922) and Matsuda Sekka (1823–1881). Nakabayashi Gochiku (1827–1913) who studied calligraphy and ink painting in China, and the politician Soejima Taneomi (1828–1905) produced an innovative style of calligraphy influenced by *rikuchō shodō*. Their calligraphy can be seen as a precursor to post-Second World War *avant-garde* calligraphy because of the creative forms of written characters.

The inclusion of calligraphy in the art section at the Domestic Industrial Exposition of 1881 prompted the influential critic/educator Okakura Kakuzō (1863-1913) and the artist/educator Koyama Shōtarō (1857-1916) to debate whether calligraphy was fine art in terms of European ideas of art. Hidai Tenrai (1872–1939) who was aware of Western art attempted to establish *geijutsu-sho* as opposed to *jitsuyō-sho* (practical calligraphy). He studied Chinese classics practically and theoretically to expand the horizon of calligraphic expression. Tenrai’s disciples became key figures in establishing *gendai-sho* (contemporary calligraphy). His first disciple, Ueda Sōkyū (1899–1968), established the *Shodō geijutsu sha* (the Calligraphic Art Association)in 1933. Its members included other disciples of Tenrai such as Uno Sesson (1912–1995), Ōsawa Gakyū (1890–1953), Kaneko Ōtei (1906–2001), Teshima Yūkei (1901–1987) and Hidai Nankoku (1912–1999).

**References and further reading**

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