

## Art Review

### Sakai Hoitsu: The Aesthetics of Japanese Rinpa Paintings

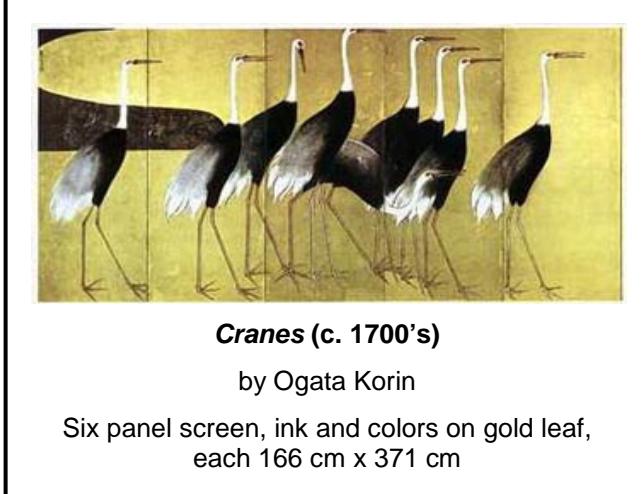
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Art Review Editor

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In September 2012 the Japan Society Gallery in New York City opened an exhibition entitled “*Silver Wind: The Arts of Sakai Hoitsu (1761-1828)*,” which will be on display until January 6, 2013. This is the first retrospective exhibition of the works of the Japanese Edo period (1615-1868) master Hoitsuin the United States. This exhibition is curated by Matthew Mckelway, Takeo and Itsuko Atsumi Associate Professor of Japanese Art at Columbia University. The focus of this show is on works completed by Sakai Hoitsu, who revived the Japanese Rinpa School of art. The show includes Ogata Korin (1658-1716), who was a 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese artist and inspiration for Hoitsu, his circle of friends, and his students such as Suzuki Kiitsu (1796-1858). This exhibition displays 58 works in various formats such as large scale screens, hanging scrolls, small size painted fans, elegant lacquerware, woodblock prints, and books.



### Selected Works of Art

To understand the aesthetic traditions of the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Rinpa (also called Rimpa) school of art, it is necessary to retrace Ogata Korin’s impressive work. The name Rinpa came from Ogata Korin’s name *rin* (from *Korin*) and *pa*, or school. The Rinpa School was different from the Kano School, which was based on maintaining family traditions by family members. The Rinpa School represented a group of different artists who admired and followed its artistic styles and tradition. The Rinpa School’s aesthetic style was continued by Sakai Hoitsu and his assistant Suzuki Kiitsu.

During the early Edo period in 1658, Ogata Korin was born into a wealthy family in Kyoto. His father was a successful textile merchant who supplied fabrics and garments to clients of the noble and samurai classes such as the wives of the Shogun Hideyoshi Tokugawa and the daughter of the empress. Ogata Korin's family had a long association and contact with shoguns, daimyo (meaning territorial lords), and the noble class. Korin was influenced by Honami Koetsu and Tawaraya Sotatsu, artists of the Momoyama (1573-1615) and early Edo periods but developed his own style. Korin applied bold designs, utilizing contrasting colors and innovative usage of space, and disregarded realism, the style of that time. The Rinpa School was a key part of the revival of decorative style and Yamato-e themes in the Edo period. The rebirth of Heian (794-1185) culture appeared in the painting and crafts of the Rinpa school, whose dominant theme was nature including birds, flowers, and the four seasons. Contextual settings were drawn from Japanese literature, such as *The Tale of Genji*, *The Tales of Ise*, and Heian-period poems composed by courtiers. Korin and his brother Kenzan were interested in applying lavish, decorative, ornamental, and bold designs to paintings, textiles, lacquerwares, and ceramics.

On the Japan Society Gallery entrance wall, Ogata Korin's powerful ink painting entitled *Rough Waves* on a gold-leaf gilded paper screen is displayed next to Hoitsu's



***Rough Waves* (1704-09)**

by Ogata Korin

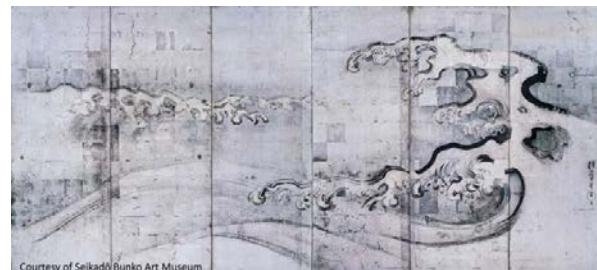
Two-panel screen; ink, color, and  
gold on gilded paper  
57 11/16 x 65 1/8 in

*Silver Wave*. Seeing the two works shown side by side supports the evidence that Hoitsu was deeply inspired by Korin, the master he admired. The screen has a signature seal reading *Dosu*, the name Korin adopted in 1704. This screen was completed between 1704 and 1709, when Korin was living in Edo (today's Tokyo). The inspiration for the screen may have been an image by Muromachi period (1392-1573) artist Sesson Shukei (1504–1589), whose works include a number of dynamic and mysterious renderings of waves. Korin's *Rough Waves* is outlined in ink using the ancient Chinese technique of black ink painting. The edge of the waves appears like claws ripping the ocean apart. Next to Korin's works, Hoitsu's *Silver Wave* (1815) is filled with powerful energy of strong ocean waves. These two works by different artists who painted same subject make it easier for the viewer to

understand how the Rinpa aesthetic innovation continued from one artist to another. In Hoitsu's *Silver Wave* the powerful ocean crest is more natural, such as the break of the wave line and spontaneous water flow especially in the glowing silver background. The thin and thick irregular lines of the water are organized chaos with a freedom of expression reflected in energetic large brush strokes. In contrast, Korin's *Rough Waves* appears more organized on a gilded paper background. Each wave is carefully described using thin articulated brush lines and claw-like outlines. Both master works remain powerful, impressive, and glowing some 200 years later.

In 1761 Sakai Hoitsu was born into a rich, powerful samurai family in Edo Japan. Instead of pursuing the family business, he became a Buddhist Monk and followed an artist's path in life. Hoitsu's family had patronized Ogata Korin, and Sakai had opportunities to study Korin's artworks in close detail. Hoitsu's artistic interests delved into subjects and themes about nature, trees, flowers, waves, birds. Hoitsu was interested in Ukiyo-e (Japanese woodblock prints). He admired the works of Korin's artistic style and published two books containing woodblock prints. The two books are *The Korin hyakuzu* (One Hundred Paintings by Korin) and *The Ogataryu ryaku inpu* (Collected Seals of the Ogata School). Hoitsu was interested in different artistic mediums which was evident in this exhibition's display of elegant matchbox-sized medicine cases. He collaborated with lacquerware makers and designed images for the lacquerware medicine cases.

Hoitsu gradually shifted his themes to representations of the four seasons, rather than scenes from classical Chinese and Japanese literature. The strong influence of Korin's works is evidenced in many works by Hoitsu that show techniques such as the use of brilliant colors, empty space, and a bold design on a flat background. For example, in Korin's work *Red and White Plum Blossoms*, he focused on bold designs and used contrasting colors. He boldly cropped the plum trees and branches. A large background shape represents the surface of stream in a simple shape of a curve with textural lines. Korin disregarded the realistic depiction of nature, which was the convention of his time. He rejected pure realism in his paintings and manipulated the appearance of ordinary nature to expose the beauty he saw from his perspective. Korin manipulated space with simple shapes that created powerful positive and negative space. He broke from tradition and developed an original and distinctive painting style. The characteristic of this innovative style is boldly expressed in simplified forms, with an absolute disregard for photo realism. Some 100 years after Korin's death in 1716, Sakai Hoitsu, who was fascinated by the lavish appearance and innovative design elements, celebrated and revived the works of Korin. Many works by Hoitsu reflect the influence of the Rinpa School of painting. From 1810 to 1819, Hoitsu's artworks incorporated Korin's style and design elements. Hoitsu revived Korin's aesthetic beliefs in his successful Rinpa paintings such as *Silver Wave*, *Pine and Wisteria*, *Paulownia and Chrysanthemums*, *Persimmon Tree*, and *Cranes*, all of which were part of the exhibition.



Courtesy of Seikadō Bunko Art Museum

### **Silver Wave (1815)**

by Sakai Hoitsu

Two Six-panel screen; ink, color,  
and silver on gilded paper

*Pine and Wisteria (1815-1816)* by Hoitsu is a two-panel folding screen. The thick pine trunk is painted with a brownish color but accented with differently sized patches of white dotted green moss.



*Pine and Wisteria (1810-1819)*

by Sakai Hoitsu

Two panel folding screen, ink and colors on gold leaf on paper, 153.7 x 155.6 cm

The pine branches form a large green ellipse which changes in appearance depending on how close the viewer is to the screen. From three feet or more away, the painting appears to be a nature scene. When you move closer, the trunk becomes a human body and the major branch is an arm reaching down. The density of the vivid green pine needles pulls viewers into the painting. For an artwork painted 200 years ago, it is vibrant, powerful, and mesmerizing with its bold composition and the artist's intentional simplification of form and space. The large empty

flat space and asymmetrical composition of this painting inspires viewers with its contemporary appearance.

*Paulownia and Chrysanthemums (1810)* by Hoitsu is a two-section screen. A twisted old tree branch with white-flecked green moss growing on it adds visual texture that is harmonized with ivy in various ranges of green. White-colored chrysanthemums are supported by the verdant green ground. This boldly cropped composition is the signature of Hoitsu's use of space. The flat background with minimum details of a swirling water wave in a stream adds an abstract abbreviation. In contrast to the simple background, each leaf and flower is super-detailed, realistic, ornamental, and treated in a decorative way. While the tree trunk and some areas of green leaves are painted using a thin wash method, the white mum flowers are painted in thick repetitive brush strokes. The painting looks fresh and lively, filled with energy which represents summer and early autumn.



*Paulownia and Chrysanthemums (1810)*

by Sakai Hōitsu

Two-panel folding screen; ink, colors, on gold leaf on paper, 60 1/8 x 61 in  
Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the American Foundation for the Maud E. and Warren H. Corning Botanical Collection, 1964

In contrast, the *Persimmon Tree* (1816) shows an old persimmon tree with a few leaves on its frail trunk and twisted branches hanging heavy with five red persimmons ready to harvest. The branches are too thin to carry the weight of the ripe persimmons. The tree is a metaphor for an elderly person carrying life burdens which are too heavy to sustain. The work creates a chilly autumn flavor in a large untouched empty space filled with the meaning of life. It is a fine example of the statement that less is more in empty space aesthetics. The solitary persimmon tree, bent and brittle with age, has lost most of its leaves. At the center, a cluster of overripe red fruit hangs heavy from a frail branch that seems about to snap under the weight. Hoitsu used space brilliantly with bold asymmetrical composition in this work.

*Cranes* (1820)

by Sakai Hōitsu

Two-panel folding screen; ink, colors, and gold leaf on paper,  
143.5 x 143.3 cm

Worcester Art Museum,  
Worcester, Massachusetts,  
Charlotte E.W. Buffington Fund

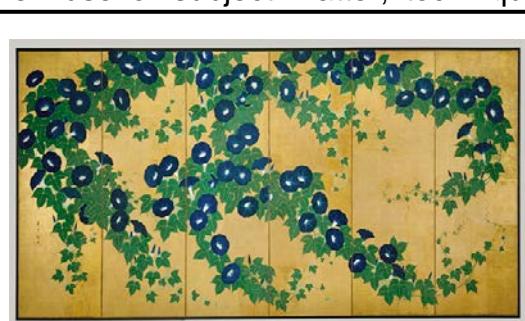
painted 19 standing cranes on a pair of six panel screens, each 166 cm x 371 cm, ink, and colors on gold leaf. In his screens Korin lined up the 19 cranes on a patterned water surface stream in simple shape without any indication of a background or setting.

Suzuki Kiitsu (1796–1858) came from a family of textile dyers where he was trained but went on to study painting with Hoitsu. In this exhibition, Kiitsu's large six-panel folding screen *Morning Glories* (1844–1858) shows evidence he was influenced by Ogata Korin's *Irises* (1701). Kiitsu developed his own

*Persimmon Tree* (1816)

by Sakai Hoitsu

Two-panel screen; ink and color on paper, 143.5 x 162.6 cm

*Morning Glories* (1844–1858)

by Suzuki Kiitsu.

Pair of six-panel folding screens; ink, color, and gold on gilded paper,  
178.2 x 379.8 cm

creative signature which carries on the tradition of Rinpa painting while avoiding simple replication. Kiitsu introduced a greater sense of naturalism to his representations of flowers and plants. In this display of dark purple blue and green, he concentrated on the exuberant proliferation of the blossoms and leaves through space and omitted any natural setting or context. The blossoms appear as they would on an embroidered garment emanating a theme of fresh vibrant nature, a greeting in the morning when morning glories open up to collect sunlight and moisture during the summer. Even though Kiitsu painted figures and animals in great quantities, nature scenes such as the flowers in *Morning Glories* have a powerful and modern appeal. Their works reflect the influence of textile design, embroidery pattern, and the Rinpa School in the brilliant decorative effects of thick mineral pigments on gold leaf. Natural pigment colors of green and blue still look brilliant some 250 years later.



**Maples and Cherry Trees, (1817)**

by Sakai Hōitsu

Pair of six-panel folding screens; ink, colors, and gold leaf on paper, each screen, 175.3 x 341.6 cm

Lent by the John and Celeste Fleming Family, courtesy of the Denver Art Museum

The exhibition *Silver Wind: The Arts of Sakai Hoitsu (1761- 1828)* is an excellent opportunity to enjoy the first retrospective exhibition of the Japanese Edo period master Sakai Hoitsu's works in America. The masterworks of art by Ogata Korin, Sakai Hoitsu, and Suzuki Kiitsu (1796-1858) and works of Sakai Hoitsu's circle of artists were refreshing and crisp. The decorative ornamental Rinpa aesthetics, beauty and elegance combined with the large scale Japanese screens and hanging scrolls are memorable.

### **Resources: Books**

Fahr-Becker, G. (2011). *The art of East Asia*. Cologne, Germany: Ullmann.

Lee, S. (2002). *History of Far Eastern art* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Mason, P. (2004). *History of Japanese art.* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

### **Resources: Websites**

About Japan: K-12 Educator Resources Including Lesson Plans  
<http://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/>

Exploring Japanese Arts & Architecture in the K-12 Art Classroom  
[www.msarted.org/JapanResources.pdf](http://www.msarted.org/JapanResources.pdf)

Metropolitan Museum of Art – Japan Collection  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections?ft=\\*&where=Japan](http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections?ft=*&where=Japan)

Teaching Primary Children About Japan Through Art  
<http://spice.stanford.edu/docs/137>

### **Acknowledgment**

I extend appreciation to Mr. Shannon Jowett, Director of Communications, Japan Society, for providing materials from the *Silver Wind: The Arts of Sakai Hoitsu (1761-1828)* exhibition.