

## Nankoku Hidai | Calligraphy as Painting

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The art of calligraphy seems distinct from the typical, conventional arts, such as painting, and sculpture. This is probably due to the assumption that Japanese art, which appears deeply rooted in Japanese tradition, is an independent field that shares only a few commonalities with Western art, i.e. of the aforementioned mediums. Nevertheless, when placed under scrutiny, the notion of "(a) tradition (that is) unique to Japan" seems invalid as calligraphy, as well as many other aspects of Japanese culture, bears Chinese roots and, as such, exists because of it. Returning to the topic of calligraphy, it appears that calligraphy was commonplace in everyday Japanese life until the Edo period before Westernization became mainstream. While the study of Japanese and Chinese classics was regarded as two respective worldviews, these divisions are nowhere as large as it is now. However, following the Meiji period, daily life underwent drastic change once Western influence began to materialize. To this day, social values have and continue to fluctuate under a state of flux. Rather, through a phenomenon that surfaced in the Meiji era, things that were uniquely Japanese have become vulnerable and are at risk of extinction.

Now, there are two things I would like to confirm when thinking of Nankoku Hidai's calligraphy. Firstly, is modern calligraphy an art form that is unique to Japan, with a special context that cannot be discussed in the same terms as other globalized practices, such as paintings and sculptures? In other words, is it a strictly native art form that is immune to globalization? The second regards what defines calligraphy. Is it the art of words? The art of ink and paper? The art of monochrome aesthetics? Or is this a metaphysical question that goes beyond the use of materials and techniques?

To be clear, these questions regard modern calligraphy, not classical calligraphy. If you asked me whether there was a difference between both, I would say, of course, there is. The fruits of an era that has not undergone the baptism of modernity would be utterly different from those of a time following modernity whereby Western values have become universal. As with traditional Japanese art and culture in general, there is a disconnect that cannot be overcome by simple theories on the matter. Furthermore, in the present day, whereby the art form has begun to relativize, there is an increased significance in the practice of calligraphy.

Through these challenges (on why one should write or what calligraphy means), modern calligraphy began with a need to make a fresh start. This can be seen through the calligraphy of the postwar period. Whether out of desperation or calculation, principal artists, such as Sesson Uno, Outei

Kaneko, Yuichi Inoue, Yukei Teshima, and Nankoku Hidai had their backs against the wall. Their moves were forceful and, at times, over-the-top and provocative, but they had a large obstacle, called Westernization, that required great intention to overcome. This obstacle regards the aforementioned questions early regarding calligraphy (why is calligraphy relevant now?), and each of these calligraphers faced this challenge with utmost sincerity, by breaking away from tradition to expand calligraphy's boundaries and opening new horizons by creating new connections with other genres. While each artist's response was indeed unique and original, the value of avant-garde calligraphy owes to the variability of each interpretation. Nevertheless, one that emerges as truly distinct is Nankoku Hidai. By doing what no one has ever done before, he is by far the most exceptional, and, as I will explain, I believe his significance goes past just being the first.

Specifically, as a calligrapher who defers from calligraphy's innate reverence of orthodoxy, Nankoku's calligraphy does not look like calligraphy. This would depend on the type of work, but just by looking at a piece, you may notice a true sense of contemporaneity in how it maintains a feeling of originality that is independent of any school or style. Rather, they bear a universal aesthetic that can only be described as a painting that does not belong anywhere. Furthermore, there (appears to be) no comparable rival that one can point to when thinking about who he was influenced, challenged, dismantled, or threatened by. His works exist independently, free of context, history, and tradition, yet they point and end at Nankoku. This is something unique to modernity. Nevertheless, when you notice Nankoku's ingenuity, you realize that it is the result of his calligraphic knowledge. To create a single work, the artist drew countless sketches. Furthermore, he sought to build a foundation for his ideas by compiling a history of calligraphy from a global perspective. I don't have the time to go into detail here but, the uniqueness of his stance, to reevaluate the history of calligraphy from a perspective that includes the history of Western art, and his attempt to reshape calligraphy by applying individual expression, is comparable to that of a single piece of calligraphy, or even more.

Now, let's return to the beginning. Once again, a culture that holds a Japanese identity is facing a crisis. Calligraphy is one of them. The two questions Nankoku faced in his career are still alive and appear more relevant.

Can calligraphy continue to exist within an international context? If so, will calligraphy cease to be calligraphy? Or will it retain its essence as calligraphy? Nankoku's light and, at times, humorous works make us laugh and wonder whether we already have the answers.