

# Masterpieces of *Kinpeki Shouhekiga* at Chishakuin Temple

Visitors to Chishakuin Temple in Kyoto City can view late-sixteenth-century masterpieces in a painting style known as *kinpeki shouhekiga*, large works painted on walls and sliding screens that are entirely covered with gold leaf.

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**S**HOUHEKIGA (wall and sliding screen paintings) first appeared around the ninth century on *fusuma*<sup>i</sup> sliding screens, walls, ceilings, and other elements of residential architecture in the homes of aristocrats and the wealthy. Unlike murals, which are painted directly on the surface of a wall, the paintings on shouhekiga are pasted onto the surface. Another distinguishing feature of shouhekiga is the large scale of the fusuma “canvas,” which enabled artists to give full play to their ideas and create a distinctive atmosphere in the interior space.

*Kinpeki shouhekiga* is one style of such

wall and sliding screen paintings. This style is characterized by magnificently striking paintings featuring motifs of beautiful scenes from nature rendered with pigments such as *gunjo*, *rokusho* and *taisha*<sup>ii</sup> on wall and floor-to-high-ceiling screens entirely covered with gold leaf foil.<sup>iii</sup> Kinpeki shouhekiga became especially popular in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries when the world was transitioning from a time of conflict to a time of peace, as a way for powerful people of the time to decorate their castles and mansions, with many fine examples of the painting style produced during this time.

Some Kinpeki shouhekiga that are acclaimed as masterpieces are housed in Chishakuin Temple in Higashiyama Ward, Kyoto City. These shouhekiga were painted by the Hasegawa school, including Hasegawa Tohaku (below “Tohaku”; 1539–1610) and his son Kyuzo (1568–1593). Tohaku is one of the most eminent artists in the history of Japanese painting, renowned for his kinpeki shouhekiga and *suibokuga* (ink wash paintings). Chishakuin Temple houses a collection of kinpeki shouhekiga painted by Tohaku and the Hasegawa school, five of which have been designated National Treasures by the Japanese government.



“Maple” by Hasegawa Tohaku (National Treasure, Chishakuin Temple. Height 180.0 cm, Width 563.0 cm)

All photos: Courtesy of Chishakuin Temple





Of these, “Maple” (National Treasure) by Tohaku and “Cherry Blossom” (National Treasure) by his son Kyuzo are particularly stunning. “Cherry Blossom,” painted by the 25-year-old Kyuzo, is a large painting 179.5 cm high and 649.5 cm wide, depicting cherry blossoms in full bloom on a background of *kinpaku* gold leaf. However, a certain fragility and impermanence can be sensed behind its external magnificence.

“If you look closely at the white, double-flowered cherry blossoms in ‘Cherry Blossom’ delicately depicted on the slender branches, you can see that some of the petals are raised from the surface. This is



accomplished by using an advanced technique called *moriage gofun* involving the application of layers of calcium carbonate (*gofun*) made from crushed oyster shells to create a raised textured effect. It wouldn’t be surprising if all the petals had peeled off by now, 400 years after the work was painted, and the fact that some are still intact is testament to the high level of technical skill,” explains Chishakuin Temple curator Inoue Mami.

However, the year after this splendid piece was completed, Kyuzo passed away at the young age of 26. His talent as a painter showed great promise, and was said even to surpass that of his father, yet in the end that talent was as ephemeral as the petals of a cherry blossom.

Meanwhile, the loss of his son left Tohaku crushed with grief, but it is said that he painted “Maple” when he was 55 years old as a way to encourage himself. In the painting, which is 180 cm high and 563 cm wide, a mighty maple trunk is depicted in the center with delicate branches and leaves spreading out on either side over a resplendent background of kinpaku gold leaf covering the entire surface of the painting. Red autumn leaves and the sprinkling of multicolored autumn flowers reflected in the kinpaku gold leaf create an impression of majestic beauty. The work may be interpreted as a simultaneous depiction of life and death, this world and the next world.

It is interesting to note that, although both works are covered entirely in kinpaku gold leaf, the effect in “Maple” is the solemn glow of a religious painting, while “Cherry Blossom” seems to radiate a delicate light, evoking moonlight illuminating the nighttime cherry blossoms just before they fall.

Says Hattori Yuryo, Director of the Teaching and Education Department of Chishakuin Temple, “The paintings passed down at Chishakuin Temple have been subject to fire damage and theft, yet these particular works have always been saved thanks to the monks’ strong conviction of their particular worth. The reason these paintings have survived in the same condition as when they were created is because of our predecessors’ desire to protect them.”

Until now, kinpeki shouhekiga have been on open display. However, from April 2023<sup>iv</sup> it is planned to keep them in a new repository, a special glass case controlled for temperature, humidity, and lighting, in order to ensure that these shining gold National Treasures are preserved for the next generation. **7**

i Sliding screens (or doors) constructed of wooden frames and covered with paper or fabric on both sides.  
ii *Gunjo* is a bright blue mineral pigment. *Rokusho* is a green pigment made from malachite. *Taisha* is a yellowish brown or reddish brown ochre pigment whose main component is ferrous oxide (hematite).  
iii Gold ground with traces of silver and copper then pounded to form thin sheets.  
iv From November 17, 2022 to April 3, 2023, all *kinpeki shouhekiga* by Hasegawa Tohaku and the Hasegawa school will be unavailable for public viewing.