



Hayami Gyoshu's Artistry in Gold

In this article, we introduce Hayami Gyoshu, a painter who pursued new expressions in *nihonga* through his skillful use of gold.

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THE term *nihonga*, literally “Japanese painting,” appeared near the end of the 19th century to differentiate this painting style from painting introduced from the West as Japan started on the path of modernization. The technique of *nihonga* is based on a form of painting that draws on traditional Japanese techniques and styles that have continued for more than 1,000 years.

A distinguishing feature of *nihonga* are the materials used. Pigments made from finely crushed minerals, *sumi* ink, gold leaf, and more were used to draw on *washi* paper or silk, with adhesive glue called *nikawa* used to attach the mineral pigments and gold leaf to the surface.

Hayami Gyoshu (1894-1935) was a prominent *nihonga* artist and created many masterpieces making skillful use of gold as a coloring material.

“As Gyoshu died suddenly at 40, his time as an artist was short at a little over 20 years. Despite this, throughout his life, he always kept trying out new means of artistic expression, greatly altering his style and techniques. He was an artist who continually deconstructed and recreated *nihonga* without sticking to a single form. And it was gold that Gyoshu consistently used as a key means of artistic expression,” says Yamazaki Taeko, the director of the Yamatane

Dancing in the Flames by Hayami Gyoshu, 1925. Color on silk, 120.3 cm × 53.8 cm. Important Cultural Property. Collection of Yamatane Museum of Art



Emerald Mosses and Verdant Grass by Hayami Gyoshu, 1928. Color on gold-leafed paper; folding screen; pair of four-panel screens, each pair 172.7 cm × 363.5 cm. Collection of Yamatane Museum of Art

Museum of Art and a researcher on Gyoshu. The Yamatane Museum of Art in central Tokyo houses over 1,800 modern and contemporary nihonga pieces, 120 of which are paintings by Gyoshu.

Three of Gyoshu's works in particular stand out for their use of gold: *Dancing in the Flames*, *Emerald Mosses and Verdant Grass*,ⁱ and *Camellia Petals Scattering*.ⁱⁱ

Dancing in the Flames was unveiled in 1925 and is designated a national Important Cultural Property. To paint this, Gyoshu built a bonfire every night and continuously monitored the flames and the moths that would gather there for three months as he stayed at his summer home. Using a pigment called *kindei*, which is gold powder mixed and dissolved into glue and water, he depicted the sparks rising into the dark and the dancing of the moths with detail and exquisite coloring. For *Emerald Mosses and Verdant Grass*, a pair of four-panel folding screens unveiled in 1928, gold leaf that was flattened out to one to two ten-thousandths of a millimeter was applied to the surface of the painting.

Gold leaf and kindei are materials that have been used in nihonga since ancient times, and in *Camellia Petals Scattering*, an Important Cultural Property that was unveiled in 1929, Gyoshu made use



Camellia Petals Scattering by Hayami Gyoshu, 1929. Color on gold ground on paper; folding screen; pair of two-panel screens, each pair 167.9 cm × 169.6 cm. Important Cultural Property. Collection of Yamatane Museum of Art


of his own technique known as *makitsubushi*, where gold leaf is added to a bamboo tube, ground into powder and then sprinkled onto the work.

“When he was young, Gyoshu also studied the *makie-e* lacquer decoration technique,ⁱⁱⁱ and this may have been an inspiration for his invention of makitsubushi,” says Yamazaki. He created a delicate, mellow gold background different from that made with gold leaf or kindei by sprinkling the fine gold powder over washi paper painted with glue. A deep beauty can be found in the brilliance of such use of gold. Then he depicted flowers of a camellia tree said to be 400 years

old, accentuating their presence through the use of vivid colors.

“With makitsubushi, the amount of gold used is five to six times higher compared to simply pasting gold leaf onto the same area. In a sense, it is an extremely extravagant technique,” says Yamazaki.

According to Yamazaki, Gyoshu's talent as an artist stood out from the start, and yet he worked hard throughout his lifetime.

Had Gyoshu lived a long life, he may have produced even more innovative works and the world of nihonga might be a different place than it is today. Gyoshu's works with their bold compositions featuring gold continue to attract viewers. 

Yamatane Museum of Art

3-12-36 Hiroo, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

Opening Hours: 10:00 am – 5:00 pm (last admission 4:30 pm)

Closed: Mondays (closed the day after a national holiday), the New Year's holidays, and for exhibition installations

<https://www.yamatane-museum.jp/english/index.html>

i *Dancing in the Flames* and *Emerald Mosses and Verdant Grass* are to be shown at a planned exhibition from May 20 to July 17, 2023 at the Yamatane Museum of Art

ii *Camellia Petals Scattering* is to be shown at a planned exhibition from September 30 to November 26, 2023 at the Yamatane Museum of Art

iii See *Highlighting Japan* May 2022, The History and Culture of Lacquer in Japan https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202205/202205_01_en.html