

## Death and the Prospects of Unification: *Nihonga's* Postwar Rapprochements with *Yōga*

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Over the course of 1947, four *yōga* painters, Suda Kunitarō (1891–1961), Nakagawa Kazumasa (1893–1991), Ishii Hakutei (1882–1958) and Kimura Shōhachi (1893–1958), published their views on *nihonga* in the periodical *Sansai*. The positions these artists adopted were instrumental in initiating the Westernization discourse in the early postwar *nihonga metsubōron*. In this essay, I introduce the *metsubōron* and a number of historical and terminological issues, particularly relating to correspondences between the mid-twentieth century postwar situation and the earlier Meiji period (1869–1912), in which *nihonga* was emergent as a modern painting idiom. Thereafter I chart the pervasiveness of the *nihongalyōga* divide across Japanese modernism, then critically discuss the four *yōga* painters' 1947 commentaries that contributed to speculation about *nihonga's* postwar death. Following this, in an extended coda, I indicate the pressure exerted upon early postwar *nihonga* painters by these Westernization discourses, which resulted in artistically productive solutions to *nihonga's* mid-twentieth century malaise.

**Keywords:** *metsubōron*, death of painting, Westernization, postwar, Suda Kunitarō, Nakagawa Kazumasa, Ishii Hakutei, Kimura Shōhachi

### Introduction

The debate concerning the death or destruction of *nihonga* (*nihonga metsubōron* 日本画滅亡論) was the salient crisis for the tradition of *nihonga* 日本画 (Japanese painting) in the early post-WWII period.<sup>1</sup> It is not entirely clear if these discussions should in fact be viewed as a single debate, or as a plurality of debates, for their often diverging, sometimes unrelated, occasionally intersecting, concerns. Much of what came to be known as *metsubōron* commentary tended to be less formal argument or counterargument than positional statement or opinion.

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1 *Nihonga* is the modern umbrella term given to the amalgamation and modernized forms of a number of premodern Japanese schools of painting. The term is usually posited in contrast to the Western painting-inspired practices of *yōga* 洋画 that formed the other half of major painting practiced in Japan from the end of the Edo period and thereafter. The division of modern painting in two was formalized when the government invited submissions in *nihonga*, *yōga*, and sculpture for the first Bunten 文展 (Ministry of Education Art Exhibition) in 1907.

The central concerns of the *metsubōron* have mostly gone unarticulated to date, and there are few serious scholarly sources to turn to on this subject.<sup>2</sup> Many of the issues that emerged in the early postwar period and engaged *metsubōron* contributors have not secured wider critical purchase in ways commensurate with the generalized art-historical disregard for the exploration of *nihonga*'s roles in the formation of Japan's early postwar modernism. The *metsubōron* gave rise to a host of intermingling cultural, social, and art-political considerations and anxieties in a period of dramatic upheaval and turbulence, but my purpose here is to address the specific issues surrounding the calls for an early postwar Westernizing of *nihonga*. This was inarguably the most pressing issue facing *nihonga* in the first couple of decades following WWII. *Nihonga* was faced with a supposed death, followed by cultural renewal of variant sorts. Renewal, it appeared to a number of artists and critics, could be delivered through the further Westernization of *nihonga* through *yōga* 洋画, or by the adoption and development of Western painting practices, styles and movements, within *nihonga*.<sup>3</sup> At this early postwar historical point, *nihonga* and *yōga* mostly remained relegated by conventions to separate spheres of cultural operation.

The very term *nihonga* carried the implication that the idiom could not be appreciated abroad on account of its hermetically sealed, pictorial language and artistic practices that were rooted in considerably older, premodern art traditions.<sup>4</sup> Aspirations to reform postwar *nihonga* were part of a period trend for internationalism in the broader field of modern painting in Japan. The progression of this trend would potentially expel the localism and nationalism characteristic of some *nihonga* in the early and mid-twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> *Nihonga* might, according to some artists and critics, attain internationalism through further enduring rapprochement with the idiom's ostensible antonym, *yōga*. In doing so, *nihonga* would be engaging a variety of pictorial styles and associated painting practices that were conventionally said to take place outside of the field of *nihonga* proper. In theory, this would eventually, perhaps finally, overcome the bisection of modern Japanese painting into *nihonga* and *yōga*, and result in a singular postwar painting idiom.

I suggest in this essay that the critical year for the inauguration of what came to be known as the postwar *metsubōron* was 1947, which saw the emergence of a small but critical corpus of essays penned by highly esteemed *yōga* painters. These essays featured in the *nihonga*-focussed journal, *Sansai* 三彩, and were written by Suda Kunitarō 須田国太郎 (1891–1961), Nakagawa Kazumasa 中川一政 (1893–1991), Ishii Hakutei 石井柏亭

2 Chelsea Foxwell charts some territory similar to mine. Her conception of the significance of the *metsubōron* for *nihonga* in general, however, goes in other scholarly directions. See Foxwell 2015.

3 *Yōga* typically refers to painting done in Japan by Japanese painters, usually in oil paints. *Yōga* began to take root in Japan from the mid-to-late nineteenth century, and usually addressed antecedent European painting in subject or style while undergoing a lengthy process of Japanization, particularly in terms of subject matter. *Yōga* later took stylistic and conceptual cues from further diverse cultural geographies over the course of the twentieth century.

4 Note that the *nihongalyōga* distinction was not entirely a product of modernism. The earlier structural binaries of *yamatōe* 大和絵/*karāe* 唐絵, Japan/China, were gradually usurped over the decades of the mid-to-later Meiji period by that of the *nihongalyōga* binary, or Japan/the West. The *nihongalyōga* binary also frequently seems more of a terminological distinction than one of actual pictorial practices. For a discussion of some of the terminological polysemy relating to the term *nihonga*, for example, *kanga* 漢画, *yamatōe*, *waga* 和画, *hōga* 邦画, *ranga* 蘭画, *seiyōga* 西洋画, and *seiga* 西画, see Furuta 2006, p. 219.

5 Disdain for localism, replaced by internationalist art aspiration, was a particular early postwar concern. See Mitsuda 2014, p. 565.

(1882–1958), and Kimura Shōhachi 木村莊八 (1893–1958). These texts in large part appear to have provided the critical foundation initiating the rhetoric that built up around postwar *nihonga's* future-oriented, Westernization discourse. The positions articulated by these four painters became the basis for the slightly later *metsubōron*, a term not widely in use at this historical point in relation to *nihonga*, and not one employed by these painters at their times of writing.

Hereafter I discuss in sequence the emergence of the postwar *metsubōron* and some conspicuous historical and terminological issues. Following this I make historical reference to the pervasiveness of the *nihongalyōga* divide over the course of Japanese modernism, focusing on the seemingly elusive desire for the unification of Japan's painting idioms that was at issue in the mid-twentieth century *metsubōron*. I then chart and critically discuss the commentaries in 1947 that inaugurated what subsequently became known as the *metsubōron*, with specific concern for calls for the rapprochement of Japanese and Western painting. I conclude by means of an extended coda, indicating some of the artistic directions the influential *metsubōron* had upon early postwar *nihonga* practitioners. This suggests that rather than “death,” the ostensible conflicts of *nihonga* and *yōga* were artistically productive.

### **The *Metsubōron***

Who first used the term *metsubō* to characterize early postwar *nihonga* remains opaque. Indeed, in none of the four *yōga* painters' commentaries I discuss below does the terminology appear, suggesting that it was not in common usage in 1947. It was, however, by 1949, when the editors of the *nihonga*-focused journal, *Sansai*, articulated a summary of contemporary issues mirroring *nihonga*. Entitled “Nihonga *metsubōron*” 日本画滅亡論, the editorial indicates that the term “*metsubōron*” was by then a recognized *nihonga* art world phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

But *metsubō* was not so much a newly coined locution used in relation to postwar *nihonga*; rather, it had specific Meiji period (1868–1912) roots. One of the earliest references to the relation between *nihonga* and the proposition of its death known to this author was set forth in 1899 by the painter Nakamura Fusetsu 中村不折 (1866–1943), who wrote

I note that Japanese-style painting has been infected with Western-style painting. [...] It would be more appropriate to call these works Western-style paintings rather than Japanese-style paintings.

He continued, “Japanese-style painting will disappear at length and Western painting alone will exist as painting.”<sup>7</sup> Nearly a decade later in June, 1910, the *nihonga* painter Hishida Shunsō 菱田春草 (1874–1911) wrote that *sumi* ink and exquisite lines were not the special province of *nihonga*. If they continued to be so regarded, wrote Hishida, *nihonga* would be “destroyed” (*metsubō* 滅亡).<sup>8</sup> Nakamura Fusetsu again predicted the downfall of Japanese

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6 Jihyō 1949, p. 14.

7 Nakamura Fusetsu cited in Furuta 2006, p. 222.

8 Hishida Shunsō cited in Aoki 1996, p. 91.

painting in print in 1911, foretelling *nihonga's* death as a protracted one, extending beyond its initial Meiji period parameters.<sup>9</sup>

The postwar *nihonga* debates appear to have been first stimulated by the early postwar critiques of contemporary poetry, *tanka* and haiku. The values of *tanka* were interrogated in print as early as March 1946, and the debates concerning the future of *tanka* went under a number of designations, including the *tanka hiteiron* 短歌否定論 (negation of *tanka* debate) and the *tanka ketsubetsuron* 短歌決別論 (the break with *tanka* debate).<sup>10</sup> Comparatively contemporaneous to postwar uncertainties about *tanka* was the publication of an influential article by the French-language scholar, Kuwabara Takeo 桑原武夫 (1904–1988). This was published in the November 1946 issue of *Sekai* 世界 as “Daini geijutsuron: Gendai haiku ni tsuite” 第二芸術論: 現代俳句について (Second-class art: About contemporary haiku).<sup>11</sup> Kuwabara here demoted contemporary haiku to the status of a lesser art, likening the schools of haiku to medieval guilds that supposed ancient authority, and gave to haiku a formalized, mannered, and so mediocre quality. Kuwabara disparagingly called contemporary haiku an activity for “whiling away the time or serving as a diversion for the ill or elderly [...]”<sup>12</sup> These antecedent and partly equivalent types of literary disputation subsequently metamorphosed into questions of a visual nature, fueling the ensuing *metsubōron*.

*Metsubō*, in its postwar, painting-related usages, was a term of extremity, even violence. It was used predominantly in art journalism to cast a shadow of anxiety over early postwar *nihonga* and its prospects.<sup>13</sup> Some latter-day commentaries referring to the mid-century *metsubōron* as the artistic backdrop have tended to exacerbate this violence. One of the more radical statements in this regard was made by philosopher Umehara Takeshi 梅原猛 (1925–2019). In the 1982 context of discussing the early career of the *nihonga* painter Ōno Hidetaka 大野秀隆 (1922–2002) and that artist’s supposed suffering from “Picasso-shock” as an artistic form of PTSD following his decommissioning from WWII conscription, Umehara wrote of young artists returning home from war to pursue radicalized avant-garde aesthetics. He proposed that, by drawing keenly from Western art rather than from local art traditions, young painters set *nihonga* on a suicide course.<sup>14</sup> For Umehara, *nihonga* was being killed off by its own practitioners, and Westernization was the means of dispatching it.

The art historian Kawakita Michiaki 河北倫明, a significant early postwar *metsubōron* contributor in his youth, also offered what was perhaps an immoderate characterization in

9 Nakamura Fusetsu cited in Furuta 2006, p. 222.

10 The thirty-one-syllable form of *tanka* was described in the Meiji period as “inadequate to the literature of today,” and disparaged as a form in which “no meaning could be discovered” (Katō 1993, pp. 448–49). However, these early postwar debates about haiku and *tanka*, and later *nihonga*, were largely about the value of some (but not all) traditions and their ongoing significance. In the wartime period too, in 1942, for example, the novelist and critic Sakaguchi Ango 坂口安吾 (1906–1955) had argued against the significance of tradition in architecture in the urban landscape. He stated that, if necessary, the temple Hōryūji 法隆寺 should be pulled down and a parking lot put in its place. For Sakaguchi, it was vital to address the realities of contemporary life and the degree to which tradition should influence it. See Mitsuda 2014, p. 551, and Katō 1993, p. 447.

11 Shimada 1995, p. 6.

12 Kuwabara Takeo cited in Jewel 2006, unpaginated.

13 Kitazawa 2003, p. 179.

14 Umehara 1982, p. 163.

later years. In the mid-1980s he wrote of the death of *nihonga* as being none too distant from the theory of the destruction of Japan (*Nihon metsubōron* 日本滅亡論).<sup>15</sup> But as another art historian, Kitazawa Noriaki, has pointed out, the early postwar period literature on *nihonga* did not specifically equate the destruction of Japan in WWII with the demise of *nihonga*.<sup>16</sup>

Another value-laden characterization in the postwar *nihonga* debates was “second-class art.” This was a nomination which not only appears to have migrated to *nihonga* from the late-1946 critical demotion of haiku to “second-class art” status by Kuwabara, but which also followed some of the lexical symmetry of one of the Japanese designations for WWII, (*dainiji sekai taisen* 第二次世界大戦), though in this latter case indicating chronology rather than a value judgment. Some circumspection, however, is necessary in dealing with the more extreme terminologies. Indeed, in discussing what I consider to be the originating mid-twentieth century *metsubōron* commentaries below, it will become apparent that the beginnings of the *metsubōron* were of a rather more benign character.<sup>17</sup>

The postwar death of *nihonga* was, like other cultural deaths, a form of rhetorical fiction. “Death” would necessarily be an occurrence of a once-and-for-all-time nature, and “destruction” depicted *nihonga* as either somehow in ruins, or ruined beyond retrieval, which it was not. Because *nihonga* continued to be practiced in various forms, such a death could only take place by distorting much about the actual contemporary and historical situations, or by mistaking period concerns for the longer history, or *raison d'être*, of *nihonga*. Perhaps, in preemptive form, the postwar *metsubōron* represented the reoccurrence of perennially unresolved issues in Japan's modern painting that have migrated, without resolution, into contemporary art.

The postwar *nihonga* debate also has important parallels within international modernist painting. The art historian and theorist Thierry de Duve has written, for example:

It is both amusing and pathetic that about once every five years the death of painting is announced, invariably followed by the news of its resurrection. This doesn't mean there isn't a certain truth hidden in this swinging of the pendulum—otherwise the phenomenon would have ceased long ago. Is it not symptomatic that just shortly after the invention of photography, Paul Delaroche prophesied the death of painting for the first time? This certainly points to one of the causes, not of the actual death of painting—there is no such thing—but rather of the feeling that painting was under threat. This feeling is as old as modernity [...].<sup>18</sup>

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15 Kawakita 1986, p. 6.

16 Kitazawa 2003, p. 178.

17 The early years of the *metsubōron* were not without acerbic commentators. For example, in 1948, the *yōga* painter Somiya Ichinen 曾宮一念 (1893–1994) leveled a concerted attack on *nihonga* that nonetheless reflected some of the 1947 calls for *nihongalyōga* rapprochement. Somiya thought *nihonga* had reached its terminal stage; the idiom was without life, mired in depression, and wore a death mask heavily made up (Hirano 1997, p. 189). Somiya gave five reasons for this: (1) mistakes in *nihonga* instruction in educational institutions; (2) a decreasing number of those disposed to *nihonga*; (3) lack of learning from nature and old paintings; (4) the relative ease of earning a living as a *nihonga* painter compared to the same for a *yōga* painter; and (5), the marked murdering of individual expression in *nihonga* (Hirano 1997, p. 189). Somiya concluded by asking readers to forgive his malicious tongue. Somiya 1948, p. 32.

18 Thierry de Duve cited in Danto 2003, unpaginated.

And in early postwar *nihonga*, the threats of modernity and Westernization were again anxiously felt in seemingly overwhelming ways, as they had earlier been in the very different cultural circumstances of the Meiji period.<sup>19</sup> In the early mid-twentieth century, however, the tradition of *nihonga*, was not being challenged. Predominantly, the concern was with *nihonga* in its present state, and its future forms, and what it should perhaps look like, address, or aspire to.

The majority of the arguments for or against the postwar demise of *nihonga* took place in the pages of *Sansai*. These took place throughout the years 1947–1949, but they also continued in variant forms through the early 1950s, and on into the present. The tenor of the debates over this 1947–1949 period tended to move from initial doubts about the future of *nihonga*, or pessimism regarding even *nihonga*'s short-term durability, to a later optimism that emerged from at least around 1949, particularly from younger artists.<sup>20</sup> *Nihonga*, then, went from being dismissed as a ghost of times past (*bōrei* 亡霊), to the postulation that the idiom was encountering a renaissance of sorts: death, then potential rebirth.<sup>21</sup>

The stakes were high. Could *nihonga* be eclipsed by *yōga* in the forward thrust of postwar modernity, relegated to a stockpile of merely historical interest? Or should *nihonga* be eventually and seamlessly absorbed into oil painting, so unifying the divided field of modern painting, *nihonga* and *yōga*? Alternatively, would a future with the divisions maintained be a possibility, or would *nihonga* have a future of an altogether different kind?

### Elusive Unification

*Nihonga* was, in originating conception, a composite form of painting. The art historian Satō Dōshin 佐藤道信, writing of the Tokyo-centric quotient of *nihonga*, noted that it was in 1885 that Okakura Tenshin 岡倉天心 (1862–1913) and Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) “initiated a movement to create ‘new *Nihonga*’ which would incorporate aspects of Western art.”<sup>22</sup> Even predating this, *nihonga* painters (or painters working within earlier Japanese painting traditions who contributed to forming concepts of modern *nihonga*) borrowed from *yōga*'s serviceable resources: perspective for compositional organization, chiaroscuro for further palpable modeling, and subject matter. *Yōga*, too, was frequently “Japanized” by its practitioners across the later nineteenth century and through the twentieth. This was particularly in regard to subject matter, and a contemporary example complicit with the emergence of the *metsubōron* would be Kitawaki Noboru's 北脇昇 (1901–1951) *Sesshū paranoia zusetzu* 雪舟パラノイア図説 (1947) (figure 1). In Kitawaki's oil on canvas, in the right section that apes the appearance of *sumi* ink conventions, the painter collaged together landscape elements from four different late fifteenth-century works by Sesshū Tōyō 雪舟等楊 (1420–1506). Utilizing the doubling concept of Dali's surrealist provenance, Kitawaki turned an amalgamation of Sesshū's craggy mountain forms into a number of obliquely angled human faces, especially conspicuous in the far-right section of the landscape.<sup>23</sup>

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19 Kawakita 1980, p. 103.

20 See, for example, *nihonga* painter Asakura Setsu's impassioned rallying call in “Riaru no jikaku.” Asakura 1949.

21 Suzuki 1949, p. 40.

22 Satō 1995, p. 79.

23 Tōkyō Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan 1997, p. 125.



Figure 1. Kitawaki Noboru 北脇昇, *Sesshū paranoia zusetsu* 雪舟パロノイア図説 (Explanatory diagram of Sesshū's paranoia; 1947). 60.6 x 72.0 cm. Collection of Tōkyō Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan. In Tōkyō Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan 1997, p. 125.

Centrist pictorial propositions combining elements of Japanese and Western painting, however, are much longer in evidence before the advent of modernism.

Approximately coincident with the mid-Meiji emergence of the mutually regarding painting discourses of *nihonga* and *yōga* were critical voices calling for painting's unification. Okakura Tenshin made one of the first statements of the kind in 1887: "I say to the Japanese artists, art is something to be shared by the entire world. There should be no distinction between the Orient and the West."<sup>24</sup> And then in 1896, Okakura responded when questioned whether oil painting included Japanese-style painting: "All works painted by Japanese people are Japanese-style paintings."<sup>25</sup> Inarguably the best known statement of this kind was by painter Hishida Shunsō in 1910:

I firmly believe that the day will come—of course not in the near future—when all the painting we know today by the different names of *yōga*, watercolor, and *Nihonga* will be regarded as *Nihonga*, that is, painting conceived and produced by Japanese people. There will be no difference between what we call *Nihonga* and *yōga*, except on one point: their different painting materials.<sup>26</sup>

24 Okakura Tenshin cited in Furuta 2006, p. 216.

25 Okakura Tenshin cited in Furuta 2006, p. 218.

26 Hishida Shunsō cited in McDermott 1995, p. 296.

The desire for a unified field of painting, an indefinitely deferred issue in Japan's modern painting, was also of significance in the postwar period following the crucial *metsubōron* period of the later 1940s. Painter-poet-writer Takiguchi Shūzō 瀧口修造 (1903–1979) hoped the day of unification for *nihonga* and *yōga* could yet arrive, writing in 1957 that: “I believe, rather, that there will come a time when the two will be unified.”<sup>27</sup> Recent commentators have also addressed the issue. Curator Furuta Ryō has written:

From after the war to the present day, both genres have been swallowed into the contemporary art trend so that the anatomy of conflict has been relatively nullified. [...] I suggested that the term “Japanese-style painting” should not be used in contemporary art history from the 1960s onwards. I recommended unifying everything into “painting” and, if necessary, distinguishing the material as “*kōsai* [*nikawa* 膠 paint]” and “*yusai* [oil paint].”<sup>28</sup>

Furuta's comments are largely in accord with Hishida's about *nihonga's* and *yōga's* respective painting materials. His vision of an “anatomy of conflict” being nullified, however, is suspect. For the unification of painting has remained elusive, even in contemporary times. Hishida's seemingly prophetic words intuiting modern Japanese painting's unification, however, appeared to approach realization in 1947. This was when issues leading to the slightly later claims about *nihonga's* postwar death were first raised, later exaggerated. They were made by hybrid *yōga* painters, looking across the bisection of modern painting, at *nihonga*.

### ***Metsubōron* Beginnings: Oil Painters Regarding *Nihonga***

The rhetoric giving rise to the demise of *nihonga* debate began with a number of articles in the journal *Sansai* in 1947, the principal print forum for discussions about the postwar roles of *nihonga*. These were authored by influential *yōga* painters born in the late nineteenth century: Suda, Nakagawa, Ishii and Kimura. What distinguished these artists was their range of cultural activities. Suda was also an academic, occasionally painted *nihonga*, and produced an ostensible fusion of Eastern and Western painting practices in oils; Nakagawa engaged the indigenized form of Chinese literati painting (*nanga* 南画), and practiced calligraphy in addition to ceramic decoration; Ishii was one of the founders of the modern printmaking movement (*sōsaku hanga* 創作版画) and occasionally made *nihonga*-type painting; Kimura was additionally an illustrator. All four were polemical essayists and senior artists with established reputations. These four took issue with a variety of *nihonga*-related issues, primarily dealing though with the rapprochements of *nihonga* and *yōga*, thus engendering the critical beginnings of the postwar *nihonga* debates.

It is notable that these formative *metsubōron* critiques were articulated one-sidedly by *yōga* painters who happened to work in media other than oils. In this sense, their observations could be considered art-political: they were painters overlooking the historical bisection of painting from the position of *yōga*, discerning *nihonga* becoming incrementally closer to their own art practices. This is of some significance because there was no

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27 Takiguchi 2012, p. 74.

28 Furuta 2006, p. 228.



comparable *yōga metsubōron* in this period. As a later *metsubōron* contributor, the *nihonga* painter Asakura Setsu 朝倉攝 (1922–2014), was to write in 1949, *yōga* was filled with “made in Japan” type “imitations,” and frequently aped recent European painting precedents and practices.<sup>29</sup> *Yōga* had also long been beset by problems of its own kind, and so perhaps one way of not addressing these was for *yōga* painters to direct attention to the ostensible malaise afflicting *nihonga*.

It may come as some surprise that *nihonga* painters were largely uninvolved in the first years of the *metsubōron* from 1947. Asakura pointed out in 1949 that *nihonga* painters were almost entirely absent from the *metsubōron* debates to date. Asakura was indeed among the first practitioners of *nihonga* to come to the defense of her besieged idiom.<sup>30</sup> Highly regarded *nihonga* painters may not have felt threatened by the critiques, particularly since many originated in the sometimes anti-*nihonga* position of *yōga*. But it remains that neither *nihonga* painters of reputation from an older generation, nor younger radicals, came forward in print until 1949 to defend *nihonga* publicly against its alleged shortcomings. As such, in the early years of discussion giving rise to the *metsubōron*, *nihonga* was essentially being critiqued from the outside, by representatives of its supposed rival, *yōga*, and also by art critics and art historians.<sup>31</sup>

In this regard, the four essays discussed below can implicitly be understood as art-political polemics by painters in elevated positions. Suda, for example, had been admitted to the highest artistic honor of Teikoku Geijutsuin 帝国芸術院 (Imperial Arts Academy) in 1947.<sup>32</sup> But honors aside, these were also senior and practicing *yōga* painters, ones who had forged and developed the very idiom they worked in over decades. The early postwar period was a time of recovery, rupture, and disarray, in which these painters took advantage of their positions to assert the media, and associated painting practices, that were in postwar ascendancy.

Suda's “Seiyōga kara nihonga o miru” 西洋画から日本画を見る began from his personal experience as an artist who undertook Western art training, even though his background was also in Eastern art. He claimed in-depth familiarity with two broad traditions of painting, and did not distinguish himself as an arbiter of either. In Suda's conception, Eastern painting was embodied by “empty space” (*yohaku* 余白) in which the unpainted areas became, in a sense, the “painted,” distinguished from the typical all-over surface application of oil paint on canvas.<sup>33</sup> The spatial character of Western painting, for Suda, arose with *chiaroscuro* in ancient Greek painting, and then the later invention of pictorial perspective.<sup>34</sup> But, Suda noted, Eastern art was never entirely ignorant of, nor unconcerned,

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29 Asakura 1949, p. 43.

30 Asakura 1949, p. 41.

31 Pictorial propositions, and not the penning of essays, stand as an alternative means of rebuttal. Curator Furuta Ryō offers a significant example of this sort: “During his final years [Yokoyama] Taikan was most interested in the future of Nihonga. The cause for this focus can be found in the immediate post war eruption of the ‘theory that Nihonga was dead’ and the resulting strong criticism that Nihonga was a form of an art dedicated to national purity. [...] Even at the age of almost 90 years old, Taikan continued to produce works and discuss the revival of Nihonga. Taikan never took on any disciples or followers throughout his life, and can be said to have continued his solitary battle until his final period” (Furuta 2008, p. 14).

32 Suda 1947, p. 25.

33 Suda 1947, p. 22.

34 Suda 1947, p. 22.

with *chiaroscuro* or perspective. Western pictorial organization, he implied, was also part of the formal repertoire of Eastern art.<sup>35</sup> East and West were partially congruent, as Suda demonstrated in his own mature painting practices.

Suda thought that within early postwar *nihonga*, one approach was to adopt *yōga*'s appearance, such that the two were barely visually distinguishable. But while Suda rejected the idea that *yōga* and *nihonga* were essentially characterized by differences in painting materials and appearances, he understood that contemporary *nihonga* had unmistakably entered *yōga*'s territory, and wondered what future directions *nihonga* might take.<sup>36</sup> In Suda's early postwar perception, *nihonga* was becoming increasingly cognizant and adoptive of *yōga*'s spatial conventions. Some contemporary *nihonga* painters were producing types of Westernized *nihonga* which persuaded Suda that they wanted to be *yōga* painters. *Nihonga* painters were courting the resources of *yōga*, and not the reverse.

For Nakagawa Kazumasa in his essay "Nihonga o dō miru" 日本画をどう見る, the major distinction between *nihonga* and *yōga* was their respective, though essentialist, painting materials—oils, or mineral pigments with a binding agent.<sup>37</sup> Another potential difference for him, however, was that *yōga* painters used their "heads," while *nihonga* painters used their "hands."<sup>38</sup> Discerning a technical amateurism in the paintings of Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Nakagawa considered their techniques to arise from the individuals themselves in relation to the demands of their respective painting practices. Hence, the individual oil painter determined what was technically sufficient to arrive at particular pictorial effects. The *nihonga* painter, on the other hand, cobbled together pictorial effects from an already existing repertoire of techniques.

In Nakagawa's view, oil painting was a "simple and honest art" (*junboku bijutsu* 純朴美術), whose exemplary practitioners were found in early European modernism (and not, interestingly, among modern Japanese oil painters, of whom the author could count himself).<sup>39</sup> It was ideally pursued in individually expressive, and technically unmediated, ways. Nakagawa conceived *yōga* as technically creative, and continually refashioned anew according to the creative aims of the individual artist.

By contrast, the technical skills of *nihonga*, for Nakagawa, resulted in passivity in artistic production. They demonstrated a mastery of what the painter had been taught, rather than what he or she had individually created. In this sense, painting *nihonga* was akin to a performance of technical skill; painters were technicians as opposed to individual creative artists. And as technical performances, *nihonga* was the staging of somebody else's techniques and processes, enacting the past, rather than proposing new painting directions.

Nakagawa went on to express a distinctively Western aesthetic attitude to painting, one that drew on Kantian aesthetics and the usual Western distinctions about fine art concepts. He noted that the "honest art" of oil painting did not have any practical use value. If art had a "purpose," he believed, it could not be an honest one.<sup>40</sup> He turned to *haikai* by Matsuo

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35 Suda 1947, p. 23.

36 Suda 1947, p. 25.

37 Nakagawa 1947, p. 3.

38 Nakagawa 1947, p. 3.

39 Nakagawa 1947, p. 3.

40 Nakagawa 1947, p. 3.

Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644–1694) and Yosa Buson 与謝蕪村 (1716–1784) to illustrate his point. Their poetry fulfilled no practical use in daily life, and was without any particular relation to the public masses.<sup>41</sup> Buson's "Cuckoo, flying obliquely over Heian-jō" (*hototogisu Heianjō o sujikai ni* ほととぎす平安城を斜かひに) embodied the qualities of Nakagawa's honest, top-tiered art.<sup>42</sup>

There were of course useful and purposeful arts, Nakagawa conceded, and among (oil) painting examples, he included portraits, religious art, and war and reportage imagery. However, the core of art was its purposelessness. Use-values could only paralyze painting, relegating it to a second level, somewhat as haiku had been demoted to a lesser creative rung in 1946. Nakagawa was dissatisfied with contemporary *nihonga* painters' insistence on explaining "things" (*monogoto* 物事). Such "useful" paintings were behind the times of more progressive *yōga*.<sup>43</sup> Having elaborated at length on differences, Nakagawa concluded by calling for the abolishment of distinctions between *nihonga* and *yōga*.<sup>44</sup>

But if *nihonga* was behind the times, so also were Nakagawa's exemplars. Bashō was centuries old and with a literary provenance. Buson was an Edo-period painter/poet/calligrapher, though Nakagawa privileged his verse. Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne were among the European inspirations for early Japanese oil painting (post-impressionist and expressionist, as these artists were received in Japan) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But these painters had died more than half a century before Nakagawa's critique.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Nakagawa had practically nothing to say about Japanese painting over the centuries prior to the time of his writing. Such grand elisions came to characterize the early postwar *metsubōron*. It was almost as if thinking about significant art and artists in the early postwar period had never moved beyond the Meiji period.

Ishii Hakutei's "Waga no zento" 和画の前途 avoided conventional terminology. *Nihonga* was not to be used, nor was *yōga*. Ishii stated that even the Tokyo School of Fine Arts had changed the name of its department of Western-style painting from *seiyōgaka* 西洋画科, signaling a Western painting orientation, to *aburagaka* 油画科 (Department of Oil Painting), indicating that the institution was no longer concerned with oil painting's geographic origins or the cultural implications these might entail. Ishii's reluctance to use the designations *nihonga* and *yōga* also suggested that these were outdated terms. Extending Ishii's characterization in this respect, oil painting might no longer be Western, might potentially have become Japanese through the passage of time since its later Edo period introduction, or even a painting medium now without regional affiliation. Perhaps early postwar "oil painting" could name painting aspiring to international engagement and participation.

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41 Nakagawa 1947, pp. 3–4.

42 Nakagawa 1947, p. 4.

43 Nakagawa 1947, p. 4.

44 Nakagawa 1947, p. 5.

45 Many Western artists mentioned in texts concerning the early postwar *nihonga* debates were introduced to Japan during the Meiji period, or shortly afterwards. Contemporary photographer Morimura Yasumasa 森村泰昌 (b. 1951), noted of his formative postwar art education: "In terms of both knowledge (textbooks) and techniques (materials and methodology), the Western art that was introduced to Japan during the Meiji period was the basis of my art education, as someone who was born in Japan in 1951." Even many years after the early postwar *nihonga* debates, Western artists introduced to Japan during the Meiji period appear to have remained the salient ones in art education and art circles. Morimura Yasumasa cited in Uematsu 2016, p. 165.

In analogous fashion, Ishii proposed the term *kōsai* 膠彩 (signaling the *nikawa* binding agent and colored mineral pigments) as a substitute for the designation, *nihonga*. Like *abura* 油 (oils), *kōsai* appeared to obviate many of the national, political, geographical, and cultural implications of *nihonga* (“Japanese” painting). In using *kōsai*, there would no longer be a specifying “Japan (*nihon*)” in the name for one half of modern painting.

But instead of maintaining a bisection of painting through the employment of *nihonga* and *yōga*, or through his surrogates of *abura* and *kōsai*, Ishii proposed the single unifying term, *waga* 和画 (Japanese painting), to refer to all painting done by Japanese artists. Why should painting alone be singled out for division into Western and Japanese forms, he asked, when sculpture and architecture, say, were not divided along similar lines?<sup>46</sup> Ishii’s conception was, however, not unproblematic. For example, Buddhist woodcarvers had largely been tasked with originating Japan’s modern sculptural idiom while Western-style sculpture was increasingly promoted from the early twentieth century in the government-sponsored salons. Architecture similarly had its modern divisions and cultural allegiances.

Ishii’s disillusionment with the partitioning of painting was practically related to his artistic activities. He had felt troubled when replying to his interlocutors about his particular specialty, because he worked in oil paints, watercolors, sumi ink, and mineral pigments. Rembrandt was never asked to make distinctions between being a painter and a printmaker.<sup>47</sup> Michelangelo, he wrote, was both painter and sculptor. Again, as in Nakagawa’s essay, we can observe here a rhetorical recession into the Western past for examples to elucidate vexations concerning mid-twentieth-century Japanese painters. But in Ishii’s view, a painting smelling of oil paint was produced by the hand of a practitioner of *waga*, and works fashioned from *nikawa* and mineral pigments (*nihonga*) were also “Japanese painting (*waga*).”<sup>48</sup>

Even so, Ishii was pessimistic about the future of Japanese painting. One issue he discerned—which also applied to other traditional arts such as *noh* theater and *bunraku* puppetry—was that no new generation of revered exponents was emerging to take over.<sup>49</sup> Painters of the past had copied old pictures and learned the traditions along with brush techniques, but these practices were disappearing in the postwar art world. Ishii also thought that the quality of the materials for painting, such as the binding agent *nikawa*, was worsening. He also denigrated imported painting materials. Their use resulted in diminished visual beauty.<sup>50</sup>

Ishii had long been convinced of the decline of Japanese painting. A near half-century earlier in 1902 he had written of his desire to see a syncretic field of painting develop that “would synthesize *yōga* and *nihonga* in the name of a ‘new, perfect Japanese painting.’”<sup>51</sup> Even at this earlier time, however, he had been disenchanted with *yōga* and *nihonga*, questioned

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46 Ishii 1947, p. 27.

47 While Ishii sought to unify Rembrandt’s artistic practices, art historical scholarship indicates Rembrandt himself made significant practical distinctions. Svetlana Alpers writes, for example, “One of the remarkable things about Rembrandt’s production as an artist is the almost total separation that he maintained between the three media in which he worked—drawing, painting, and etching.” Alpers 1990, p. 71.

48 Ishii 1947, p. 27.

49 Ishii 1947, p. 27.

50 Ishii 1947, p. 28. Perhaps Ishii was referring to imported Western pigments, though it is unclear. Japanese painters had long imported a number of painting materials. Historically, imports from China were of a higher quality than was usually available in Japan.

51 Ishii Hakutei cited in Hirayama 1996, p. 58.

whether *nihonga* was superior or inferior to *yōga*, and wondered whether *nihonga* would “be more prosperous in the future, with its characteristics intact, or will it eventually perish?” According to art historian Mikiko Hirayama, Ishii came to conclude that any and all paintings by a Japanese hand would eventually be called “Japanese painting.”<sup>52</sup> In this respect, Ishii’s views had largely not changed over half a century.

Several of these mid-twentieth-century *nihonga* art world positional statements published in *Sansai* embodied a distinctive Meiji period character. One reason was that the authors had acquired their own formative artistic educations at that time. And indeed, for some *metsubōron* commentators, the early postwar period was in fact comparable to the Meiji Restoration of 1868. While there are important political implications to the use of *ishin* in relation to intellectual positions established in the 1930s, my concern here is specifically with its usage in the context of early postwar *nihonga* and its future prospects. In 1952, for example, the art historian Kitakawa Momoo 北川桃雄 (1899–1969) explicitly referred to the postwar period as a “second restoration” (*daini ishin* 第二維新).<sup>53</sup> Other commentators in the same year were implicitly referring to it. Painter Asada Benji 麻田辨次 (1900–1984) wrote of the early postwar period as one in which Japan was once again open to other countries following an Edo-period-type closure (*sakoku* 鎖国).<sup>54</sup> *Nihonga* painter Iwasaki Taku 岩崎鐸 (1913–1988) noted that a modern sense of *nihonga* was coming, giving birth to an art that was not simply the exotic local color of a single island nation.<sup>55</sup> In particular cases, like the views expressed by Ishii, Meiji period rhetoric could be overlaid on early postwar cultural situations.

A final *yōga*-based commentator active in 1947 was Kimura Shōhachi who had decided, as had others before him, that the distinction between *nihonga* and *yōga* was essentially one of materials. But for this painter, *nihonga* and *yōga* could not unify because they had differing forms of artistic consciousness.<sup>56</sup> For Kimura, *nihonga* and *yōga* were as different as *shamisen* and piano.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Kimura also referred to the two painting traditions as “mortal enemies” (*shiteki* 死敵).<sup>58</sup> *Nihonga* wants to be like *nihonga*, he wrote, and *yōga* like *yōga*.<sup>59</sup>

Chronologically following the essays by his *yōga* peers, Kimura’s position was a polemical one of antithetical concern, that was never true in any absolute way. Variant forms of the Westernization of *nihonga*, and the Japanization of oil painting, had taken place for well over half a century by this point. But for Kimura, an amalgamated idiom was monstrous. The time of the “*nue*” 鶺鴒, he wrote, was over.<sup>60</sup> In referring to the mythical

52 Hirayama 1996, p. 59.

53 Kitakawa 1952, p. 42.

54 Asada Benji cited in *Sansai* 1952b, p. 64.

55 Iwasaki Taku cited in *Sansai* 1952b, p. 60.

56 Kimura 1947, p. 12.

57 Kimura 1947, p. 13.

58 Kimura 1947, p. 12.

59 For Kimura, *nihonga* and *yōga* possessed distinctive spirits (*esupuri* エスプリ), and these were embodied in the particular painting materials used (Kimura 1947, p. 12). *Nihonga* and *yōga* were also defined for him by characteristic forms of aesthetic feeling or consciousness (*bikan* 美感). Kimura 1947, p. 15.

60 A Meiji period criticism utilizing the term *nue* can also be found in relation to Takeuchi Seiō’s 竹内栖鳳 (1864–1942) *Byōji fukēn* 猫兒負喧 (Cat with Kittens; 1892), a painting that amalgamated elements of various schools of Japanese painting without apparently achieving a unity of the parts in the whole. This term *nue* as used in the Meiji and Taishō periods could also refer to an incongruous amalgamation of Western and Japanese cultures, such as a man dressed formally in kimono while wearing a Western top hat. See Szostak 2005, p. 34.

beast mentioned in the *Heike monogatari* that was a single entity, though also a frightening and unnatural composite of parts (the head of a monkey, the body of a badger, a tiger's legs, and the tail of a snake), Kimura was implying that a satisfactory fusion was fictitious.<sup>61</sup> For Kimura, *nihonga* and *yōga* were as water and oil—no amount of mixing could result in a lasting fusion.

The principal concern with *nihonga* for senior *yōga* painters in 1947 was whether *nihonga* and *yōga* should, or could, unify. This had been a practical and conceptual issue percolating through modern Japanese painting from the late nineteenth century, and it was now assuming reinvigorated critical importance as painters began to reflect on their artistic traditions, and their relations to them, as the sense of a new postwar era was beginning to take shape. The chasm dividing *nihonga* and *yōga* appeared to several of these 1947 commentators to have been exaggerated. Little apart from the materials used, oils or mineral pigments, seemed to distinguish them. Suda thought that *nihonga* had become like *yōga* to the degree that the two could appear almost visually identical. Nakagawa considered the two traditions to be distinguished only by their materials, though *yōga* was the more intellectual whereas *nihonga* was mired in adherence to slavish and uncreative technical facility. He did, however, think the distinctions between *nihonga* and *yōga* should be abolished. Ishii had gone further, doing away with the terms of *nihonga* and *yōga* altogether. In their place, he advocated the use of *waga*, uniting modern Japanese painting under a single term. Among the *Sansai yōga* critics of *nihonga* in 1947, only Kimura believed that the modern painting idioms could not be reconciled.

These dialogues implied that a unified painting idiom would probably obliterate much of the traditions of both *nihonga* and *yōga*, though there was no crisis concerning *yōga* comparable to that coalescing around *nihonga* in the early postwar period. Historically, *nihonga* and *yōga* had been mutually regarding painting discourses. But they also held or adhered to separate and distinct techniques, normative subjects and motifs, had distinctive histories, and differed in their reverences for particular lineages, personages, geographies, seminal works, and institutions. The future of painting as posited in 1947 was an intriguing one. *Nihonga* might now only have a past, and if it were to have a future at all, it would go by another name in forging a new postwar identity. This could have been *kōsaiga* 膠彩画, perhaps, or Ishii's *waga*, though neither of these ultimately prevailed over the status quo of *nihonga* and *yōga* in the early postwar period. The revival of the painting unification dialogue in the early postwar period did, however, have marked effects on early postwar painting production.

### Coda

*Nihonga* was faulted for many more diverse issues in the subsequent years of the late 1940s' *metsubōron* and also in the years thereafter, often in regard to Western painting-related concerns: *nihonga's* generalized conservatism, particularly regarding themes and subjects that neither resonated with contemporary society, nor engaged postwar realities; the inability to compete with or compare favorably to international art trends; implicit restrictions on individual artistic proclivities in favor of propagating technical or thematic conventions; mannerism; anti-humanism; and a generalized creative exhaustion. *Nihonga's* institutions

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61 Kimura 1947, p. 15.

were said to be feudal organizations, embodied by top-down hierarchies. Painters were said to be complicit, maintaining the status quo propagated by senior generations schooled in ways that were outdated.

*Metsubōron* theorists were fundamentally concerned with what and how to paint at the dawn of a new age, and what *nihonga* ought to look like in this postwar period. At stake were both the contemporary circumstances of *nihonga* and its future. Westernizing *nihonga* further was the solution proposed by artists and critics for the idiom's troubled state, both in the critical year of 1947 when Suda, Nakagawa, Ishii, and Kimura expressed their views on *nihonga*, and in the years thereafter through to at least the early 1960s.<sup>62</sup> This Westernization, it appeared to many artists and critics, was already long in evidence, and could eventually result in a singular postwar painting idiom. In many ways, then, the early postwar *metsubōron* beginnings as they were shaped in 1947 were simply the verbal acknowledgement, and perhaps encouragement, of what had been taking place in regard to *nihonga* for decades. Indeed, many of the issues addressed in the postwar dialogues had been part of the formative Meiji period conceptions integral to the birth of *nihonga*. In Westernizing *nihonga*, these Meiji period concerns were being revived, bolstered, and pushed into the critical foreground as crucial to the directions *nihonga* should take in the postwar period.

But this is not to say that every *nihonga* painter was compelled to suppress the tradition(s) that he or she had trained in and thereafter practiced and developed. Nor would I want to imply that every artist was engaged with Western painting in the early postwar period for significant stretches of time. Even though some artists and critics had called for the dispensation of the past, or called for a *nihonga* made anew for postwar realities, it was usually not the case that the themes, formats, and materials of prewar and wartime painting were now irrelevant to *nihonga*. Nor were all *nihonga* painters enjoined to change their artistic practices and start afresh with subjects that dealt with postwar realities, or to use pigment treatments that aped the look of *yōga*, or to create *nihonga* that was otherwise indistinguishable from *yōga* in subjects, styles, and perhaps even ideologies. The evidence for this is found in the pages of *Sansai* during the early years of the debates. The illustrations that were editorially privileged were the usually conservative and decorative images of *nihonga* censured by the more acerbic of *metsubōron* critics. These were still lifes or pictures of animals, landscapes, and *bijinga* 美人画 (figure 2).<sup>63</sup> This indicates the prestige and importance, even the centrality, of this kind of imagery in the early postwar period. It was also not usually imagery by the young and passionate individuals or vanguards of *nihonga* that featured in these pages. Rather, it was the sketches and paintings of the prominent figures from earlier generations, established artists with significant reputations. The early

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62 It would be incorrect to conclude that *nihonga's* seemingly perilous situation had been righted by the end of the 1940s or even in the following decades. Articles, positional statements, and verbal reflections of variant kinds continued to condemn or praise *nihonga* thereafter. For example, in a special issue of *Sansai* in 1952 which reported on the status and prospects of contemporary *nihonga*, artists and critics mostly restated or elaborated on concerns that had arisen in the *metsubōron* between the years 1947–1949. See *Sansai* 1952a and *Sansai* 1952b.

63 Note that this image differs slightly from the often reproduced painting of the same name in the collection of Kyōto Furitsu Ōki Kōtō Gakkō 京都府立鴨沂高等学校.



Figure 2. Uemura Shōen 上村松園,  
*Yūgure* 夕暮 (Twilight; 1941). Collection  
unknown. In Sansai 三彩, ed. *Sansai 2*  
(1946), p. 10.

*metsubōron* rhetoric, however, was followed by the formation of a pictorial corpus of more radically Westernized *nihonga* by those of both older and younger generations.

Many *nihonga* painters engaged with pictorial Westernization fleetingly or in piecemeal ways, limited to only a small number of works, or to individual works that used Western painting in partial ways. Some of the more overt Western art concerns included subject matter, formal or compositional concerns, and the employment of European and American modernisms: prewar expressionism, cubism and surrealism, and postwar Parisian Salon de Mai, Art Informel, and Abstract Expressionism, for example. A further concern was with the impasto layering or coagulations of pigments by which artists attempted to procure for *nihonga* something of the *matière* of oil painting.

But it is also important to note that there was a seemingly totalizing element stemming from the influence of the postwar *metsubōron*, one that cut across the generations, *nihonga* art world status, reputation, institutional affiliations, and apparent stylistic allegiances and idiosyncrasies. While each artistic case has its particularities of crucial significance, the production of Westernized *nihonga* in the early postwar period was indicative of this or that painter or art organization participating in a new postwar sense of *nihonga* modernity, even if that sense of new modernity was only defined by attempting or advocating forms of Westernized *nihonga*.

The scope of this Westernized *nihonga* advocacy included major artists of the prewar generation who were both inspired by and practiced variant forms of Western painting in *nihonga* in the postwar period. They include Dōmoto Inshō 堂本印象 (1891–1975) (figure 3), a painter using mineral pigments and *nihonga* materials while utilizing Western ways of





Figure 3. Dōmoto Inshō 堂本印象, *Hachi jikan* 八時間 (8 Hours; 1951). 130.0 x 160.0 cm. Collection of Kyōto Furitsu Dōmoto Inshō Bijutsukan 京都府立堂本印象美術館. In *Chō "nihonga" modanizumu* 超「日本画」モダニズム, ed. Kyōto Furitsu Dōmoto Inshō Bijutsukan. Kyōto Furitsu Dōmoto Inshō Bijutsukan, 2008, p. 22.



Figure 4. Ikeda Yōson 池田遙邨, *Sengo no Ōsaka* 戦後の大阪 (Postwar Osaka; detail; 1951). 130 x 112 cm. Collection of Ōsaka-shi Shōbōkyoku 大阪市消防局. In *Asahi Shinbun Ōsaka Honsha Kikakubu* 朝日新聞大阪本社企画部, ed. *Ikeda Yōson kaiko ten* 池田遙邨回顧展. Asahi Shinbunsha, 1982, p. 33.

thinking about art through composition, coloring, and perspective;<sup>64</sup> Yamaguchi Hōshun 山口蓬春 (1893–1971) and Nakamura Gakuryō 中村岳陵 (1890–1969); the painting by Ikeda Yōson 池田遙邨 (1895–1988), *Sengo no Ōsaka* 戦後の大阪 (1951) (figure 4), that was inspired by Paul Klee (1879–1940) and exhibited in the seventh Nitten; the Western-type *nihonga* of Ono Chikkyō 小野竹喬 (1889–1979), in both his early and later oeuvres. As for the near-abstractions of Fukuda Heihachirō 福田平八郎 (1892–1974) and Tokuoka Shinsen 徳岡神泉 (1896–1972), they appear to accept both deeply Japan-traditional, and European-American modernist, interpretative readings.<sup>65</sup> Among these painters, Ono, Ikeda, Dōmoto, Fukuda, Tokuoka, Yamaguchi, and also Dōmoto's head *juku* student, Miwa Chōsei 三輪晁勢 (1901–1983), all held organizational affiliation with the Nitten, the most significant postwar *Kanten* successor and the dominant exhibition forum in the early postwar years.<sup>66</sup>

What was distinctive about the works of these Nitten painters was the frequently conservative level of abstraction, though Dōmoto may be considered an exception. They often shared a predilection for the adoption of reduced palettes dominated by a color or two, and the inclusion of largely blank or near-blank areas of pictorial space somewhat reminiscent of attenuated modernist color-field painting. Fukuda Heihachirō's *Shinsetsu* 新雪 (1948), for example, had a palette restricted to whites and greys for a scene celebrating snow covering the ground and shallow set stones, in what is ostensibly a Japanese garden. His *Mizu* 水 (1958) in blue and green represented swirling movements on the meniscus. Tokuoka Shinsen's *Nagare* 流れ (1954) (figure 5) portrayed a brown ground bisected by a horizontal blue flow of paint through the center, resembling the mid-twentieth century American color-field paintings of Mark Rothko in *No.61 (Rust and Blue)* (1953), for example. Tokuoka's *Akamatsu* 赤松 (1956) had three tree trunks represented and these were set against a further diluted brown background that could be read as a conservative take on American Barnett Newman's "zips." Miwa's geometricized paintings also recalled Newman's "zips." One of Miwa's titles was *Shubashira* 朱柱 (1961) (figure 6), which grounded the painting in the representational field of traditional sanctuary architecture.

Nitten-affiliated abstraction was conservative because, even as representational imagery was to degrees eroded by the painters, stylized, and reduced in palette range, painting titles could allege entirely representational content. This content commonly referred to traditional Japanese aesthetic sensibilities—poeticized landscapes or seasonal elements, the snow on garden stones, rippling water, flora and fauna—all imagery at the thematic and aesthetic core of the *kachōfūgetsu* 花鳥風月 (nature-based and poeticized imagery) sensibility. The art journalist Hashimoto Kizō 橋本喜三 (b. 1912) wrote that within the Nitten in the

64 Kitakawa 1952, p. 37.

65 Kitakawa 1952, p. 37.

66 *Kanten* (governmental exhibitions) is an umbrella term referring to public competitive art exhibitions sponsored by the Japanese government, usually through the Ministry of Education. The Nitten was the last major manifestation of the sequence of government-sponsored exhibitions. Waei Taishō Nihon Bijutsu Yōgo Jiten Henshū Iinkai 1990, p. 132. A summary outline of the major formal *kanten* organizations and reorganizations is as follows: the Ministry of Education Art Exhibition (Bunten) was established in 1907 and ran until 1918, when it was reorganized as the Imperial Academy Art Exhibition (Teiten) until 1934. Subsequently it was reorganized as the New Ministry of Education Art Exhibition (Shin Bunten) from 1935–1943, then the Special Wartime Exhibition in 1944, becoming the Nitten from 1946. Retaining the Nitten name, the exhibition forum relinquished its government affiliation in 1958, becoming a private organization, which it has remained since. Tōkyō-to Teien Bijutsukan 1992, p. 148.



Figure 5. Tokuoka Shinsen 徳岡神泉, *Nagare* 流れ (Stream; 1954). 137.0 x 170.0 cm. Collection of Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan 京都市美術館. In *1950 nendai Kyōto no nihonga: Nenshō no toki* 1950年代京都の日本画: 燃焼の時代, ed. Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan. Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan, 1990, p. 18.



Figure 6. Miwa Chōsei 三輪晁勢, *Shubashira* 朱柱 (Vermillion Pillars; 1961). 192.0 x 142.0 cm. Collection of Nihon Geijutsuin. In *1950 nendai Kyōto no nihonga: Nenshō no toki*, ed. Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan. Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan, 1990, p. 24.

1950s and 1960s, the pursuit of abstraction was generally censured and became increasingly so over that period. The majority of Nitten artists engaging with abstraction eventually shifted back to increasingly representational imagery, bringing an end to the trend of an intensifying Westernization in painting via abstraction in that particular forum at that point in recent history.<sup>67</sup>

The figures who defined significant, though relatively conservative, threads within the postwar generations of *nihonga*, include the following: the Nitten's Higashiyama Kaii 東山魁夷 (1908–1999), Hirayama Ikuo 平山郁夫 (1930–2009) of the Inten, and Kayama Matazō 加山又造 (1927–2004) of the Shinseisaku Kyōkai 新制作協会 (formerly the Sōzō Bijutsu Kyōkai 創造美術協会 established in 1948 in opposition to the Nitten).<sup>68</sup> These three painters similarly pursued *yōga*-type orientations in their own *nihonga* vocations, particularly in their early postwar careers.<sup>69</sup> Higashiyama, for example, was primarily a landscape painter who began to make boldly simplified and abstracted compositions that became evermore abstracted in the early postwar years.<sup>70</sup> His early body of work followed after Western-style painting for its address to realism, though the difference between *nihonga* and *yōga* was for him at the time probably “not of much concern.”<sup>71</sup>

Higashiyama made his major postwar *nihonga* debut with the realistic though romanticized mountain landscape of *Zanshō* 残照 (1947), a work purchased by the government.<sup>72</sup> One of the most representative and well-known *nihonga* paintings of the early postwar period, however, and certainly Higashiyama's most well-known work, was *Michi* 道 (1950) (figure 7). This has been called “a major breakthrough in postwar *nihonga*,” and a work by a painter “acutely conscious of oil painting.”<sup>73</sup> Sketched before the war, the scene was modeled on a “road leading to the Tanesashi Coast in Hachinohe, Aomori Prefecture.”<sup>74</sup> Revisiting the livestock farm area in 1950, Higashiyama re-sketched the scene but eliminated the fences, horses, and lighthouse. Instead he concentrated on the road, soil, and the grass moist with dew.<sup>75</sup> This pictorial shift was from an earlier realism to an increasing abstraction that pushed his painting toward quite literal “color-field” painting, and abstraction through the elimination of representational details. Higashiyama's pictorial approach in *Michi* eschewed lines in favor of suffused brushwork and coloring. With all the major details erased except the field, path, and a minimal sky, the subject signified what

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67 Hashimoto 1986, p. 108. For the most significant scholarly treatment of Dōmoto's oeuvre, see Tsuchikane 2009.

68 Inten is the commonly used abbreviation for the exhibiting forum, the Nihon Bijutsuin 日本美術院 (Japan Art Institute), established in 1898. Sōzō Bijutsu members formed the core of the *nihonga* section of the Shinseisaku Kyōkai from 1951.

69 In the Nitten, Higashiyama was known as one of the “three mountains” 三山, the other two being Takayama Tatsuo 高山辰夫 (1912–2007) and Sugiyama Yasushi 杉山寧 (1909–1993). The name derived from the fact that the surnames of all three included the word “yama” or mountain. Along with the Inten's Hirayama Ikuo and Sōzō Bijutsu's Kayama Matazō, these artists were known collectively as *nihonga*'s “five mountains” (*gozan* 五山), indicating their towering and influential presence in postwar *nihonga*. Mitsuda 2014, p. 596.

70 Kimura 2004, p. 21.

71 Ozaki 2008, pp. 232–33.

72 Yokohama Bijutsukan 2004. It is of interest that the government was buying contemporary art at all in this period, when much of the country remained impoverished and recovering from war.

73 Yokohama Bijutsukan 2004; Yamashita 2013, p. 192.

74 Yamashita 2013, p. 192.

75 Yukiama 2004, p. 19.

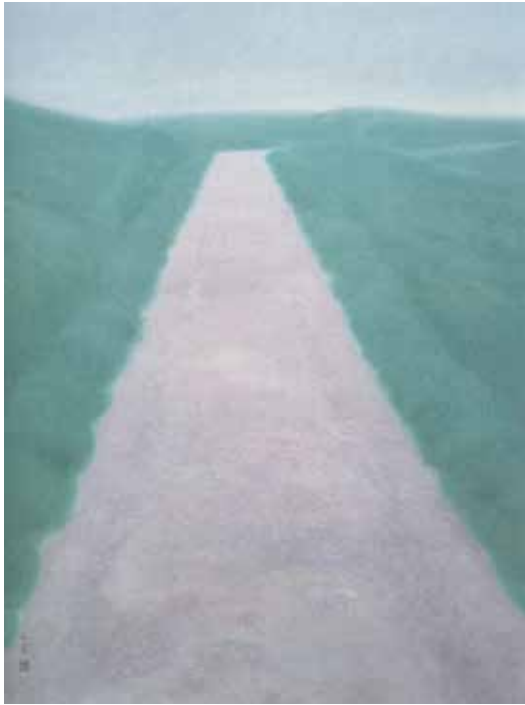


Figure 7. Higashiyama Kairi 東山魁夷, *Michi* 道 (Road; 1950). 134.4 x 102.2 cm. Collection of Tōkyō Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan. In Yokohama Bijutsukan 2004, p. 54.



Figure 8. Higashiyama Kairi 東山魁夷, *Kōyō no tani* 紅葉の谷 (Autumn valley; 1952). 57.5 x 51.5 cm. Collection of Nagano-ken Shinano Bijutsukan, Higashiyama Kairikan. In Yokohama Bijutsukan 2004, p. 56.

Higashiyama himself called “a scene that could be found anywhere.”<sup>76</sup> Perhaps the painting might be called a form of *nihonga* absenting the cultural/geographical *nihon*. Higashiyama’s artistic thinking at the time eschewed the particular in favor of more generalized effects in scenes of representation/abstraction. Another slightly later work in a more heightened, though more conservative, form of abstraction was his *Kōyō no tani* 紅葉の谷 (1952) (figure 8). In this, the autumnal forests become pictorially reduced to colored, blocky areas in red, orange, yellow, and brown. The painting is almost unrecognizable as a landscape. Rather it appears as a collage of interlocking areas of color in a loosely geometrical abstraction.

The Sōzō Bijutsu Kyōkai (Creative Art Society) was formed in 1948 by artists breaking away from the Nitten. This organization too can be included within the characterization of *nihonga*’s rapprochement with Western painting, witnessed in the oeuvres of artists such as Uemura Shōkō 上村松篁 (1902–2001), Yamamoto Kyūjin 山本丘人 (1900–1986), Yoshioka Kenji 吉岡堅二 (1906–1990), Fukuda Toyoshirō 福田豊四郎 (1904–1970), Hashimoto Meiji 橋本明治 (1904–1991), Katō Eizō 加藤栄三 (1906–1972), Nishiyama Hideo 西山英雄 (1911–1989), Sugiyama Yasushi, Mukai Kuma 向井久万 (1908–1987), and Hirota Tatsu 広田多津 (1904–1990) (figure 9) among others. Indeed, this organization’s formation at the time the *metsubōron* was acquiring critical traction, and the group members’ Western art-looking focus in *nihonga*, suggested to some critics that the organization was the best initial first step forward out of *nihonga*’s postwar crisis.<sup>77</sup> This was largely because of the group members’ diverse artistic borrowings from the Western art repertory and from longer-held Japanese artistic sensibilities. This includes Yamamoto’s bold landscapes, the gorgeous decorative qualities of Yoshioka’s bird and flower paintings, Fukuda’s monumental genre scenes, the general penchant for primitivism among group members’ painting styles, and an impasto application of pigments that resonated with the “look” of *yōga*. In later Sōzō Bijutsu Kyōkai members’ paintings, there was also a generalized tendency for the deformation of the painted subject.

The Pan Real Art Association (パンリアル美術協会) formed later in 1948 and represented a more radical form of the Westernizing trend in postwar *nihonga*. Group members from the late 1940s turned to cubism and surrealism, and then explored European and American abstraction in *nihonga*, though these forays were frequently moderated in further complex relation to a wider number of traditions, Japanese or otherwise. In an unusual early example of revolt against the conservative *nihonga* practitioners preference for elegant subjects and esteemed materials, Mikami Makoto 三上誠 (1919–1972), in *Sakubin (F41) 作品 (F41)* (1949) (figure 10), created a lyrical abstraction from what are perhaps body parts such as limbs and organs. Mikami utilized cement (possibly because of its ready availability in the postwar period) as his primary “pigment,” and gave the work the appearance of the collaging techniques of earlier twentieth-century cubism and modernist experimentation.<sup>78</sup>

In some later instances, Pan Real painters such as Shimomura Ryōnosuke 下村良之助 (1923–1998) and Nomura Kō 野村耕 (1927–1991) conducted experiments in sculptural

76 Higashiyama 2004.

77 Ueshima 1948, p. 28.

78 Mikami’s penchant for fragmented body parts, and line work of this kind, was more common in the works of his middle and later oeuvre. Hoshino 2009, p. 9. It appears that Mikami reworked a number of his early paintings later in his career.

Figure 9. Hirota Tatsu 広田多津, *Rafu* 裸婦 (Nude; 1951). 152.0 x 62.0 cm. Collection of Kyoto-shi Bijutsukan. In *1950 nendai Kyōto no nihonga: Nenshō no toki*, ed. Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan. Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan, 1990, p. 32.



Figure 10. Mikami Makoto 三上誠. *Sakubin* 作品 (F41) (Work (F41); 1949). 74.6 x 91.2 cm. Collection of Kyoto Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan. In Hoshino 2009, p. 9.



Figure 11. Ōno Hidetaka 大野秀隆 (俣嵩), *Kin to kuro no korāju* 金と黒のコラージュ (Gold and black collage (detail); 1958). 61.0 x 212.0 cm. Collection of Tōkyō-to Gendai Bijutsukan. In *1950 nendai Kyōto no nihonga: Nenshō no toki*, ed. Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan. Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan, 1990, p. 32.



Figure 12. Ōno Hidetaka 大野秀隆 (俣嵩), *Hi 緋 No. 24* (Scarlet no. 24; 1963). 141.0 x 129.0 cm. Collection of Kyōto-shi Bijutsukan. In *Pan Riaru sōseiki-ten: Sengo nihonga no kakushin undō* パンリアル創世記展: 戦後日本画の革新運動, eds. Shino Masahiro 篠雅廣 and Nakai Yasuyuki 中井康之. Nishinomiya-shi Ōtani Kinen Bijutsukan, 1998, p. 66.



forms of painting, stimulated by the generalized thrust of postwar Western modernism. The Pan Real painters' entry into forms of abstract and sculptural *nihonga* was inaugurated following the piecemeal introduction of Art Informel in Japan over the 1950s. Instrumental to this group shift in artistic focus was Ōno Hidetaka 大野秀隆 (俣嵩) (1922–2002) who, after initially pursuing forms of cubist painting inspired by Pablo Picasso's (1881–1973) *Guernica* (1937), developed his *Dongorosu* ドンゴロス series made from organically bunched burlap over, or around, which he painted as a form of low-relief sculptural painting. The first such work was *Kin to kuro no korāju* 金と黒のコラージュ (1958) (figure 11), the year of Ōno's departure from Pan Real to pursue painting without group affiliation. Ōno's *Dongorosu* series was initially inspired by the textiles of the Egyptian Copts that he had seen in an exhibition of Asian and African art at a department store in Osaka, and the textiles that wrapped the Chūsonji 中尊寺 mummified bodies that were exhumed briefly in 1950.<sup>79</sup> The influence on Ōno of the early postwar paintings of the Italian, Alberto Burri (1915–1995), is suggested by the coincidence of material and surface effects. From the early 1960s, Ōno gradually began to minimize the wrinkles in the fabrics of his paintings, which also became incrementally geometrical in composition. By the mid-1960s, Ōno insisted on his geometries by folding the burlap sacking into crisp shapes, thereby arriving at an almost sculptural origami, as with *Hi No.24* 緋 No.24 (1963) (figure 12). The significance of these sculpture-paintings by Ōno, and those by his earlier Pan Real painter colleagues, remains mostly unrecognized in Japanese art history and elsewhere.

The postwar *metsubōron*, then, was evidently instrumental in bringing about Westernized forms of pictorial consciousness and an increasingly Westernized sense of identity within *nihonga*. The ostensible artistic conflicts between *nihonga* and *yōga*, while occasionally surrounded by a rhetoric of death and despondency, were indeed generative of new pictorial approaches within *nihonga*, and productive of extensive bodies of work, which remain little known and little studied today. For *nihonga* painters of the early postwar period, particularly those working in the later 1940s, through to the early 1960s, Westernization came to appear as a pursuit that was not merely about closing the gap with *yōga*, or obviating distinctions between *nihonga* and *yōga*. The early postwar period was a time when parity, or contemporaneity, with international modernism, appeared possible. It was additionally a time when *nihonga* painters looked abroad to Western modernism for artistic stimuli, rather than relying upon the filtered versions relayed to them by their *yōga* peers whose pictorial expressions developed within Japan. *Nihonga* seemed it might shed its conservative image, surpass the languishing imitative phase that *yōga* appeared to be mired in, and result in styles of painting in Japan that favorably compared to contemporary painting elsewhere.

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<sup>79</sup> For the Osaka exhibits, see Kimura 1986, unpaginated. See also Ōno 1987, p. 7. For a discussion of these mummified bodies, see Yiengpruksawan 1998, pp. 131–42.

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