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THE FUSION OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN JAPANESE CALLIGRAPHY: THE CASE OF THE MAINICHI SHODO-TEN

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Abstract

Even today, calligraphy remains deeply valued among the Japanese, serving not only as an elite art form or technical skill but also as a widely popular pastime. People of all ages, from four-year-old children to the elderly, actively practice this art. Every year, a diverse range of exhibitions is organized across schools, cultural centers, museums, and galleries. Among these, the Mainichi Shodo-ten (The Mainichi Calligraphy Exhibition), a major national event held annually since 1951, holds a place of distinct importance. Taking this prominent exhibition as a case study, this paper analyzes the artistic expressive possibilities of contemporary Japanese calligraphy and its harmonious fusion with traditional styles.

Keywords: Japanese calligraphy, contemporary art, shodo, exhibitions, Mainichi Shodo-ten.

Introduction

In Japan, shodo (calligraphy) has long been recognized as a dentō geinō—a traditional art form. Yet, it remains a living art today, serving as a contemporary medium of expression and a powerful symbol of cultural identity. Many foreigners tend to view Japanese calligraphy merely as vertical wall scrolls featuring a few large, brushed kanji characters.

In reality, however, modern Japanese calligraphy is incredibly diverse in its forms, dimensions, styles, techniques, and thematic content. National and local calligraphy exhibitions offer the perfect vantage point to observe this rich diversity. One of the most influential among these is the Mainichi Shodo-ten, which has been held regularly every year since 1951.The works submitted to the exhibition are classified into nine distinct categories and evaluated based on factors such as character type (kanji or kana), the number of characters, writing technique, and artwork dimensions. The exhibition debuts in Tokyo before traveling to other major regions across Japan, including Hokkaido, Kyoto, and Kyushu.

The history of using Chinese characters—known as kanji—as a medium of written communication in Japan dates back at least fifteen centuries. Over time, the Japanese developed two syllabary writing systems based on kanji: hiragana and katakana. Consequently, these three writing systems continue to be used alongside one another to this day.

However, these characters evolved not merely as tools for written communication, but also as mediums for artistic expression. In this way, shodo—the "way of writing" or the "art of calligraphy"—became one of the oldest and most prestigious traditional art forms in Japanese culture.

The complex and beautiful forms of kanji, the stroke count, meaning, and unique readings of each character, combined with the rich variety of ink, paper, and brush types, provide Japanese calligraphy with boundless creative possibilities.

This analysis examines the technical aspects of each category (such as brush style, ink density, and its interaction with the paper), as well as the thematic content and artistic expression of the written text. This study is grounded in the author's own observations during her journey of learning the Japanese language and culture, alongside academic sources and official exhibition materials.

In Japan, enthusiasts can immerse themselves in the art of shodo through two primary pathways:

A. Private instruction: Studying in small groups under the guidance of a personal master (sensei).

B. Institutional education: Learning through specialized clubs or elective courses in schools and universities.

For many, calligraphy is valued not only as an aesthetic pursuit but also as a practice that fosters discipline and spiritual balance. For this reason, numerous exhibitions are organized across Japan every year—some at the local level (in schools, cultural centers, and temples) and others on a national scale.

Furthermore, many study groups host their own internal exhibitions under their masters' supervision. These exhibitions provide students with a valuable platform to showcase their work, receive constructive feedback, and grow creatively.The concept of presenting art to the general public emerged relatively late in Japan. In Europe, this tradition had already taken root by the 17th century—for instance, the official art exhibition Salon de Paris, established in Paris in 1667, stands as one of the earliest examples of showcasing artwork openly to the public.

In contrast, Japan remained largely isolated from the outside world between 1630 and 1860 due to its national isolation policy, known as sakoku. Consequently, Western-style art exhibitions did not appear in Japan until after the Meiji Restoration (1868), a pivotal era when the country initiated rapid modernization and began actively embracing Western culture.

Traditional exhibitions prior to the Meiji period

Before the Meiji era, the Japanese public engaged with art primarily through religious rituals and seasonal customs. Key examples include:

Kaichō (開帳): This practice involved the "unveiling of the curtain" in Buddhist temples to display sacred statues and paintings to the public. More than just a religious ritual, it served as a major social event where people gathered to view art while making donations to the temples.

Mushiboshi (虫干し): Another widespread custom was the seasonal airing out of valuable books, manuscripts, and paintings. Dating back to the 12th century, this cultural tradition was inherited from the Heian period (794–1185) to prevent insect damage and mold, while simultaneously doubling as an informal art display.

By the second half of the 18th century, private gatherings among art enthusiasts began to flourish. Participants would bring their own calligraphy pieces and paintings to showcase and discuss within their circles. These meetings are widely considered the earliest precursors to modern private exhibitions.

The emergence of modern exhibitions

Following the Meiji restoration, Western-style exhibitions officially began to take shape in Japan.

The first of these was the National Industrial Exhibition (Naikoku Kangyo Hakurankai), held in 1877. It was at this exhibition that calligraphy works were displayed to the general public for the very first time.

However, the second national exhibition, held in 1881, sparked a major controversy in Japanese art history. The painter Koyama Shotaro (1857–1916) published a provocative article titled "Calligraphy is Not Art."

In response, the renowned art scholar Okakura Kakuzo (1863–1913) published a counter-argument titled "Upon reading the view that calligraphy is not art." This debate triggered a profound philosophical discussion regarding the status and role of calligraphy within Japanese culture. Although calligraphy was subsequently excluded from official state exhibitions for a period of time, this did not diminish its immense popularity among the public.

Calligraphy societies and national exhibitions in the 20th century

Beginning in the 1920s, the number of calligraphy practitioners saw a significant rise.

In 1924, the first national-scale calligraphy society, Nihon Shodo Sakushinkai, was established, hosting its inaugural major exhibition in 1925. Over time, several prominent calligraphy organizations emerged from this foundation, initiating a tradition of regular annual exhibitions across Japan.

By 1948, calligraphy exhibitions had solidified at the national level. In 1951, the exhibition now widely recognized as the Mainichi Shodo-ten was officially launched. To this day, it remains one of Japan's largest and most prestigious calligraphic events.

As Japan’s premier calligraphy exhibition, the Mainichi Shodo-ten attracts thousands of submissions annually from both professional master calligraphers and passionate amateurs.

According to exhibition guidelines, every submitted piece is classified into one of nine distinct categories. These divisions are determined by the script type, character count, materials used, and the overall creative approach. While the official submission terms are updated annually on the exhibition's website (mainichishodo.org), the core criteria remain largely consistent.

Classification of exhibition categories

1. Kanji I (Large character count): 21 or more characters

Works in this category are typically composed using excerpts from classical Chinese texts or ancient Japanese literary masterpieces. Due to the substantial length of the text, the characters are structured into neat, organized blocks across the page. The brushwork alternates between a highly precise, disciplined style and a free, expressive flow. Frequently, the artistic impact of these pieces stems from the striking contrast between the ancient text and the modern calligraphic style execution.

2. Kanji II (Medium to small character count): 3 to 20 characters

This category generally features shorter phrases, philosophical aphorisms, or poetic verses. With fewer characters to arrange, the calligrapher is granted the freedom to write them in a larger, more uninhibited scale. Here, the artist projects raw emotion through every brushstroke—utilizing varying pressure, ink wetness, or the fading texture of a drying brush to breathe life into the composition. Consequently, these works focus heavily on capturing energy, movement, and the artist's psychological state.

3. Kana I (Long texts: Multiple poems or sutras)

The foundation of this category relies on lengthy, classical texts, such as excerpts from the Lotus Sutra or selections from classical waka poetry anthologies. These compositions are painstakingly rendered using a fine-tipped brush (kofude), often covering the entire canvas with delicate, intricate characters. This style demands immense patience, deep focus, and spiritual tranquility. The works are frequently executed on gold-leaf or softly colored paper, emphasizing delicate expression and a masterfully balanced layout.

4. Kana II (Short texts: 1–2 poems or select haiku)

This category places a stronger emphasis on artistic composition and spatial design. The calligrapher evokes an emotional mood through the strategic placement of letters, the manipulation of negative space, and the subtle gradation of ink tones. Short haiku by legendary poets like Matsuo Basho or Yosano Akiko are central to this category. Success hinges on the harmonious interplay between color, line strength, and "white space" (negative space).

5. Contemporary poetry and prose (Kindai Shibunza)

Regarded as one of the most innovative and creative domains, this category showcases modern Japanese poetry, prose excerpts, or translations of Western literature. Breaking away from classical constraints, the calligrapher embraces complete creative freedom—experimenting with background colors, diluting ink with water to achieve abstract, misty effects, or incorporating unconventional colors like red, white, and gold. Striking a balance between form and content is critical; the writing must not only remain legible but must also be felt emotionally by the viewer.

6. Large-scale characters (1 or 2 Characters)

This is undeniably one of the most dramatic and visually arresting categories in the exhibition. Works are usually presented in a large, square format, dominated by just one or two massive characters that fill the entire space. These characters usually represent profound spiritual concepts such as "Life" (生), "Soul" (魂), "Tranquility" (静), or "Water" (水). When working on this scale, the bleeding, splattering, and uneven texture of the ink reflect raw artistic energy, exerting a direct and powerful emotional impact on the audience.

7. Tenkoku (Seal engraving)

In this distinct category, characters are first meticulously carved onto small stone blocks, and their stamped ink impressions (imprints) are then transferred onto paper. The script style is strictly rooted in ancient Seal Script (tensho), which originated in China around the 7th century BCE. Artists alternate between the "white script" (hakubun) and "red script" (shubun) techniques—where either the background or the character itself is carved away. This category beautifully merges graphic composition, symmetry, and historical aesthetics.

8. Kokuji (Wood or bamboo carving)

This category bridges the gap between master calligraphy and traditional craftsmanship. The texts are initially written on paper and then carefully carved onto wood, bamboo, or stone surfaces. In most cases, archaic character variations, such as Bronze age inscriptions or seal scripts, are preferred. The engraved characters are often filled with brilliant gold or vibrant red pigments against dark blue or deep purple backgrounds, evoking a sacred, solemn, and monumental atmosphere.

9. Avant-garde (Experimental and abstract calligraphy)

As the most uninhibited and innovative domain, this category is broadly divided into "mojisei" (character-based) and "himojisei" (non-character-based) compositions. At times, the script is altered to the point of being completely unrecognizable, shifting the burden of meaning entirely onto form, motion, or the dynamic behavior of the ink. For instance, abstract concepts like "mind," "spirit," or "wonder" are captured through a visceral arrangement of lines, splatters, and heavy brush strokes.

Representing the most contemporary, abstract, and deeply philosophical dimension of Japanese calligraphy, this movement evolved alongside new art waves that emerged in Japan roughly 65 years ago. It breaks entirely past the boundaries of conventional writing to establish itself as a pure fine art. Within this style, writing ceases to be a mere vehicle for conveying text; instead, it is re-imagined as a canvas for emotion, movement, and psychological states. The brushwork here is so remarkably powerful and free that it has historically served as a profound source of inspiration for Western abstract expressionists.

Conclusion

Modern Japanese calligraphy stands as a seamless harmony between time-honored tradition and contemporary artistic innovation. By showcasing this synthesis year after year, the Mainichi Shodo-ten exhibition proves that shodo remains a vibrant, living cultural phenomenon. The nine exhibition categories collectively illuminate the multifaceted nature of Japanese calligraphic art:

a) The kanji and kana categories preserve traditional calligraphic aesthetics, masterfully capturing the rhythm, balance, and flow of classical characters.

b) Contemporary poetry and prose enrich the art form by infusing shodo with fresh, modern literary substance.

c) Large-scale characters, seal engraving (Tenkoku), and wood carving (Kokuji) emphasize the physical power of the art form and its tactile relationship with diverse materials.

d) Avant-garde calligraphy represents the ultimate expression of creative freedom, where text transcends literal legibility to transform into pure kinetic energy and spiritual expression.

Together, these diverse categories build a resilient bridge between shodo's historical roots and contemporary artistic visions. Today, Japanese calligraphy is no longer confined to a national tradition; it has evolved into a medium for global artistic dialogue. Just as it has left a definitive footprint on Western art, it continues to draw creative energy from global aesthetic trends. Ultimately, shodo is not merely the act of writing—it is a profound unity of spirit, discipline, and

aesthetic thought. Exhibitions like the Mainichi Shodo-ten not only safeguard this ancient heritage but also empower each successive generation to articulate the spirit of their time through the medium of ink. In doing so, this enduring harmony between tradition and modernity continues to flourish as a living symbol of Japanese culture.

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