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Translation Errors Involving *Nihonga* (Japanese Painting): An Argument to Correct the Record

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ABSTRACT

The word *Nihonga* (Japanese painting) carries such a weight of cultural importance in the Japanese painting community as to make the translation of words describing *Nihonga* problematic. This paper explores reasons this has happened making use of standard texts on the materials and techniques of painting and investigating modern Japanese painting history, concluding that because Japanese art was under such great pressure from the popularity enjoyed by Western styled painting being newly imported in the Meiji Era (1868- 1912) that at its conception the modern school of *Nihonga* attempted to distinguish itself from this foreign invasion, creating problems that remain with translation of *Nihonga* terms to the present day.

Keywords: *Nihonga, Japanese Painting, Japanese Painting History, Materials and Techniques of Painting*

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1. Introduction

Takamura Kotaro was part of an early generation of artists to travel outside of Japan to study in America and Europe. He brought his studies home when he returned to Japan. He translated foreign books. He translated a book on van Gogh. He translated Walt Whitman into Japanese. (Sato, 1992)

In Kotoro's essay, *Green Sun*, he wrote, "The so-called Japanese-style painters can't move forward, marked by the term "Japanese-style. The so-called Western-style painters can't, either, weighed down by oil paint on their backs. Sometimes you end up being more protective of the pawn than the knight." (Sato, 1992, p.180)

I have noticed anomalies in the translation of words concerned with, "Nihonga," "Japanese painting." Whether it is from xenophobia or cultural pride, words describing *Nihonga* are routinely romanticized and translated in a non-standard way to set *Nihonga* apart from all other forms of painting.

This problem was driven home to me when I was given the task of rewriting the English translation of a large catalog of graduate works for a major Japanese art university. Terms for western materials and techniques were translated in a standard

way, "Etching on paper," "Oil on canvas," "Acrylic on board," while *Nihonga* was translated as, "Mineral pigments on Japanese paper."

To understand why this practice is strange it is important to understand what paint is. Paint is basically two things. Paint is pigment (the color) and a binder (a substance to adhere the pigment to a surface, i.e. glue.) All paints are made from pigments and a binder. (Wehlte, 1975) For oil paint the binder is oil, vegetable, or nut oil. It is called, "oil paint, or oil." For acrylic paint, the binder is an acrylic polymer, and is called, "acrylic paint, or acrylic." For egg tempera the binder is the protein found in the yellow yolk of an egg. This is called, "egg tempera," or simply, "tempera." There are different forms of tempera. Casein tempera uses milk protein as a binder. It may be called, "tempera," "casein tempera," or, "casein." *Nihonga* paint is a form of tempera. The binder for *Nihonga* paint is protein derived from animal skins. Yet it is not called, "tempera," or, "skin tempera," or even, "gelatin tempera." It is called, "mineral pigments on Japanese paper", an admittedly more romantic description, but deceptive, as all paints are made from pigment. The translation has no meaning. If the painting was made in Europe, or



America, it would be called, “Tempera on paper”. (Mayer, 1951)

“Mineral pigments,” is also vexed. Japanese painting was originally done with natural pigments made for the most part from stones, metals, earth, but that was long ago. As early as the Edo Era, artificial pigments were imported to Japan from Europe and were used by Japanese artists. (Bickford, 1982)

I think you will find Hokusai used Prussian blue, a pigment invented by a German chemist by creating an oxidation of ferrocyanide salts (originally made from, among other things, animal blood). Animal blood is not a mineral. I believe Hokusai also used a red made from aniline dye (coal tar). (Bickford, 1982)

Nihonga artists use these materials today. I don’t believe there are many young art students who can afford to use natural ultramarine blue made from the gem stone lapis lazuli. “Nihonga” (paint) should be translated in a catalog, or museum as, “Tempera on paper.” To label it, “Mineral pigments on Japanese paper,” is culture spin. Even the softer, “color on paper.” commonly used by Japanese museums is incomplete.

This willful, not an error in translation. It goes back to the creation of “Nihonga,” in 1906, led by Okakura Kakuzo, a great protector of Japanese culture that was under fire in the Meiji Era. Okakura was a principle involved in establishing the National Art Museum, the Tokyo Art School, later to become the National University of Fine Arts and Music. At the age of 25 he became the second president of the Tokyo Art School, later breaking from the school to form his own art society to protect and promote Japanese painting. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020) In 1906 Okakura gathered his best students including Taikan Yokoyama, Shunso Hishida, Kanzan Shimomura and Buzan Kimura. Together they invented, “Nihonga,” as a reaction to the rising influence of Western art. (Gordenker, 2020)

“At the time, Japanese painting was widely regarded as flat and primitive compared to Western painting. The primary complaint was that it lacked the mechanisms used in Western art, including scientific perspective and chiaroscuro shading, that create dimension and variations in light.”(Gordenker, 2020)

The creation of this new school of painting was called Nihonga, as it was a reaction to Western art Nihonga sought to differentiate itself, to define itself as

different from Western art. All the large Art universities in Japan to this day have two painting departments; “Japanese painting,” and, “Western painting.” This never happened with ceramics, sculpture, or design in Japan. Japanese Nihonga artists felt Japanese painting was particularly under fire and had to be protected. Okakura Kakuzo and his group of exceptional artists raised a Japanese challenge to Western painting, a challenge to Western painting’s shading and perspective with Japanese washes of sparkly whitened atmosphere, while in many ways imitating the Western art they were fighting against, stepping back from the lines that so defined Japanese painting. In the end Nihonga has defined itself by its materials rather than its design. If you go to an exhibition of Nihonga now it can look very much like the oil paintings in the next room, with one exception, mineral pigments on Japanese paper.

Sum Up

Thus, we get “Oil painting,” “Acrylic painting,” “Watercolor painting,” and “Tempera painting,” vs. “Mineral pigments on Japanese paper.” It is deceptive. It is the thing Kotaro warned us about. It is protecting the pawn rather than the knight.

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