

## TSUJI KAKO (1870-1931)

In the world of Kyoto nihonga, known for its polished renderings of nature, Tsuji Kako stood out for seeking a different path. As proclaimed by Iguchi Setsudo in 1914, “Kako is an artist of subjectivity. He paints inspired by his emotional response.” Having investigated a broad range of styles early in his career and pursuing spiritual discipline in Zen, Kako emerged at the end of Meiji period as the foremost individualist among his prominent colleagues such as Kikuchi Hobun, Taniguchi Kokyo, Takeuchi Seiho and Yamamoto Shunkyo.

Kako was born in 1870, the oldest of five children in a yuzen (paste-resist dyed silk) artisan’s family. Encouraged by his father, who wished his son to become a painter, Kako became a pupil of Kono Bairei in 1880. Kako deeply revered his teacher. Soon after Bairei’s death, Kawai Gyokudo (1873-1957) tried to persuade Kako to study in Tokyo with Hashimoto Gaho (1835-1908). Despite his deep admiration for Gaho’s work, Kako remained in Kyoto out of respect for his deceased teacher. Throughout his career Kako expressed his indebtedness to Bairei in his paintings by frequently using a seal carved “Bairei isshi”, which means “one branch of Bairei.”

By 1890, pursuing a career as a professional painter, Kako was creating painted designs for export textiles at the dry-goods store Takashimaya, as did many other Kyoto artists. Around 1891 or 1892 Kako became ill and spent time at Hamadera beach in Osaka with financial support from a patron. During the next few years he traveled extensively throughout western and central Honshu, Shikoku Island, and the Noto Peninsula. This experience, Kako believed, was extremely enriching for the subsequent development of his art. During the 1890s he began to participate in competitive exhibitions with works such as *Prince Daito* (Daito no miya, 1890), a historical subject, and *Seeking Enlightenment, Loosing Oneself* (Kyudo boku, 1900), a representation of a Zen anecdote. Kako achieved recognition as a figure painter, and he emerged as one of the young leaders of the Kyoto painting circle.

Kako’s Zen practice began in 1899 under Mokurai (1854-1930) at Kenninji and continued for the next thirty years, helping him to gain physical and psychological strength. Even after several decades Kako referred to himself as “incomplete in Zen” and downplayed the profundity of his spiritual pursuit. He confirmed the significance of Zen in his life with his last painting, completed several weeks before his death, a magnificent portrait of his spiritual mentor Mokurai.

Kako’s involvement with the wave theme in the first decade of the twentieth century marked a period of transformation in his art. Liberating himself from the limitations imposed by established styles, Kako strongly advocated artistic freedom and individualism. During this period he remained active in the Kyoto painting circle, publishing books of his paintings (*Kako bokuen*, 1901; *Kako gafu*, 1902-3) and participating, along with Seiho, Hobun and Kokyo, in the publication of an art magazine titled *Garin* (1904-c.1907). Kako’s close association with Takashimaya continued. His widely known work *Cherry Blossoms at Mount Yoshino* (Yoshinoyama, 1904) was turned into a cut-velvet triptych with Seiho’s *Moon over Venice* and Shunkyo’s *Snow in the Rockies*. Another Takashimaya related work of historical importance is Kako’s *Opening of the Heavenly Rock Door* (Ama no iwado biraki, 1908). Takashimaya produced an impressive stage curtain (*doncho*) based on his painting for the Teikokuza Theater in Osaka. The first *doncho*

Takashimaya ever created, it marked the beginning of a long collaboration between many painters and the store in theater curtain design.

After the Bunten opened in 1907, Kako submitted ambitious compositions almost every year, and although his work was consistently accepted, his experimental approach to painting was not well received. He was not offered a prestigious appointment as a judge until 1924, almost two decades later than colleagues such as Hobun, Seiho and Shunkyo. Kako declared his artistic freedom and independence from official exhibitions with a one-person show in 1921 titled "Painting Exhibition to Commemorate the Exploration of Beauty at the Diamond Mountains." His mature style displayed a penchant for bold and decorative coloring as well as intensive, vibrant brushwork.

Outspoken and honest to a fault at times, Kako was admired for the integrity and dignity of his character, and he occupied a position of prominence in the Kyoto art world from 1910s on. When the empress of Japan visited Kyoto in 1917, Kako was selected to demonstrate painting skills with a group of distinguished Kyoto artists which included his colleagues Seiho, Shunkyo, and Hobun, among others. In 1926 Kako was appointed the principal of both the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts and the Kyoto Municipal Special School of Painting, where he had taught since 1909 and 1911 respectively. Through this role, Kako in a sense carried on the legacy of his teacher, Bairei, who had been one of the founders of the Kyoto Prefecture Painting School (1880), the forerunner of the two schools. In his later years Kako continued his painting activity, which included many *haiga*, a sketchlike painting accompanied by a seventeen-syllable haiku poem. Kako enjoyed composing haiku, a habit he had acquired early in his career from Bairei. *Kako kushu* (Collection of Kako's haiku), published after his death, contained more than a thousand poems.

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For the end notes of the article please see the original text.

Source: Michiyo Morioka and Paul Berry, *Tsuji Kako 1870-1931, The Transformation of Japanese Painting Traditions Nihonga from the Griffith and Patricia Way Collection Modern Masters of Kyoto*, the Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, 1999: 142-143.