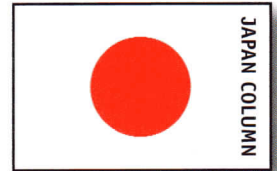


A new encounter with Japanese traditional culture: "書: Sho" The art of drawing characters



"Sho" is something that we should remember when we discuss Japanese traditional culture. Sho is one of the most approachable arts in our world today. Sho is a unique, artistic way of writing, or more precisely of drawing characters only with a brush and sumi (Indian ink) which attracts a lot of attention, also in Europe. Today, we can see Sho art in many different places. People often say that Sho is profound art work because Sho artists present, in a skilful way, dynamics and/or sensitivity by adjusting the characters' flowing curves and contrasting density. This may sometimes reflect their spirit



Figure 1: "Encounter"

and imagination at first glance, even with drawings that consist of monochromatic characters only. Sho work is one of the origins of MONODUKURI, whereas Sho art is the "design" which evolved and has been polished throughout its long history, but will never be completed in infinity.

MONODUKURI is the Japanese expression for manufacturing. It is not limited to general manufacturing though and used often in discussions about Japanese engineering spirit and traditional manufacturing.

Truly, the Japanese traditional culture of Sho and Japan's similar spiritual culture might be very interesting for the readers of the EnginSoft Newsletter who work in the areas of "Design" and "MONODUKURI", although both are completely different from virtual prototyping and mechanical design.

This is why we are introducing Japanese Sho in cooperation with Ms. Shizu Usami, one of the most famous contemporary Sho artists, whose fine art work we are pleased to present to our readers in this 2nd Japan Column.

Incidentally, for most readers outside Japan, it may be easier to comprehend if we called the art "Shodo" and not "Sho". However, in Japan, children in elementary schools enjoy being taught "Shodo" to develop their creative and writing skills. Also, Shodo is broadly interpreted and known as a form of adult education and hobby. Hence, when we speak about the art itself, Sho is the more suitable expression for the final work and the MONODUKURI process. So, in this article, we are discussing Sho.

Japanese Sho

Sho originally came from China, but in Japan, Kanji, the Chinese characters, were combined with the original Japanese characters "Kana" to create a unique art of writing characters. This calligraphy stands as a symbol for Japanese culture and its history of 2000 years. Before talking about Sho, we need to dwell on the derivation of the characters.

The history of mankind dates back to about six hundred thousand years. The art of painting was born fifty thousand years ago, hence about 10% of the time span of humankind, whereas the origins of drawing and writing characters can be traced back to 5.200 years ago, 1% of the entire history of mankind. The latter is based on Egyptian hieroglyphs written in 3.200 B.C., which means 5.200 years ago.

Altogether, the use of "words" and the elements of nature, such as "fire", characterize and distinguish humanity

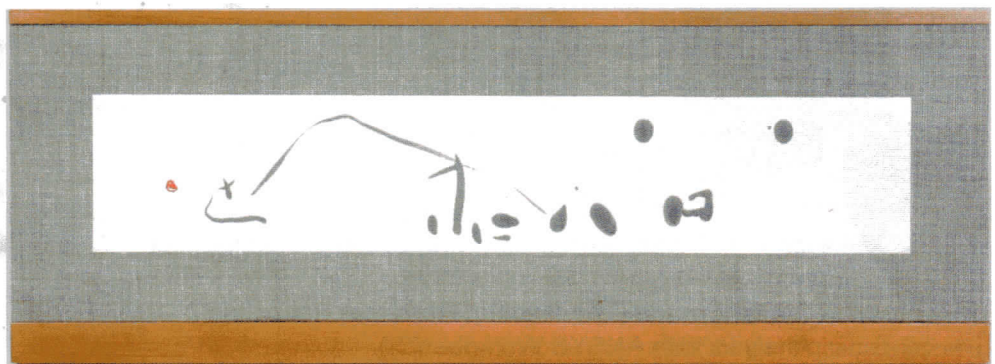
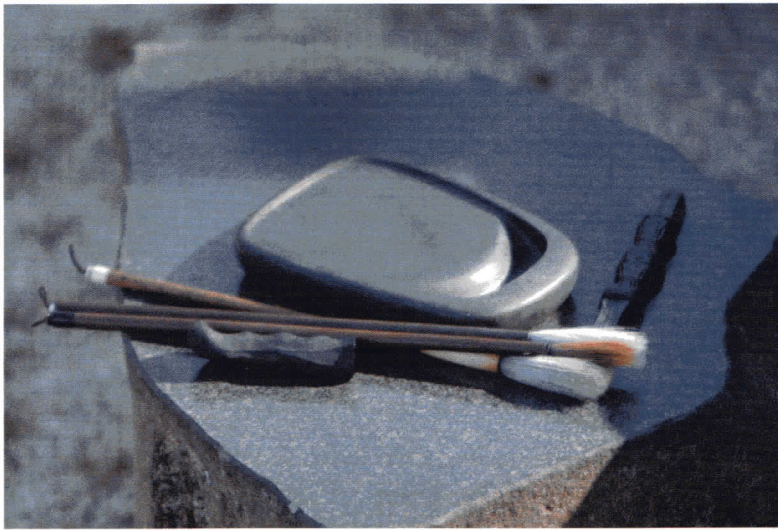


Figure 2: "i, ro, ha, ni, hō, he, to"





fundamentally from any other creature. In general, it is also important to note that, to express our words, we use spoken and written language and letters.

Today in Japan, we use 3 kinds of spelling and words: "Kanji", "Hiragana" and "Katakana". Since Kanji came from China at the end of the 4th century, the Japanese had created the unique words of "Hiragana" and "Katakana" based on Kanji. All of this has inspired and guided many of the great works of Japanese literature, including "The Tale of Genji", which are known all over the world.

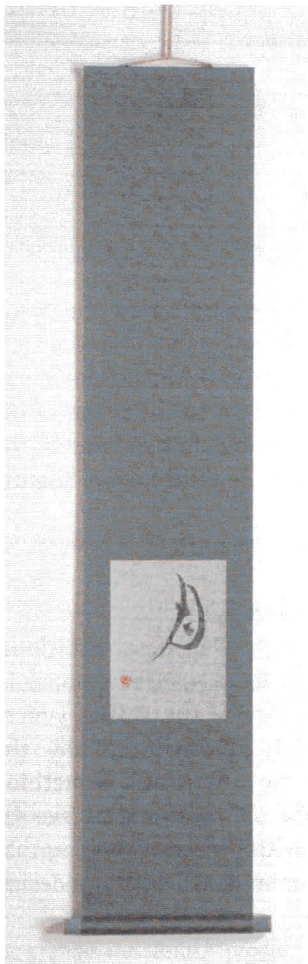
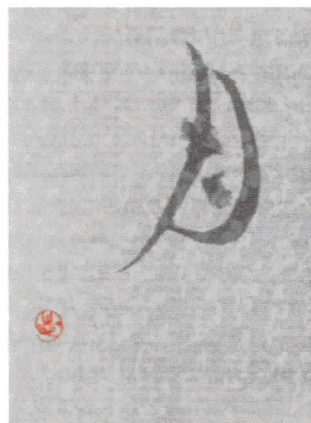


Figure 3: "The Moon"

Most of the Japanese writings have been handed down through the ages and generations. These works were not only meant to deliver information or literary achievements, indeed not, they should also delight their readers with the beauty of the characters and the finest papers used.

This is the main feature of Sho and what it is all about - in the past and



today! For instance, people who are interested in and study old Japanese writings, consider deeply and enjoy the different subtle expressions of Sho, such as thickness, shading and flow of the characters' curves.

Another role of Sho is to support the growth and reputation of Japanese historical fine arts. For example, Shikki, the craft work coated with lacquer, and ceramics with Sho design, have been highly appreciated, for Sho is not just figurative art, it can express people's spirit delicately through brush writing.

Nowadays, writing letters has become so underrated. While this trend continues, Sho attracts more and more interest as one of the most fundamental means of expressing feelings in Japan and other countries. In this respect, Sho is also regarded and used by many industries as a very effective way to deliver emotional messages linked to company and product names.

"Sho" as a MONODUKURI

The basic tools for Sho consist of the brush, sumi, suzuri (ink stone) and paper called "Four Treasures of the Study". They also have a long history in China, however, Japanese tools have a unique and extra beauty that is highly appreciated. The craftsmen who create these tools, provide some of the fundamentals for the work of the Sho artists, and at the same time, they conserve and pass on traditional Japanese culture to future generations.

Today, such superior skills are highly sought after and in the spotlight in other industries. For example, a certain Japanese Sho brush maker also produces high-grade make-up finishing brushes and its global market share for the same is more than 50%. Sho artists make their choice in accordance with their own taste and expression.

They have various tools and select suitable ones for each work, to create the best art. All tools are made from natural materials and each work offers different pleasures. Sho artists are applying and cherishing these living tools every day.



Sho artist Ms Shizu Usami pays close Figure 4: "Yukata Firefly"



attention to each and every detail of her work, such as the black color of sumi (Indian ink) and the time it was made, to fit her art work. Sometimes, months pass by for what we call "concept design" in CAE, before she takes up her brush. When her real work starts, there is no revision and no second chance. Facing the white paper, soaking the brush with black sumi richly, she "writes" and creates her work with total devotion. The moment we encounter her Sho work, we can feel her Japanese modesty, motherly warmth, unyielding grace and her dynamism that fascinates those around her instantly. Then, only her art work and its monochromatic color starts telling us a story - silently.

To complete our story, we also have to explain the work of the "Hyogu-shi" (Hyogu-professional/paperhanger) who finishes the Sho work. The Hyogu-shi makes scrolls and frames which are made to order for each piece of Sho art. His or her skills transform an entire performance. If the scroll is not of best quality, it may not be tightened enough and warp, especially in the humid climate of Japan.

Thus the beauty of Japanese Sho is supported by the MONODUKURI spirit of the craftsmen and professionals for tools (brush, sumi, suzuri and paper) and the Hyogu-shi. Sho artists spark the fire and enthuse with Sho art which integrates the professional skills of others with their own artistry.

From now on, the message of Japanese Sho will inspire people around the globe giving new values to society.

Figure 1 "Encounter"

Every encounter is unique and has a meaning and so has every farewell. Every day of our life, our entire lives, are full of encounters and farewells. We continue our great journey sometimes holding our breath and sometimes taking a deep breath..... Blue black sumi is used. Expressing our life's love by ink bleed and time with the between of characters.

Figure 2 "i, ro, ha, ni, ho, he, to"

"i, ro, ha, ni, ho, he, to" is the old Japanese poet using Hiragana characters one by one. The first 7 characters describe the scene of a Japanese province. Quietly drifting clouds, small houses and bridges, and the shape of gentle mountains are brought to our minds with Hiragana.....

Sho artist: Ms. Shizu Usami

Ms. Shizu Usami is a famous contemporary Sho artist and Japanese calligrapher who started the traditional study of Sho at the age of 3, established the basis of her expression and is currently looking at new ways of presenting her art. For example, she creates her work by being particular about the black color of sumi, such as blue black, brown black, more intense black....She also dedicates her work to education and lectures and actively fosters Japanese writing and traditional art. Her art adorns the covers of the official brochures of Japan's "Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry", the "Wooden House Industry Association", and many other MONODUKURI makers. Moreover, at this time, Ms. Shizu Usami studies textile design at University of the Arts London and produces new art devoted to the integration of European MONODUKURI techniques and Japanese culture. Her art is highly valued, also by embassies, and collectors over the world.

Ms. Shizu Usami URL http://www.shizuusami.com/index_e.html

Ms. Shizu Usami is also the fourth generation president of Usami Honten.co.,Ltd. which produces premium quality soy source and Japanese-style seasonings and boasts a history of 110 years.

Usami Honten. co.,Ltd. URL http://www.usamihonten.com/index_e.html



using brown black sumi made 35 years ago.... hoping it gives you a sweet sense of déjà-vu.

Figure 3 "Moon"

Oriental have loved and written poetry about the moon for a long time. We see ourselves in the moon and miss a loved one or someone who passed away when looking at the moon. The origin of Kanji is linked to the shape of the crescent moon. While the sun is always full and round, the moon waxes and wanes... Expressing the moon silently behind the light cloud.

Figure 4 "Yukata (Japanese Summer Kimono): "Firefly"

The Kimono is one of the beautiful Japanese traditional garments which is usually worn for formal occasions. In the summer though, we often choose the Yukata which, made from cotton, looks casually stylish. Originally, the Yukata was worn after a bath. Now, it is also something we enjoy to wear in the summer carnival and at events. This Yukata has been designed with fireflies... hoping that every lady shines like a firefly at sundown with the design that stands out at night.

Akiko Kondoh, Consultant for EnginSoft in Japan

