

## Calligraphic Abstraction

Seattle Asian Art Museum,  
May 9–October 4, 2015

A BOY WAS BORN to a low-ranking samurai. This was near Uena, in the Iga Province of Japan. Working in the kitchens as a servant, the boy developed a love of *haikai no renga*, a form of collaborative poetry. Each poem consisted of three lines—five syllables, seven syllables, five syllables—and was called *hock*, a form, centuries later, that would be called haiku. The name of the boy, who rose to great fame as a poet, became the most important in all Japan during the Edo period: Matsuo Bashō.

He wrote in elegant calligraphy on paper, using an ink stick, paper, an ink stone, a brush, a seal—very simple tools for a beautiful form of art. During this time the famed calligraphers Hosoi Kotaku (author of the five-volume *Kanga Hyakudan*), Honami Kōetsu, Konoe Nobutada and Shōkadō Shōjō were creating a distinctive calligraphy that was purely Japanese rather than the Chinese style that the Japanese had used for generations.

One of Bashō's calligraphic works appeared recently at the Seattle Asian Art Museum's exhibition *Calligraphic Abstraction*, highlighting nearly a thousand years of calligraphy from the 11th century until today. The show, which ran from May to October 2015, presented works ranging from Islamic to archaic Chinese, from traditional Japanese to modern art forms, each with its distinctive traits and histories.

The Chinese calligrapher Sun Guoting, in the seventh century, remarked, “[When viewing calligraphy,] I have seen the wonder of a drop of dew glistening from a dangling needle, a shower of rock hailing down in a raging thunder, a flock of geese gliding, frantic beasts stampeding in terror, a phoenix dancing, a startled snake slithering away in fright.” Visitors to the museum, in a few small rooms, saw Guoting's imagined menagerie on paper in full force.

Chinese characters can be retraced to 4000 BCE. Inscriptions in ceramic date back to about 1435 BCE. These were writings in cinnabar paint. Meanwhile, contemporary characters—still recognizable today—are visible in ancient pieces dated from the 14th to the 11th century BCE. Calligraphic expression goes far back in time, in other words. Mi Fu was writing about calligraphy during the Song Dynasty (960–1270 CE).

Calligraphy, to the Chinese, is more than a form of writing; it is a form of art. Joan Stanley-Baker, Emeritus Professor of Art History at Tainan National University of Arts in Taiwan, says, “Calligraphy is sheer life experienced through energy in motion that is registered as traces on silk or paper, with time and rhythm in shifting space its main ingredients.” Bashō's piece at the exhibition is a breath of his life caught on paper.

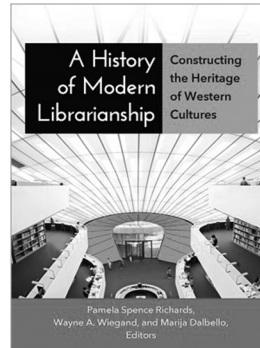
There was more than poetry on the walls, though looking at Honami Kōetsu's “Waki Poem” (circa 1600) is like looking at a quiet heart turned gold. The exhibition included a piece by Mark Tobey, famed Northwest School painter who passed away in 1976. Tobey's pieces, resembling Abstract Expressionism, were heavily influenced by his interest in Eastern religions and, specifically, Asian calligraphy. Also on show was a piece by Xu Bing, a Chinese-born artist living in Beijing, whose calligraphy is based on a writing system he invented on his own. A piece from Ottoman Turkey called “Tughia” suggested a whirl of musical notes that were, in fact, text from the Prophet.

Contemporary Korean artist Son Man-jin created a piece for the exhibition based on a Daoist quote from 300 BCE. “All men know the use of the useful, but no one knows the use of the useless.” On the right of the piece, an abstraction of the words “useful” and “useless” in calligraphy. On the other side, a wash of grey and black ink. In the middle of it, ink splatters. Is the artwork useful or useless? Is art ever useless?

The Japanese calligraphy, including the work by Bashō and calligraphy by master Shoei, was housed in two galleries, a distinct style in each. Much of Japanese calligraphy was, and is, influenced by Zen Buddhist thought. It employs a state of mind called *mushin*.

## *A History of Modern Librarianship: Constructing the Heritage of Western Cultures*

EDITED BY PAMELA SPENCE RICHARDS,  
WAYNE A. WIEGAND & MARIJA DALBELLO  
(LIBRARIES UNLIMITED, 2015, US\$60)



THIS BOOK IS AMBITIOUS in chronology and geographic scope, yet includes significant depth of detail in its 248 pages. It gives historical overviews of the development of library institutions and professional practice for European countries, Canada and the United States, Africa and Australasia, along with a more general introduction, and concludes with a discussion of convergence arising from digital developments.

Much of what the authors classify as “modern librarianship” originated in Europe, and it is there the historical discussion begins. Due to the divergent histories of the various countries, each is discussed separately, with cultural and institutional histories of institutions and professional practice.

This chapter is followed by a discussion of the United States and Canada. The histories of libraries in those two countries are much more similar, and there is less need for a division between them. Here we read about the development of libraries, the development of professional education, cultural considerations related to library holdings, and the fight to have women’s contributions recognized.

The chapter on Africa discusses the development of libraries in Africa starting in

One’s mind is clear and the letters flow out of themselves. *Mushin*, translated as “no-mind” or “empty mind,” is a state where the mind is not preoccupied by any thought or emotion. It is empty in the sense that it is unbiased, free and adaptable. *Mushin* is the essence of Zen, and also is a core principle of Japanese martial arts. There is no practice with calligraphy, no do-overs. For any one piece of paper, the artist has but one chance. It is a moment in time, harkening back to Stanley-Baker’s comment.

One of the two Japanese galleries featured *kana* calligraphy, with its thin, gentle, flowing lines that present a more feminine form. Think of the calligraphy as a haiku itself—serene, peaceful, contented. That’s *kana*. As Bashō wrote, “A bee / staggers out / of the peony.” The room also featured an exquisite scroll by the Zen monk Musō Soseki.

The other gallery housed *kanji*, a more masculine style similar to Chinese calligraphy. It’s bolder, thicker. There’s more ink. While *kana* follows the flow of the lettering, *kanji* emphasizes the overall composition.

Though the exhibition showed only a few examples, the rich history of Persian calligraphy shouldn’t be forgotten. A thousand years old, it was developed by Ibn Muqla (c. 885–940) and his brother, and the styles were commonly used for 400 years. In the past 500 years or so, Nasta’liq calligraphy has been the predominant style. Famed Persian calligraphers include Mir Emad Hassani (1554–1615), Karim Molaverdikhani (b. 1911) and Gholam Hossein Amirkhani (b. 1939).

Long before Bashō’s birth, calligraphy was a prized and admired form of art. It has continued as such long after his death. The only thing remaining of Bashō are his words. And calligraphy, which remains always, for all time.

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