

# **A study on Ornamental Expressions Seen on the Early Stage of the Bunten Exhibition**

## **—Focusing on the Artworks Exhibited at the 6th Bunten Exhibition—**

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### **ABSTRACT**

I attempted to explain the aspects of ornamental expressions that used in modern Japanese paintings. In this study, I focused on the artworks exhibited at the 6th Bunten exhibition.

The exhibition had two features. Firstly, it was the first time that the category-dividing system was implemented. The other one was that the combination of realism and ornamental expressions became the viewpoint for the evaluation of the artworks.

Firstly, I conducted a research on a range of interpretations about the term 'ornament' and found some differences and similarities between each interpretations.

Secondly, I analyzed the ornamental trends at that time referring to the methods by the then painters and the critics' opinion. As a result, I found out that apart from the visible expression techniques, there were also invisible aspects involving emotion expressed as a decorative element.

Furthermore, I assumed that it would be essential for the realistic elements and the ornamental ones to coexist within a single motif. To verify the assumption, I tried to pick up some ornamental expressions on the artworks exhibited at the 6th Bunten exhibition and re-interpreted it from my viewpoint, and implemented it on my artworks.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

I am interested in ornamental expressions seen in Japanese paintings. And I find out order and rhythm from them. Also, I expect them to have the effects such as emphasis of intention of the artworks and addition of symbolic elements. Besides, I am certain that ornamental expressions can become the main subject of the artworks. That is why I set them as a research topic of mine.

Bunten exhibition (official name: An annual art exhibition sponsored by the Ministry of Education), I take up as my research topic, is a governmental art competition established in 1907 which aimed cultural unification by national government, promotion of fine art from the position of education, and integration of the artists' groups which were too many at that time.

The trends of Japanese paintings at that time are now expressed not only referred Western realism but also design-like and decorative style by Japanese classical Yamato-E, Korin school and so on.

The recent research says such consciousness of balance between ornamental expressions and realism was shared by painters and critics, and when the 6th exhibition in 1912, the words 'ornamental' and 'realistic' were used as specific measure to criticize the artworks by critiques as the widespread of the ornamental trends.

Now I focus on the phenomenon then and try to research about the movement of Japanese painting circles around the early stage of the Bunten exhibition.

### **2. METHOD**

The main part of research in this study consists of 3 chapters.

#### **3-1. About interpretative range of the word 'ornament'**

In this chapter, firstly, I pick up the meaning of ornament by some dictionaries, documents and previous researches related to fine arts, design, and Japanese painting. Secondly, I compare these interpretations and point out some similarities and differences.

#### **3-2. About ornamental expressions seen on the 6th Bunten exhibition**

Next chapter, I investigate how ornamental expression came to be a trend on the early stage of the Bunten exhibition. Especially, I focus on the 6th Bunten Exhibition. I make a list about ornamental techniques seen on the artworks of Japanese paintings at the 6th Bunten exhibition referring the images of them and the coterie critiques appeared in '*Bijutsu Shinpo*'.

### 3-3. Verification by my artworks

The third chapter, I apply these ornamental expressions to my artworks and try to verify the assumptions above.

Through 3 kind of researches, I aim to make it clear about the aspects of ornamental expressions used on the early stage of the Bunten Exhibition and probe the necessary conditions to harmonize ornamental expressions with realistic ones in a piece of the artwork.

## 3. RESEARCH

### 3-1. About interpretative range of the word 'ornament'

First of all, as for the formative elements of ornamental expressions, I find out the words like 'line', 'plane' and 'color' on the literature. Besides, 'symmetry', 'balance', 'rhythm' that expressed as aesthetic notion called 'principle of form' are also indicated. Relating to these words, 'ornament' is usually explained.

On the other hand, I notice its secondary character and inconvenient impression in a part of the field of the fine arts as somewhat negative images.

Regarding the ornamental elements seen in Japanese painting, subjective and impressive senses that the Japanese races originally had formed the independent painting expressions. And such expressions developed through the history, and when the modern period, these expressions were seen in a new light as 'decorativeness of Japanese art' by the then painter and critics.

### 3-2. About ornamental expressions seen on the 6th Bunten exhibition

When the Bunten exhibition was established in the end of Meiji era, the painting techniques were getting diverse among the then painters of Japanese painting circles because of the rise of the coming generation with modern subject, the naturalization of modern idea of arts, the influence of Western end of the century arts or post-impressionism.

For example, 《*Konoma No Aki*》 (figure 1) painted by Kanzan Shimomura (1873-1930) was exhibited at the 1st Bunten exhibition. In the piece, Kanzan tried to coexist Japanese ornamental expressions and Western realism in the points of shading that using *bokashi* and *nijimi*, the background filled with gold and unique trimming.

《*Ochiba*》 (figure 2) painted by Shunso Hishida (1874-1911) was shown at the 3rd exhibition. Regarding the artworks, Shunso said that he sacrificed distance in pictorial space to express 'savor of art'. When I watch the artworks, I can understand his trial and error to fuse two conflicting elements: ornamental expressions and realistic ones from the choice of motifs, flat style of coating pigments and the composition like accumulating objects on the picture.

Particularly such artworks, among Japanese painting circles in those days, trends of ornamental expressions was getting bigger.



figure 1 《*Konoma No Aki*》 By Kanzan Shimomura (1873-1930),  
1907, Pair of two-panel folding screens; ink and colors on paper  
169.5 × 170.0 each, Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo



figure 2 Important Cultural Property 《*Ochiba*》 By Shunso Hishida (1874-1911),  
1909, Pair of six-panel folding screens; ink and colors on paper  
156.4 × 364.0 each, Eisei Bunko, Tokyo

The 6th Bunten Exhibition that held afterwards, was individual in the point of 'Nikasei (the category-dividing system)' which divided conventional category of Japanese painting into two, 'Dai 1 ka' and 'Dai 2 ka' for the first time. The former consisted of painters who succeed Japanese traditional painting schools strictly. The latter actively challenged adopting Western painting techniques based on Japanese old schools. Related to this, recent research says that ornamental tendencies I especially focus on this time is mostly seen in the artworks exhibited at 'Dai 2 ka'. So, below, I aim at the ornamental attempts done to the artworks of 'Dai 2 ka'.

In this research, I utilize the coterie critiques appeared on the magazine 'Bijutsu Shinpo'. I peruse the critiques to the artworks of Japanese painting exhibited at the 6th Bunten exhibition, and extract the artworks that are used the words 'ornamental' and 'realistic' together in the comments. Besides, I search for another words that indicate pictorial elements accompany with these 2 words. Furthermore, I classify these words into 4 items, 'mention of external element: form / material, formative element, means of expression' and 'mention regarding feeling', and assemble to table 1.

table 1 : the analytic result of the critiques in 'Bijutsu Shinpo' that used the words 'ornamental' and 'realistic' on evaluating the artworks of 6th Buntan

No	title	name	mention of external element			mention regarding feeling
			form / material	formative element	means of expression	
3	《Tenson Korin》	Chikuha Otake	gold leaf / (huge) screen	line	composition	(poetic / picturesque) emotion / mood
8	《Yoroutaru Uma》	Somei Yuki	-	motif / color / line	design / (figure) representation / (ornamental / pure) pattern	sensuous ornament-oriented / mood
10	《Tsuribiyori》	Taiun Komura	-	-	-	subjective / character / (poetic) emotion
15	《Soemoncho No Yube》	Seien Shima	-	-	composition / repetition	-
17	《Godaigo Tei》	Kansetsu Hashimoto	-	-	same shape	-
28	《Nanen No Hitosumi Ni Okeru Kyoku To Nemuri》	Shiho Sakakibara	-	-	-	mood
35	《Kangetsu》	Okoku Konoshima	folding screen	color	composition / arrangement	-
51	《Aota》	Suisho Nishiyama	-	color	representation / Korin style	-
52	《Nasu》	Keigetsu Kikuchi	material	-	coloring / pattern / repetition / technique	pleasure / expression of mood
37	《Ushio》	Gyokudo Kawai	silver ground	color	patterning / (color) balance	-
59	《Rankyo》	Shunkyo Yamamoto	gold	-	-	meaning

(Made by author)

As the result of making out this table, I find out that various elements of the artworks are related with 'ornamental' and 'realistic' to evaluate the artworks. Above all, it is notable that apart from the visible expression techniques, there are also invisible aspects involving emotion expressed as a decorative element.

Now, based on the table, I pick up some artworks of 'Dai 2 ka' over the keyword 'composition', and analyze how these artists dealt with ornamental elements and realistic ones on their artworks.

First, I try to study 《Soemoncho No Yube》 (figure 3) painted by Seien Shima (1892-1970). In the coterie critique, the artwork was praised in the point of composition including 2 *Maiko*, some branches of willow, regularly arranged lattices with the phrases 'bring highly ornamental effect by totally using realistic sketch'. Here, I focus on utilization of lattices. They make order and rhythm on the picture. Such ornamental effect by realistic representation lead to the coexistence of ornamental elements and realistic ones in the artwork that I pursue.

Next, 《Kangetsu》 (figure 4) painted by Okoku Konoshima (1877-1938), there were opinions on the pros and cons over his realistic representation. In 'Tokyo Asahi Shinbun', Shotaro Koyama (1857-1916), an artist of Western Painting, commended his realism as earnest. On the other hand, in 'Bijutsu Shinpo', such representation was regarded as vulgar because of his too much objective way of sketching. Exactly, such techniques may lack the balance of atmosphere in the artwork. However, natural and objective composition based on bare state of groves could surely make rhythm as repeating elements at the same time. As a result, his artwork assumes a kind of ornamentality, I imagine.

One more artwork, 《Nasu》 (figure 5) painted by Keigetsu Kikuchi (1879-1955), got the 3rd prize at the exhibition. However, there was a negative comment regarding disunion of techniques in 'Bijutsu Shinpo'. In the critique, the representation of the leaves which is like a pattern, realistic eggplants, and figures that halfway between ornamental and realistic were picked out and criticized. I guess the then painter paid attention to what extent they should show ornamental elements and realistic one into a piece of artwork.

Through the analysis, I consider that it would be essential for the realistic elements and the ornamental ones to coexist within a single motif, not only to place each motifs together to harmonize ornamental expression and realistic one into a piece of artwork.



figure 3 《Soemoncho No Yube》 By Seien Shima (1892-1970), 1912



figure 4 《Kangetsu》 By Okoku Konoshima (1877-1938), 1912  
Pair of six-panel folding screens; ink and colors on silk  
167.0×372.0 each, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Kyoto



figure 5 《Nasu》 By Keigetsu Kikuchi (1879-1955), 1912

### 3-3. Verification by my artworks

To verify the above assumption, I try to pick up some ornamental expressions on the artworks exhibited at the 6th Bunten exhibition and re-interpreted it from my viewpoint, and implemented it on my artworks.

First, in 《Nevertheless》 (figure 6), I try to equip the sting of cactuses with ornamentality. Using regular range of them as characteristic, I give the artwork rhythmical movement. Also, I pile mineral pigments when I paint the sting, that's why I shoulder them the part of decoration.

Next, in 《Inner Jewels》 (figure 7), I devise the representation of eczema. Repeating it on the belly, I try to give rhythm like polka-dot on the picture, and express the capabilities of humanity too. Also, to enhance ornamental effect, I use brighter color than as it is.

The last, in 《Drifter》 (figure 8), I leave the water weeds 2 interpretations on the artwork. One is the ornament to decolate plane surface as the picture. The other is the element to express the surface of pond as creation of 3-dimensional space.



figure 6 《Nevertheless》 By Author, 2015,  
ink and colors on paper, 116.7 × 116.7

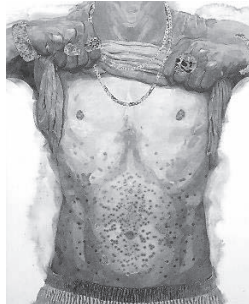


figure 7 《Inner Jewels》 By Author, 2015,  
ink and colors on paper, 227.3 × 181.8

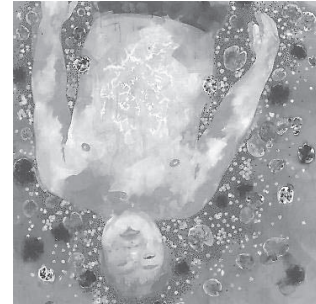


figure 8 《Drifter》 By Author, 2016,  
ink and colors on paper, 116.7 × 116.7

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

As regards the range of interpretation about ornament, there were different ways of understanding due to fields of the art, design, craft, architecture and so on. However, there were also some similarities such as the purpose that give beauty to object by using each elements of 'principle of form'. Concerning ornamental expressions seen in Japanese painting, the unique senses that Japanese race originally had formed various type of expressions that called 'ornamental expressions' present-day.

As the result of the research of the 6th Bunten exhibition, I found out that not only the visible expression techniques, but also invisible aspects involving emotion were considered from decorative viewpoint. As for specific techniques, I assumed that it would be essential for the realistic elements and the ornamental ones to coexist within a single motif. If so, harmonization of ornamental expression and realistic one would be achieved, and be able to set up ornamental expressions as independent pictorial techniques.

Through the verification by my artworks, I found these ornamental techniques picked up from the artworks in 6th Bunten exhibition the possibilities regarding visualization of emotion and attachment of symbolism.

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