



Photo: Yamatane Museum of Art

Toshi Kuru ("End of the Year," 1968). Color painting on paper, 100 × 73 cm. Collection of Yamatane Museum of Art

Snowy Landscapes of Japan Painted by Higashiyama Kaii

Higashiyama Kaii was a Nihonga¹ artist who painted snowy landscapes and scenes. We spoke about the appeal of his paintings with a director and curators at three museums that have his works in their collections.

(Text: Morohashi Kumiko)

Higashiyama Kaii (1908–1999) can be considered a representative 20th-century Nihonga painter. With experience studying abroad in Germany as well, he incorporated aspects of Western realism into Japanese painting traditions. He is known for his style, which conveys feelings of fantastical while at the same time featuring realistic representations.

His works include numerous scenes showing snowy Japanese landscapes, and they are found in the collections of museums throughout Japan. One such example is *Toshi Kuru* ("End of the Year") in the collection of the Yamatane Museum of Art (Shibuya City, Tokyo), a museum known especially for its collection of modern and contemporary Nihonga works. The painting is one in a series that arose through an exchange the artist had with Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972), a novelist awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature

"Kawabata had told him, 'Paint it now, or the unique scenery of Kyoto will no longer be there for you to paint. Paint it, please, while it still remains.' Those words inspired him to paint scenes of Kyoto throughout the four seasons, and he exhibited a series of 18



Photo: Chiba Prefectural Museum of Art

Shunsetsu ("Spring Snow," 1973).
Color painting on paper, 168
x 215 cm. Collection of Chiba
Prefectural Museum of Art

paintings in *Keiraku Shiki* ('Kyoto's Four Seasons'), a solo exhibition held in 1968. *Toshi Kuru* is one of the works he exhibited then. The painting shows snow falling on rows of houses in Kyoto on New Year's Eve as he viewed it from the Kyoto Hotel (now the Hotel Okura Kyoto), his usual lodging place in the city," the museum's director, Yamazaki Taeko, explains.

"Kaii said about the work, 'I was spending the year's end in Kyoto and had heard the *joya no kane*² bell-ringing. At this time, there were still a lot of tiled roofs and not many square buildings. *Toshi Kuru* was born of my feelings of nostalgia and longing for good old Kyoto.' Just as he said, Kyoto on New Year's Eve is represented with a great deal of poetic sentiment in the work."

Another of his paintings, *Shunsetsu* ("Spring Snow"), which is in the collection of the Chiba Prefectural Museum of Art (Chiba City), depicts stands of Japanese cedars dusted with snow on a steep mountain slope in the northern part of Kyoto, an area also known as Rakuhoku.

"Higashiyama had long admired *Suibokuga*³ (ink wash painting); he said it allowed the expression of spiritual qualities with a depth beyond what could be conveyed with the use of many different colors. He painted this work in 1973 at the age of 65 and exhibited it at Nitten.⁴ The way a monotone world of subdued color — just blue and white — expands in it for the viewer, it also feels like an introductory chapter in his shift toward the deep spiritual expression of *Suibokuga*," explains curator Aikawa Junko.

The Nagano Prefectural Art Museum's Higashiyama Kaii Gallery (Nagano City) has a collection of over 970 works, including *Fuyu no Tabi* ("Winter Journey"), which Higashiyama painted at the age of 80. The masterpiece features a composition that directs the viewer's gaze up the slopes of a mountain in Kazuno City, Akita Prefecture covered in deep snow.

"Higashiyama made comparisons between the stages of his life and the four seasons, and I think he saw the elderly years as corresponding to snowy winter scenes like this. This work could be seen as symbolic of his life, with the series of journeys he had made himself, as he approached the final stage of it," explains curator Matsuura

Chieko.

Higashiyama Kaii continued to travel and remained quite active into his final years before passing away in 1999 at the age of 90. If you have a chance, make a point of viewing pieces of work he left behind in person — Nihonga paintings expressing the beauty of snowy Japanese landscapes as viewed through his inspired gaze. ■

Fuyu no Tabi ("Winter Journey," 1989). Color painting on paper, 110 x 162 cm. Collection of Higashiyama Kaii Gallery, Nagano Prefectural Art Museum



Photo: Nagano Prefectural Art Museum

1. In modern times, Nihonga generally refers to works painted on *washi* paper and silk using traditional Japanese painting materials. Traditional Nihonga materials include natural resources such as *sumi* ink and mineral pigments, and occasionally metallic materials such as gold leaf. *Nikawa* animal glue is used to attach them, as they lack adhesive qualities of mineral pigments and metallic materials.
2. Refers to the sound of bells rung at temples throughout Japan each year from midnight on New Year's Eve into New Year's Day.
3. An Eastern-style painting form. Works are primarily painted with *sumi* ink, making use of light and dark shading of its black monotone color.
4. One of the Japan's largest public art exhibitions founded in 1907. Comprises five art faculties: Japanese and Western Style Painting, Sculpture, Craft Arts, and Sho (Calligraphy). Works by designated artists who became exempted from examinations required to display as well as awarded works are exhibited every year in fall at the National Art Center, Tokyo.