

Masahiro Suda (2018). Brushstrokes as Art's Unique Signature East and West. *Ideology*, 3 (3): 90-95, 2018

Brushstrokes as Art's Unique Signature East and West

Masahiro Suda

Nagoya University of the Arts
65 Tokushige Nishinuma, Kitanagoya, Aichi 481-8535 Japan

suda@nua.ac.jp

ABSTRACT

Painting does not have all that much influence in contemporary art exhibitions today, as most of them are devoted to installations, often featuring digital arts. Yet, painting still matters as a straightforward display of artistic spirit, as much as an original signature matters when it comes to our paper documents. Brush marks play a key role in painting, as shown by many historical examples of their unique, mutual relation.

INTRODUCTION

For each artist who seeks to paint, methods of art-making differ in terms of composition, forms, colors, and the use of materials. Moreover, since paintings are usually hand-drawn, brush marks are integral to them. The unique relation between painting and brush marks plays out in numerous examples to be found throughout the history of painting. For instance, the emergence of photography has had a huge impact on painting, and today, we almost always need a computer to paint. Nevertheless, the art of painting still plays a part in our lives.

BRUSH MARKS IN WESTERN ART

In Europe's Renaissance period around the 15th century, when the development of photographic technology was still far off in the future, painting already served as a means of depicting the real world. In other words, Renaissance perspective made it possible to represent three-dimensional space within the two dimensions of a painting. For this, Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1515) and his followers frequently used a technique called “sfumato,” which allows colors to be seamlessly blended into one another without leaving brush marks. In Leonardo's paintings, for instance, the contours of figures typically look hazy, gradually fading and merging into the background. This naturalistic rendition of figures is only achieved by applying the technique of blurring the outlines. The world's best-known painting, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, thus exhibits the application of “sfumato.” In the 19th century, in response to the invention of photography, Impressionist painters such as Claude Monet (1840–1926) championed the visible use of brush marks precisely because of their unmediated qualities. This would suggest that the preservation of brush marks was not only motivated by aesthetic aspects but by the fact that, in contrast to photography, they became the means of reflecting the artist's character. The paintings of Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), for example, bear his distinctive dashed fiery brush marks, disclosing his tempestuous, passionate character, whereas those of Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) display rather fluid and smooth brush strokes, as if revealing his feminine sensuality.

Together with color, brush marks subsequently took center stage in the palettes of mid-20th century painters. As a hallmark of American Neo-Expressionists, brushstrokes appear more visibly in their paintings and are applied rather robustly. The paintings of Cy Twombly (1928–2011), for instance, are predominantly large-scale, freely scribbled, calligraphic, and graffiti-like works on canvas. Most of them are abstract images with a beautiful harmony of line that completes handwritten expression. As a result, they suggest the richness of strong emotions. The way that Minimalist painters treated brush marks, on the contrary, was just the opposite. They removed any trace of personal expression, which brush marks effectively convey. This distinctive characteristic of brush marks is due to the fact that it requires the creator's physical and gestural movements. For instance, American artists such as Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Brice Marden

(1938–) demonstrated this sense of physicality and vigorous movements in their work by applying dynamic brushwork. Additionally, Marden was particularly influenced by Japanese calligraphy, as he wanted to break away from the Minimalist aesthetics.

CALLIGRAPHY AND EASTERN ART

In the context of Western visual art, brush marks have historically played the role of fulfilling artists' primal desire for self-expression. In East Asia, on the contrary, other means were available to that end. Along with painting, calligraphy is a long-established art form in East Asia. Its rich tradition goes back over two thousand years. Grounded in Eastern thought, calligraphy is not just about the pursuit of beautiful lettering, but it encompasses much deeper meaning; it is viewed as creative self-expression within the harmonious fashioning of written signs. In the Chinese and Japanese calligraphy traditions, lettering is executed in a single color, and the tone is determined by the density of ink and water, as well as the paper's water absorption capacity. Due to its fortuitous and creative nature, since it fashions signs on the spot rather than conform to fixed pre-existing patterns, the execution of lettering heavily relies on chance and serendipitous elements. Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800) is an important painter of Japan's mid-Edo period. He was active while Japan had closed its doors to the outside world. His paintings mostly dealt with traditional subjects such as animals and plants, particularly chickens and other birds. Yet, some of his works also display a great degree of experimentation with perspective and other modern stylistic elements. For instance, one of his typical techniques was *Sujime-gaki*. This is an expressive technique of skillful control over paper and Sumi ink, relying on a deep understanding of the nature of simple materials to convey a vivid sense of reality. Another painter, Soga Shōhaku (1730–1781), demonstrated his strong personality through his control of the brush. Needless to say, the main purpose of traditional calligraphy is literal communication. However, in the context of Japanese contemporary visual art, calligraphy is perceived rather differently. Once imbued with the spirit of Modernism, Japanese artists came up with a new type of expression, clearly distinct from its traditional precedents.

Gutai was a prominent group of artists who transformed traditional Japanese calligraphy into a contemporary art form in the 1950s. Some *Gutai* artists went to the extreme of associating calligraphy with action painting, which involved physically demanding gestural movements. For instance, a leading figure of *Gutai*, Kazuo Shiraga (1924–2008), used his own body as his primary means of producing paintings. Typically, he would cover his body with paints and literally throw himself onto paper or canvas. On one occasion, he suspended himself from the ceiling of a gallery space by a rope. While dangling, he splashed oil paints by erratically swinging his feet around. It could be said that he was a performance artist who produced a special kind of action painting. In stark contrast to *Gutai*, the *Mono-ha* movement of the 1970s, led by Minimalist artist Lee Ufan (1936–), focused more on subtlety and a philosophical kind of

aesthetics. *Mono-ha* artists often arranged industrial materials, such as stone, steel plates, glass, light bulbs, wood, wire, rope, oil, etc. They intended to examine the incidental relation between these objects when they are placed closely, albeit quite randomly and in unintended ways. Lee Ufan's Minimalist paintings are contemplative and ethereal, comprising only a few brushstrokes. The title of the exhibition "Superflat," curated by Takashi Murakami (1962–) in 2000, was intended in part to reject the Renaissance perspective and the three-dimensionality it represents. Inspired by Japanese manga and anime, Murakami focuses on the flatness and two-dimensionality of painting. Moreover, there is no trace of brush marks on the surface of his paintings, on which an army of assistants typically work with utmost care.

ECHOES OF CALLIGRAPHY IN POST-WAR AND CONTEMPORARY WESTERN ART

The recent history of Western art shows several examples of the art's relevance to calligraphy or of art wherein the ethos of calligraphy is found. Art Informel (translatable in English as "unformed" art) quickly developed during the post-war period in France. The work of Art Informel artists, often dubbed European Abstract Expressionism, shared a propensity toward unconventionality and spontaneity, as it rejected predefined forms and conformist thinking as represented by traditional realist painters. Around the same time, the better-known American school of Abstract Expressionism appeared, itself influenced by Eastern calligraphy. At that time, the Western world was particularly interested in Eastern culture. Many Western artists were inspired by various aspects of Eastern tradition, and calligraphy was indeed one of the latter's most significant exports to the West. Thus, among American Abstract Expressionist painters, Morris Louis (1912–1962) and Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011), for instance, produced paintings that show similarities with calligraphy, such as using the staining technique. Hence, the term "Stain Painting" applied to such works at that time.

In the context of art, a lot of attention has been paid to the use of different materials, as many post-war artists experimented with non-traditional materials. Various surface textures have been discovered, while materiality and physicality became the objects of investigation for many contemporary painters. In this regard as well, brush marks have remained relevant to contemporary art. Testifying to this, the use of brush marks as well as beeswax as a material can be observed in the work of Jasper Johns (1930–). He wanted to emphasize brush marks as something inherent to painting. The creative nature of brush marks is an issue of enduring relevance to contemporary painting. In particular, the smooth surface of the paintings of Gerhard Richter (1932–) has a deceptive quality, as it occupies a space between photography and painting, where the use of brush marks serves to maintain this ambiguity. We may also note that among contemporary painters, the work of Marlene Dumas (1953–) displays calligraphic staining elements, while Bernard Frieze (1954–) emphasizes on the use of brush marks in eloquent yet unpredictable, often idiosyncratic ways, and Jason Martin

(1970–) produces abstract paintings that deal with non-traditional materials and brush marks.

CONCLUSION

Thus, if gestural marks often issue from a primal human desire for self-expression, it is not to the exclusion of another primal human drive to communicate with others, as humans are social beings by nature. Therefore, a tension between these contrasting human desires simmers within the act of applying a brush stroke. This might suggest that the exploration of different materials and the emphasis on self-expression through abstract means imply a denial of literal communication, or, in other words, of communication through representations.

In the age of digital media, our visual world is flooded with visual representations. French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) calls this predicament “hyper-reality.” However, such representations lack certain qualities, among which is the one that brushstrokes can offer in allowing the artist’s self-expression and individuality to find an outlet. In the increasingly sterile two-dimensional visual world that we inhabit, this quality is not something that should be dismissed or trivialized. On the contrary, it is well worth revisiting from time to time.

REFERENCES

Gerhard Richter (1996) *Gerhard Richter Texte: Schriften und Interviews*, Japan: Tankosha.

Jean Baudrillard (1984) *Simulacres et simulation*, Japan: Hosei University Press.

Lee Ufan (2000) *Yohaku no Geijutsu*, Japan: Misuzu Shobo.

Rosalind E. Krauss (1994) *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Japan: Libroport.

Takashi Murakami (2005) *Superflat*, Japan: Madra Publishing.

Tsuji Nobuo (1970) *Kisou no Keifu*, Japan: Bijutsu Shuppansha

GLOSSARY OF JAPANESE TERMS

Sujime-gaki

The technique takes advantage of the soft and absorbent texture of the *gasenshi* paper, which makes it possible to execute strokes in Sumi ink even very close to each other without the ink merging, leaving the space between them looking like a white line—*sujime*.

Suntory Museum of Art https://www.suntory.com/sma/exhibition/2015_2/display.html

Gutai

The Gutai group is the first radical post-war artistic group in Japan. It was founded in 1954 by the painter Jiro Yoshihara in Osaka, Japan, in response to the reactionary artistic context of the time. This influential group was involved in large-scale multimedia environments, performances, and theatrical events and emphasized the relation between body and matter in pursuit of originality. The movement rejected traditional art styles in favor of performative immediacy.

Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gutai_group

Mono-ha

Mono-ha is the name given to a group of 20th-century Japanese artists. They explored the encounter between natural and industrial materials, such as stone, steel plates, glass, light bulbs, cotton, sponge, paper, wood, wire, rope, leather, oil, and water, arranging them in mostly unaltered, ephemeral states. Their works focus as much on the interdependency of these elements and the surrounding space as on the materials themselves.

Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mono-ha>