



section 6 The World of Ryōkan's Calligraphy

As the modern novelist Natsume Sōseki once said, the appeal of Ryōkan's calligraphy is surely in the way that it is bursting with a pure and naïve elegance. On the other hand, the modern potter and epicure Kitaōji Rosanjin pointed out that it was Ryōkan's humanity and depth of character that lay at the root of the magnificence of his calligraphy, stating: "Whether from the perspective of quality or from the perspective of its visual appearance, Ryōkan's calligraphy shows a rare genius in its unusual correctness and honesty of form. It is truly the epitome of truth, goodness, and beauty all in one."

After moving to Gogōan, Ryōkan studied the *kana* calligraphy of Ono no Michikaze's *Akihagijō* poetry collection and the running script calligraphy of the mid-Tang dynasty monk Huaisu's *Autobiography*. Written in a running script that is sometimes called "mad cursive," Huaisu's work was written in a single sitting like a winged horse dashing across the sky. During this period, Ryōkan devoted himself single-mindedly to studying famous calligraphies from both Japan and China and gradually these came together in perfect harmony to form the easygoing calligraphic style that has a quality distinctively his own.

Once he moved to Otoko Shrine, Ryōkan was studying Huaisu's *Thousand-character Essay* and further building up his richly modulated writing style until ultimately, in his final years, a dignified style full of boundless suggestion began to appear. Ryōkan's calligraphy was constantly evolving throughout his whole life.



section 7 Compassion in Practice

Ryōkan was a Zen monk who reached deep enlightenment through extensive training, but he never became a head priest of a temple. As an individual Zen monk, he begged for alms and received offerings of rice and other things from the common people and, for his part, offered his own words in return and through them brought enlightenment to the people. This was his chosen path. Ryōkan's character parallels that of the historical Buddha, who became close to the people through begging for alms and sermonizing about the Buddhist law. In fact, Ryōkan's poetry includes several poems that show just how deeply the monk respected the Buddha. During his time at Gogōan, while Ryōkan was studying the Lotus Sutra, he also attempted to emulate in actual practice the compassion of figures such as the "Never Disparaging bodhisattva" (Bodhisattva Sadaparibhuta) who respected people highly, or the bodhisattva Kannon, who was tirelessly and selflessly acting to save people from sadness and pain. Ryōkan connected with people with affection in his heart and also composed poetry that showed compassion toward the less fortunate.



section 8 A Sense for the Seasons

With the clarity of mind gained from his ascetic practices, Ryōkan relished the transitions of the four seasons through snow, moon, and flowers. The poem he is said to have composed in his final moments of life shows that Ryōkan became one with nature and appreciated it with an obstructed mind. With the poem, he seems to be saying that since he himself was now one with nature, anything he would have wanted to leave as a memento of himself was already present within nature anyway.

In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968 entitled "Japan, the Beautiful, and I," Kawabata Yasunari cited Ryōkan's death poem and conveyed these time-honored Japanese sentiments to the people of the world. Through his *haikai* (*haiku*), *waka*, and *kanshi* poems, Ryōkan extolled the charms of each of the four seasons individually with vivid sensitivity. When he saw things such as the violets and cherry blossoms in the spring, toad lily in the summer, maple leaves in the autumn, or snow in the winter, he wrote of their appealing frankness and complete absence of affectation.

Ryōkan liked Matsuo Bashō's *haiku* poetry as well as the *Man'yōshū* and *Koshi jūkyūshu* (Nineteen old poems) poetry collections. These were all poetry collections that expressed the human spirit with frank directness and Ryōkan's own poetry embodied the truth itself with its naïve and artless taste.



section 9 Years at Shimazaki

In the early winter of 1826 (Bunsei 9), Ryōkan was invited by one Kimura Motoemon of the Notoya household in the village of Shimazaki (now Nagaoka city, Niigata) to move into a small hut on his property. By this time, Ryōkan would have been beginning to sense his own declining strength, and the difficult work of gathering firewood and water was no doubt also starting to have an impact on his physical health.

As the rumor that Ryōkan had come down from Mt. Kugami and moved to a hut at Shimazaki spread, numerous monks and followers began to visit him. Ryōkan explained the esoteric doctrines of the Buddhist path in simple language and *waka* poetry to those who came to see him. The young nun Teishin also visited Ryōkan in the summer of 1827 and received instruction from him. The poems they exchanged during that time were later compiled to form the *waka* collection entitled *Hachisu no tsuyu* (Dew on the Lotus). Ryōkan's younger brother Yūshi also visited frequently and the two enjoyed a close relationship. Although Ryōkan had grown old, he passed his later life with great passion and still greater richness of spirit.



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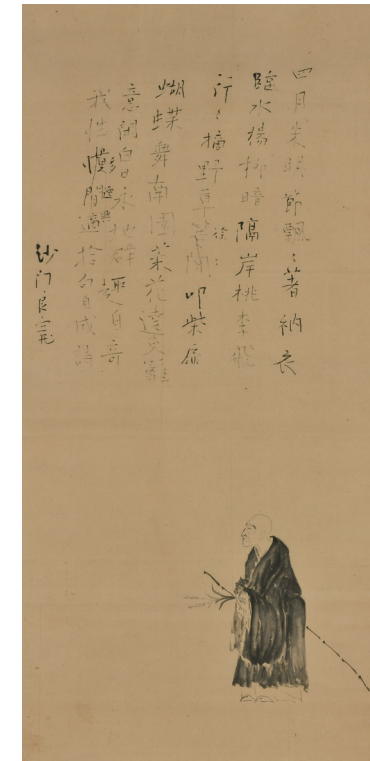
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Special Exhibition

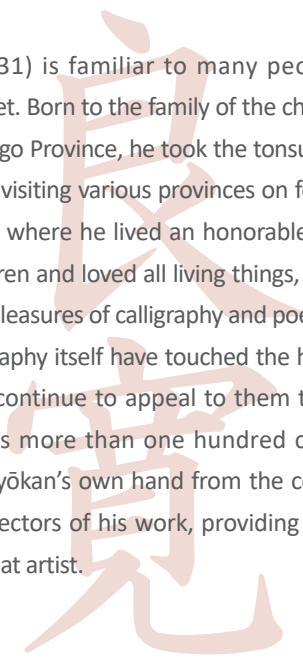
Ryōkan

the Man and his Calligraphy

November 16 (Sat.) 2019 - January 31 (Fri.), 2020
Main Building Exhibition Rooms 7-9



Ryōkan (1758–1831) is familiar to many people as a great calligrapher and poet. Born to the family of the chief of the village of Izumozaki in Echigo Province, he took the tonsure at the age of eighteen and, after visiting various provinces on foot, returned to his home province, where he lived an honorable life of poverty. He joked with children and loved all living things, and his attitude of devotion to the pleasures of calligraphy and poetic composition as well as his calligraphy itself have touched the hearts of a great many people and continue to appeal to them to this day. This exhibition presents more than one hundred calligraphic and painted works in Ryōkan's own hand from the collection of one of the premier collectors of his work, providing insight into the character of this great artist.





Background Information

waka: a kind of Japanese poetry. *Waka* poem is, in principle, composed of 5, 7, 5, 7 and 7, total 31 syllables.

haikai (haiku): a kind of Japanese poetry. *Haiku* poem is, in principle, composed of 5, 7 and 5, total 17 syllables.

kanshi: Chinese style poetry written in Chinese characters.

kana: a uniquely Japanese form of writing that developed from abbreviation and simplification of Chinese *kanji* ideographs, and was transformed to syllabic letters.

hira-gana: a kind of *kana* letters. The *hiragana* used today corresponds to the letters known as “women’s hand” (*onna-de*) and is said to have begun emerging in the latter half of the 9th century. *Kata-kana*, on the other hand, is used today to transcribe foreign origin words.

man’yo-gana (magana): The *man’yo-gana (magana)* is an ancient form of writing which transcribed the Japanese words using *kanji* (Chinese) characters, solely by making use of their phonetic sounds. It was known as “men’s hand” (*otoko-de*.)

tanzaku: *Tanzaku* paper used to be made originally from a *kaishi* paper. *Kaishi* were literally “papers stored in the front fold of the *kimono*” that were carried around on one’s person for various purposes, including wiping one’s mouth or hands or writing down notes, but around the 10th century they came to be used by poets to write down their own poems. The size of these papers was generally approximately thirty centimeters high and forty to fifty centimeters across. One sheet of *kaishi* could be divided vertically into eight *tanzaku* strips. Later *tanzaku* paper strips were produced on their own for writing down poems.



section 1 Hometown of Izumozaki

The Zen monk Ryōkan (1758–1831) was born the eldest son of the Yamamoto family, officially known as the Tachibanaya, a household whose head served as chief administrator of the village of Izumozaki in Echigo Province (now Izumozaki, Mishima-gun, Niigata). As a child, he was known by the name Eizō. His mother, Hideko (also known as O-nobu, 1735–1783), had been adopted from a branch family of the Tachibanaya in Aikawa, Sado, and later was wed to his father Inan (1736–1795), who thereby succeeded to the family headship through marriage. Inan was also a well-known poet. Behind the Tachibanaya residence, there was a storehouse for gold and silver that had been brought there from Sado since the early Edo period. Until about the middle of the Edo period, the successive heads of the Tachibanaya household had been responsible for receipt of these shipments. However, as the influence of the head of the Kyōya household, who served as the emerging chief of the

neighboring town of Amazé, began to expand, the Tachibanaya gradually went into complete decline and responsibility for the storehouse was transferred to the Kyōya.

Ryōkan was a quiet young man who enjoyed academic study. He attended a school for Chinese learning in Jizōdō called the Sanpōkan, where he diligently studied works such as Confucius' *Analects*. At one point, he was briefly groomed to become the village chief, but at the age of eighteen, he took the tonsure and became a Zen monk at Kōshōji temple in Amazé. Four years later, after meeting the abbot Tainin Kokusen, who was touring the country presenting Buddhist sermons, Ryōkan moved to Tamashima in Bitchū Province (now Kurashiki, Okayama) to train under him at Entsuji temple.



section 2 Training at Entsuji

Entsuji, a Sōtō-sect Zen temple located in Tamashima, Bitchū Province (now Kurashiki, Okayama), is reputed to have been founded by the Nara-period monk Gyōki. In the Genroku era (1688–1704), the esteemed Zen priest Tokūō Ryōkō from Daijōji in Kaga came to preach at the temple and spurred its revival. The widely renowned priest Dainin Kokusen (1723–1791) came from this lineage. Kokusen served as abbot of Entsuji and trained many disciples over the course of his twenty-three years there. Under his guidance, Entsuji was also promoted in rank from a temporary meeting place to a permanent congregation.

At Entsuji, Ryōkan silently dedicated himself to seated meditation and his daily duties, gradually mastering a state of contentment where he became free of worldly concerns. In the winter of 1790 (Kansei 2), he received the *Inka no ge*, a testament of true enlightenment, from abbot Kokusen. After that, Ryōkan visited sacred sites in various provinces, such as Mt. Yoshino and Mt. Kōya, and through these pilgrimages strove to nurture the Buddhist spirit through a return to secular life. Ryōkan composed several poems reminiscing on his training at Entsuji.



section 3 Life at Gogōan

After Abbot Kokusen's passing, Ryōkan embarked on pilgrimages to various provinces, but in the spring of 1796 (Kansei 8), at the age of thirty-nine, he returned home to Echigo. At first, he lived in a small salt-burner's hut at Teradomari Gōmoto (now Nagaoka, Niigata) and begged for alms in the desolate neighboring villages. Whenever he had extra rice, he would share it with the nearby birds and animals.

In the following year, 1797, Ryōkan went to live at Gogōan, a retreat at the old Shingon temple of Kokujōji halfway up Mt. Kugami. Cherishing the virtues of a clear mind, he would sit in meditation amidst the quiet atmosphere of this hermitage surrounded by the giant pine and cedar trees after returning from his begging rounds. During the twenty years that he lived

at Gogōan, Ryōkan also studied the Chinese monk Huaisu's *Autobiography* and Ono no Michikaze's *Akihagijō* poetry collection, establishing a firm foundation in both Chinese and Japanese-style calligraphy. Around this time, relatives and friends from his student days at the Sanpōkan began to reach out to him out of concern for his impoverished lifestyle. Various letters of thanks that he wrote to them for gifts of rice and clothing have been passed down to the present day.



section 4 Keeping Company with the Children

Ryōkan loved children and always played with them along his alms begging route, tossing balls or skipping pebbles with them. It is said that wherever Ryōkan went, children would flock around him. Once, when someone asked him why he liked children so much, he is said to have replied, "I like that children are sincere and free of all artifice."

A portrait of Ryōkan by Ikarashi Katei, a painter from Sanjō (now Sanjō, Niigata), depicts one child holding out a ball and pestering the monk to play while another holds out a branch of plum blossoms and appears to be inviting him to enjoy the flowers. Such images show that the children were the ones taking the initiative, urging him to play with them.

Ryōkan had a personal talisman, a stone figure of the bodhisattva Jizō made in Tsubakio on Sado Island, his mother's original home. Jizō is the protector of children and the weak and Ryōkan seems in many ways himself to have been the embodiment of this beloved bodhisattva figure.



section 5 Life at Otoko Shrine

When he was fifty-nine years old, in around the winter of 1816 (Bunka 13), Ryōkan moved to a humble hermitage at Otoko Shrine, located a little bit below Gogōan. Ryōkan lived here for ten years. His circumstances there were more mature and he began to produce a diverse range of artistic works, including calligraphy and *waka*, *haikai*, and *kanshi* poetry. He added supplemental commentary to the *Man'yō wakashū* poetry collection owned by his close benefactors, the Abe family, and studied Huaisu's *Thousand Character Classic*. He also studied the Chinese poetry of Du Fu and Li Bai and eventually composed his own distinctive Chinese-style poetry that was filled with rich lyricism. As he begged for alms, Ryōkan frequently composed *waka* and *kanshi* poems and gave them to people along his way. Ryōkan's easygoing and carefree lifestyle was directly reflected in his artworks, which are truly unequalled.

