
PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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PAINTINGS BY KAWAHARA KEIGA AND OTHER EARLY 19TH CENTURY JAPANESE ARTISTS IN THE JOHAN FREDERICK VAN OVERMEER FISSCHER COLLECTION (PETER THE GREAT MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY) [1]

1. The MAE Collection of Japanese Painting

Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences possesses a collection of traditional Japanese paintings of about 300 items of various format. The history of their collecting dates back to early 19th century. Some of the items are gifts of famous Russian and foreign public figures; among them — Russian Emperors, outstanding researchers, orientalist, marine admirals and officers, famous collectors, etc.

Traditional Japanese paintings in MAE collection are very diverse in terms of historic and artistic value. Most of them are dated by late Edo and Meiji periods (late 19th—early 20th centuries). There are several scores of early 19th century pieces and perhaps some paintings must be dated by the late 18th century. The collection presents various traditional schools of painting: Nagasaki school, various Kyoto schools (*Maruyama-ha* and *Shijō-ha* schools in their number), *Kanō-ha* and *Tōsa-ha* schools.

These paintings refer to various styles according to the schools, genres, and format. As for schools, *Kanō* school (traditional Japanese school from late 15th century; its painters worked for Tokugawa *bakufu* and the most flourishing in Edo period), *Tōsa* and *Sumiyoshi* school (traditional Japanese school from late 15th century; *Tōsa* school had worked for Emperors and royal families), *Nan-ga* or *Bunjin-ga* school (literally men style), *Maruyama Shijō* school (founded by a painter *Maruyama Ōkyo* in Kyoto in 18th century), and *Ukiyo-e* school. As for genres divided based on the subjects, *Butsuga* (Buddhist painting), *Zen-ga* (Zen painting), *Sansui-ga* (“mountains and waters” painting), *Kachō-ga* (“flowers and birds” painting), *Fuzoku-ga* (genre painting), *Monogatari-e* (illustrations of *monogatari*-tales such as *Heike-monogatari*, *Ise-monogatari*, *Genji-monogatari*, etc.), *Musha-e* (war-scenes and famous warriors), *Bijinga* (beauties), *Shunga* (erotic pictures) and so on. As for format, *kakemono* or *emaki* scrolls, *gachō* (albums), *senmen* (fan painting), and some are unformatted.

As a matter of fact, a large part of this collection remained unpublished; many paintings remained not attributed and not known to the public as well as to the Japanese art specialists. This is partially explained by a long period of misunderstanding of Japanese painting in Russia due to the great difference of approaches to the meaning of fine art. Russian collectors, art amateurs and museum curators, educated in a strict tradition of academic painting, often could not appreciate the charm of Japanese art and often denied any artistic value of flat and shadeless “drawings”. Moreover, in MAE inventory documents Japanese painting pieces are not distinguished as a separate category and often are referred to as “images”, “pictures” and even as “scrolls of wallpaper” [2].

Prince Esper E. Ukhtomskii, who accompanied Nicholas II in his Asian voyage, characterised Japanese painting in the following way:

“Drawings on pieces of textile or paper are called *kakimono*. This sort of painting has its own history, the beginning of which goes back to the times when Buddhism was introduced, and for a long time artists had a status of clergymen. The most valuable picture is dated by year 607 AD and is preserved by one of the temples. It is a masterpiece of a Korean monk — via this country not only Chinese, but Indian and even Persian art was injected to Japan. A lot of precious paintings vanished because of fires, which are often in Japan. Chinese origin of art still can be traced both in the plots inspiring artists as well as in methods of painting: soft brushes are held by the end of a handle, and quick strokes produce the lines, impressing the Europeans by lightness and resolution.

The perspective is substituted by mounds of objects, and dubious places — exactly in a Chinese manner — are covered by clouds. Pointing out the Chinese origin of this art does not mean a desire to diminish the particular merits of the masterpieces of Japanese artists; European experts do them justice and confess that some techniques are worthy of been followed. The specific effects of these drawings are attained