Japanese Calligraphy as a Way to Make the Invisible Visible

Japanese Calligraphy as a Way to Make the Invisible Visible

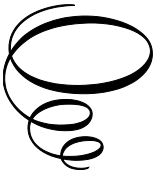
By

Rodica Frentiu

Translated from Romanian by Ciliana Tudorica

Foreword by Florina Ilis

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



Japanese Calligraphy as a Way to Make the Invisible Visible

By Rodica Frentiu

Translated from Romanian by Ciliana Tudorica

Foreword by Florina Ilis

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2023 by Rodica Frentiu

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-0128-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0128-7

Darkening the darkness
there they are
the gates of light.
—Nichita Stanescu, *Another haiku*[1]

[1] (our transl.) In original: "Întunecând întunericul/ iată/ porțile luminii." (Nichita Stanescu, *Alt haiku*)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword ix
by Florina Ilis

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 9
Japanese Calligraphy: From the Medieval *Secret Teachings* to the Twentieth Century Avant-Garde

Chapter 2 31
Reveries of the Brush: Writing by Painting and Painting by Writing

Chapter 3 49
Japanese Calligraphy as an Artistic Act: Visibility, Movement, *Calligraphicity*

Chapter 4 69
Contemplative Meditation and Transcendent Vision: The Calligraphic Work and the Byzantine Icon

Chapter 5 103
The Memory of an Instant: Fleeting Milestones on the *Path* of Calligraphy

Bibliography 125

FOREWORD

Western interest in Japanese art was initially manifested, predominantly, in favour of the *ukiyo-e* stamp, which European artists discovered with amazement and delight, beginning with the Universal Exhibition in Paris (1867), stirring among Parisian painters a true trend for Japanese-inspired elements. If Manet was attracted to the way in which Japanese artists painted nature and Monet was fascinated by the angles from which the woman was depicted in *ukiyo-e*, Van Gogh trained his eye to acquire a "Japanese perspective", seeking to get out of the immobility of gaze of the academic painting. Pierre Loti, with the novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1888), fuels the imagination of Parisians regarding Japan and arouses the interest of collectors in varied objects of decorative art. The windows of art dealers' stores in Paris began to display prints of the floating world (*ukiyo-e*), *kimonos*, *netsuke* (miniature sculptures), ceramics, painted screens, as well as samurai armours or swords. Perhaps intimidated by a lack of knowledge of the Japanese language, art collectors were, however, less attracted to the refined and elevated art of calligraphy.

Compared to the last century, the European perception of Japanese art and culture has evolved naturally, becoming more refined. Nevertheless, with the triumph of *pop culture* and, especially thanks to the internet, popular culture and art forms, such as *anime* (animated movies and series) and *manga* (comics) have gone far beyond the borders of Japan, conquering today's young audiences all over the world. Even so, certain fields of art, including Japanese calligraphy, have remained unknown to the general public, being reserved only for specialists, connoisseurs of the Japanese language, art and culture.

The book *Japanese Calligraphy as a Way to Make the Invisible Visible* by Rodica Frentiu fulfils, from this point of view, a double role. Firstly, it demonstrates that the art of calligraphy is not only simple writing, but, by presenting to us the evolution and development of artistic writing styles, it shows that it is one of the oldest and most powerful forms of Japanese art that, in turn, influenced other art forms as well, such as the art of painting,

the art of poetry, or the art of tea. Secondly, it introduces to the audience a remarkable art, whose artistic language can be understood and perceived also in an aesthetic and/or spiritual dimension, not only as a strictly linguistic one. Rodica Frentiu is the coordinator of the Japanese Language and Literature Programme within the Faculty of Letters (at Babes-Bolyai University, Romania). She is a professor who practices the art of calligraphy, having been guided by well-known calligraphy masters. Harmoniously combining the two qualities of the art of calligraphy, writing and art, Rodica Frentiu invites us, in this book, to a methodical lecture of understanding and studying the calligraphic techniques and styles, as well as to the artistic one of entering a fascinating field of art – which harmonises in perfect communion the beauty of the form of writing with the sensitive subtlety of its meanings.

Developed in four substantial chapters, this book includes in its conception the four fundamental dimensions of calligraphy: the historical dimension, the cultural dimension, the aesthetic-artistic dimension and the spiritual-religious dimension. To these four great chapters a fifth will be added, not by chance, because, in the tradition of Confucian symbolic numerology, which speaks of the five elements (earth, water, air, fire and void), Japanese culture privileges the significance of the number five. Because it is a diary in images and words of initiation into the art of calligraphy, I would attribute to this last chapter, which acts as an epilogue, a *subjective dimension*.

The first chapter of the work – *Japanese Calligraphy: from the Medieval Secret Teachings to the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde* – traces the history of Japanese calligraphy from its beginnings, with mention of its roots in Chinese calligraphy, continuing with the medieval period, when Japanese calligraphy refined its own identity and surpassed its models, achieving artistic perfection, ultimately reaching the modern era, when the artists of the avant-garde group *Bokujinkai*, who rethought the functions of calligraphy, reclaimed its status of art, ignored by the modern world. The second chapter –*Reveries of the Brush: Writing by Painting and Painting by Writing* – expresses the cultural dimension of Japanese calligraphy, which ever since the Heian period (794-1185) has gone beyond the field of beautiful writing, as calligraphy artists have tried, without distancing themselves from the ancient *secret* teachings, to follow the true path (way)

of *shodō* art and to capture in their work the ephemeral beauty of the moment, conveying to the viewer serenity in the face of its impermanence. The aesthetic-artistic dimension is portrayed in the third chapter – *Japanese Calligraphy as an Artistic Act: Visibility, Movement, Calligraphicity* – which, by discussing the aesthetics of Japanese art, situates calligraphy in relation to the evolution of the vision of art, as an art of contemplation, but also of revelation, an art of rendering the metaphysical shadow of things. In order to better understand the extremely exciting relationship between the scriptural and the artistic, this chapter connects the art of Japanese calligraphy to European graphic poetry, which tried, in a relatively similar manner, to cause possible breaches in the modern theory of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and to impose *visual* poetry, practiced, for example, by Apollinaire. The comparative analysis of the poetics of visual poems and the art of calligraphy is unique and, put through the filter of the modern poetic paradigm, it offers us surprising reading suggestions. The fourth chapter – *Contemplative Meditation and Transcendent Vision: Calligraphic Work and the Byzantine Icon* – , built from a comparative perspective, creates a link between the art of Japanese calligraphy and that of Byzantine icon painting, showing that each of the two arts, by favouring the metaphysical dimension, represent a possible way of accessing the spiritual world. In an attempt to render the invisible visible, and to reveal what lies hidden beyond ordinary perception, writing with black ink fulfils, similarly to the art of the icon, a meditative ritual as well. The ritual character of the two arts, which consists in the preparation of the rice grain paper and ink, in the case of calligraphy, or of the wall for the fresco or the canvas, in the case of religious art, has the role of purifying the artists' mind, preparing them for the true path of initiation into the *religiosity* of art. I have invoked only a few common elements between the art of calligraphy and Byzantine religious art, but the reader will discover others that the author captures and analyses here with boldness and intelligence, yet also with subtlety and artistic refinement.

The four chapters portray, therefore, the conceptual framework of the book, but the reader will be surprised, going through them, to find, in addition to the description of the fascinating world of the art of Japanese calligraphy, examples of calligraphic writing as well. What is outstanding about these calligraphic works is the fact that they were created by the

book's author herself. She chose the most representative and expressive works from her rich artistic portfolio for the illustration and understanding of the text. Through the author's calligraphic works (which vary in size or style), the reader will discover the various Japanese calligraphy styles (*tensho, kaisho, gyōsho, sōsho*), but also an extraordinary variety of the possibilities of this art's expression in relation to others, such as *haiku* or Zen meditative thinking. In full agreement, however, with the Japanese vision of seeing calligraphy as an art that does not represent the path of self-affirmation, in contrast to the egocentric vision of the European artist, Rodica Frentiu adopted the precepts of the old Japanese masters of *learning* the *path* (*way*). She progressed over time, perfecting both her style and her technique, writing with force but also with delicacy, with serenity but also with momentum, with elegance and refinement yet always with a *pure heart*. In this sense, the last chapter of the book – *Memory of an Instant: Fleeting Milestones on the Path of Calligraphy* – compresses into only a few temporal markers, necessary for the reader's orientation, the miraculous story of the encounter with the art of Japanese calligraphy, on whose *path* Rodica Frentiu perfected herself in search of *harmony between ink, brush and paper*, without ever forgetting the *true way* of calligraphy.

The way that the brush and black ink follow to meet the white rice grain paper and then part with it forever, but not before unveiling the miracle of the harmony of the whole captured in the *memory of an instant*, is described with depth and subtlety throughout the book – revealing itself to the reader when reading the entire text, as well when contemplating the works signed by the author.

The book *Japanese Calligraphy as a Way to Make the Invisible Visible* is the result of serious academic research on the poetics and semiotics of the art of calligraphy, yet the reader will discover in its pages not only a unique and profound book about the art of Japanese calligraphy, but also an authentic way of portraying, experiencing and understanding Japanese culture and civilization.

—Florina Ilis

Fig. 1 ゆめ・Dream[2]

[2] All the calligraphic works in this volume belong to the author. These are used for illustrative purposes and do not always follow the text.

INTRODUCTION

- Maître, la lune claire et paisible brille tellement haut dans le ciel!
- Oui, elle est très loin!
- Maître, aidez-moi à m'élever jusqu'à elle.
- Pourquoi? Ne vient-elle pas à toi?
—Henri Brunel, *Les plus beaux contes Zen*

The idea that the act of writing is also an art can be found in all cultures of the world, and the gesture of writing beautifully or artistically is called *calligraphy* (a term derived from the Greek *kallos* 'beautiful' and *graphy* 'to write'). If the art of calligraphy is generally associated in Medieval Europe with the peak of the manuscript – losing, with the use of printing, its artistic function in creating books –, in Islamic culture or in Asian cultures[3] such as Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, Vietnamese or Japanese, calligraphy has retained its pictorial character, continuing, in parallel with writing, to develop as an art in its own right.

Calligraphy has been considered, for almost two millennia, the highest art form in East Asia. In Japan, the art of calligraphy, having its origins in Chinese calligraphy, gradually *nipponized* and evolved, ultimately being considered a *complex art*, which incorporates the functions of a representative and expressive art, of a pictorial and verbal art, of an art of space and time. Using a flexible brush that responds to the calligrapher's[4]

[3] The Vedic Tantras record, for example, how Shiva reminds his consort Devi of the magic of writing: "While, subjectively, letters flow into words and words into sentences, and while, objectively, circles flow into worlds and worlds flow into principles, you can ultimately find these converging into our being." (our transl.) [In original: "În vreme ce, subiectiv, literele curg în cuvinte și cuvintele în propoziții, și în vreme ce, obiectiv, cercurile curg în lumi și lumile curg în principii, află-le în cele din urmă pe acestea convergând în ființa noastră."] (Reps and Senzaki, 2008, 174)

[4] The word for calligrapher is, in modern Japanese, *shodōka* (書道家: 書 'writing, to write' + 道 'road' + 家 'specialist'), and in old Japanese it was *teshi* (手師: 手 'hand' + 師 'teacher, master').

every breath and movement, both as a form of representation, as well as means of expression, calligraphy exploits the expressive potential of logographic characters that can be written in six different styles, with essentially infinite graphic variations. Combining the discipline of beautiful writing with the practices of individual cultivation and refinement – 「書」は「人」なり。[5] –, the art of calligraphy is, at the same time, an essential legacy in the development of Japanese culture and civilization. Of course, in contemporary times, when the pressure of the digitalization of written culture is so strong, research dedicated to the art of calligraphy might seem somewhat out of date. However, since it gives writing itself additional meaningful nuances such as aesthetic and philosophical value, Japanese calligraphy *shodō* 書道 (書 'writing, to write' + 道 'path, way, road') is not only an artistic expression and form, but also a *way* towards knowledge.

If a text is constituted by the selection of words and its syntax, the *grammar* of the calligraphic exercise is firstly linked to the *harmony* of four *treasures* (*shihō* 四宝) chosen with great care by the calligrapher: the animal-hair brush *fude* (筆), the rice paper *kami* (紙), the ink *sumi* (墨) [obtained by dissolving a solid ink stick in water, through friction], and the inkstone *suzuri* (硯) [used for obtaining ink].

[5] (lit.) *Calligraphy becomes the person*. As an addition to its utilitarian function recognised over time, the practice of calligraphy also finds its purpose in institutionalised and/or personal education, for a complete formation of the individual through self-cultivation, in a harmonious relationship both with the self and with the other, both with the natural world and with society in general.

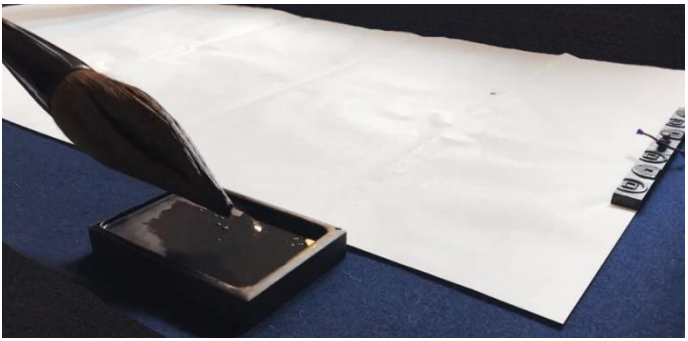


Fig. 2 The four *treasures* of calligraphy: 筆・紙・墨・硯

The continuation of the calligraphic exercise requires the practitioners to follow *the path* through which they will deepen the peculiarities of logographic writing, based on the Shinto belief in a deity that rules the kingdom of words, according to which every word is endowed with soul (*kotodama* 言霊). In this way, the disciples will understand that the discipline of calligraphy is, ultimately, a sort of meditation that leads to *mushin* 無心 (*empty heart*) or the state of mind that recognises the connection and dynamic motivation between opposites, and cancels, in the end, any possible contradiction. As a result, the preparation of the calligrapher for the practice of calligraphy (*keiko* 稽古, in Japanese), which serves to *awaken* the body and mind as a single unit, becomes, naturally, as important as the final *calligraphic work*; from the unfolding of the rice paper to the dripping of water into the inkstone to prepare the ink, from the smooth hand movements that dissolve the ink stick in the water, held with the fingers relaxed, to the delicate pressing of the hair of the brush and its proper dipping into the ink, from the actual writing to washing the utensils, all the gestures prepare the "emptying" of the mind, so that the state of *mushin* can be achieved. What is more, given the connection between the human body and the calligraphic text as a material *continuum*, not only the fingers or the wrist, but the whole body must be in permanent relaxation, allowing the flow of vital energy *ki* (気) to freely circulate from the physical centre and the spiritual one of the body *hara* (腹) to the brush in the hand, without the slightest pressure or force exerted locally – creating calm movements,

without any hurry, with minimal pressure, so that the *peace of mind* can release, free from all constraint, the black line on the white sheet. *Ki* manifests itself in the dance of brushstrokes (*hippō* 筆法), in the balance of the features of logographic characters, in the movement transmitted from one character to the next, remaining permanently recognisable in the finished *product* (= the calligraphic work), as evidence of the artistic process (*shohō* 書法), which reconstructs the experience of creation. *Ki*, *hippō* and *shohō* become the (unique) stylistic signature of each calligrapher, and the sense of movement, similar to a dance, brings the calligraphic work to life.

Fig. 3 月水・*The Moon on the Water*

Calligraphy is a rather difficult art to understand. Most studies in the field pay attention to considerations of historical and cultural nature: how to explain the evolution of the art of calligraphy in the respective historical context, with whom a certain calligrapher studied, in which style or in the technique of which old master would his or her artistic line fit, what are the known influences, etc. These are important elements, of course, in the study of calligraphy from a diachronic perspective. But there are also desirable

elements of visual analysis, contextual or purely visual approaches, which highlight its artistic values as a choreography of line and form in space, so that calligraphy can be seen immediately and as an *art of pleasure*.

Although oftentimes illegible, the calligraphic work becomes a purely visual experience that can be understood as a direct and powerful expression of the spirit and mind, which will reveal the true face of the calligrapher, becoming an *experience* (= arousing a physical and emotional reaction) both for the practitioner and the receptor (experienced or not), in a movement that passes from the moment of creation to that of interpretation. The unknown always invites the public to create projections, as a function of the human *psyche*, so that even the viewer alien to the culture of logograms, when in front of a calligraphic work, will try to fill the abyss of lack of information with perceptions, sensations, feelings or ideas. A calligraphic work reveals the meaning of a continuous, unbroken rhythm, as well as physical sensations and emotions/feelings caused by tactile and visual senses, which give the viewer a vivid perception of the balance and harmony of the logographic character, passing from flat two-dimensionality to spatial three-dimensionality. The spirit of the calligrapher and that of the receptor are thus captured in a time frame that reveals an expressive flash from a particular moment. Nevertheless, in the end, the calligraphic work is a paradox that displays a contradictory characteristic from a compositional point of view. On the one hand, since no feature of the calligraphic character can be left unfinished, redone or corrected, it – as a final *product* – must be contemplated by the calligrapher as a whole before the brush touches the paper, creating a kind of vision of the mind. On the other hand, calligraphic execution must be quick and spontaneous, without any hesitation; although the calligrapher feels the movement of the brush as very slow, to an outside eye it might appear very fast... The creative synergy that overlaps the calm rapidity of the brush movement in a moment of concentration, attention and freedom, over an act the contemplative mind becomes synonymous not only with the *return to oneself*, but also with the revelation of *the way* of calligraphy.

I discovered the art of calligraphy when I started studying Japanese at Kobe University (Japan) as a Monbukagakushō (Ministry of Education and Research) scholar. As a foreigner coming from a completely different cultural horizon, when I began learning Japanese, I was in awe at the writing

used, especially after I learned that, in Japanese, writing and drawing/painting are homophones (*kaku*). The state of awe continuously grew and, together with it, the questions that would not stop coming: *What are the origins of such writing? Is there any way to understand it at a deeper level?* If the *kana* syllabaries (*hiragana* and *katakana*) used by Japanese writing seem accessible, since they are, like their names, the graphic correspondent of some phonetic syllables, the *kanji* (漢字) writing system, which borrowed the Chinese logographic characters, is close to a true revelation for someone educated in the culture of the alphabet. The number of *kanji* characters learned in the classes was increasing and I had begun to wish, more and more, for a closeness – somewhat from the inside – to this graphic form concomitantly word and image. The memory of the first Japanese calligraphy class will forever remain linked to the question asked by the *sensei* ('teacher, master') at the end of the class: *Are you sure you've never done Japanese calligraphy before*?! At first, *shūji* (習字) or the exercise of writing logograms with the brush, the practice of Japanese calligraphy turned for me, without realising, into *shodō* (書道) or the *way* of writing as an art, the personal narrative being configured by and through three coordinates: a *space* of the meeting between the West (the culture of the alphabet) and the East (the culture of logographic characters) through Japanese calligraphy, a *place* of dialogue of the disciple (*deshi* 弟子) with the master calligrapher (*sensei* 先生) and a *time* of adoption offered by this art to the disciple, marked by the moments of learning, self-cultivation and discovery of the *creative* dimension.

My books dedicated to Japanese calligraphy have been shaped and structured over the years through the direct experience of calligraphic practice and complementary readings[6]. The movement towards the art of

[6] My previously published works in this field are: *Haiku şi caligrame* [*Haiku and Calligrams*] (Cluj-Napoca, Echinox, 2000, in collaboration with Florina Ilis who signs the *haiku* poems); *Imagini-cuvinte în mişcare. Caligrafia japoneză* [*Image-words in Motion. Japanese Calligraphy*] (Foreword by Florina Ilis, Cluj-Napoca, Echinox, 2004); *Caligrafia japoneză. Metamorfozele liniei* [*Japanese Calligraphy. Line Metamorphoses*] (Foreword by Dr. Livia Dragoi, Preface by Dr. Nina Stanculescu, Cluj-Napoca, Diotima, 2006); *Lecţia de caligrafie japoneză* [*Japanese Calligraphy Lesson*] (Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut, 2008); *Une leçon de calligraphie*

calligraphy was initially, naturally, from the *outside* to the *inside*. However, the process of writing this book, in which I highlight the role of Japanese calligraphy in a historical and cultural context, as well as in an artistic and spiritual one, forced me to make a reverse movement, from the *inside* to the *outside*. The narrative of personal experience is here rather implicit, suggested by the calligraphic works that support the various (unique) investigations and explorations of a semiotic-cultural, hermeneutic and poetic nature in the universe of calligraphic art. In order to avoid writing a purely descriptive work, and so as not to piercingly separate *scientia* from *sapientia*, I prefer to reveal the personal experience of calligraphy first in a mediated manner, by approaching this art as an aesthetic exercise and spiritual practice – with examples provided by my own works –, and to end with a fictitious calligraphy *journal* to illustrate the *meaning* that Japanese calligraphy has gained for me over time[7].

If the *story* of the experience (direct and mediated) as a practitioner of Japanese calligraphy is the personal "testimony" coming to signal the uniqueness of the calligraphic art encountered in its home country, I find it appropriate to express my gratitude to the Japanese master calligraphers for the generosity with which they helped a foreigner get closer to the Japanese soul, and interpret the seen and the unseen of the black line on the white paper... I, therefore, dedicate the book of Japanese calligraphy written in these lines to the memory of my calligraphy master Nishida Senshū *sensei*, humbly.

japonaise/ A Lesson in Japanese Calligraphy (Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut, 2010); *Caligrafia japoneză: meditații din vârful pensulei* [*Japanese Calligraphy: Meditations from the Tip of the Brush*] (Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut, 2012).

[7] I do not wish to imply that only those who practice the art of calligraphy can understand it. However, the attempt to pick up the calligraphy brush can show someone not only the difficulty of controlling the movement of the brush, but also the extent to which it allows for the expression of individual personality. The experience of calligraphy is within everyone's reach...

Fig. 4 *Ensō* (Zen Circle)

CHAPTER 1

JAPANESE CALLIGRAPHY: FROM THE MEDIEVAL *SECRET TEACHINGS* TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AVANT-GARDE

Calligraphy is one with form, and yet manifests an individual's heart.
—Fujiwara Norinaga (1109-1180), *Saiyōshō*

Ultimately, the study of any Way is a labor of the heart.
—Son'en (1298-1356), *Jubokushō*

Japanese calligraphy, as an academic subject of study directs research towards a field whose complexity is given by various cultural characteristics, out of which the writing system immediately stands out.

Writing, one of the most important forms of human communication, through a set of visible marks, related by convention to certain layers of language, includes in its history two great directions: Sumerian and Chinese writing. The first of them, also known as cuneiform, symbolic writing, used in the 8th millennium BC, has evolved, over time, from a pictorial form, to an increasingly conventionalised one, the culmination of its transformation being the invention of the Greek alphabet (later borrowed by other cultures), considered to be the great fulfilment of Western logical and scientific culture (The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1993, 1025). Chinese writing, whose history begins around 1400 BC in East Asia (Shang Dynasty period, 1600-1046 BC), used pictorial signs to represent objects, in the original form of oracular inscriptions on turtle shells or animal bones (Ishikawa, 2011, 22), created, according to the legend, by a mysterious person with four eyes, named Thang-Hsieh, and inspired, the legend continues to say, by the footprints left by birds on the sand (Kuiseko, 2002, 8). Structurally, the Chinese character is a composition of horizontal, vertical, zigzag and curved lines, their number reaching 50,000, unlike the alphabet, which has

only 26 letters. Also, because they are ideographic characters, in Chinese writing, there is no need for a space between words as they can be freely aligned horizontally or vertically.

And if, in Egypt, abbreviated paintings were used to represent sounds, the Egyptian hieroglyphs being later transformed into the alphabet through an "aural transliteration" (Ishikawa, 2011, 249), in the Far East, the Chinese characters (which can be divided, in turn, into pictograms and ideograms – the pictograms being closer to the real referent than the ideograms), without being paintings of sounds, to this day mean stylised copies of nature or stylised paintings of the concepts they represent[8]. It is an eloquent case from human history that makes it difficult to understand language without writing, the particular influence between the two thus modifying the usual relationship between referent-signifier-signified (Kristeva, 1981, 79). In the absence of a complete hierarchy, the meaning, the sound and the object, acting as functional actors in a "spatial theatre", overlap and get confused in such a language in a single feature transformed into a logographic character:

> Cette soudure du concept, du son et de la chose dans la langue chinoise qui fait que la langue et le réel construisent un ensemble sans se poser face à face comme l'objet (le monde, le réel) et son miroir (le sujet, la langue), est matérialisé par et dans l'écriture chinoise : écriture idéographique, vieille de plus de trois mille ans, la seule qui n'a pas évolué vers l'alphabetisme (comme ce fut le cas de l'écriture égyptienne ou de l'écriture cunéiforme). (Kristeva, 1981, 80)

The history of writing in Japan spans nearly two millennia, and its study brings together many facets of Japanese culture. The earliest Japanese compilations, *Kojiki* 古事記 (*Records of Ancient Matters*), from 712, and *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (*The Chronicles of Japan*), from 720, record the time when the (Korean) king of the land Paekche Shōko sent as a gift to the (Japanese) emperor Ōjin through Wani – considered one of the greatest

[8] Recent theories in the field indicate only the phonetic basis of Chinese characters, as they do not express ideas through their visual form; see Yuehping Yen, *Calligraphy and Power in Contemporary Chinese Society* (London and New York, Routledge, 2005).

scholars of his time – the *Analects (Lunyu)* of Confucius (551 BC-479 BC) in ten volumes and a scroll of Chinese writing (Seely, 1991, 4-5). Without having developed a writing system of its own, between the 4th and 6th centuries, Japanese culture borrows Chinese characters and, as a result of understanding the function of writing, instruction in this direction begins. Although Japanese chronicles try to highlight a cultured branch through which Chinese writing entered Japan, archaeological discoveries have proven that, before the scroll manuscripts (*maki*), Chinese writing had been introduced to the archipelago through inscriptions on various artefacts: coins, arrived in Japan in the century 1st and 2nd, mirrors from the 3rd century or swords from the 4th century (Seely, 1991, 9-12).

What is more, this is the moment that also prepares the birth of calligraphy in Japan, when this art, created from the deconstruction and reconstruction of Chinese logographic characters, acquires its own style (*wayō* 和様), derived from the strongly stylised *onnade* 女手 (*women's hand*) style, the most beautiful achievement being the creation of *kana* syllabaries. Interpreted as grammatical "morphemes" (Seely, 1991, ix), following a series of readings (the *kun* Japanese reading and the *on* Chinese reading), the texts composed in Japan during this period are consistent with the writing rules of the literary Chinese language, although written with the intention of being read or decoded as Japanese (not Chinese). However, either as a result of the scribe's insufficient knowledge of the Chinese language and of how to avoid the difficulties of the Chinese style, or due to simple errors, but, above all, in response to the need of a formal expression much more suitable to the vernacular language, the linguistic influence of the Japanese language soon made itself felt. In this way, texts in a hybrid style begin to be written, conforming to the model provided by the syntax of both the Chinese and Japanese languages, so that, gradually, short inscriptions in the Japanese style began to appear, certainly a revolutionary moment in terms of impact. If, in the 5th and 6th centuries, the use of writing seems to be quite limited, beginning with the 7th century, reading and writing became an important part of political, social-administrative and religious life. Prince Shōtoku (574-622), the follower and promoter of Buddhism in Japan, created, in 727, for example, the *Sutra* Buddhist Texts Copying Bureau (*Shakyōjo*), to meet the great demand for Buddhist texts of the time. What is more, by the 7th century, the *Manyogana* syllabary had

been compiled in Japanese (Ishikawa, 2011, 158) and named after the most famous use related to the collection of poems *Manyōshū* 万葉集[9] (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, ca. 759), and, from the 8th century, the syllabary consisted of an inventory of *kanji* (漢字) characters – the Japanese word for Chinese characters – selected and used mainly with phonetic value (which use the *on* Chinese reading)[10]. However, these *kanji* constituted, in the following centuries, the basis on which the most simplified characters from the *kana*[11] syllabaries (*hiragana* and *katakana*[12]) were created. Obtained through the graphic deformation of current Chinese logograms, Japanese writing is, even today, being considered "the most complicated system of writing" (Seely, 1991, ix) in use in the modern world.

In Heian (平安時代) culture (794-1185), the classical *golden* age appreciated as the peak in Japanese cultural history, all the arts excelled (painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, etc.), in a new environment,

---

[9] The collection contains approximately 4,500 poems, most of them written in the Japanese style. It is true that, due to its orthographic complexity, the anthology remained unintelligible for two hundred years.

[10] This form of "derived writings" (Seely, 1991, 49-52) may include a semantic-phonetic double association when using the *kun* Japanese reading of the logograms. An erudite (bookish) example of this would be the bi-syllabic sequence *teshi*: 羲之 and 大王. The word *teshi* with the meaning 'calligrapher' existed in the old Japanese language, consisting of the components *te* 'hand, writing' and *shi* 'teacher, master'. On this basis, in several poems from *Manyōshū*, the compound suffix *-teshi* is written 羲之, by association with the characters used to write the name of the Chinese master calligrapher Wang Xizhi (王羲之, 303?-361?). Wang Xizhi's seventh child, Wang Xianzhi (344-388), became a famous calligrapher as well, and in the era the two were referred to as "the greater Wang" (大王) and "the lesser Wang" (小王), which could explain the use of 大王 for the compound suffix *-teshi* (Seely, 1991, 51-52).

[11] The word is derived from *karu* ('to borrow', in Late Old Japanese) and *na* 'name, symbol'.

[12] While the term *katakana* appears in the 10th century text *Utsubo monogatari* (*The Tale of the Hollow Tree*), the first known occurrence of the term *hiragana* is in the *Vocabulario da Lingoa de Iapan*, a Japanese-Portuguese dictionary compiled by Portuguese missionaries and published in 1603. The *hiragana* type of writing seems to have as an equivalent in the Heian period that of *onnade* (Seely, 1991, 78).

freed from the influence of Chinese culture, against the backdrop of Japan breaking off diplomatic relations with China in the 9th century, during the declining times of the Tang period (618-907). The ladies of the imperial palace (*the palace beyond the clouds*) now came to play an unprecedented role in the midst of an aristocratic court that valued the official recognition of the culture of the Chinese language and Japanese poetry. In this context of elegance and poetic dreaminess, but also of effervescence of literature in the vernacular, Sei Shōnagon (966?-1024?) wrote her daily notes, *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi* 枕草子, ca.1000), and the lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu (978?-1016?) wrote the world's first novel, entitled *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari* 源氏物語, 1008?). These may be considered illustrious examples not only for the *nikki* (日記) type journal or for the new *monogatari* (物語) type literary genre, but also for the *onnade* style.

Consisting of 41/54 "books", which recount the childhood, the youth full of love affairs, the career and death of Genji, an imperial prince of captivating beauty and endowed with special artistic talents, the novel *The Tale of Genji* also contains the first essay on calligraphy (*shoron* 書論) with reference to the traditional *wayō* style, revealing the importance of handwriting in expressing an aesthetic sensibility (Eubanks, 2016, 186). Chapter 32 *The Plum Tree Branch* (*Umegae* 梅が枝), for example, provides details about a calligraphy competition, which sets the narrator up for various references to calligraphers and styles of calligraphy, suggesting that the aesthetic choices regarding the paper and its decorations, the intensity of the ink, the brush or the writing style used should be understood as subtle nuances of the calligrapher's emotional state of mind. *Kanji* and *kana* writing are now and here put on an equal footing:

> Genji secluded himself as before in the main hall. The cherry blossoms had fallen and the skies were soft. Letting his mind run quietly through the anthologies, he tried several styles with fine results, formal and cursive Chinese and the more radically cursive Japanese "ladies' hand." He had with him only two or three women whom he could count on for interesting comments. They ground ink for him and selected poems from the more admired anthologies. Having raised the blinds to let the breezes pass, he sat out near veranda with a booklet spread before him, and as he took a brush

meditatively between his teeth the women thought that they could gaze at him for ages on end and not tire.

Fig. 1-1 おもうかたよりかぜやふくらむ・*The wind blows from the dear one*
Murasaki Shikibu (978?-1016?), *The Tale of Genji*

His brush poised over papers of clear, plain reds and whites, he would collect himself for the effort of writing, and no one of reasonable sensitivity could have failed to admire the picture of serene concentration which he presented[13]. (Murasaki Shikibu, 1976, 517-518)

[13] In original: いつもこんなときにするように、源氏は寝殿の方へ行っていて書いた。花の盛りが過ぎて淡い緑色がかった空のうららかな日に、源氏

Shoron-type discourses on calligraphy had first appeared in Japanese culture in the form of handbooks with recommendations for the calligraphic style used in letter writing, so that over time the information and details related to calligraphy became more numerous and specialised. Preceding the *shoron*-type passage from the novel *The Tale of Genji*, the list of discourses on calligraphy would also include the treatise *Shōryōshū* 性霊集, signed by Kūkai 空海 (774-835), a compilation on various topics made by disciples after the death of the master nicknamed "the priest who writes with five brushes", as proof that he flawlessly mastered all five calligraphic styles of Chinese writing. In the short sequence devoted to calligraphy, Kūkai, with the posthumous canonical name Kōbō Daishi (The Grand Master who Propagated the Dharma), borrows much from Chinese treatises on the subject, to which he had access during his visit in China (804-806), placing calligraphy in the context of poetry and insisting on the practitioner's study of past masters, with the mention that study should not be limited to them alone (DeCoker, 1988, 201).

However, the first treatise exclusively dedicated to calligraphy is considered to be *Yakaku Teikinshō* 夜鶴庭訓抄, signed by Fujiwara Koreyuki 藤原伊行 (?-1175), the sixth head of the *Sesonji* 世尊寺 School of Calligraphy. Less of a study manual, *Yakaku Teikinshō* is more of a document-record inventorying the Sesonji family's "secrets" regarding not only the most appropriate calligraphy tools, but also various conventions a calligrapher should follow in order to maintain his position in the ritualistic society of the late Heian imperial court, in the context of the competition created by the growing popularity of the Hosshōji 法性寺 School of

---

は古い詩歌を静かに選びながら、みずから満足のできるだけの字を書こうと漢字のも仮名のも熱心に書いていた。その部屋には女房も多くは置かずにただ二三人、墨をすらせたり、古い歌集の歌を命ぜられたとおりに探し出したりするのに、役に立つような者を呼んであった。部屋の御簾はみなあげて、脇息の上に帳を置いて、縁に近いところでゆるやかな姿で、筆の柄を口にくわえて思案する源氏はどこまでも美しかった。白とか赤とかきわ立った片は、筆をとり直して特に注意して書いたりする態度なども、心のある者は敬意をはらわずにいられないことであった。(Murasaki Shikibu, 1965, 344-345)

Calligraphy, led by the famous rival Fujiwara Tadamichi 藤原忠通 (1097-1164).

In the aristocratic circles of the imperial court of the time, great importance is given to the elegant style of *wayō* calligraphy and, as a result, schools were created in which directions related to the teachings and rules regarding the correct use of the brush were promoted. *Saiyōshō* 才葉抄, the first important *shoron* discourse exclusively on calligraphy in the tradition of the Japanese *wayō* school of calligraphy, contains the teachings of Fujiwara Norinaga 藤原教長 (1109-1180) along with Fujiwara Koretsune 藤原伊経 (?-1227). In 1177, Koretsune visits Norinaga's Mt. Kōya hut, on which occasion the latter reveals to the guest the "secrets" of calligraphy, which Koretsune would later compile as *Saiyōshō* or *Notes on Talent/ Notes on Generations of Talent* (才 'talent, ability, bud' + 葉 'leaf, book pages, generation' + 抄 'notes').

Norinaga, famous especially as a poet with forty of his poems being included in imperial anthologies, began his study of calligraphy at the *Sesonji* School and remained faithful to the more conservative rules promoted by it, not being influenced by the *Hosshōji* School of calligraphy, deliberately less elegant and less refined than the competing school (DeCoker, 1988, 261). According to Norinaga, calligraphy is primarily the result of the harmony of four treasures (*shihō* 四宝): the animal-hair brush (*fude* 筆); the rice paper (*kami* 紙); the ink (*sumi* 墨), obtained by dissolving a stick of solid ink in water, through friction; and the stone container (*suzuri* 硯), used to obtain ink. As an addition to the details related to the tools and materials used, which regard the choice of paper and the preparation of the brush, the shape, dimensions and positioning of the logogram on the page, the feeling of flow that must be created between the characters and the space of the paper, the author insists on spiritual preparation of the practitioner, prior to the calligraphic exercise itself, emphasizing the importance of his or her mental concentration:

> When you want to write, first grind the ink, focus your spirit, and quiet your thoughts. Consider beforehand the size of the characters and the various movements of the brush, making the muscle and the bone of the character