

New art exhibit at PAM captures Japan's poetic imagination

By Kelly La Croix
The Asian Reporter

A new exhibition of Japanese artworks — “Poetic Imagination in Japanese Art: Selections from the Collection of Mary and Cheney Cowles” — is currently on view at the Portland Art Museum (PAM). The display focuses on the intertwined art forms of poetry, painting, and calligraphy in Japan. Featured are more than 100 works from the 8th through 20th centuries, the majority of which are on view to the public for the first time. Curated from the collection of Mary and Cheney Cowles by Dr. Maribeth Greybill, along with Dr. Jeannie Kenmotsu and Sangah Kim, the pieces are viewable through January 13, 2019.

The exhibit is split into four sections, each giving context to the role poetry has played in the visual arts throughout different time periods.

“Waka and the Courtly Tradition”

The first of the sections, titled “Waka and the Courtly Tradition,” showcases the traditional Japanese poem, or *waka*, written elegantly in calligraphy, often on ornate handmade paper. The poems themselves are composed of 17 syllables and five lines. The *haiku*, a poetic form that many Americans are familiar with, is derived from the *waka*; the syllable count of a *haiku* is the same as the first three lines in a *waka*.

While originally a means of communication for the aristocratic class, today the poems are celebrated and written by average Japanese citizens. “Waka and the Courtly Tradition” also features portraits of renowned poets. The portraits were made after the poets’ deaths, and the depictions were not intended to capture likeness, but offer an imagined scene. They were often made by, or at the request of, aspiring poets to show reverence to those whom they wished to emulate.

“Ink Painting and the Zen Milieu”

The second section, “Ink Painting and the Zen Milieu,”



POETIC IMAGINATION. A new exhibition of Japanese artworks — “Poetic Imagination in Japanese Art: Selections from the Collection of Mary and Cheney Cowles” — is currently on view at the Portland Art Museum. The display focuses on the intertwined art forms of poetry, painting, and calligraphy in Japan. Pictured are (clockwise from top left) “Old Plum” by Tokuyama Gyokuran, one of a pair of six-panel screens, ink and light color on paper; “Orchid Pavilion in Blue and Green” by Yamamoto Baiitsu, 1855, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk; and “Waka Album” (detail) by retired Emperor Goyozei, early 17th century, from an album of twelve double leaves, ink on gold-and-silver decorated paper. (Images courtesy of the collection of Mary and Cheney Cowles)

focuses on calligraphy informed by the practice of Zen Buddhism and ink landscapes, both of which arrived to Japan from neighboring China. Zen monks created calligraphies of poems and *sutras*, or religious teachings, that were looked upon as physical representations of their spiritual status.

Some of Japan’s most famous Zen monks are represented in the exhibit. Monks were also among the first to paint monochrome ink landscapes, though the practice was later taken up by professional painters. Dr. Greybill noted that these landscapes can be looked at as an art of “action painting,” much like calligraphy, where the viewer is invited to imagine the often fluid, elegant gestures of the artist.

“Literati Culture”

During the 18th and 19th

centuries, low-ranking Japanese samurai began painting landscapes as a means of self-expression. Though they were inspired by Chinese literati culture — paintings done by well-off officials — the artists were not wealthy, and painted, in part, to help form circles of friends with similar interests. These works form the basis of the third section, “Literati Culture.” Many of the pieces featured invite the viewer into romantic landscapes of high mountains and remote countrysides.

Of note in this section are two large paintings on six-panel screens by Tokuyama Gyokuran, one of two rare women artists represented in the exhibit.

“Modern Innovations”

The fourth section, “Modern Innovations,” highlights works that are not strictly traditional

but arguably maintain a Japanese character. After Japan opened trade with the west in the 1850s, the influence of western art caused a separation of styles. Though art schools had classes focusing on each style, many artists tried their hand at both, and by the 1880s, they were attempting to blend the influences to create something at once modern and distinctly Japanese.

The paintings in this section do not contain inscribed poems as the other sections do; instead, the works deal with the major themes featured in historical Japanese poetry.

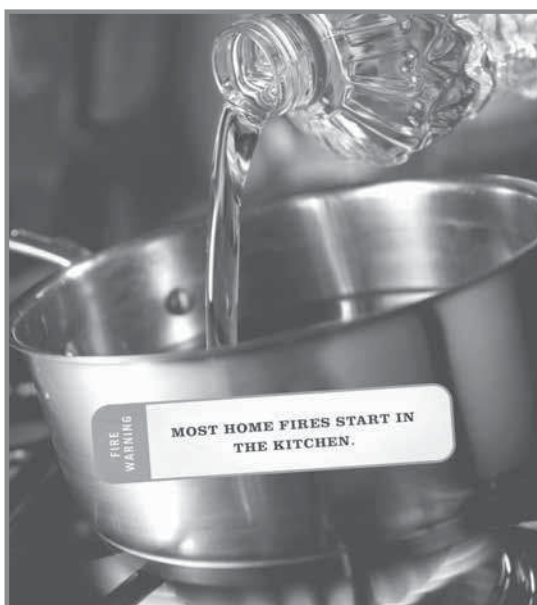
Dr. Greybill explained that because poetry is so central to Japanese culture, to the point where children memorize poems in school, artists can rely on their audience to understand the



poetic themes they evoke. She also noted that it is not necessary to know about these themes to be able to enjoy the exhibit: “While those deeply familiar with Japanese culture will appreciate the literary allusions in these works, all visitors will be able to savor their evocative beauty.”

In conjunction with the exhibit, PAM is hosting a number of events that encourage a closer look at the material. On January 11 and 12, a “Japanese Poetry, Art, and Culture Weekend” event will feature origami, poetry, calligraphy, food, *ikebana* (flower arrangement), and music. A symposium, which is scheduled for December 7 and 8 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Mildred Schnitzer Annual Asian Art Lecture, is hosting an international group of scholars who will take an intensive look at the works and themes of the exhibition. A youth poetry reading event is also scheduled in January. In addition, several programs are available to educators who wish to involve their classes in the exhibit.

The Portland Art Museum is located at 1219 S.W. Park Avenue in downtown Portland. To learn more, call (503) 226-2811 or visit <www.portlandartmuseum.org>.



What to do if one starts in yours: Never put water on a grease or oil fire. Keep a lid handy when cooking. If a fire starts in a pan, turn off the burner and carefully slide the lid over the pan to extinguish the fire. Don't run outside with the burning pot. Keep a fire extinguisher in the kitchen. If the fire continues, leave the home and call 9-1-1.



A Message from the Oregon Life Safety Team: A Coalition of Fire Service, Community and Insurance Professionals

Behind the wheel there is no such thing as a small distraction.

AUTO ALLIANCE
DRIVING INNOVATION™

OTA ORTHOPAEDIC TRAUMA ASSOCIATION

AAOS
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ORTHOPAEDIC SURGEONS

DecideToDrive.org