

About artist Hiroshi Senju and his Murals

Hiroshi Senju

Biography

- Master Painter Hiroshi Senju was born in Tokyo in 1958.
- He graduated from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music
- Holds graduate degrees from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music
- Won honorable mention at Venice Biennale in 1995.

He is currently:

- Professor and Vice President of the Kyoto University of Art and Design
- Director of the University's International Research Center for the Arts.
- He maintains studios in Tokyo, and in New York (since 1992).



Other work:

- Murals for Tokyo International Airport Terminal 2 in Haneda
- Murals at Grand Hyatt in Tokyo
- Murals Milano Salone Lexus L-finesse
- "Sister work" at Naoshima Standard & Underground Museum in Shikoku, Japan (permanent installation)

Before being permanently installed in Philadelphia, the Japanese House and Garden murals were exhibited at:

- Gwangju Biennale 2006 in Gwangju, South Korea - September 8-November 11, 2006
- Yamatane Museum Tokyo, Japan - December 2, 2006-March 4, 2007

As you can see from the list of places where Senju has show or installed his work most of them are in Japan. Shofuso is the first American venue for his work.

Nihon-ga (Japanese Style Painting)

- Traditional Japanese painting technique
- Blend of mineral-based pigment and hide glue.
- Washi- mulberry paper (hemp paper)
- Painting technique – effective use of blank space (collaboration with space)

Hiroshi Senju follows a thousand-year old tradition of Japanese painting called Nihon-ga. Nihon-ga literally means Japanese painting in Japanese but encompasses a diverse set of painting styles. This technique combines pigments derived from natural materials – minerals, seashells, corals in a medium of animal glue and applies to washi (rice paper). The paper is actually made of mulberry not rice.

Since the Japanese House in Philadelphia has a drier climate than in Japan, Senju decided to use different materials to create the Philadelphia murals:

Shohekiga or Fusuma (Murals)

- Shohekig means “murals”
- Adds character to the architecture
- Format is three-dimensional and flexible – the doors can be slid open or closed.
- Mural paintings are not bounded by a frame – they are meant to look like they go beyond the frame.
- Ichinoma – room of “dynamics”; Ninoma – room of tranquility. Tokonoma – water curtain symbolizing freedom as opposed to iron curtain

How the Philadelphia mural differ from his other work

He used acrylic paint called Lascaux (a swiss brand of acrylic paint) to prevent the paint from cracking during drier weather. Senju carefully choose colors to blend the murals with the garden and architecture of the house. Colors include: Olive green, clay and dark red). He tried not to use much red because much paint with red has mercury in it and therefore, is more toxic. This color is very unique to Shofuso and the artist is very proud of it.

Senju’ work before 1995 was more representational. His earlier work included mountain and city landscapes.

How Senju painted the waterfall

Painted background color and poured white paint from the top

With airbrush sprayed more white paint to create “waterfall mist” effect

Also used brush to splatter paint and brush paint at bottom

There are many layers of paint. When he didn’t like how the white paint dripped, he would paint over it with the background color and try again.

Senju painted on a frame and then cuts the murals to fit.

Paper underneath is black (pigment added to hemp paper when it is made). Senju tested different paper and decided that hemp is the most durable. Using black as a base color allows his colors to be more enhanced. Senju describes this decision as one made by Renaissance artists.

Senju used an English title so that Western visitors can better understand it.

Why did Senju use the Waterfall Motif

Senju uses the motif of the waterfall. This motif has been in Senju's work since the 1995 Venice Biennale, when he won recognition for honorable mention.

Senju describes the waterfall as: "Waterfall is living energy. I was emotionally moved by the waterfall. This may have been forgotten by people over time. Water is constantly moving - water comes down, mist goes up (see this in the painting)."

The waterfall demonstrates a passage of time. Water rushes down and the spray and mist come up when water hits the bottom.

On the tokonoma – In the middle a blank space allows viewer to image seeing through the painting. It can be described as a water curtain.

He first thought of doing a forest series. But he became aware of the quiet noise there (at Shofuso) and the (idea of) the waterfall came up. When he first came to visit Shofuso, Senju noticed the calmness (of Shofuso) and that triggered the waterfall idea.

Senju intended these murals to look as if they have been here for a long time. Using black ink, as in traditional murals, would have been a stark contrast of line and color to the architecture and garden. Instead, he chose colors and form to blend with the surroundings.

Senju describes abstract art this way: "Abstract art is an easier way to express his ideas. You can go back and forth with themes. There are many ways to create a waterfall."

During a tour one person asked him how long it took him to come up with the idea of the waterfall for his paintings. He said, "Well, I am 48 years old and it has taken 48 years."

What makes the murals still Japanese

Traditional Japanese murals are often less abstract than Senju's murals. They are often nature scenes characterized by birds, plants and mountains. The previous murals destroyed by vandals were of mountains and tree branches.

Senju's murals still continue the Japanese tradition of using minimal decoration. The Japanese tradition of displaying only a few key items -such as a flower arrangement or vase on a

tokonoma- continues here because the murals are of a waterfall and not a whole scene. Furthermore, the murals continue the Japanese idea of “creating something from nothingness” much like the scroll art in the tea house. (The concept of “mu” in Zen Buddhism.) Just as you empty your mind before participating in a tea ceremony, here Senju creates a painting from nothingness.

The Japanese House also is meant to blend with nature. The viewing garden is such an important part of the architecture because the garden is meant to be seen from the porch. The murals enhance, not detract, from that effort. Senju meant to paint the murals to look as if there is no boundary from the house to the garden. The murals fill the walls and the color blends with its surroundings.

Japanese architecture and culture has always acknowledged nature. The use of screens and sliding doors enables the people inside the house to easily respond to the weather – closing and opening doors depending on the climate. Even the wearing of kimono – a style of clothing that is cool in the summer and warm in the winter- also shows an appreciation of nature. Kimono cloth also usually has nature scene or flowers on it. Senju continues this idea.

Senju’s Message: What does Senju want the public to experience?

Philadelphia citizens to own and interpret the murals
Murals are universal, not limited to Japanese painting
Art – communication of imagination

The murals are meant to be viewed while kneeling or sitting.

Senju also continues a tradition of Shofuso, by donating the paintings. Shofuso was a gift from the Japanese people to the United States after World War II. Senju gave the paintings to the people of Philadelphia so that they can enjoy and interpret them in their own way.

Senju sees the role of an artist as a communicating imagination. The artist wants the public to interpret the paintings and decide for themselves what they mean.

Senju quotes:

I liken it (the painting) to “bring blood back to the building” I want to make Shofuso alive again. Like when an artist brings spirit and has energy and life. I can feel that in the house.”

“There is an energy and calm interacting – this is a new feel for the house.”

“The murals are like one long painting, never ending. There is no boundaries top to bottom. However, each panel can stand on its own but they are meant to be together.”

The Murals and the House and Garden – the connection and their interaction

The murals are a living embodiment of Japanese culture.

- They represent the art that is traditional in Japanese houses and temples. Fore example the art in a tokanoma
- The house is not really a historic house it is a piece of art itself. It was inspired by a 17th c. building but a number of its features are 20th century – particularly the swooping roof which is more exaggerated then a traditional house.