

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

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FIRST SHOWING OF ABSTRACT JAPANESE CALLIGRAPHY AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Approximately 40 examples of the new abstract calligraphy developed by Japanese artists in the past decade will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from June 23 through September 19 in the first exhibition of its kind presented in this country. After its New York showing ABSTRACT JAPANESE CALLIGRAPHY will tour the United States as one of the new shows in the Museum's extensive Circulating Exhibitions Program.

Work by approximately 35 artists is included in the exhibition, which consists of examples of these new "word paintings" mounted and framed as well as on 4 large free standing screens. They were brought to this country by Arthur Drexler, Curator of the Department of Architecture and Design, who installed the exhibition with Mildred Constantine, Associate Curator. Executed in black ink on white or tinted paper, each of the word paintings is based on the characters used in writing a line from a famous poem or philosophical essay. The letter forms are intended to convey pictorially the mood of each quotation, and the paintings range from delicate linear designs to massive, broadly-brushed compositions, often drawn so freely that they can be read by most Japanese only with difficulty. Although the observer with no knowledge of Japanese is sometimes able to sense the feelings described by the words, a literal translation is provided for the short text of each painting.

This new abstract calligraphy, according to the introductory text accompanying the exhibition, is the newest development of the Japanese calligraphy tradition and seeks primarily to exploit the pictorial values of the written symbol, making legibility incidental. Traditional calligraphy, primarily a form of communication, has always been valued by the Japanese as an art form, and the traditional symbols have always lent themselves to free and highly personal interpretation. In the abstract calligraphy the artist alters the ancient forms somewhat like a western painter who, in abstracting a figure or a still-life, preserves only fragmentary visual clues as to the actual appearance of his subject.

Some distinguishing characteristics of the new calligraphy are found in the composition and brush work. Characters are drawn directly to the edge of the paper where they may be abruptly cut off, or, as in the earlier forms, the characters may be isolated on a white ground. In either case the white paper itself serves as an important element of the composition. The brush work ranges from fragile, tenuous lines to massive broad strokes which sometimes cover large areas of the picture. Often the artist varies the tone of the ink, introducing a gray wash or using the pigment so thickly that it acquires a texture in contrast with the paper.