

Ya.G. Gileva

The concept of Buddhism in *nihonga* art based on the work of Yokoyama Taikan

Abstract. During the Meiji period (1868—1912), Japan faced serious challenges. Amidst rapid Westernization and modernization, the country was forced to re-invent its national identity. At the same time, the government made Shintō the state religion, which contributed to the rise of anti-Buddhist sentiment and the development of the *haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈 (“eradicating Buddhism and abolishing Shakyamuni”) movement. This policy led to the destruction of temples, statues, and paintings, threatening centuries-old cultural heritage. Then, in response to the adoption of European-style painting *yōga* 洋画, the *nihonga* 日本画, or Japanese-style painting movement emerged. It sought to preserve and reinterpret traditional art in a contemporary context. One of the key figures of this school was Yokoyama Taikan, who studied under Okakura Kakuzō. Thanks to his teacher’s influence, the young artist perceived Buddhism as one of the foundations of Japanese culture. In his work, Taikan did not simply copy ancient works but instead sought to develop a new visual language to express traditions and philosophical concepts. A significant milestone was his trip to India in 1903, where the artist was inspired to create works with Indian motifs, which served as impetus for the further development of modern Japanese painting. In his works, Yokoyama Taikan placed great emphasis on a profound understanding of Buddhist philosophy, which is reflected in such outstanding works as *Selflessness* (*Muga* 無我) and *Metempsychosis* (*Seisei ruten* 生々流転). Furthermore, the artist made a significant contribution to the development of artistic expression in modern art as one of the founders of the “hazy style” (*mōrōtai* 朦朧体). This technique conveyed the atmosphere and spiritual depth without the use of clear contours. Thus, Yokoyama Taikan was one of the leading *nihonga* artists who actively engaged with traditions, particularly Buddhist themes. In his works, he strove to find a subtle balance between cultural heritage and innovation, which lay at the heart of the formation of Japan’s national identity at the time.

Keywords: *nihonga*, Yokoyama Taikan, Buddhism in art, Okakura Kakuzō, modern Japanese art, modernization, Meiji period.

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Conflict of interests. The author declares the absence of the conflict of interests.

For citation: Gileva, Ya.G. (2026). The concept of Buddhism in nihonga art based on the work of Yokoyama Taikan. *Yaponskiye issledovaniya* [Japanese Studies in Russia], 2026, 2, 5—23. (In English). DOI: 10.55105/2500-2872-2026-2-5-23.

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Концепция буддизма в искусстве нихонга на примере творчества Ёкояма Тайкан

Аннотация. В период Мэйдзи (1868—1912) Япония столкнулась с серьезными вызовами. В условиях стремительной вестернизации и модернизации страна была вынуждена переосмыслить свою национальную идентичность. В то же время правительство сделало синто государственной религией, что способствовало возникновению антибуддийских настроений и развитию движения *хайбуцу кисяку* (廃仏毀釈, «искоренение буддизма и уничтожение Шакьямуни»). Эта политика повлекла за собой разрушение храмов, статуй и картин, поставив под угрозу многовековое культурное наследие. Кроме того, в качестве ответа на активное распространение живописи в европейском стиле *ё:га* (洋画) возникло движение *нихонга* (日本画, живопись в японском стиле), которое стремилось сохранить и переосмыслить традиционное искусство в современном контексте. Одной из ключевых фигур этой школы был Ёкояма Тайкан, который обучался под руководством Окакура Какудзо. Благодаря своему учителю молодой художник начал воспринимать буддизм как одну из основ японской культуры. В своем творчестве Тайкан не просто копировал старые образцы, а искал новый визуальный язык для выражения традиций и философских концепций. Важным этапом стала поездка в Индию в 1903 г., где художник вдохновился на создание работ с индийскими мотивами, что послужило импульсом для дальнейшего развития современной японской живописи. Ёкояма Тайкан в своих работах уделял большое внимание глубокому осмыслению буддийской философии, что нашло отражение в таких выдающихся работах, как «Не-я» (*Муга*, 無我) и «Метемпсихоз» (*Сэйсэй рутэн*, 生々流転). Помимо этого, художник внес значительный вклад в формирование выразительных средств современного искусства, будучи одним из создателей «туманного стиля» (*мо:ро:тай*, 朦朧体). Эта техника позволяла передавать атмосферу и духовную глубину без использования четких контуров. Таким образом, Ёкояма Тайкан был одним из ведущих художников *нихонга*, который активно обращался к традиционной культуре и, в частности, к буддийской тематике. В своих работах он стремился найти тонкий баланс между культурным наследием и инновациями, что лежало в основе формирования национальной идентичности Японии в то время.

Ключевые слова: *нихонга*, Ёкояма Тайкан, буддизм в искусстве, Окакура Какудзо, современное японское искусство, модернизация, период Мэйдзи.

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Конфликт интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Для цитирования: Гилева Я.Г. The concept of Buddhism in *nihonga* art based on the work of Yokoyama Taikan [Концепция буддизма в искусстве *нихонга* на примере творчества Ёкояма Тайкан] // Японские исследования. 2026. № 2. С. 5—23.
DOI: 10.55105/2500-2872-2026-2-5-23.

Introduction

Buddhism has been one of the foundations of Japanese culture since its introduction in the 6th century. However, the Meiji period (1868—1912) was the age of challenges and transformation. In the face of rapid modernization and the spread of Western culture, Japan began a serious reconsideration of its national identity. Rapid socio-economic and cultural changes accompanied artistic transformation, particularly associated with the influence of European-style painting (*yōga*). In response, *nihonga*, Japanese-style painting, emerged to preserve traditional art. However, it is crucial to understand that *nihonga* was not simply an artistic current, but a part of a complex cultural and political project. It used art as a model for “self-creation, manifestation and self-recognition of the people” [Clark 2003, p. 65]. In the art sphere, the movement sought not merely to retain traditional techniques and materials, but to develop a modern art form which would connect the country’s history with its present.

At the same time, the Meiji government made Shintō the state religion and supported this policy with laws like the *Shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離 (“separation of Shinto and Buddhism”) edict of 1868. These factors created unfavorable conditions for Buddhism. However, despite the pressure, it remained an integral part of Japanese culture and was appreciated by the *nihonga* movement. One of the main figures in the development of Japanese-style painting was Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三 (1863—1913), who encouraged the development of modern Japanese art based on its heritage, including Buddhist traditions, and reinforcing connections with other Asian countries and the world in general. Among his students at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (*Tōkyō Bijutsu Gakkō* 東京美術学校) and the Japan Art Institute (*Nihon Bijutsuin* 日本美術院) was an outstanding *nihonga* artist Yokoyama Taikan 横山大観 (1868—1958).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the concept of Buddhism in Yokoyama Taikan’s paintings. To achieve this goal, the following tasks were formulated. First, to explore the historical and cultural context that shaped *nihonga* and formed the relationship between this art movement and Buddhism, including the Meiji-era policies and the influence of cultural exchange with other countries. Second, to conduct a detailed analysis of Yokoyama Taikan’s artistic path and his paintings, focusing on the depiction of Buddhist concepts, figures, symbols, and narratives. Third, to examine the role of *nihonga*, as exemplified by his work, in the preservation and reinterpretation of Buddhist traditions within the context of modernizing Japan.

Legacy of Japanese Buddhist painting

To fully appreciate the innovation of Yokoyama Taikan and the *nihonga* movement, it is necessary to look more closely at the rich tradition of Buddhist painting that modern artists inherited and sought to modernize. Japan has a rich and diverse tradition of Buddhist painting that has lasted over a thousand years, leaving numerous national treasures and contributing to the country’s artistic heritage. Buddhism entered the country in the 6th cen-

tury and actively developed during the Asuka (538—710) and Nara (710—794) periods. Early wall paintings can be found in temples like Hōryūji 法隆寺 [Mason 1993, pp. 82—83]. Another type of Japanese Buddhist art was narrative scroll (*emakimono* 絵巻物), such as *Sūtra of Cause and Effect*, or *Kako Genzai Inga Kyō* 過去現在因果經 (8th century, Fig. 1), which depicts the life of Shakyamuni Buddha (*Shaka Nyorai* 釈迦如来) [Mason 1993, pp. 98—99]. In Buddhist tradition, the purpose of art is to convey the permanent in the constantly evolving, the basis of a constantly changing world, to discern the eternal truth in individual manifestations [Grigoreva 2008, p. 190]. In other words, such art has always been filled with deep philosophical meaning and symbolism.



Fig. 1. Artist Unknown. Detached Segment of *Inga Kyō* (“Illustrated of Buddha’s”). Nara period, 8th century. Color on paper, handscroll, 26.4 x 33.6 cm. Tokyo National Museum. URL: <https://bunka.nii.ac.jp/heritages/detail/435392> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

The Heian period (794—1185) saw the development of Esoteric Buddhist schools, namely Shingon (*Shingonshū* 真言宗) and Tendai (*Tendaishū* 天台宗) brought to Japan by Kūkai 空海 (774—835) and Saichō 最澄 (767—822) respectively [Mason 1993, p. 122]. Shingon introduced the *Ryōkai Mandara* 両界曼荼羅 (“Two Realms Mandala”) tradition as well as portraits of patriarchs [Mason 1993, pp. 125—129]. Scrolls with images of wrathful deities (*Fudō Myōō* 不動明王 and others) were also actively produced [Mason 1993, pp. 139—141]. Moreover, Pure Land Buddhism emerged, leading to the creation of Amitabha Buddha (*Amida Nyorai* 阿弥陀如来) *Raigō* 来迎 paintings depicting his descent to greet the faithful [Mason 1993, pp. 146—147]. *Sūtra* illustration continued to develop, resulting in more exquisite works, such as *Heike Nōkyō* 平家納経 (12th century, Fig. 2) containing silver and gold decoration [Mason 1993, pp. 157—161].

During the Kamakura period (1185—1333), Japan experienced another significant spread of Buddhist art. *Emakimono* retained its popularity and depicted a wide range of scenes, such as legends and lives of monks [Mason 1993, pp. 198—199]. Cults surrounding personalities like Kūkai (posthumously called *Kōbō Daishi* 弘法大師, “the Grand Mas-

ter Who Propagated the *Dharma*”) also produced special imagery, such as *Kōbō Daishi as a Boy*, or *Chigo Daishi* 稚児大師 (14th to 15th centuries, Fig. 3) paintings [Mason 1993, pp. 200—201]. Pure Land continued evolving, ranging from depictions of the renowned *Taima Mandara* 当麻曼荼羅 to various *Raigō* styles. This era also produced vivid disturbing depictions of the “Six Realms” of Existence (*Rokudō-e* 六道絵), particularly *Hell Scrolls* [Mason 1993, pp. 205—211].



Fig. 2. Tanaka Shinbi. Fragment of Copy of Chapter 23 of “The Sutras Donated by the Heike Clan” (Masuda Version). Taishō period, 20th century (Original: Heian period, 1164). Ink on decorated paper, handscroll. Tokyo National Museum. URL: <https://bunka.nii.ac.jp/heritages/detail/536227> (accessed: 15.05.2025).



Fig. 3. Artist Unknown. *Kōbō Daishi as a Boy*. Muromachi period, 14th to 15th centuries. Color on silk, hanging scroll, 74.2 x 42 cm. Miho Museum. URL: <https://www.miho.jp/booth/html/artcon/00000008.htm> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

Zen Buddhism influenced Japanese art throughout the Kamakura period and retained its significance in the following Muromachi period (1336—1568). Zen paintings often featured landscapes paired with poetry or portraits of Buddhist monks. They emphasized the importance of meditation and captured a new aesthetic category of *wabi-sabi* 侘寂 (“modest simplicity”). Monochrome ink painting *suibokuga* 水墨画 symbolically conveyed Zen philosophy and was developed by monk-artists like Sesshū Tōyō 雪舟等楊 (1420—1506) [Mason 1993, pp. 217—226]. An exceptional example of his art is *Huike Offering His Arm to Bodhidharma* 慧可断臂図 (1496, Fig. 4), which demonstrates the technique of ink painting combined with light color wash (*tansai* 淡彩) on paper. Besides, the topic of teacher-disciple relationship and devotion to the doctrine, presented in the painting, is of great importance in modern art as well.¹

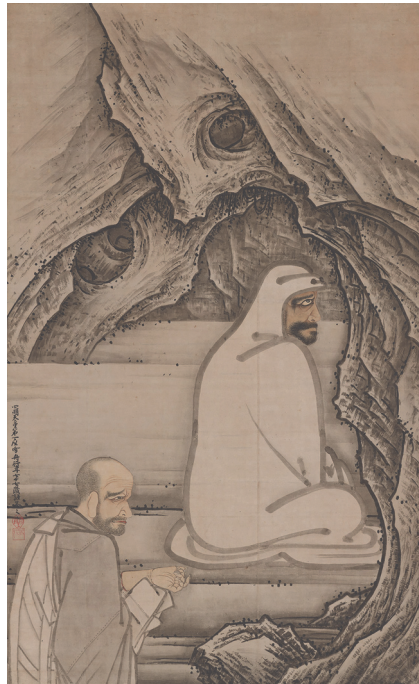


Fig. 4. Sesshū. Huike Offering His Arm to Bodhidharma. Muromachi Period, 1496. Ink and light color wash on paper, hanging scroll, 199.9 x 113.6 cm. Sainen-ji Temple, Aichi. URL: <https://www.kyoha.ku.go.jp/eng/collection/meihin/suibokuga/item06/> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

By the late Muromachi and during the Momoyama period (1568—1600) professional schools gained popularity. The Kanō school (*Kanō-ha* 狩野派) is particularly renowned for *kanga* 漢画 (“Chinese-style painting”), namely Zen ink painting and Ming (1368—1644) court style. For example, Kanō Motonobu 狩野元信 (1476—1559) created compositions in the form of *fusuma* 襖 (sliding door panels) of a Zen Patriarch [Mason 1993, p. 231].

¹ Kyoto National Museum. Retrieved May 15, 2025, from <https://www.kyohaku.go.jp/eng/>

Moreover, Hasegawa Tōhaku 長谷川等伯 (1539—1610), greatly influenced by Chinese painting, created works like *Old Trees and Monkeys* 枯木猿猴図 (16th century, Fig. 5), which conveys Zen philosophy symbolizing an unenlightened person who is trying to reach something nonexistent [Mason 1993, p. 261]. In other words, Zen art continued to play a key role during this period.



Fig. 5. Hasegawa Tōhaku. *Old Trees and Monkeys*. Momoyama Period, 16th century. Ink on paper, hanging scrolls, (each) 155 x 115 cm. Ryusen-an Temple, Kyoto. URL: [https://www.kyohaku.go.jp/eng/collect ion/meihin/kinsei/item13/](https://www.kyohaku.go.jp/eng/collect%20ion/meihin/kinsei/item13/) (accessed: 15.05.2025).

In the Edo period (1600—1868), *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 (“pictures of the floating world”) emerged and gained popularity. Their philosophy is deeply associated with the Buddhist concept of impermanence [Mason 1993, p. 278]. Moreover, a new distinctive form of Zen Buddhist painting known as *zenga* 禅画 flourished. It once again embodied philosophical concepts and was considered a form of meditation. The style includes ink monochrome painting and calligraphy. Arguably, *zenga* was the closest and most important continuation of Buddhist art practice during the Edo period [Mason 1993, pp. 324—326].

This vast heritage, spanning over a millennium and encompassing a variety of styles, became the cultural foundation for *nihonga* artists. The philosophical depth, symbolic language, and specific techniques developed over the centuries were more than just history; they became an inspiration for contemporary artists seeking to preserve and reinterpret Japanese traditions in a rapidly changing world.

History of *nihonga* and its special features

The history of *nihonga* (Japanese-style painting) began in the latter half of the 19th century, in the Meiji period. At that time Japan had to end its isolationist policy (*sakoku* 鎖国) under pressure from Western powers. Foreign culture and science began to rapidly penetrate the country, and Japan faced the challenge of integrating its traditional culture with new influences amidst rapid modernization. The nation confronted a serious dilemma: how to preserve its traditional culture and develop a national identity in the face of foreign influence [Bowring, Kornicki 1993, p. 195].

This issue was especially relevant in the arts, where European-style painting (*yōga*) with its techniques and materials spread widely across Japan. Consequently, *nihonga* emerged as a movement to revive Japanese painting in its traditional form. It was not merely an attempt to preserve authenticity but to develop modern art combining traditions and novelty, national identity and some aspects of foreign, namely Western painting. It is therefore important to note that *nihonga* and *yōga* were not rivals or isolated from each other. Rather, they shared some similarities while retaining significant stylistic differences. The most significant distinguishing element is the materials and methods. While *yōga* artists used oil paint, pastels, and other traditional European materials, *nihonga* was defined by materials more typical of East Asian art, such as ink, natural pigments derived from minerals or plants and applied to silk or paper. *Nihonga* paintings were also often created in the traditional forms of hanging scrolls, *emakimono*, folding screens (*byōbu* 屏風), or *fusuma* [Gelūnas 2004, pp. 211—212].

In addition to technical features, the philosophical peculiarity of *nihonga* is also crucial to note. The artists of this movement valued not only the final product but also the process of its creation. In addition, whereas Western art tends to emphasize the originality of the artist, Japanese culture places more importance on the details, precision, and the process, in which harmony with nature and tradition may be more significant than innovation. In Japan, art is viewed not just as a visual representation but as a means of communication with the world and nature, and thus the philosophical background is often as important as the work of art itself [Gelūnas 2004, pp. 212—214]. However, it is important to emphasize that the creation of *nihonga* was largely a state-sanctioned political project designed to shape a new national style [Clark 2003, p. 67].

Connection between *nihonga* and Buddhism

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the new government's decision to make Shintō the state religion had profound and destructive consequences for Buddhist art and heritage, marginalizing Buddhism in favor of a nationalist ideology centered on the emperor. Shintō, as the indigenous religion of Japan, was therefore better positioned to justify the restoration of imperial authority and to create the spirit of national unity required to develop in such challenging conditions. The new authority also intended to distance itself from institutions associated with the Tokugawa rule [Marra 2014, p. 173].

The legal separation of Buddhism and Shintō was ordered by the *Shinbutsu Bunri* edict in 1868, and it aimed to purify the latter from centuries of syncretic Buddhist influence. The decree and subsequent legislation required the following: 1) defrocking Buddhist

priests in Shintō shrines; 2) removal of Buddhist statues and symbols from the shrines; 3) eradication of syncretic Buddhist terms; 4) abolition of the temple registration system in favor of voluntary shrine registration and compulsory civil system; 5) expropriation of temple land, and other measures [Marra 2014, p. 177]. This policy gave rise to a violent anti-Buddhist movement known as *haibutsu kishaku* [Grigoreva et al. 1993, pp. 304—305].

This was unprecedented for Japanese Buddhism; whereas persecution had previously targeted only specific sects, now mainstream Buddhism lost state patronage [Ienaga 1965, pp. 9—10]. There were several reasons for this, including the economic expense of temple upkeep and the attractiveness of their land as a means of modernization, along with adverse attitudes towards Buddhism arising partly because it was associated with weakening China, and due to the perceived corruption of its clergy [Marra 2014, pp. 174—175]. However, one must keep in mind that, in theory, the government's policy was *shinbutsu bunri* (separation), and not *haibutsu kishaku* (destruction), and it condemned acts of violence. But in practice, the line was often blurred, and the authorities did little to stop the destruction [Marra 2014, p. 177]. Varying in intensity by region, this campaign resulted in the destruction of thousands of statues, paintings, scriptures, and other valuable cultural items. According to some estimates, 40,000 temples of the 460,000 registered in the Edo period were destroyed during 1868—1888 [Marra 2014, p. 174]. Despite this challenging environment, the *nihonga* movement always viewed Buddhism as an integral part of Japanese culture and incorporated its aesthetics and philosophy into the art.

One of the leading figures in the emergence and development of *nihonga* was Okakura Kakuzō (1863—1913), also known as Tenshin 天心, who was a key ideologue in the project of reinventing the Japanese artistic and cultural identity. His work at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts was a foundation for the *nihonga* movement since it was a center of training artists who were keen on preserving Japan's artistic heritage. Tenshin cooperated with the American historian of Japanese art Ernest Fenollosa to preserve traditional techniques of painting, while fostering innovation that would reflect Japan's national character. Okakura then left the school and set up the private Japan Art Institute, which was meant to spread the same ideals.¹ However, it is crucial to understand Okakura's turn to Buddhism not as an expression of personal interest, but as a strategic component of his broader political and cultural project to build a unified pan-Asian identity [Shigemi, Singleton 2012, p. 39].

Okakura's approach to teaching painting is also of great importance. For example, his students were expected to “paint the air,” which encouraged them to experiment with color washes, colored lines, and shadows. This approach aimed to express atmosphere and perspective, incorporating the strengths of Western painting without resorting to simple realism. Moreover, Tenshin gave his students, including Taikan, sūtras and instructed them to create paintings based on them. This approach encouraged the artists to study the scriptures so that they could reinterpret them visually.² Okakura considered Buddhism one of the foundations of Japanese culture, alongside Confucianism and Taoism [Nagahiro 2012,

¹ Shimizu, E. Beyond East and West: Okakura Kakuzō and “The Book of Tea”. Nippon.com. 2018. August 30. URL: <https://www.nippon.com/en/views/b07207/>

² Taito City Culture Guide Archives. Yokoyama Taikan no shōgai wa, arata na nihonga e no mosaku deshita [Yokoyama Taikan's life was a search for a new way of Japanese painting]. 2017. March 15. URL: https://www.culture.city.taito.lg.jp/bunkatanbou/topics/famous_persons/taikan/japanese/guide_02.html

pp. 26—27]. Thus, he opposed the *haibutsu kishaku* movement and worked on the restoration of damaged artwork. He advocated intercultural harmony, which could be established through cultural exchange. Okakura actively interacted with his colleagues from both Western and Asian countries.¹

Tenshin's visit to India and interest in Indian Buddhism are particularly interesting in this context. In his book *The Ideals of the East*, Okakura narrates the influence of Buddhism on Japanese culture and art, emphasizing its importance. He also addresses Buddhist art, its Indian origins and Chinese influence, which had a great impact on the development of Japanese culture. Overall, Okakura Kakuzō made significant contributions to the research on Japanese and Asian art. In particular, he pioneered the creation of a comprehensive periodization and had an innovative vision of Eastern artistic development. He was among the first to apply Western historical techniques to the study of Japanese art and promoted a more flexible approach that would avoid rigid period, nationality, or genre classification. He attempted to place Japanese art in a larger Asian context, drawing parallels with China, Korea, and India. He saw Buddhism as one of the unifying factors in the art of the entire region [Nagahiro 2012, pp. 27—36]. Moreover, this approach and especially his interest in India should be considered in the context of the geopolitical interests of the Meiji government [Liao 2026, p. 9].

Thus, *nihonga* was created in the latter part of the 19th century as a reaction to Western cultural influence after the Meiji Restoration and as a political project to reinvent national identity. Japanese-style painting focused on harmony with nature, maintaining traditional materials, and the philosophical aspect of the creative process. However, it was not a reactionary movement but an active attempt to redefine Japanese artistic identity by blending historical heritage with modern features. One of the key aspects is how the movement was connected to Buddhism, which was among the pillars that formed the basis of Japanese culture. Okakura Kakuzō, who inspired and contributed to the development of *nihonga*, emphasized the importance of this religion for the country's art, which he put in a larger Asian cultural context.

Yokoyama Taikan and his contribution to *nihonga* art

Yokoyama Taikan (1868—1958) was an important figure in the history of modern Japanese art due to his contribution to *nihonga*. He was born in Ibaraki Prefecture and in 1889 became a student at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, where he met Okakura Kakuzō. At that time, Taikan became interested in Japanese traditional painting. After serving as assistant professor at the school, he resigned and alongside his teacher founded *Nihon Bijutsuin*. Tenshin's idea of cultural dialogue was something that appealed deeply to the young artist and made him reconsider his outlook on the art world. At the beginning of the 20th century, Taikan became one of the main representatives of modern Japanese art in both Japan and the world. He visited Calcutta, New York, Boston, London, Berlin, and Paris, and was also an envoy to the Japanese Art Exhibition in Rome in 1930.² This exhibi-

¹ Shimizu, E. Beyond East and West: Okakura Kakuzō and “The Book of Tea”. Nippon.com. 2018. August 30. URL: <https://www.nippon.com/en/views/b07207/>

² Yokoyama Taikan Memorial Hall. URL: <https://taikan.tokyo/>

tion was meant to promote Japanese painting and facilitate trade with Italy, and Taikan was selected to choose the works for it.¹

His works illustrate a fusion of Japanese traditional art and Western techniques, which was common during the Meiji period. His early paintings in particular combined national traditions with European realism. As he developed his style, the artist shifted towards a more subjective approach, incorporating impressionistic techniques. Taikan started to pay special attention to capturing the spirit of nature and a general impression rather than precise depiction. In later works, the artist also concentrated on the symbolic content of the work. For instance, in his monumental painting *Islands of Japan* 大八洲 (1941, Fig. 6), Taikan portrayed various Japanese landscapes as embodiments of Japanese spirit and the character of the Japanese Empire [Yamada 1942, pp. 401—410].



Fig. 6. Yokoyama Taikan. *Islands of Japan*. Shōwa period, 1941. Color on paper. The Museum of the Imperial Collections. URL: <https://artmuseum.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/knb/exhibition/program/232> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

Perhaps one of the key achievements of Yokoyama Taikan and his close colleague Hishida Shunsō was the creation of a style called *mōrōtai* 朦朧体 (“hazy style”). Its main characteristics are the elimination of clear contours and emphasis on the atmosphere through the use of tonal harmony and subtle gradation of color. This style was largely influenced by James McNeill Whistler (1834—1903), an American artist who pioneered tonal painting (also known as tonalism). Although the style was widely criticized in Japan for being too “vague,” it received recognition from Western critics and is now considered one of the most important phenomena in modern Japanese art [Ono 2020, pp. 113—116]. The artists defended their approach by arguing that a calligraphic line, so important to the classical Kanō school, was a foreign element from China, whereas color could express

¹ Taito City Culture Guide Archives. Yokoyama Taikan no shōgai wa, arata na nihonga e no mosaku deshita [Yokoyama Taikan’s life was a search for a new way of Japanese painting]. 2017. March 15. URL: https://www.culture.city.taito.lg.jp/bunkatanbou/topics/famous_persons/taikan/japanese/guide_02.html

emotivity they considered essentially Japanese [Wattles 1996, p. 51]. An example of Taikan's work in the *mōrōtai* style is an ink and color on silk painting called *Towing a Boat* 曳船 (1901, Fig. 7) [Chiu 2024, p. 5—6]. The painting is also a vivid representation of *nihonga* art, as it retains traditional Japanese materials while being influenced by modern Western art. In addition, the landscape theme is historically common in East Asia, which could be why tonalism gained special attention from Japanese masters.

In 1903, Taikan and other artists from Tenshin's group travelled to India to study local art. The journey was part of Okakura's strategy to establish cross-cultural exchanges, specifically between Asian countries. In India, Taikan was exposed to the indigenous art traditions and Buddhist imagery and themes, which inspired his own art. In his subsequent works, Taikan blended Japanese and Indian cultural influences to create a fusion of spiritual symbols. The paintings created during the “Indian period” (1903—1909) are discussed in the following section in more detail [Chiu 2024, pp. 6—11].

This experience marked the beginning of the artist's international experience and his exhibitions in Europe and America. After Okakura's death in 1914, Yokoyama Taikan became the central figure in the Japan Art Institute, and his works were seen as the main examples of modern *nihonga*. The highest recognition of his contribution was the awarding of the first Order of Culture (*Bunka kunshō* 文化勲章) in 1937, which finally established his reputation as “the first man in the world of Japanese painting”.¹



Fig. 7. Yokoyama Taikan. *Towing a Boat*. 1901. Ink and color on silk, 68.6 x 139.4 cm. Adachi Museum of Art.

Buddhist motifs and images in Taikan's works

Yokoyama Taikan's journey to India transformed his art, especially paintings on Buddhist themes. His works like *Kannon in White* 白衣観音 (1908, Fig. 8), *Floating Lanterns* 流燈 (1909, Fig. 9), or *Sakyamuni Encounters his Father* 釈迦父に会う, (1903, Fig. 10) were greatly influenced by Indian art and iconography and the Japanese vision of India as a spiritual homeland of Buddhism. They brought a new way of conveying religious themes in Japanese painting and deserve special attention.

¹ Independent Administrative Institution National Museum of Art. URL: <https://www.artmuseums.go.jp/>



Fig. 8 (left). Yokoyama Taikan. *Kannon in White*. 1908. Ink and color on silk, 140.3 x 113.4 cm. National Museum of Modern Art.

Fig. 9 (middle). Yokoyama Taikan. *Floating Lanterns*. 1909. Ink and color on silk, 143 x 51.5 cm. Ibaraki Prefectural Art Museum.

Fig. 10 (right). Yokoyama Taikan. *Sakyamuni Encounters Father*. 1903. Photographic reproduction. Dimensions unknown.

Kannon in White was inspired by Yokoyama Taikan's fascination with Indian women, whom he described as being like bodhisattvas. Thus, this work is an idealized representation of India as a spiritual land. *Floating Lanterns* was prompted by the Diwali festival in Varanasi, which the artist linked to the Japanese Buddhist festival of *Obon* お盆, where floating lanterns symbolize the souls of ancestors. For *Sakyamuni Encounters his Father*, Taikan drew inspiration from the Ajanta Caves, incorporating elements from Cave 17 in his depiction of Buddha. The artwork was praised for its authenticity, with critics noting the realistic portrayal of Indian figures, including Sakyamuni's mustache and his father's turban. However, while Taikan's Indian-inspired works explore Buddhist themes, they have strong foreign stylistics and may appear exotic to Japanese audiences because they incorporate distinctly Indian face features, clothing, and backdrops [Chiu 2024, pp. 14–19].

One of Yokoyama Taikan's notable early works is *Selflessness*, or *Muga* 無我 (1897, Fig. 11). The name itself gives an instant reference to Buddhist, in particular Zen, philosophy. The term *muga* refers to the state of egolessness, a central concept on the path to enlightenment. It is the dissolution of egoistic perception wherein the mind exists in sheer awareness, unbound to any subjective attachment. Zen scriptures describe a state in which "body and mind are completely in the oneness dimension, fulfilled by positive energy, but without any fixation of egoism" [Hashi 2016, p. 110], and call it *mushin* 無心. Thus, the Self which owns this open mind is known as the "non-self," or *muga*. It is believed that the highest wisdom "manifests itself when a person enters a state of complete self-forget-

fulness, “non-I,” “non-thought,” when nothing prevents the penetration of the highest Light” [Grigoreva 2008, p. 171].

Taikan’s choice of subject for such a profound theme is particularly interesting. Unlike many traditional Buddhist pictures, which typically feature monks or other enlightened persons, *Selflessness* represents a child. Some interpretations suggest that he might symbolize the young Buddha. But more broadly, the child represents the concept of *muga* itself — pure, embodying a state of Zen enlightenment through his innocence and egolessness. His absent stare to the left reinforces this, as if the boy is not aware of himself at this moment in time and space, which further emphasizes the distance between the boy and the viewer [Ueta 2006, p. 77]. Interestingly, the theme of the painting reminds of the previously mentioned images of *Chigo Daishi*, which once again testifies to the deep connection between the artist’s work and the traditions of Japanese art.

Moreover, a comparison of *Selflessness* with works previously mentioned allows one to notice significant differences in technique and style. Thus, the figure, representing the Indian-born Buddha, is given the features and clothes of a Japanese boy, wearing traditional dress and large sandals. The aesthetic choices further align the painting with the *nihonga* principles: the monochromatic background, soft linearity, muted color range, and the inclusion of calligraphy and a seal, typical characteristics of a traditional Japanese painting.

Another notable painting is *Avalokitesvara*, or *Kannon* 観音 (1912, Fig. 12), created four years after *Kannon in White*. Both paintings depict Avalokitesvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion, who is broadly worshipped in Mahayana Buddhism. She is wearing white robes, and there is a white lotus to her side, one of the main Buddhist symbols. Interestingly, Kannon is represented as a woman in both paintings, which is a distinctive feature of East Asian Buddhist iconography. But a closer look at the details highlights significant differences between the two works.

Although both were inspired by Taikan’s journey to India, *Kannon in White* retains distinctly Indian features. The Bodhisattva is depicted with large almond-shaped eyes and warm brown skin. She has a full and rounded form, with soft folds of skin on her neck. She is wearing a sheer *sari* draped across her body, partly revealing her left breast, making the painting more sensual [Chiu 2024, p. 14]. In contrast, *Kannon* features a more Japanese-looking bodhisattva, though her eyes remain slightly almond-shaped. The sensuality of *Kannon in White* was replaced with opaque fabric that covers nearly the whole body.



Fig. 11. Yokoyama Taikan. *Non-Self*. Meiji period, 1897. Color on silk, hanging scroll, 148.4 x 87.2 cm. Tokyo National Museum. URL: <https://bunka.nii.ac.jp/heritages/detail/431554> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

Additionally, the nimbus surrounding Kannon's head in the earlier painting — a detail that contributes to the mystical aura and aligns with Indian depictions of divine beings — is absent in the later version. This transformation marks a departure from a foreign Indian-inspired appearance towards a more conventionally Japanese representation, though still divergent from the canonical images of Kannon in Japanese Buddhist artwork (e.g., the serene, idealized forms often seen in sculptures like Statue of Yumechigai Kannon in Hōryūji 夢違観音 (7th—8th centuries, Fig. 13).



Fig. 12 (left). Yokoyama Taikan. Avalokitesvara. Meiji period, 1912. Color on silk, hanging scroll, 131 x 51 cm. The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. URL: <https://www.momat.go.jp/en/col/lection/j00121> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

Fig. 13 (right). Artist Unknown. Yumechigai Kannon. Asuka period, 6th—8th centuries. Bronze, 86.9 cm height. Hōryū-ji Temple. URL: <https://www.horyuji.or.jp/en/garan/daihozoin/> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

The technical aspects of the 1912 *Kannon* also better align with Japanese tradition. Reinforcing the shift in style, Taikan altered the background by replacing the rocky landscape in the earlier work with a tree in the background — a setting common in Japanese painting. This change enhances *nihonga* style, introducing features such as a monochrome background, subtle linearity, a reduced color palette, and the addition of calligraphy and a seal, all features that are characteristic of traditional art. The depiction of natural elements further emphasizes the change in style. The leaves are painted with translucent washes of col-

or, and even the stone upon which Kannon is sitting appears hazier but with defined contours. In contrast, the earlier painting features a more solid, detailed depiction of the rock.

By comparing the stylistic features of these two paintings, the change in Taikan's style becomes evident. In his later work he consciously diverged from the exotic Indian style to a more Japanese-influenced interpretation of Buddhist imagery. Although still driven by the Indian experience, the 1912 *Kannon* is closer to Japanese traditional art. This painting shows how *nihonga* combines linear technique with fluid brushwork, integrating elements of classical Japanese painting — such as *ukiyo-e*'s firm lines and *sumi-e*'s 墨絵 emotive ink wash — and Western tonal painting's influence.

Another of Yokoyama Taikan's important works featuring a clear Buddhist subject is *Metempsychosis* 生々流転 (1923, Fig. 14—15). This painting is important not only because of its deep philosophical meaning but also because of its impressive size — 40 meters long, made using traditional Japanese *sumi-e* technique. The title itself, which can also be translated as “continual flow and transformation of life,” refers to one of the main Buddhist ideas — the endless cycle of birth (*samsāra*). Thus, this concept can be vividly represented through a metaphor for flowing water. The painting shows the path of raindrops as they fall from the sky, become a stream, a river, a current, and finally dissolve into the ocean. In other words, this image conveys the Buddhist idea that true essence is more than physical materiality — it is the formless nature of water itself, in constant flow and change.¹



Fig. 14—15. Yokoyama Taikan. Fragments of *Metempsychosis*. Taishō period, 1923. Sumi ink on silk, handscroll, 55.3 x 4070 cm. The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. URL: <https://bunka.nii.ac.jp/heritages/detail/94153> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

¹ Cultural Heritage Online. URL: <https://bunka.nii.ac.jp/>

Moreover, water holds even deeper significance within Buddhist philosophy, having both biological and symbolic value. It is used to support life and is a core component of the human body and the environment. In Buddhist texts, water symbolizes purity, highlighting the need for the preservation of moral and spiritual cleanliness. According to Buddha himself, the conservation of water quality was important, and filtration and prevention of contamination were promoted to maintain health. Water also takes center stage in Buddhist rituals since it symbolizes spiritual renewal and purification. In meditation practice, the contemplation of water can be used to induce mindfulness and focus [Hewamanage 2011, pp. 450—457].

In addition, these Buddhist ideas resonate not just with Taikan's artwork but also with Japanese culture as a whole. One of the most significant Japanese concepts derived from Buddhist philosophy and possessing a strong connection with the water metaphor is *ukiyo* 浮世 ("the floating world"). This term, also translated as "transient world" or "fleeting world," represents the Buddhist perception of impermanence. According to this philosophical concept, things are constantly moving, like a stream of water, and the splendor of life lies in its transience. The kanji 浮 (*uki*, "to float") further emphasizes the connection between the fluidity of water and the nature of existence.

Thus, by selecting water as the central theme, Taikan not only referenced Buddhist thought on a deeply symbolic level but also paid tribute to traditional Japanese art and its aesthetics. The painting can be understood as a visual meditation wherein the use of ink wash technique and scroll format is utilized to evoke a contemplative state of mind. In such a state, an observer can "transcend" the illusory, material level and gain a glimpse of the "eternal flow of life." In other words, *Metempsychosis* is an artistic and philosophical exploration of impermanence, capturing the beauty of life's constant transformation. Moreover, Taikan often used *sumi* ink in his works and had a unique artistic philosophy. He thought that "If the universe does not appear on the screen, it is not art. This is true whether one is painting a landscape, a person, a still life, or even a single cherry blossom petal."¹

To sum up, Yokoyama Taikan was a central figure in the history of *nihonga* art. One of his key innovations was the *mōrōtai* style, blending Western tonalism and Japanese sensibility. Alongside other artists from Okakura's circle, Taikan travelled to India, where he acquired inspiration for subsequent works. Through key works such as *Selflessness*, *Kannon*, or *Metempsychosis*, the article highlighted the transformation of the artist's attitude to Buddhist imagery, from more exotic Indian-inspired representations to images firmly tied to Japanese traditions and Buddhist concepts, such as *muga* and *samsara*, and representing Taikan's personal growth and transformation. All in all, the artist's legacy was the successful integration of diverse cultural and technical elements, affirming his reputation as a master who largely defined *nihonga*.

¹ The Yomiuri Shimbun. Art Exhibition Japan. [Rebyū] "Yokoyama Taikan-ten — Kataru Taikan, Katarareru Taikan" Mizuno Bijutsukan — Kotoba to sakuhin ga utsushidasu tōshindai no "kyōshō" no sugata — 5-gatsu 28-nichi made [[Review] "Yokoyama Taikan Exhibition — Taikan Speaking, Taikan Being Spoken About" Mizuno Museum of Art — A life-size portrayal of the "master" through his words and works — Until May 28th]. 2023. April 27. URL: <https://artexhibition.jp/topics/news/20230426-AEJ1348692/>

Conclusion

Emerging in the Meiji (1868—1912) period, an era of rapid modernization and Westernization, the *nihonga* (Japanese-style painting) movement sought to develop modern Japanese art in response to the spread of European-style painting (*yōga*). It was a complex cultural and political project tied to the era's conservative turn and the quest for a modern national identity. The challenging context of *shinbutsu bunri* and the *haibutsu kishaku* movement prompted Okakura Kakuzō, a key figure in the emergence and the development of *nihonga*, to pay special attention to Buddhism as one of the foundations of national culture. Moreover, he advocated cultural exchange, primarily with Asian countries, which greatly influenced the movement.

One of the outstanding *nihonga* artist, Yokoyama Taikan, engaged with Buddhist themes, from direct iconographic references (e.g., Sakyamuni, Kannon) to explorations of profound Buddhist concepts, such as *muga* (“non-self”), or *samsara* (“wheel of rebirth”). He did not merely reproduce traditional iconography, but rather actively reinterpreted it according to his own individual artistic vision and technical innovations. This approach involved blending Japan's rich artistic heritage with foreign influences. His 1903 Indian trip was particularly important in the context of his art because it introduced new concepts and motifs into Taikan's works. Moreover, the *mōrōtai* (“hazy”) style he co-developed merged Western tonalism with Japanese aesthetics. Thus, Taikan's engagement with Buddhist themes reflects the very core task of *nihonga*: creating a modern Japanese art that is both deeply rooted in national tradition and receptive to international and modern influences.

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Поступила в редакцию: 02.10.2025

Received: 02 October 2025

Принята к публикации: 17.04.2026

Accepted: 17 April 2026