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# JAPAN QUARTERLY

## FINANCE

### Shaken

*Yamaichi Securities Co. went out of business this year after falling under huge fraud-induced debt. About 7,000 employees were out of jobs and reporters and worried investors flocked to its central Tokyo headquarters. The failure of what had been one of Japan's Big Four brokerages underscored the depth of problems in the nation's financial sector.*



Ishikawa Shigehiro

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## ART

# Migishi Setsuko— Portrait of an Artist

By Linda C. Ehrlich

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**W**hat leads a Japanese woman artist, at the age of 63, to set herself up in France, not in fashionable Paris, following her son's path and the path of so many Japanese artists from the late 1800s, but in the relative isolation of southern France? Why would a Japanese artist do only large-scale paintings at a time when they were not popular, in a country of small houses and walls? These are just two of the unconventional aspects of the career of painter Migishi Setsuko.

In a life studded with hardships, Migishi, now 93, has produced monumental works that continue to surprise the viewer with their boldness and clarity of vision. Migishi's paintings have been exhibited widely abroad, in Brazil, France and the United States—a retrospective exhibition was held in 1991 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. In Japan, her work has been shown in prestigious galleries in the Ginza and other Tokyo locations, in Kanagawa Prefecture's Museum of Modern Art at Kamakura, and at the Umeda Gallery in Osaka, among others. In 1977, the Himalaya Art Museum in Nagoya opened with a special exhibition hall dedicated to her work. In March, yet another exhibition opened in Paris.

Who is the woman behind these powerful paintings? Her *Self-Portrait* (1925) shows a strong-willed young woman with piercing eyes. Born in Bisai, Aichi Prefecture, Migishi long regarded herself as "different," because of a congenital hip dislocation. In one catalogue of a retrospective exhibition of her work, she was quoted as recalling, "When people gathered at our house for an event, I was placed in the storehouse out of concern for the family's reputation as local landowners." Determined to study Western-style oil painting rather than the traditional Japanese-style painting that filled her family's home, she pursued this dream, despite parental opposition and a sharp decline in the family fortunes. "Somehow or other, I felt there was more freedom, and a deeper psychological world, in Western-style painting," she has said in newspaper interviews.

Migishi began her formal studies at the Hongô Yôga Kenkyûjo (Hongô Institute for Western Painting) under Okada Saburôsuke, then she entered the Joshi Bijutsu Gakkô (now the Women's College of Fine Arts), graduating in 1924 with top honors, despite having followed a rather rebellious lifestyle.

In 1934, after a tumultuous 10-year marriage to the brilliant, philandering painter Migishi Kôtarô, she found herself a widow with three small children—a kind of "useless person" during the war years. She recalls trading pictures for food. Art supplies were limited at that time, and the uncharacteristically somber tones of the costumes in her 1940 *Korean Study*, a painting of five Korean women with somewhat abstract facial features, might well have reflected that shortage.

Migishi's recognition as an artist grew after exhibition of four of her paintings at





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Warrior Figurine With Shield (1956)



## Migishi Setsuko—



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Flowers in Véron (1982)





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Castle in Lacalahorra (1987)



the third Shunyôkai Exhibition in 1925. Her work won an award in 1935 at the Dokuritsu-ten. She was reputed to be the first artist to have a private exhibition mounted in Japan after World War II, in September 1945. But, as she later recalled, it was only after her *Gardenia* received the Minister of Education Prize in 1951 that she felt she no longer had to worry about how to support her family. She was thereafter able to concentrate on her painting.

Migishi's second marriage, to artist Sugano Keisuke (whose paintings of northern European towns she described as "steeped in romanticism") lasted from 1948 to 1953.

### Reaching for a New Level

Between 1957 and 1964, after she separated from her second husband, Migishi lived in Karuizawa, a summer resort in Nagano Prefecture, for her health. There, she sought a new level of artistry. Of that period she wrote, as quoted by art curator Ôta Yasuto, "Cutting off all ties with the outside world, I imposed upon myself a life restricted to the atelier... My only companion besides my paintings was the silent world of nature around me. But the life of solitude in Karuizawa was also a painful time of trial. Thoughts of my own foolishness, the emptiness of existence, feelings of remorse and shame, gnawed at me."

It was in her Karuizawa period that Migishi moved beyond interiors and still-life works to include broad, flowing themes from nature. Criticized by some members of the Japanese modern art world for her earlier Pierre Bonnard-like interiors, she reached deep within herself and found huge birds and flowers. As she painted, year after year, her flowers pushed to become landscapes, stretching against the edges of the frame. They became great blotches of color, great exclamations. Migishi's flowers challenge the viewer to stand back to meet their grandeur. Even in her most abstract moments, she never loses sight of the object. For example, in *Bird and Fish* (1958), a painting that reflects her fascination with the still-life works of Georges Braque, the brown lines soar against the white background, more bird-like than any exact representation.

In the mid-1950s, following her first visit to Europe, Migishi used the theme of the *haniwa*, a terra cotta tumulus figure, in a series of paintings. Migishi's *Warrior Figurine With Shield* (1956) is a towering soldier who carries the sun on his shoulder and breastplate, and the crescent moon on his upraised arm. This figure incorporates the heavens even as he stands firmly on the earth of which he was made. According to Arimoto Akane, curator of the Himalaya Art Museum, Migishi chose that form because she felt the *haniwa* represents something intrinsically Japanese and also because she saw it as an example of a pure artistic spirit without the constraints of self-consciousness. In Migishi's world, objects cast their own shadows without human assistance. In her 1977 essay collection *Hana Yori Hana Rasbiku* (More Flower-like Than Flowers Themselves), as quoted by art curator Amano Kazuo, she explains, "I am troubled by living creatures. I do not want to worry about what they might do the next moment."

Migishi Setsuko has declared white her favorite color. It is difficult to make white alone eloquent, however, so the artist endows it with scratches of brown or gray or black. One color Migishi rarely uses is royal purple, making its presence in *Flower of Eternity* (1967) especially surprising. For Japanese, purple is reserved for the robes of senior monks, or for the jaunty headband of a kabuki character like

**It was in her Karuizawa period that Migishi moved beyond interiors and still-life works to include broad, flowing themes from nature.**





© Migishi Setsuko, Photo by Kyuryudo

Self-Portrait (1925)



Sukeroku. It is also a color some believe has the power to extract evil influences and illnesses. In this painting, the purple flower, with touches of white, set against a fence-like background, becomes a geometric eternity. Each of Migishi's flowers has a distinctive nature, becoming an expression of a specific locale, whether Karuizawa, Ōiso (in Kanagawa Prefecture) or Véron. As she explains in a newspaper interview, "This is how it will turn out when I follow my instincts and work with great enthusiasm."

Migishi traveled in Europe in 1954 to 1955, after her second marriage ended, and went again in 1968. Attracted to a particular quality of light in southern Europe, she lived in Cagnes-sur-Mer in southern France, following in the tradition of artists like Raoul Dufy, Henri Matisse and Bonnard, who had also painted there. From 1974, she set up her studio in Véron, a small village in Bourgogne, where her paintings acquired a new luminosity. "As long as I have the sun, the ocean, flowers, solitude, my painting—my companion—I am satisfied," she wrote of this period.

Like the colors used by Catalan artist Joan Miró, her bright reds, yellows and greens, and her thick black outlines invite and refresh the eye. In *Red Stairs at Cagnes* (1969), for example, Migishi decides to leave out extraneous details from earlier sketches, such as an ornate hanging lamp and the patterns on a door. Instead, she paints only the essential forms, imbuing the whole with a great sense of mystery. Where do these calligraphic red stairs lead? What would we find if we had the courage to open the door at the top?

Many objects in Migishi's world—autumn leaves, buildings on the canal—are reflected in water. Her Venice pictures from that general period have been especially well-received in Japan and internationally. Migishi's Venice is an enchanted castle city, casting gray and black reflections into a lagoon of water that appears far more blue than the heavens.

One of Migishi's most memorable natural scenes is depicted in *Tree in Bourgogne* (1978). This firmly rooted tree, with "lightning" in its branches, appears completely centered within the frame. Nothing rests in this tree: not the black birds—nothing but flicks of the brush—that soar into its uppermost branches, nor the turbulent air that surrounds it. It is a proud image, but it could be called a profoundly solitary one. Arimoto notes the artist's words, however: "I do not find this image a lonely one. Look at the tree's wide trunk and long roots!"

In the autumn of 1987, Migishi's visit to Andalusia, in southern Spain, yielded a series of striking Spanish landscapes in colors far more vibrant than those preferred by many Japanese; therefore these paintings have not been exhibited as frequently in Japan as they deserve to be. In her *Castle in Lacalaborra* (1987), for example, the eye follows a violently red and black hill, with a hint of white walls in the foreground, to a castle perched on top like a king's crown. Only later do we realize that the windows are black and shuttered, and that the sky is an impossible shade of green mixed with brown.

Migishi's Andalusian towns perch precariously. There are no human forms; these are villages inhabited by rooftops. In her earlier Spanish paintings, the rooftops are obvious experiments with Cubism; in later pieces, the forms have relaxed. Still in the same eye-catching red, individual rooftops become less well-defined, less geometrically rigid.

Migishi's Spain avoids the stereotypes so often associated with representations of that country. The white walls of the southern cities are not picture-postcard white,

**Many objects in Migishi's world—autumn leaves, buildings on the canal—are reflected in water.**





© Migishi Setsuko, Photo by Kyuryudo  
Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art

### Fish and Incan Pot (1952)

but are incised with grays and browns that show the effects of the insistent sunlight. Beneath the brilliance of that sun, outlines stand in sharp relief—a seductive, but not entirely welcoming, world. Wood shutters on the windows are closed tightly against the noonday sun. With no noticeable roads through the village, the houses seem to press together even more tightly.





© Migishi Setsuko, Photo by Kyuryudo

### Tree in Bourgogne (1978)

Like so many of her images, from the early years of her career as a painter onward, Migishi's Spanish landscapes strive to present the essential forms beneath the surface design.

While never losing her ties to her native country, Migishi took control of her life, even at a relatively advanced age, and gave herself the space, free of intrusions



and societal involvements, to allow her paintings to breathe. This rejuvenation of image and of self is exactly the response to the question of why a woman at the age of 63 would cut her ties, even temporarily, to live in relative isolation in a foreign country. In Migishi's own words: "I realized that if I stayed in Japan, the past would pursue me. Even living on a mountain in Ôiso, I couldn't be alone." She also says: "I went to Europe to reinvigorate myself in my old age."

Since her return to Ôiso in 1989, in a spot overlooking the ocean, Migishi has again taken up the still-life and interior themes that had disappeared from her work after the 1950s. Her frail health no longer permits travel or extensive interviews. She has been quoted as describing her Ôiso studio this way:

"From where I sit in the studio, I can see the scenery in three directions. It was here that I began my career as a landscape artist... . The landscape is so clear that it seems to sparkle... . It was here that I was finally able to find peace."

While Migishi Setsuko fits into a long—if undervalued—tradition of Japanese women artists, and even helped establish the Joryû Gaka Kyôkai (Association of Women Artists) in 1947, she has retained her natural independence. Her paintings give courage to a new generation of artists—women and men alike—as they remind us to bring out the monumental still lifes and landscapes we find inside.

An exhibition of about 65 oil paintings by Migishi Setsuko has been organized by *Asahi Shimbun*. "Migishi Setsuko et la peinture" is in Paris, at Espace des Arts at Mitsukoshi Etoile, from March 3 to May 9, and will be shown in Tokyo, at Mitsukoshi Department Store in Nihonbashi, from May 26 to June 8, and at Yokohama, at Mitsukoshi Department Store, from September 15 to 27.