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[Images available upon request.]

***Her Brush: Japanese Women Artists from the Fong-Johnstone Collection* Opens at Denver Art Museum in Winter 2022**



Denver — July 26, 2022 — The Denver Art Museum (DAM) presents *Her Brush: Japanese Women Artists from the Fong-Johnstone Collection*. The exhibition takes a nuanced approach to questions of artistic voice, gender and agency through more than 100 works of painting, calligraphy, and ceramics from 1600s to 1900s Japan.

Many of the artworks will be on view for the first time to the public. Opening at the DAM Nov. 13, 2022, through May 13, 2023, in the Martin Building's level 1 Bonfils-Stanton Gallery, *Her Brush* is included with general admission. Tracing the pathways women artists forged for themselves in their pursuit of art, *Her Brush* explores the universal human drive of artistic expression as self-

realization, while navigating cultural barriers during times marked by strict gender roles and societal regulations. These historical social restrictions served as both impediment and impetus to women pursuing artmaking in Japan at the time.

Her Brush showcases works by renowned artists such as Kiyohara Yukinobu 清原雪信 (1643–1682), Ōtagaki Rengetsu 太田垣蓮月 (1791–1875), and Okuhara Seiko 奥原晴湖 (1837–1913) as well as relatively unknown yet equally remarkable artists like Ōishi Junkyō 大石順教 (1888–1968), Yamamoto Shōtō 山本細桃 (1757–1831) and Katō Seikō 加藤青湖 (fl. 1800s).

“This stunning exhibition brings forward the ideas of autonomy, legacy and a person’s ownership of their individual story,” said Christoph Heinrich, Frederick and Jan Mayer Director of the DAM. “This body of artwork has never been presented to our communities. Most importantly, the exhibition aligns with the museum’s ongoing commitment and mission of elevating voices of overlooked artists and their art.”

The exhibition was conceived by Professor Andrew L. Maske, Wayne State University, and co-curated by Dr. Einor K. Cervone, Associate Curator of Asian Art at the DAM.

“*Her Brush* questions established art historical tropes and rethinks the canon itself,” said Cervone, who joined the DAM September 2021. “Since Patricia Fister’s groundbreaking exhibition, *Japanese Women Artists: 1600–1900*, in 1988, no exhibition has addressed the subject on this scale. It offers an alternative art historical narrative that is inclusive, nuanced and complete.”

Interactive components facilitate a personal, intimate connection between the visitor, the artwork and the artist. Paintings, calligraphy and ceramic works of art are presented through the lens of the exceptional individuals behind them, with biographical focuses that tell the stories of their makers interspersed throughout the galleries. A rich roster of public engagement programs, symposia and artist visits will accompany the exhibition.

Exhibition Organization

Her Brush is organized into seven sections representing different realms in which artists found their voice and made their stamp on art history. Subtle design choices borrowing from traditional architecture and materials—such as paper & ink, plastered walls, sliding doors and *tokonoma* niches—distinguish and allude to each of the spheres presented in the exhibition.

Introduction

An introduction space presents the two major themes of the exhibition: artists’ pathways to art, and art as agency. Each gallery evokes a different cultural context, within and through which artists pursued their art. Whether being born into a family of professional artists or becoming a nun for the freedom to produce art, the groupings do not pigeonhole the artists as identities. Instead, they highlight how women navigated their personal journeys as artists. In *Her Brush*, many of the artists



can and do appear in more than one section, shuttling through these spheres, despite the strict limitations imposed on them by the time's gender roles and class hierarchies.

The Inner Chambers (*ōoku* 大奥)

"The Inner Chambers" refer to the secluded areas where women primarily resided within the courts and castles of the upper class. The term became synonymous with women and reveals the gender segregation in the upper echelons of early modern Japan. Daughters born into elite and wealthy households studied the fundamentals of "The Three Perfections" (painting, poetry and calligraphy). This artistic education was intended to prepare them to be proper companions for the men in their lives; they were not expected to become working artists. This section includes works by exceptionally driven and talented women who leveraged their unique access to education to become artists in their own right. Included in this section are works by Nakayama Miya 中山三屋 (1840–1871), Oda Shitsushitsu 織田瑟瑟 (1779–1832) and Ono no ozū 小野お通 (1559/68–before 1650).



Daughters of The Ateliers (*onna eshi* 女絵師)

In the third section, "Daughters of The Ateliers," visitors will glimpse the world of professional artists. Painting traditions were commonly passed down in the form of apprenticeships or from father to son. In this manner, some lineages endured for centuries. These professional painters subsisted through the patronage of wealthy clients. Artists in this section emerged from artistic families and, thanks to their talent and tenacity, established themselves as successful professional artists themselves. They were able to continue their family's artistic legacy, while developing a distinctive style and voice. Included in this section are works by Kiyohara Yukinobu, Nakabayashi Seishuku 中林清淑 (1829–1912) and Hirata Gyokuon 平田玉蘊 (1787–1855).

Taking the Tonsure (*shukke* 出家)

The fourth section sheds light on the world and work of Buddhist nun artists. Taking the tonsure, the shearing of one's hair to join a Buddhist monastic order, was a symbolic act of leaving one's past behind and becoming a nun. *Shukke* literally translates to "leaving one's home." Subverting expectations, this section brings works by Tagami Kikusha 田上菊舎 (1753–1826), Ōtagaki Rengetsu, Daitsū Bunchi 大通文智 (1619–1697) and others for whom taking the tonsure did not mean relinquishing autonomy. On the contrary, it offered them a form of liberation from societal expectations, such as "The Three Obediences (*sanjū* 三従)" of a woman to her father, husband and son. It also enabled nuns to travel freely in times of state-imposed restrictions, which especially impacted women. Above all, it allowed them the freedom to pursue their art. Leaving their old names behind and taking new names as ordained nuns, these artists crafted new identities for themselves.



Floating Worlds (*ukiyo* 浮世)

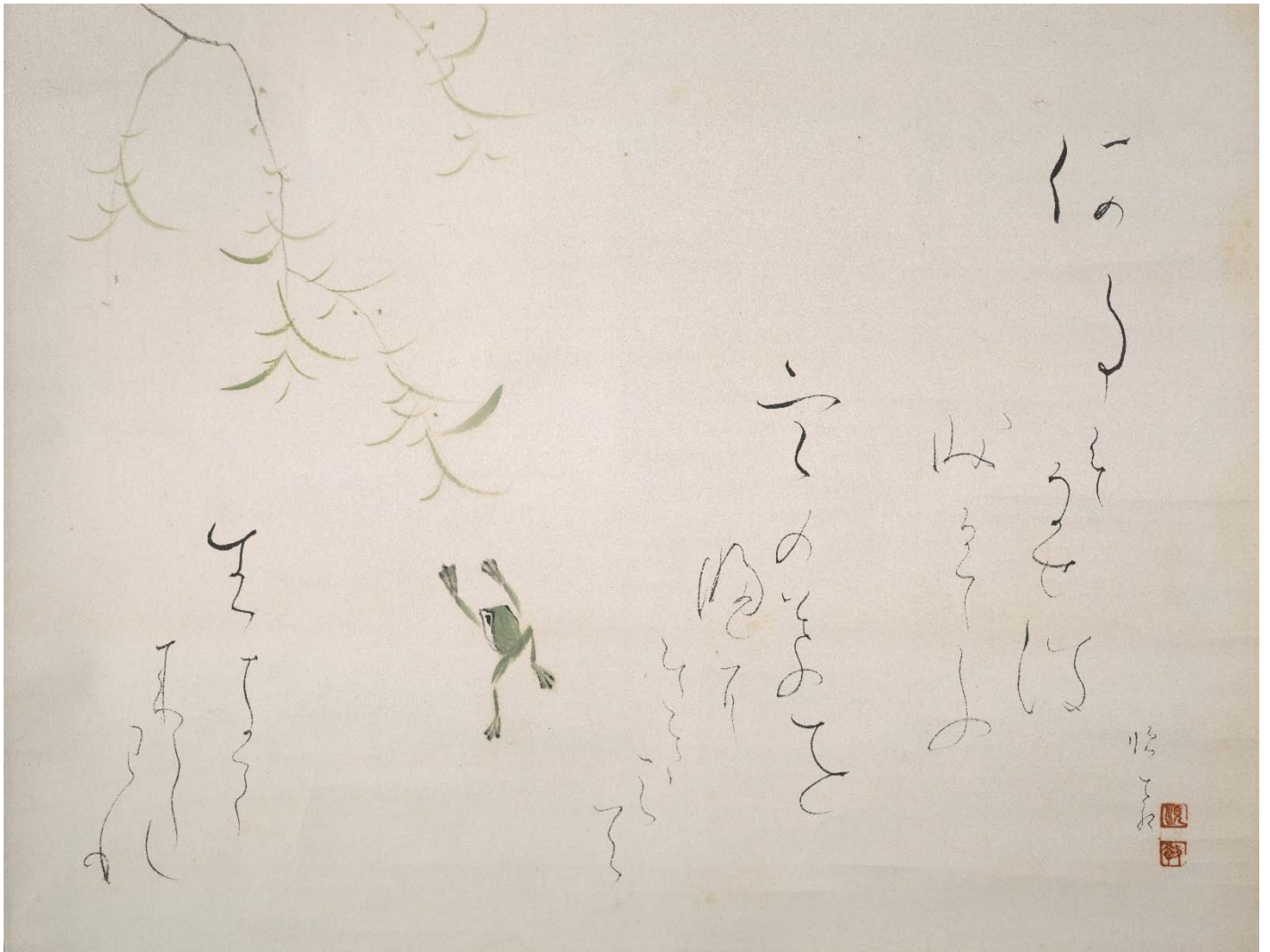
“The floating world” refers to the state-sanctioned quarters or urban entertainment districts, which catered to male patrons who frequented the teahouses, brothels and theaters. The term alludes to the ephemeral nature of this realm. Entering it, whether as a musical performer (*geisha*), an actor or a sex worker, meant leaving behind one’s name and constructing a new persona. Entertainers often cycled through several stage names, inventing and reinventing themselves time and again.

Being well-versed in “The Three Perfections” was a coveted trait in women of the floating world, adding to their allure. Some, however, transcended the strict confines of the pleasure quarters, sometimes even undoing their indentured servitude, becoming important artists and leaving their literal mark by creating artworks that were collected and cherished for generations. Alongside calligraphy by Tayū, commonly translated as “grand courtesans,” this section introduces works by the “Three Women of Gion,” who were not sex workers but rather owners of a famous teahouse. The three became formidable artists, in effect forming a matriarchal artistic lineage.

Literati Circles (*bunjin* 文人)

The sixth section, “Literati Circles (*bunjin* 文人),” features literati societies united by a shared appreciation for China’s artistic traditions. For these intellectuals and art enthusiasts, art was a form of social intercourse. Together, they composed poetry, painted and inscribed calligraphy for one another. Literati painting (*bunjinga* 文人画) prioritized self-expression over technical skill. Following this understanding of the brushstroke as an expression of one’s true self, artists in this section conveyed their identity and personhood through art.

As in other social contexts explored in this exhibition, literati circles included women from diverse backgrounds. More so than any other sphere introduced in this exhibition, literati circles were accepting of women participants. Many prominent women artists in Edo and Meiji Japan flourished within these intellectual cliques, including Okuhara Seiko, Noguchi Shōhin 野口小蘋 (1847–1917), Ema Saikō 江馬細香 (1787–1861) and Tokuyama (Ike) Gyokuran 徳山(池)玉瀾 (1727–1784), the latter being one of the Three Women of Gion.



Unstoppable (No Barriers) (*mukan* 無関) – conclusion to *Her Brush*

The concluding section, “Unstoppable (No Barriers) (*mukan* 無関),” takes its name from a double-sided screen by Murase Myōdō 村瀬明道 (1924–2013). On one side, it reads: “no,” or “nothingness.” On the other side, it reads “barriers.” When considered together, the two characters spell “unstoppable,” or “no barriers” (*mukan*). Each of the works in this gallery, including paintings and calligraphy by Takabatake Shikibu 高畠式部 (1785–1881), Ōtagaki Rengetsu and Ōishi Junkyō, addresses the subject of perseverance, overcoming personal and societal obstacles, and shattering the glass ceiling.

*“Taking up the brush
just for the joy of it,
writing on and on, leaving behind
long lines of dancing letters.”*

—Ōtagaki Rengetsu 太田垣蓮月

About the Fong-Johnstone Collection and Study Collection

Artworks showcased in *Her Brush: Japanese Women Artists from the Fong-Johnstone Collection* were selected from a generous gift of more than 550 artworks donated by Dr. John Fong and Dr.

Colin Johnstone. A large percentage of the works featured in this expansive gift were created by women artists. This collection, housed at the DAM, will be used for both exhibition and as a study collection, which will be made accessible to students and specialists alike. The Fong-Johnstone Collection and Study Collection are dedicated to advancing scholarship, the study of connoisseurship and to raising public awareness of this much overlooked body of works.

Credit

Her Brush: Japanese Women Artists from the Fong-Johnstone Collection is organized by the Denver Art Museum and made possible through the generous gift of the John Fong and Colin Johnstone collection. Support is provided by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, the Blakemore Foundation, the donors to the Annual Fund Leadership Campaign, and the residents who support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD). Promotional support is provided by 5280 Magazine and CBS4.

Planning Your Visit

The most up-to-date information on planning a visit to the Denver Art Museum can be found online under the [Plan Your Visit](#) tab. Use this page to find details on ticket pricing, public transit options and access information. General admission for museum members is free every day. Youth aged 18 and under, regardless of residency, receive free general admission everyday thanks to the museum's Free for Kids program. Free for Kids also underwrites free admission for school and youth group visits.

COVID-19 Protocols

The safety of visitors and staff remains a top priority, and the museum is continually updating its COVID-19 safety and security protocols based on advice from the CDC and federal and local guidelines. Current protocols can be found in the "Visit" section of the museum's website: <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/plan-your-visit>.

About the Denver Art Museum

The Denver Art Museum is an educational, nonprofit resource that sparks creative thinking and expression through transformative experiences with art. Its mission is to enrich lives by sparking creative thinking and expression. Its holdings reflect the city and region—and provide invaluable ways for the community to learn about cultures from around the world. Metro residents support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD), a unique funding source serving hundreds of metro Denver arts, culture and scientific organizations. For museum information, visit www.denverartmuseum.org or call 720-865-5000.

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Image Credits

Image 1: Murase Myōdō 村瀨明道, *Breaking Waves in the Pines* (Shōtō), late 1900s. Hanging scroll; ink on paper. Denver Art Museum: Gift of Drs. John Fong and Colin Johnstone. Photo © Denver Art Museum.

Image 2: Ōtagaki Rengetsu, 太田垣蓮月, *Hanging Flower Vase in Shape of Hechima Gourd* (*hana ike*), 1791–1875. Stoneware. Denver Art Museum: Gift of Drs. John Fong and Colin Johnstone. Photo © Denver Art Museum.

Image 3: Kiyohara (Kanō) Yukinobu 清原雪信, *The Goddess Benzaiten and Her Lute* (*biwa*), 1660–1680s. Hanging scroll; ink, color and gold on silk. Denver Art Museum: Gift of Drs. John Fong and Colin Johnstone. Photo © Denver Art Museum.

Image 4: Okuhara Seiko 奥原晴湖, *Orchids on a Cliff*, 1898. Hanging scroll; ink on paper. Denver Art Museum: Gift of Drs. John Fong and Colin Johnstone. Photo © Denver Art Museum.

Image 5: Ōishi Junkyō 大石順教, *Willow and Frog*, mid-1900s. Ink and color on paper. Denver Art Museum: Gift of Drs. John Fong and Colin Johnstone. Photo © Denver Art Museum.

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