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Illustration: William Chua

Enduring Japanese styles

Charlotte Rivers meets six leading contemporary creatives who are breathing new life into centuries-old Japanese styles and techniques

Japan is well-known for its long and rich artistic history. Its distinctive traditional artforms include calligraphy, ukiyo-e art, kamon and hanko crests, rinpa painting, silk kimono patterns and tapestry designs, to name but a few. And although these traditional styles are hundreds of years old, for many contemporary Japanese artists and designers they remain a rich source of inspiration in the 21st century.

The stunning work of Japan's great masters, such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Utagawa Yoshitora, Hasegawa Tohaku and Katsushika Hokusai, and traditional Japanese artforms as a whole, maintain

their appeal because of their integral role in the country's cultural heritage, for the awe-inspiring skill involved, and also because of the compelling, and still very relevant, storytelling element of each image. As Singapore-based illustrator William Chua, who draws heavily on



→ "When I was a child I lived in a house with an engawa [a wooden veranda or porch area] and we used to sit there and look out onto the garden. I'd watch the plants grow and the colour of the leaves change with the seasons, and this has always stuck with me and is what inspires my work today. That and the art of kimono design, on which I have many illustrated pattern books."

Created with acrylics, Mizuho's designs could equally be described as illustration or as fine art, and have graced the pages of many a magazine. Another inspiring artform for him is rinpa, an ancient style of painting that involves creating images using natural subjects such as birds, plants and flowers. "I very much like the rinpa style because rinpa artists don't always draw exactly what they see in nature, but rather choose particular features or characteristics of a plant or flower, and then compose an image made up of those elements – so that the image becomes more of a pattern," explains

Mizuho. "I always like drawing on ancient Japanese methods of painting because they are beautiful, as are many of our Japanese rituals and traditions."

Japanese artist Kahori Maki studied Fine Arts in New York before returning to her native country, where she now works freelance. Her drawings are a combination of reality and fantasy, which she creates initially by hand using pencil, ink and watercolour, before scanning and finishing in Photoshop. "Calligraphy and painting in India ink has always interested and inspired me, together with traditional Japanese arts of rinpa and ukiyo-e," she explains. "I learned calligraphy at the age

of eight, and have loved it ever since. I like working in the world of black-and-white, and watching as the ink spreads and moves on the paper. I also love traditional Japanese techniques, and I do think it's really important to keep them alive. They are beautiful, and they endure time – and these qualities are so valuable."

The content of Maki's images draws on nature – light, wind, plants – and, of course, people with the aim of capturing a feeling of beauty and energy. She has collaborated with bands to create artwork for albums as well as working on window displays, installations and films. For one such installation, entitled Box Garden, or

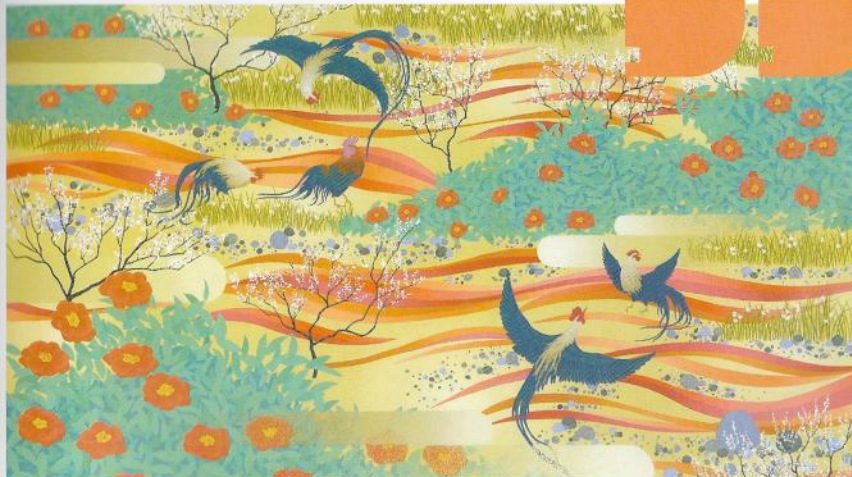
Japanese culture

"When you live in Japan you are surrounded by many beautiful things and so many traditional styles and rituals," says Masayoshi Mizuho. "Many Japanese people still like traditions like the wearing of kimonos and the traditional tea ceremony. It's important that these traditions are still alive today."

Hakoniwa in Japanese, Maki transformed an entire room into a fantastical garden from floor to ceiling. "When I create my images and installations my aim is for them to be visually strong, and to capture the imagination of the viewer to get them thinking," she explains.

Many Japanese artists agree that even after moving abroad, early childhood experiences of their native country's culture remain influential. Yuka Yamaguchi was born in Kobe, Japan, but currently lives and works in Saskatoon, Canada. She's drawn since she was in school, but it wasn't until 2004 that she began to show anyone her drawings, or consider making a career out →

 Traditional Japanese art contains morals that are often still relevant today 



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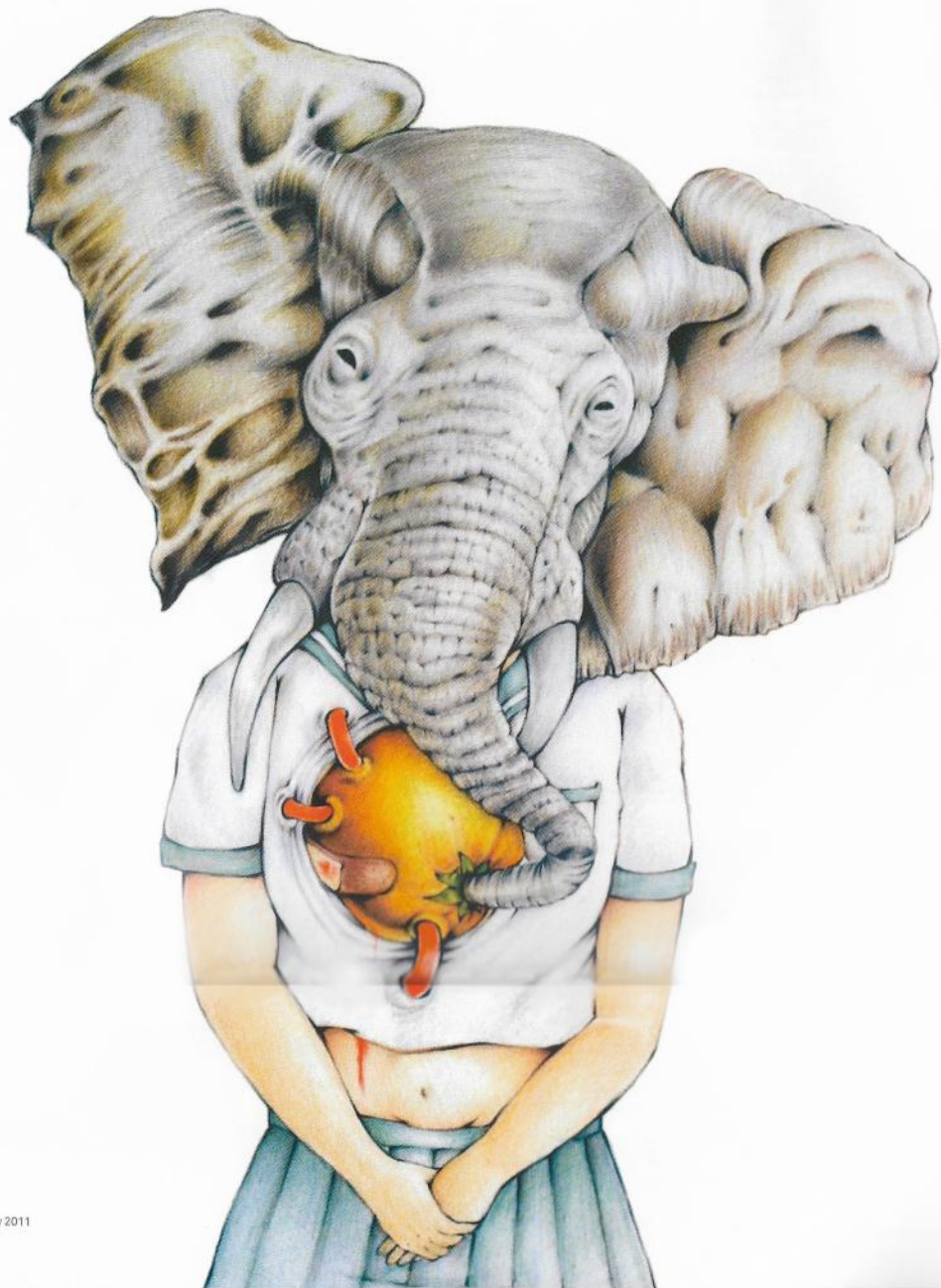
09 (left)
Painting with acrylics on Kert paper, Masayoshi Mizuho created this illustration, which she called First Light, for a postcard for NBC Online

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Featuring Onagadori, or long-tailed birds, Mizuho's Circle Dance was also created using her medium of choice – acrylic paints

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Entitled Four Seasons, this beautiful illustration by Mizuho was originally commissioned by Casio Computer Co. for the company's calendar



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→ of it. "Drawing is something I've enjoyed doing since I was a little girl," she explains. "But I didn't always show my drawings to a wide audience – this happened much later on in my life. Most of my drawings are unintentional self-portraits. Many of the characters in my drawings are children wearing school uniform. I'm inspired by those times in my life, as they were precious times when I was innocent and free from sexuality. Nowadays, many of my drawings are based on motherhood."

Yamaguchi was also inspired to draw by Japanese artist Ryusei Kishida, who is famed for his yoga-style portraiture and his nihonga paintings. "His painting

titled Portrait of Reiko was something that I saw and loved," she says. "It is of kind of an ugly girl in a dark setting, and yet she looks so peaceful. Kishida's work and other traditional Japanese styles are extremely old, but to me – because I only know about them now, in my lifetime – they are new and fresh and inspiring."

Yamaguchi's drawings feature a hybrid of animals and humans whose body parts have been somehow disconnected. The idea is for her images to surprise and make her laugh. She creates her works using coloured pencils and paper, following a technique that her brother told her about one day after school when she was 10 years

old. He told her simply that if you colour in a circular motion, you can colour well. "I thought it was a good idea then, and it's still a good idea now," she smiles.

As well as her own experiences in life, Yamaguchi is inspired by the older generation, including her grandmother who was very traditional. "She wore a kimono every day and a kappogi [a gown-like Japanese apron]," she explains. "She kept her kimono in an empress tree dresser, put camellia oil in her hair and prayed to Buddha every morning. I didn't live like this, I dressed in Western style clothes, so to me it was really interesting.

"Things change over the years but it is good to look back to other times," she adds. "Japanese traditions and our older artforms continue to attract new generations who interpret them in their own way. This makes them both old and new – and the juxtaposition of this for me is really attractive."

It is evident in the abundance of modern work shown here that traditional

Strong but delicate

"There's a truly unique quality to Japanese art in terms of colour and composition," believes Feolbee. "They have a very strong impact, but are delicate at the same time. The elegance with which these two things exist simultaneously continues to inspire me, and I try to achieve a similar effect in my illustration work."



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“ Ancient Japanese methods are beautiful, just like the rituals that they portray



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12 (left)

Yuka Yamaguchi enjoys creating images that feature both humans and animals, as shown in this piece, entitled Tough Skin, Juicy Heart

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Yamaguchi's Stop and Chat was created using coloured pencils on paper, using a circular shading technique that her brother showed her

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This self-portrait of Yuka Yamaguchi in school uniform again shows her distinctive method of shading with coloured pencils