



Excerpts from “Sōtatsu’s Gold and Silver Paintings”

The essence of jazz is improvisation, as it is by nature a form of “on-site music” born of spontaneity. The only thing that is predetermined is the main melody, on which variations are developed through the back and forth between performers. I was quite taken by the live recording of Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things,” which conveys the atmosphere of the performance so well. My ears vibrated from the intensity of this extraordinary piece of time carved out of daily life, with its melody that continued to be elaborated upon between the musicians, turned over and over as if they were somehow intertwined. Can the same be true of a work of painting? In works that combine word and image, for example, can the painting engage with the calligraphy in the same manner?

The Crane Scroll

While viewing Tawaraya Sōtatsu’s *Thirty-Six Immortal Poets with Picture of Cranes* (the Crane Scroll) in the Kyoto National Museum, one of my colleagues noticed that silver pigment had been applied over the black sumi ink of the poetic inscriptions. I immediately assumed that it was a misidentification but on closer examination confirmed that silver pigment did indeed lie on top of the ink. I briefly considered the possibility that this was due to a later retouching, but the overlay of pigment came at the end of a rather bold brushstroke; if it were a later addition, then all of the silver paint up to that point in the scroll would have been retouched as well. I then sought out similar instances of silver on top of the ink throughout the scroll and found a relatively large number.

The *Crane Scroll* consists of an under-painting in gold and silver Sōtatsu, on top of which the calligrapher Hon’ami Kōetsu inscribed thirty-six poems by the “Thirty-six Immortal Poets” in the “scattered writing” (*chirashi-gaki*) mode. The painting depicts a flock of cranes taking flight from a shore, soaring over the sea, and eventually landing on another shore. It flows effortlessly over a scroll surface measuring fifteen meters in length; viewing it is akin to witnessing a drama unfold. The brushwork used to depict the cranes and waves is uninhibited, rendered with no hesitation whatsoever. The painting far transcends the typical associations one might harbor vis-à-vis the genre of paper decoration and is truly a masterpiece of Sōtatsu’s so-called gold-and-silver paintings.

How then should we assess the fact that gold and silver have been applied over the calligraphy?

[...]

Early modern Kyoto witnessed many types of literary gatherings, where participants might discuss *waka*, or Chinese poetry, or Sino-Japanese verse matchings. [...] The gold-and-silver works by Sōtatsu and Kōetsu must have emerged from such contexts as well, the result of impromptu acts of creation in front of a live audience.

Excerpts from Okudaira, Shunroku. “Sōtatsu’s Gold-and-Silver Paintings: The Interaction Between Painting and Calligraphy.” In *Sōtatsu*, edited by Yukio Lippit and James T. Ulak, 44–45 and 61. Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2015.



Tawaraya Sōtatsu (artist) and Hon’ami Kōetsu (calligrapher), *Anthology with Crane Design*, 17th century, handscroll, ink and color on paper, 13 26/64 in × 44 ft 5 55/64 in (34.0 × 1356.0 cm). Kyoto National Museum (AK364).