

# Japanese Calligraphy

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More than any other area of the world, Japan and China have refined the practical act of writing into a highly-expressive art form. With their roots in earlier Chinese symbols, Japanese calligraphers have—through a 1300-year history—developed a variety of unique styles of their own. Two main classifications are discussed: “classical” in which form and emotion are closely integrated, and “subjective” in which feeling takes precedence over form.

Insofar as writing was invented as a series of signs to represent the spoken word, the primary emphasis is on its practical aspect. In this respect, all countries are probably the same. However, man also has an instinct to represent things as aesthetically as possible. It would be no wonder, then, if in the course of using his scripts he should come increasingly to see their forms as a vehicle for his own aesthetic outlook. To put it differently, writing is perfectly capable of acquiring an artistic character in addition to its practical nature as a set of signs. Even so, it is probably no exaggeration to say that of all the countries of the world only Japan and China have made of writing something more than a useful set of signs and refined it into a highly artistic “calligraphy,” capable of giving aesthetic pleasure while retaining to the full its practical usefulness.

The history of Chinese calligraphy dates back incomparably farther than that of Japan, but even the latter, starting as it did around the seventh century, can boast a history of more than 1,300 years. That Japanese calligraphy throughout these centuries grew and developed under a succession of influences from the styles of Chinese calligraphy is undeniable; but it is equally true

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that Japan has also developed all kinds of unique styles of its own. It is not my purpose to go into detail concerning the various differences between the two nations in this respect. Nevertheless, I feel it is necessary to give at least a general account of the special characteristics of calligraphy that have won it such a respected place among the formal arts of both China and Japan, and of the common features, transcending stylistic differences, which the calligraphy of both countries shares.

### *Calligraphy as a Formal Art*

What fundamental differences distinguish calligraphy—considered as a formal art—from, say, painting or sculpture? Writing, which calligraphy uses as its medium, is no more than a set of signs designed to replace the spoken word. To take Chinese characters as an example, some of them first came into being as primitive pictorial representations without even fixed forms, and even after developing into true hieroglyphs which had been simplified into fixed arrangements of lines and dots still—as in the character for “horse” 馬 —retained strong visual suggestions of the actual object in nature which they were intended to represent. However, such complex forms were too unpractical to survive for very long, and the lines and dots in each character were progressively pared down or reorganized until the result was a completely abstract arrangement with no apparent relationship to the original object, and signifying that object only by general agreement. Other characters were unconnected with naturally occurring phenomena from the outset, being geometrical arrangements of formal elements—such as horizontal and vertical lines or squares and triangles—which were endowed with an arbitrary meaning. Other characters, again, were formed by means of a combination of these two types.

Whatever the origins of the characters, however, it should be noted that the results are in every case purely abstract forms. The hieroglyph, insofar as one can still detect signs of the actual object it was intended to represent, has affinities of a kind with painting and sculpture, but the purely abstract character is an entirely different matter. When one considers that most of the characters one is likely to see in calligraphy nowadays consist of

just such abstract forms, the abstract quality of calligraphy begins to emerge as one of its chief features as a formal art, one that clearly distinguishes it from the representational qualities of most painting and sculpture.

What, then, are the chief aesthetic factors in this art so different from painting and sculpture? They can be summed up, perhaps, as the pleasure given by the arrangement of the dots and lines which make up each character, and the appeal of those dots and lines in themselves. That it is not a question of the meaning will be obvious from the fact that, for example, a number of different calligraphic works all based on the character for “cloud” will all convey precisely the same meaning irrespective of the artistic value of the calligraphy. What do I mean, now, in speaking of the “pleasure” given by, or the “appeal” of a character? Both, in short, lie in the character as an outward expression of the spiritual rhythms of the calligrapher at the moment when he put brush to paper. Even though calligraphy cannot, of course, ignore the structural conventions of that medium, there is no obligation, as in painting, to represent actually existing objects. Thus the calligrapher is comparatively free in the act of artistic creation which precedes expression, and the lines and dots through which an arrangement is achieved have a correspondingly close relationship with the personality of the calligrapher. Nor should one forget here the extremely important role played by the special tool employed for calligraphy—the hair writing-brush. By varying the speed with which the brush is plied, or the pressure brought to bear on it (the tip is, of course, far more pliant than, say, a pen or quill), it is possible to provide a graphic picture of the mental rhythms of the calligrapher at any particular moment. The interest and appeal of this process make themselves felt in the viewer’s mind as a type of beauty—which makes it plain, I would suggest, that a strong “spiritual” quality can also be listed among the special attributes of calligraphy.

I have just referred to the “spiritual” nature of calligraphy. I could equally well have spoken of its “artistic” quality, insofar as the feelings of the calligrapher use the characters for artistic purposes—that is, as a medium through which to evoke a specific emotional reaction within the viewer’s mind. It scarcely needs

pointing out that the quality of the “art” involved varies in direct relation to the quality of the calligrapher’s mind.

Of course, although I have spoken here, for simplicity’s sake, of “using writing as a medium,” in practice all kinds of factors must be present before it can be effective as a means of artistic expression. The most basic of all these is that, since the medium is a series of characters, each made up of lines and dots, there must be a sure grasp of the structural form of each character, and a sense of rhythmical flow where a number of characters follow each other, as well as a sensuous appeal, deriving from the brushwork as such, in the lines and dots themselves. More specifically, if the calligrapher wishes through his work to create an atmosphere of, say, solemnity, he must obviously consider what quality of line is best suited to this particular aim. Or if, again, he wishes to express a romantic feeling, he must obviously work out what permutations and combinations of the factors mentioned above would be most effective for his purpose.

In both China and Japan, changing conditions from period to period have given rise to many different modes of calligraphic expression. It is the accumulation of the thought and ingenuity expended in this direction by the best of the calligraphers who have appeared over the course of this long history that constitutes what is known as *shoho*.

The work of every celebrated calligrapher of both Japan and China, from ancient times up to the present day, has invariably been founded on one or another of the traditional styles which go to make up *shoho*. For practical purposes, however, one can distinguish two main types of calligraphy.

The first type of work is that in which form and emotion are closely integrated; this is the calligraphy which has come to be known as “classic.” Representative calligraphers in this class include Ono no Michikazu (also known as Ono no Tofu; 894-966) and Fujiwara no Yukinari (972-1027) (Fig. 1) in Japan, and Yu Shih-nan (588-628) (Fig. 2), Ou-yang Hsun (557-641), and Ch’u Sui-hang (596-659) in China.

In the second type—which adopts what one might call a “subjective” approach—feeling takes precedence over form. Calligraphers who can be classed in this category include Fujiwara no

八月十五夜月  
月好共傳唯此  
秋境來  
皆為是  
連想萬山  
表  
裏子重  
雪落  
亦高  
位  
南彩  
時清  
系難  
多  
是  
重惜  
白頭  
相親  
是誠  
心  
念  
有  
明年  
乞保  
乃清  
乃  
乃  
乃

Figure 1. Calligraphy by Fujiwara no Yukinari (972-1027).



人生留上第光滅巧妍盡春風  
繞樹頭日與化進只知雨露貪不  
同零落近我若飛骨時憐見  
當塗墳青松霜初寂語的  
山下村改碧月魄無復破  
珠兔念此一脫憑長鬢終  
出峯醉著啼皇衣星斗  
俯身捫

元祐八年七月十日  
丹元復傳此二詩

Figure 4. Calligraphy by Su Shih (1036-1101).

Sadanobu (b. 1088) and the Buddhist priest Ryokan (1757-1831) (Fig.3) in Japan, and Su-shih (1036-1101) (Fig. 4) in China.

Calligraphy in the classical style tends to impress one, first and foremost, by its well-ordered, regular beauty. Thus when it is used as a model for practice the results are liable to be too craftsman-like, an enormous technical proficiency being lavished on an often threadbare spiritual content. With the more subjective style, on the other hand, it is the feeling which strikes one first, so that calligraphy in this style tends to be confused with the work of the dilettante who ignores technique and tries to carry the day with mere bravura. Moreover, both the craftsmanlike work and the showy work of the dilettante—perhaps because of their ready comprehensibility—are often mistaken for the real thing. Thus anyone who is really interested in calligraphy should first train his eye to distinguish between the true and the false in each case, and should be prepared to distinguish all the styles of the best calligraphers of the past in China and Japan.

Both the two types of beauty which I have postulated above unquestionably represent genuine, orthodox approaches to calligraphy. However, one has only to look about to realize that besides these “orthodox” types of calligraphy there are others which can give us aesthetic pleasure of a different kind. Such kinds of calligraphy should be viewed as products of a state achieved without completing the process of training based on the orthodox calligraphy. One frequently comes across examples which fall in this category among work done by artists, with their especially delicate susceptibilities and rich powers of expression, or among scholars of especially profound learning, or among particularly cultivated persons in all kinds of other fields. They are all stamped with the humanity, at once profound and elevated, of the men who wrote them, and are deeply moving in their own way, which is distinct from that of the conventional schools of calligraphy. This means, in other words, that one must recognize here the existence of an artistic quality distinct from that of calligraphy learnt via the traditional schools.

An example which can be cited here is the calligraphic works of celebrated Zen priests of the past. In their day, the study of how to write well using a writing-brush was an important aspect

of education from a very early age, and since they were doubtless educated in the same tradition, they had, in this sense at least, “studied” conventional calligraphy. However, most of them differed from the ordinary run of well-known calligraphers—who chose a certain existing style and stuck to it throughout in perfecting their own work—in that once they reached a certain age they ceased to trouble themselves with particular schools and wrote as they pleased. In this respect they resembled the average man of today; where they differed from him was that those whose work is prized today were all noted religious leaders who, as a result of rigorous religious training, had acquired a fervent desire for ultimate truth and a lofty nobility of spirit. It is no wonder that although they did not rigidly observe any particular style of calligraphy, their work exudes a powerful character of its own which impresses in a totally different way. It is this, without doubt, that gives the work of the famous Zen priests its worth as calligraphy. Some people tend to attach so much importance to traditional styles that they under-estimate work of this kind—work, that is, which represents a powerful statement of its author’s personality.

I doubt whether in any other of the formal arts, such as painting or sculpture, the practice exists of mastering technique through the repeated copying of the works of the masters—even though a correct appreciation of those works may play an important role. In calligraphy, however, it is a normal method to choose a classic work, then make its style one’s own through repeated copying. Moreover, it is common practice for a teacher himself to write specimens of calligraphy for his pupils which they copy repeatedly, in the same way as the classics. In fact, whether one’s model is the classics or a model provided by one’s teacher, it is far from an easy task to reach the state where one has mastered the original style and proceeded just that little bit further—where one has succeeded, in other words, in expressing one’s own individuality. Obviously an enormous effort is required here, but still more does one need a rich share of the artistic temperament. For this reason, most people who learn calligraphy seem more or less content, in practice, to reach the level of perfect copies. However, calligraphy which still smacks of imitation is obviously not a work

of art; in fact, the work of the Zen priests, for all its disregard for the rules and its untrammelled self-expression, is far more effective than more orthodox work that stops at this level. Here, one suspects, lurks the greatest difficulty of calligraphy as an art. Mi Fu (1051-1107) complained: "Writing calligraphy is really hard work: one can write the same thing several times over and produce only one or two characters that are pleasing to oneself." This remark is illuminating, coming from one who is famed, even among the great calligraphers of the Sung Dynasty, for his technical skill.

### *The Meaning of Shodo*

Chinese has the word *shoho*, but not *shodo*. Both may be translated into English as "calligraphy," but whereas the former refers to the art, or technique, of calligraphy, the latter signifies the "way" of calligraphy, i.e. calligraphy as a "way of life"—almost in the religious sense. The word, which is peculiar to Japan, is still current, but scarcely seems appropriate to the world of calligraphy today when one considers the sense in which it first came into being.

From the late Kamakura Period (around the middle of the fourteenth century) on through the Muromachi Period (first half of the sixteenth century), new ideas came to the fore in artistic and dramatic circles in Japan. The priest Kenko (1283-1350), who wrote the well-known collection of belles-lettres known as *Tsurezure-gusa*, has the following to say in this work: "A specialist in a particular field, even if he has not reached the stage of expertise, is invariably superior to the expert dilettante; it is the difference between the man who makes constant efforts to ensure that he does not break the rules and the man who behaves just as his fancy takes him." This can be construed as meaning that for the artist to give expression to his emotions just as they stand is a perversion of art, that true art can only exist where the lesser self has been suppressed and the emotions purified by being confined within a fixed form. To carry the argument further, one could say that training in suppressing the self, and in purifying the emotions by restricting them within form is, in a sense, both an artistic and a religious discipline; besides being an indispensable

stage toward technical mastery, it is also an important means to forming the character of the calligrapher himself as a man. In other words, both artistic and religious disciplines go to mold the man, and it is only when the man is well formed as a human being that artistic beauty can emerge.

This way of thinking clearly indicates a bond between the world of art and the world of religion and morality, and this is how the concept of *shodo*—of calligraphy as a way of life—first came into being. It was to dominate the world of calligraphy from then on; even nowadays, it seems, the idea that to learn calligraphy is a means of elevating the character still persists among some calligraphers. However, most of them have discarded it in favor of the view which treats calligraphy simply as a formative art. The kind of “genuine” calligraphy which is dependent, as I have suggested, on spiritual discipline within the confines of a fixed form is inevitably deficient in individuality and, as such, undoubtedly tends to leave modern man very much unmoved. I do not feel, however, that it can be dismissed lightly on this account, since, whatever theories may be bandied about concerning artistic values nowadays, the fact that such a characteristic concept should have been produced by artistic circles, and that a type of calligraphy worked out strictly on the basis of this concept should have enjoyed such a vogue in Japan at one period still represents an important episode in the cultural history of Japan.

### *Kana*

The word *kana* signifies “letters used provisionally.” In order to explain what “provisionally used” letters means, it is necessary to say something about how Japan first acquired its own script. By the time society had developed to a stage necessitating the invention of some method of writing, the ancient Japanese were already in possession of Chinese characters (*kanji*) brought over from the continent. It is impossible, of course, to say just when *kanji* were first imported into Japan. However, objects bearing an inscription in *kanji* showing them to have been made around the middle of the first century A.D. were excavated in Japan in 1784, and records fortunately survive in China which show that they were brought to Japan around the same time. This is an extremely important

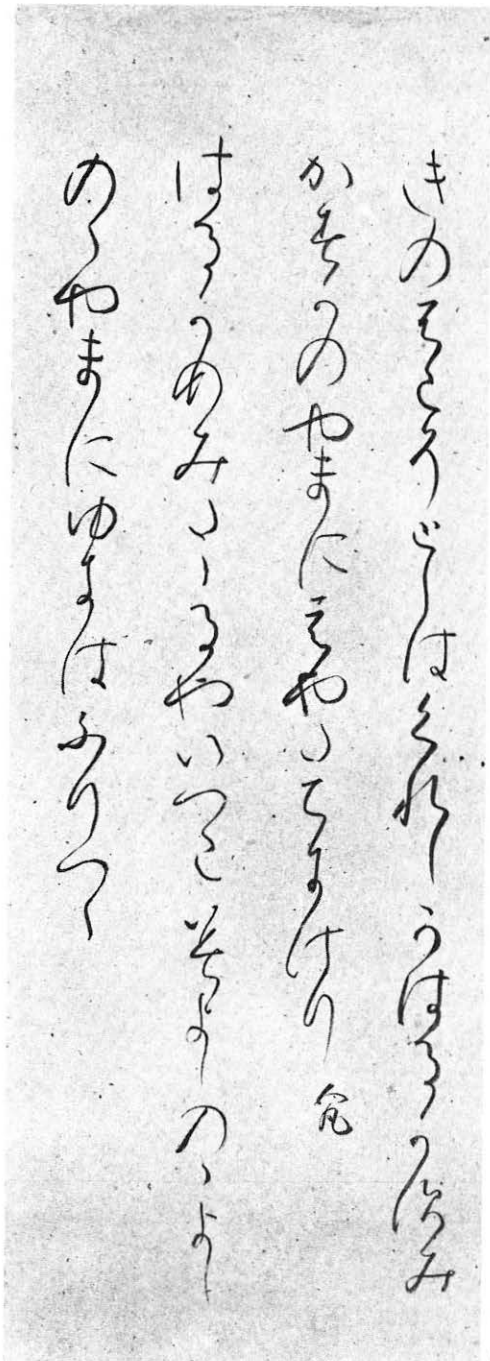


Figure 5.  
*Onnade kana*  
by an unknown calligrapher  
of the mid-eleventh century.

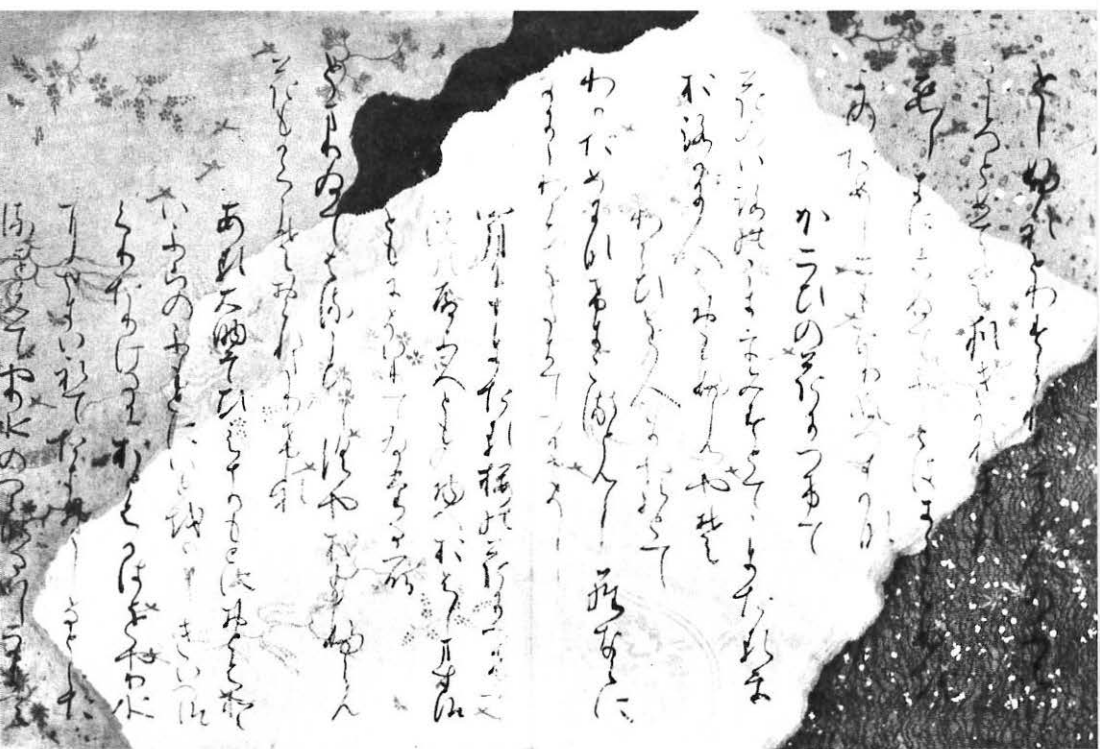


Figure 6. Calligraphy by an unknown artist of the early twelfth century; from the *Isheshu*, an anthology of Japanese verse.

fact in any consideration of the import of Chinese characters into Japan. It means, at the very least, that the ancient Japanese already had a script on hand which they could use in writing their own language.

The question was, just how were they to make use of this script? *Kanji* of course, were designed in order to write the Chinese language, and are ideographs, each of which conveys a meaning by itself. Without doubt, it was the writing of Chinese that the ancient Japanese first learnt from the Chinese scribes who settled in Japan. They were obliged, as it were, to translate Japanese into Chinese before they could write it. The fact remained, though, that however proficient they might become in this method Japanese had nuances of its own which it was impossible always to convey adequately in translation. This was a formidable barrier which they brought up against from the very outset. To put it at its simplest, there was obviously no way of turning personal and place names into Chinese, and there was no alternative but to transcribe them phonetically, using one Chinese character for each sound. Inevitably, this was no more than a kind of emergency measure which involved using *kanji* for their sound only and ignoring the meaning which was such an important element in them. In this emergency measure, we see the first buddings of *kana*. Indeed, no way of using the Chinese characters could be more literally “provisional”—considered in the light of their original function—than one which mutilated them by discarding their sense and using only their sound. One of the oldest surviving examples of this phonetic use of *kanji* occurs on a sword excavated from an ancient burial mound at Funayama in Tamana City, Kumamoto Prefecture. Measuring 90.7 cm. in length, it bears on its back an inscription, inlaid in silver, which describes the circumstances of its manufacture. Though consisting for the most part of Chinese, the inscription gives personal names in *kana*. A study of other articles buried with the dead suggests that the mound was erected in the latter half of the fifth century, while the inscription has been interpreted as showing that the sword itself was made in the first half of the same century.

This, very roughly speaking, is how the method of writing known as *kana* first came into existence. In Japan during ancient

times—surviving sources suggest that this means from the Nara Period on through the Heian Period, i.e., from the eighth century through the twelfth century—it was the general custom for men of the intelligentsia, most of whom were aristocrats, to use Chinese for all written purposes—not only for official documents but for private documents such as letters and diaries as well. *Kana* during this period was used only by men of comparatively low education and by women. Examples of writing by men using *kana* only are to be found amongst letters dating from the mid-eighth century, and it is also certain that by the beginning of the latter half of the tenth century a kind of superstition was prevalent among ordinary women which held that for a woman to have anything to do with *kanji* was to invite misfortune.

I have spoken several times of using *kanji* as *kana*. In practice, however, three principal styles of writing *kanji*—known in Japanese as *kaisho*, *gyosho*, and *sosho*—are distinguished (Fig. 8), and it was the custom from an early date in China to use one or the other as the occasion demanded. In *kaisho* each character is written carefully in its full form without even minor contractions; it takes time to write, but the finished product has a characteristic dignity all its own. *Gyosho* abbreviates and softens the forms of *kaisho* somewhat, while in *sosho* the forms are subjected to extreme simplification and the movements of the brush speeded up to produce a flowing beauty not to be found in *gyosho*, much less *kaisho*. The distinctions in the use of these three styles customarily made in China were taken over as they stood by the Japanese and, as might be expected, were carried over into *kana* too. *Kana*, thus, also had its *kaisho*, *gyosho*, and *sosho*, which were used side by side, and the distinction between the three can be clearly detected in actual specimens of *kana* surviving from the Nara and Heian periods.

In the ninth century, moreover, a new style began to evolve which took some of the *sosho* forms and made even bolder simplifications, to the extent that all apparent connection with the original Chinese characters was lost and they became phonetic signs pure and simple. It is significant that this new form should have been evolved and made use of in female society, since this too was another outcome of the prohibition on the use of Chinese

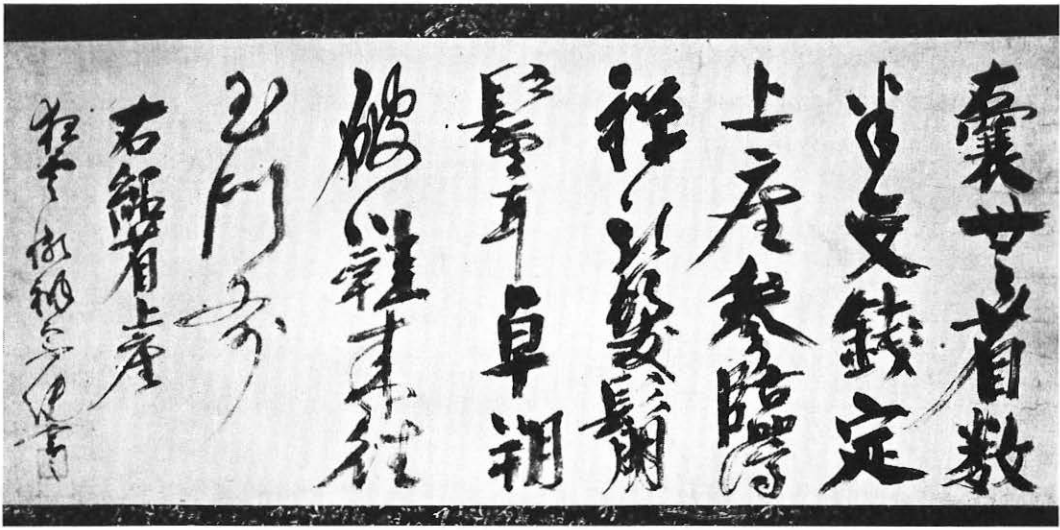


Figure 7. Calligraphy by Ikkyū (1394-1481), a high-ranking priest of the Zen sect.



Figure 8. An example of the various styles used in writing a character (the example here is pronounced *na* in Japanese) and of the further simplification of the same character for use purely as *kana*. From left to right: *kaisho*, *gyosho*, *sosho*, and two examples of the pure *kana* forms known as *onnade*.

by women. An ignorance of Chinese and the Chinese characters automatically implies an ignorance of how to write those characters. This is why it was possible for female society to carry through drastic simplifications in the direction of a purely phonetic syllabary such as would have seemed rash and outrageous in the world of men, where the writing of *kanji* was such an important part of education. The birth of *kana* in this new style, which was referred to as *onnade*, “woman’s hand” (Fig. 8), is not unrelated to the sudden flourishing of a new literature in the form of Japanese poetry and prose romances—which could not have been written except with *kana*. And since *kana* in the *kaisho* or *gyosho* style, which retained the forms of *kanji* intact, was both over-elaborate in appearance and bothersome to write, it is not to be wondered at that *kana* in the *sosho* style and *onnade* should have come into increasing prominence along with the new vogue for Japanese verse and prose romances.

A word should be said, finally, concerning the process whereby *kana*, originally evolved simply as a phonetic syllabary, came to take its place alongside *kanji* as a form of calligraphy with a beauty entirely its own. Although, as we have seen, it found its first popularity among, and was developed by women and the lesser-educated men, its enormous convenience as a means of writing the Japanese language naturally found it favor, once it was an accomplished fact, among men of the intelligentsia also. What is particularly significant is the fact that there is frequent mention in contemporary records of a man revered as a calligrapher being asked to write a set of *kana* as a model for practice. In this transfer of the responsibility for *kana* to men, who were already well versed in the writing of *kanji*, lay the prime reason for the perfection of *kana* as a form of calligraphy in its own right. However abbreviated it might be, *kana* was, basically, a form of *kanji*, and obviously a person with a thorough knowledge of *kanji* calligraphy was best qualified to bring out the full beauty of form of each letter. In painting, too, an artist must first be able to do a good drawing before he can produce any worthwhile work. Thus Japanese *kana* came to enjoy a kind of Golden Age from the tenth century on into the thirteenth century, and especially in the eleventh century. Since that time, different ages have

each brought their own variations of style, but it is no exaggeration to say that there is no *kana* style to be found among the calligraphers of today which is not based on the style first perfected in the eleventh century. The reason is that in the early nineteenth century this style enjoyed a sudden increase in popularity, and led to a kind of classical revival whose influence still persists strongly to this day.