

JAPANESE CALLIGRAPHY AS EXPRESSION OF BEAUTY AND COMMUNICATIVE ACT

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Abstract This study focuses on the dual function of Japanese calligraphy (*shodō*): expressive and pragmatic. The study will assess the way in which the calligrapher's ideas are conveyed through *shodō* and how the public perceives them, illustrating the importance of both visual and linguistic components of calligraphic works. In order to highlight this phenomenon, two works created by contemporary Romanian calligrapher Rodica Frențiu will be analysed: 情 *Passion* and 雪月花 *Snow. Moon. Flower*. Conclusions show that the two functions are closely linked and present within each calligraphic work, as they help the calligrapher express their vision and later on support the public to understand it.

Keywords Japanese calligraphy, *shodō*, wabi sabi, transcendent meaning, Japanese studies.

I. Introduction

The flexibility of Japanese calligraphy has made it an established art form that has been greatly appreciated from antiquity to the present day. Although its role in people's lives and the way in which the calligrapher relates to their work have undergone slight changes over time, *shodō* has remained a practice known and appreciated by the general public. This was possible due to a multitude of factors, but one of the most important aspects is the fact that *shodō* concomitantly fulfils an expressive (美, *bi*) function and a pragmatic (用, *yō*) one,¹ being at the same time an expression of beauty and a means of

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¹ Seiichi Hirakata et al., Zenkoku Daigaku, Shodo Gakkai, *Sho no koten to riron* (Tokyo: Mitsumura Toshō, 2013), 90.

communication.² The expressive function (美, *bi*) that gave rise to unique ways of displaying one's creativity has made calligraphy known not only in Japan, but also in the West, in turn influencing various other arts and practices. However, even if *shodō* is often appreciated for the elegance of the line and the dynamism of the calligraphic works, its pragmatic function (用, *yō*) has supported the art in finding new ways to adapt to socio-cultural changes. In the case of *shodō*, the pragmatic function showcases its functional use in everyday life and in several other fields, such as marketing or advertising.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the connection between the two functions of calligraphy, and underline how a calligraphic work concomitantly fulfils both. This article aims to showcase the way in which calligraphic works deliver their message and the role that images and words play within this process. In an effort to show the way in which *shodō*'s pragmatic and aesthetic functions are revealed within a calligraphic work, this article will analyse two calligraphic works created by contemporary Romanian calligrapher Rodica Frențiu: 情 (*jō*, "Passion") and 雪月花 (*Yuki. Tsuki. Hana* "Snow. Moon. Flower").

2. Concepts

In order to analyse *shodō*'s dual function, this article will make use of Ishikawa Kyuyoh's theory of communication.³ According to Ishikawa, expression can appear in three ways: *naked*, *tooled* and *assembled*.⁴ Using *naked* communication, people can directly communicate using their bodies through the words they use, the facial expressions, or the gestures employed. However, in *tooled* communication, people need various forms of extensions of their bodies in order to modify a medium that can transmit their message. Such an example can be sculpting, which implies altering the form of stone to create the final result. *Assembled* communication occurs when things are put together in order to transmit messages, an example being the way that landscape architects deliver a powerful message through the way in which they put together the boulders that create a Zen garden.⁵

² Yanagida Taiun, "Sho", in *Words in Motion: Modern Japanese Calligraphy*, Yomiuri Shinbun (Tokyo: Library of Congress and Yomiuri Shinbun, 1984), 44

³ Kyuyoh Ishikawa, *Taction. The Drama of the Stylus in Oriental Calligraphy* (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2011), 161-168.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

The ability to be both *bi* and *yō* at the same time is conferred by the fact that a *shodō* work is concomitantly word and image. For a better understanding of the structure of a calligraphic piece, we propose a dual characterization of the components of *shodō* works: a linguistic component (the written words, phrase, or text) and a visual component (the visual representation of the linguistic component). The presence of both components within a *shodō* work becomes crucial in fulfilling functions of this art form, as a piece that does not have a linguistic component falls into the category of abstract art, rather than calligraphy, and a work without a visual component becomes simple writing and cannot be considered art.

In understanding the way in which meaning occurs within a calligraphic work, we will extend our critical tools by using Wunenburger's types of meaning of an image: *immanent* meaning and *transcendent meaning*.⁶ Whereas the *immanent* meaning can be noticed by the receptor without excessive effort, *transcendent* meaning requires a complex interpretative approach in which the receptor pieces together various information contained within the image.⁷ Wunenburger's dual typology of meaning helps with the understanding of how message reception occurs in *shodō*. Although both the *immanent* meaning and the *transcendent* meaning are forms of messages, in order to access the significance of the work, the receptor aims to grasp the *transcendent meaning*, a complex form of a message. A calligraphic work can be enjoyed at the level of *immanent meaning*, which can be done by simply reading the transcription of the calligraphic work and its translation, but in order to understand the calligrapher's ideas regarding the linguistic component, the *transcendent* meaning needs to be revealed by piecing together the different constituents of a *shodō* piece.

Particularly relevant for the way in which meaning is conferred and conveyed within calligraphic works are the five main calligraphy styles: *tensho*, *reisho*, *kaisho*, *gyōsho* and *sōsho*. *Shodō* works are created either by using one of these styles, a variation of them, or a combination of styles. Regardless of the artist's choice, the five calligraphy styles are the foundation of all calligraphic works. *Tensho* and *reisho* are relatively seldom used, as they are the first styles developed. Initially, *tensho* was used for carving and, as a result, its lines are particularized by even width.⁸ *Reisho* emerged as an easier, faster and more accessible form of *tensho*,⁹ visually characterized by longer horizontal brushstrokes.¹⁰ *Kaisho*, also known as the

⁶ Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor*, trans. by Albumița -Muguraș Constantinescu (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 250.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Heart of the Brush. The Splendor of East Asian Calligraphy* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2016), 7.

⁹ Christopher J. Earnshaw, *Sho. Japanese Calligraphy*, 5th ed. (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2000), 92.

“correct style”, is a widely used style, being characterized by precise, easy to distinguish brushstrokes that make each character easy to read. Due to its highly practical nature, it became the foundation of typography and a multitude of the commonly used fonts of the present day.¹¹ However, *kaisho* style is very restrictive in terms of creative freedom, as it underlines the importance of clear lines that make the logogram easy to understand. The writing styles which allow endless creative possibilities are *gyōsho* and *sōsho*, as *gyōsho* is a semi-cursive style and *sōsho* is a cursive style. In these two styles, the structure of the characters is moderately to heavily altered, at times making the character illegible. For this reason, calligraphic works are usually accompanied by a note that rewrites the linguistic component in *kaisho* style and translates it if necessary.

3. *Shodō* at the Crossroads of Beauty and Function

The dual function of Japanese calligraphy stems from its very composition: a linguistic component and a visual component. Through its ability to be concomitantly word and image, a calligraphic work serves both as an object of beauty, in which the calligrapher can openly express their vision, thoughts and personality, as well as a way to transmit a message to the public, which can later be used in different fields, such as advertising or marketing.

The concept of “image” is present in multiple fields, not only in calligraphy, and defines the entire area of research for some of them, the visual arts being one of the areas in which the image plays a central role. The image is not limited to art or literature, it is valuable for any type of science, including the exact sciences. Being one of the ubiquitous elements in both science and everyday life, the image has always been positively perceived by the public. Lately, the image seems to play a central role in an era of digitization. Because of the attention received by the visual arts from the general public and the nostalgia of the tradition felt in an era of excessive modernization, graphic design incorporating calligraphy is one of the most dynamic areas of Japan,¹² allowing calligraphy to thrive in a digital age.

The image is particularly important for the expressive function of calligraphy, as images have both an expressive value, as well as an inventive function.¹³ Following the inventive function in the field of Japanese calligraphy, a distinction must be made between

¹⁰ Shozo Sato, *Shodo. The Quiet Art of Japanese Zen Calligraphy* (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2013), 18; Tanahashi, 8.

¹¹ Tanahashi, 8.

¹² Alex Kerr, *Lost Japan. Last Glimpse of beautiful Japan*, (UK: Penguin Books, 2015), 112-113.

¹³ Wunenburger, 267.

shūji and *shodō*, both of which would be translated through the word “calligraphy”. However, only *shodō* can be called art, having a *transcendent* meaning. *Shūji* is the practice of writing correct and beautiful characters with the brush, being studied by students, especially in the early years of school, while *shodō* is a way of expressing the personality and feelings of the calligrapher. If *shūji* does not allow the deviation from the rules of writing, using mainly the “correct” *kaisho* style, in *shodō*, the calligrapher already masters all the known norms and rules and deviates from them in order to be able to communicate deep meanings. *Shodō*, therefore, possesses both an expressive and an inventive function, revealing a *transcendent* meaning. In activating the inventive function of the image, calligraphers initially master the rules of writing and then surpass them,¹⁴ in order to find their own personal style.

As proof of this complex search for personal style stands the avant-garde period, in which calligraphers started testing the limits of *shodō* and the limits of the relationship between word and image. Thanks to the reforms that took place under the American occupation, the avant-garde period of Japanese calligraphy, known as *zen'ei sho* (前衛書)¹⁵ or *zen'ei shodō* (前衛書道),¹⁶ tried to bring calligraphy closer to abstract art by focusing on the visual component, attempting to break the tight connection between image and word¹⁷ that was omnipresent in calligraphic works from previous years. As a result, avant-garde calligraphic works have a strong abstract visual aspect, the connection between the visual and the linguistic component being partially disrupted.

The avant-garde period was characterized by testing the limits of calligraphy, trying to engage in an active dialogue between American and European abstract painting on the one hand and Japanese calligraphy on the other. Despite their commonalities, the two fields failed to communicate, with *shodō* eventually returning to some of the traditional writing conventions.¹⁸ However, this experimental period allowed calligraphy to evolve, with contemporary calligraphers trying to find unique ways to render their vision in their own

¹⁴ Miyeko Murase, *The written image* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 30.

¹⁵ Rodica Frențiu, *Caligrafia japoneză în memoria clipei* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară clujeană, 2021), 40.

¹⁶ Stephen Addiss, “Japanese Calligraphy Since 1868,” in *Since Meiji: Perspectives on the Japanese Visual Arts, 1868–2000*, J. Thomas Rimer (ed.), Toshiko McCallum (trans.) (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2012), 462; Ayako Shibata, “Iconicity in branding. A case of Japanese whiskey,” in *Operationalizing Iconicity*, Pamela Perniss, Olga Fischer, Christina Ljungberg (ed.), (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2020), 252.

¹⁷ Eugenia Bogdanova-Kummer, *Bokujinkai. Japanese calligraphy and the Postwar Avant-Garde* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2020), 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 138-140.

style.¹⁹ This period of *shodō* history proves that the link between word and image cannot be completely broken, as a calligraphic work without the visual component remains simple, inexpressive writing, while a work without the linguistic component can be considered abstract art, rather than *shodō*.²⁰ Due to this strong connection between the visual and the word, the aesthetic function and the pragmatic function are therefore in a constant dialogue, highlighting the complexity of *shodō*.

While the aesthetic function is primarily linked to the way in which calligraphers can shape their vision through the black ink, the pragmatic function stems from *shodō*'s ability to transmit a message, which allows the art to be used in fields such as advertising or marketing. For this function, we prefer the term pragmatic, although we shall not use it to denote exclusively the linguistics branch, but rather the practicability of the art. From this perspective, writing as a universal human act is based on a pragmatic function, as it helps people complete basic daily tasks, such as shopping (by writing a shopping list) or communicating with family members the location where a trip took place (by writing a note before leaving the house).²¹ Writing is now a daily activity, an indispensable element for human actions, and the close connection that calligraphy has with the evolution of writing has made it possible to transfer this property to the field of art.

In Japan, the act and ultimately the art of writing have found many ways to reinvent themselves over the years, keeping up with the fast-paced world. It is important to note, however, that in calligraphy, like in many traditional Japanese arts, novelty and new practices do not aim to completely replace the old ways. The new has coexisted and will continue to coexist in harmony with traditional methods, helping arts reinvent themselves, while keeping their essence intact and thus remaining extremely relevant as the public's preferences, desires and needs change.

When it comes to *shodō*, the pragmatic function is highlighted through the most important rule of Japanese calligraphy: no matter how visually or expressively pleasing a *shodō* work is, if it is not based on characters or words, therefore lacking the linguistic component, the work can no longer be called calligraphy,²² as it becomes abstract art. The calligraphic work thus becomes an act of communication. It functions as a medium for communication between

¹⁹ Yuuko Suzuki, *An Introduction to Japanese Calligraphy* (Lower Valley Road: Schiffwe Publishing Ltd., 2016), 11.

²⁰ Sato, *Shodo. The Quiet Art of Japanese Zen Calligraphy*, 14.

²¹ Kenneth Goodman and Yetta Goodman, "Reading and writing relationships: Pragmatic functions," in *Language arts* 60, no. 5 (1983): 592-594.

²² Sato, 14.

the calligrapher and their own interiority, later becoming a dialogue between the calligrapher and the receptor. Regardless of the degree of ornamentation or stylization of the written characters, a *shodō* work will represent a word, logogram, or sentence, thus having a linguistic component. Even if at times the semantic element might seem almost indecipherable even to an experienced eye, the linguistic component will be made clear to the public through the inscription next to it that transcribes the work in *kaisho* style and explains the meaning of the characters.

Communication, in the case of Japanese calligraphy, becomes an expression of a complex set of inner feelings that the calligrapher wants to translate on paper. This expression of complex ideas is a human endeavour,²³ being present and vital for many arts. In order to understand the pragmatic function of Japanese calligraphy, it is important to identify how the communicative act takes place within this art. According to Kyuyoh Ishikawa's theory, *shodō* is concomitantly both *tooled* and *assembled* communication.²⁴ Analysing the art of writing as *tooled* communication, one can notice that in order to express ideas and feelings, the calligrapher needs the tools used in writing: the brush, paper, ink, *suzuri* (ink holder), *shitajiki* (material placed under the sheet of paper in order to protect the surface on which the calligrapher writes), *bunchin* (small but heavy weight used in order to keep the paper in the same position), the personal seal and the red paste used to apply the seal.

The brush becomes an element that mediates the interaction between the calligrapher and the paper. It is at the same time both a direct and an indirect connection with the medium on which it will be written.²⁵ Due to its importance for the art of writing, the brush is seen as an extension of the calligrapher, moving in harmony with their hand, thus acquiring a "carnal flexibility".²⁶ At the same time, however, the brush is an instrument, an external object that the artist deliberately uses in order to create new means of expression.²⁷ The choice of tools, ink type, or brush type is an important aspect in deciding how the message will be conveyed and ultimately received by the public, which is why the calligrapher pays special attention to this process, different types of brush being chosen depending on the type of calligraphy and the writing system used. As a result, *kana* calligraphy, often created with a thin brush, denotes a high degree of finesse and delicacy through the movement of the brush, the curvature and the

²³ Ishikawa, *Taction. The Drama of the Stylus in Oriental Calligraphy*, 161.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Imperiul semnelor*, trans. by Alex. Cistelean (Chişinău: Cartier, 2007), 97.

²⁷ Ishikawa, 165.

thickness of the lines. *Kanji* calligraphy, on the other hand, is often written using a thick brush that gives shape to strong, well-defined and dynamic characters.

Shodō is, at the same time, *assembled* communication, Ishikawa explaining this phenomenon through the metaphor of the act of weaving,²⁸ in which several elements are brought together to form a whole. In the case of Japanese calligraphy, the white of the paper and the black of the ink coexist and intertwine in order to create complex messages that encapsulate the author's vision. Given the close connection between the history of writing in Japan and the way in which *shodō* as an art has developed, it can be noticed that *shodō* is not assembled communication only at the level of the practice of the art, but at the level of the linguistic component as well, as most *kanji* are composed of one or more components (for example, the logogram 情 – *jō*, “passion” – contains the radical 忄 and the component 青).

Using the theory of calligraphy as a communicative act developed by Ishikawa, we can look at calligraphy as an ensemble at every level: from the materials used (paper, ink, the brush), to the linguistic component (as *kanji* logograms are composed of one or more elements), to the visual component (the image being made up of lines and dots) to the calligraphic work itself, which is an ensemble of all the elements previously mentioned. The final work becomes a complex system of elements that emerge at each stage of the creative act. In order to understand a calligraphic work and reveal its *transcendent* meaning, the receptor will remain open to all aspects of the *shodō* piece, not just the linguistic or visual component. What reveals the *transcendent* meaning is the inclusive interpretation of these elements and the openness to novelty of the receptor, who manages to perceive each component and its role within the overall image of the final work. For this reason, the perception of the *transcendent* meaning may be similar in some cases to the moment of reaching the illumination called *satori*, calligraphy becoming a method of experiencing a fragment of enlightenment not only for the calligrapher through the act of writing, but also for the receptor, by observing and analysing the work.

The two functions do not exist independently, a calligraphic work focusing on one function, rather than the other. Both the aesthetic and the pragmatic functions are incorporated simultaneously within each work and contribute to the way in which the message of a *shodō* work is created and later understood. Overemphasizing one of the functions might bring the other in the second place, but the two remain nonetheless

²⁸ Ibid., 165-168.

present within a calligraphic work. Therefore, in a work in which the calligrapher accentuates the aesthetic function by going beyond the rules or limitations of calligraphy, using new techniques of representation, or writing the linguistic component in a highly abstract manner, the pragmatic function will still be present, as a *shodō* work is a means of sending a message and communicating. As a means to show this co-dependency and the way in which each calligraphic work balances both *bi* and *yō*, a closer look at calligraphy works becomes necessary.

4. Case Studies

In order to illustrate the two functions of *shodō* through the relationship between the linguistic and the visual components within a calligraphic work and how they help the receptor understand the artistic message, we will focus on analysing two calligraphic works created by Romanian contemporary calligrapher Rodica Frențiu: 情 (*jō*, “Passion”) and 雪月花 (*Yuki. Tsuki. Hana* “Snow. Moon. Flower”). Rodica Frențiu was trained in calligraphy by master Nishida Senshū (1936-2015) in Japan and has been practicing *shodō* for over 20 years. Having numerous exhibitions both in Japan and in Romania, in 2017 she received the Platinum Prize (Character Design section) at *Connect the World. International Japanese Calligraphy Exhibition. Global Shodo @ Yasuda* and in 2016 the Gold Prize (Brush Writing section) at the 1st *International Japanese Calligraphy Exhibition, Yasuda Women’s University* in Hiroshima.

The choice of calligraphic works that will be analysed was made based on their ability to showcase the importance that calligraphers place on the linguistic and visual component and, subsequently, on the pragmatic and aesthetic function, regardless of the writing style in which the work has been created. Therefore, 情 (*jō*, “Passion”) was written in an easy-to-read style, whereas the cursive aspect of 雪月花 (*Yuki. Tsuki. Hana* “Snow. Moon. Flower”) makes it more difficult for the audience to identify each of the three logograms at a first glance.

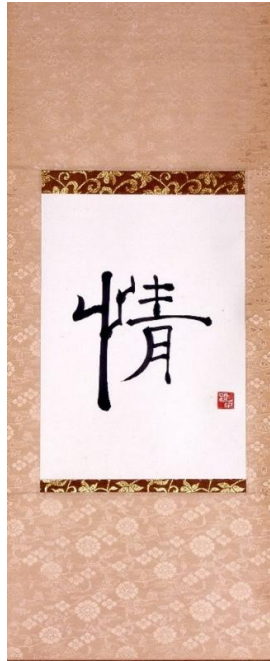


Fig. 1. 情 (*jō*, “Passion”)

Source: Rodica Frențiu, *Caligrafia japoneză în memoria clipei* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021), 40.

Difficult to assign to a single writing style, the way the logogram 情 *Passion* was written maintains the clarity of the shape specific to the *kaisho* style, yet the details make it fit within *tensho* and *reisho* styles. The visual aspect of the logogram presents elements that evoke a form of primitivism, bringing the logogram closer to its original form. The idea of primitivism in *shodō* is one that was explored in the avant-garde period of calligraphy, when Japanese calligraphers, observing Western trends in art, turned their attention to ancient writing. Because in this type of calligraphic primitivism the interest of calligraphers was directed towards the first forms of writing present in their own culture (unlike in the West, where artists used exotic cultures as a reference), they did not aim to create discontinuity between tradition and modernity, but rather to connect modern forms of writing and

consecrated calligraphic techniques.²⁹ Thus, primitivism for Japanese calligraphy did not imply a sudden shift between tradition and modernity, as it became a way to honour the continuous link between the two.

Although the influences of primitivism are not as intense in 情 *Passion* as in avant-garde works (given the fact that avant-garde calligraphers primarily used the style of writing that was found on bone inscriptions as inspiration), the composition of the line and the shape of the logogram 情 are reminiscent of the first forms of writing. Although the primary impression of the receptor is to notice the archaic aspect of the visual component, at a closer look, novelty elements become noticeable, reflecting in a modern way the vision of the calligrapher. The radical 丩 is the most visually accentuated element, the line being thick and uninterrupted, of an intense black and having a larger size compared to 青. However, the second component, 青, is written with thin lines, emphasizing only the first brushstroke of 月. The radical 丩 is the element that suffered the biggest transformation, making it mildly difficult to identify. However, through its association with the clearly written 青, the word 情 becomes distinguishable, the alteration of 丩 not being an impediment to the perception of the work. The linguistic component is clearly represented within the visual component, the connection between the two becoming accessible at a first sight.

The clarity of the linguistic component facilitates the communicative aspect of *shodō*, highlighting its pragmatic function. Although the way in which the calligrapher uses elements reminiscent of primitivism manages to aesthetically enhance the message, without the presence of a linguistic component, the message cannot be constructed.

What draws attention to the style in which the work is done is the technique in which the brush moved on paper. If most calligraphy styles are dominated by a continuous, elegant movement, the movement in 情 *Passion* is fragmentary, the hand of the calligrapher stopping at times when the brush would normally change its direction. Through this effect, the logogram acquires an angular aspect, the focus becoming the points where two or more brushstrokes meet or change direction. These juncture elements seem to become new components in themselves, taking the form of a joint that acts as a unifying constituent.

Specific to calligraphic writing, where symmetry is avoided as the calligrapher is looking for variation,³⁰ the lack of symmetry accentuates the natural element of writing. Therefore, the first two brushstrokes of the radical 丩 are not symmetrical. This phenomenon

²⁹ Bogdanova-Kummer, 93.

³⁰ Tomoko Nakashima, "The synergy of positive and negative space in Japanese calligraphy," in *Journal of Kinki Welfare University* 8, no. 2, (2007): 118.

is also reflected in the calligraphic work not only through fluctuations in length, but also through a distinct constitution where the two take the form of ramifications that are oriented upwards, unlike the *kaisho* style version of the logogram. Although 青 is smaller than the radical 忄, the seventh stroke of the logogram 情 (the stroke written above the component 月) is visually extended, attracting the viewer's attention. The extension of the horizontal lines is specific to the *reisho* style, but the calligrapher deviates from the conventions of this style by completing the brushstroke with a rounded dot.

Shodō has the unique ability to make the public relive the physical act of creation, which becomes the essence of calligraphy appreciation³¹ and a way for the calligrapher and receptor to remain in an open dialogue, in which the calligrapher provides the audience with experience and knowledge that can guide them to new artistic horizons. In the case of 情 *Passion*, following the creative process, the receptor notices that at the end of the line the calligrapher stopped the movement of the hand for a short time, after which she vigorously raised the brush.

The choice of the style for the visual component is closely related to the linguistic component. "Passion" is a deep, burning, natural element, a feeling that maintains its primordial form, without being processed or altered. In the spontaneous act of creation, the calligrapher manages to devise a system of signs that reproduces through modern techniques feelings and notions that will continue to exist regardless of the time of the calligraphic work. Just as *kanji* logograms manage to illustrate the poetic essence of nature,³² calligraphy successfully recovers fragments of natural existence.

Although the visual component takes a unique form through the use of elements from writing styles that are not very popular at the present and combining them with traditional writing techniques, the semantic component is present and visible to the viewer without extreme speculative effort. The two components become vital for the experience of *shodō*, the calligrapher using both in order to communicate her vision of the word "passion" to the public.

On the other hand, when cursive or semi-cursive styles are used, the linguistic component might become difficult to perceive. However, this does not negate the presence of a semantic element that turns the work into a calligraphic piece. In the case of 雪月花 *Snow. Moon. Flower*, the cursive *sōsho* style is used, making the shape of the three logograms written harder to distinguish at a first glance.

³¹ Ishikawa, 133.

³² Shutaro Mukai, "Characters that Represent, Reflect and Translate Culture – in the Context of the Revolution in Modern Art," in *The Empire of Signs: Semiotic Essays on Japanese Culture*, ed. Yoshihiko Ikegami (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1991), 72.



Fig. 2. 雪月花 (Yuki. Tsuki. Hana “Snow. Moon. Flower”)

Source: Rodica Frențiu, *Caligrafia japoneză în memoria clipei* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021), 70.

From a visual point of view, the main aspect that catches the viewer’s attention at a first glance is the writing style. Written in the cursive *sōsho* style, the shapes of the logograms 雪 and 花 are difficult to discern for a receptor who is not used to this style. However, 月, although written in a cursive style, with short and precise brush movements, still retains its consecrated shape and can be identified easier than 雪 and 花. Within the calligraphic work, one can observe a preference for thin, delicate lines that in some places gradually turn into strongly articulated brushstrokes, in spots where the calligrapher applied more pressure to the brush. Such intense elements are represented by the second brushstroke of the 月 logogram or the 冫 component of the 雪 logogram. The delicacy of the line is reminiscent of *hiragana* calligraphy, at the same time evoking the *wabi sabi* aesthetics. Representing a melancholic

acceptance of the inevitable, *wabi sabi* is an aesthetic appreciation of the ephemerality of life.³³ Out of respect for nature, an appreciation and attachment to everything that is imperfect, everything that follows the natural course of things and is in touch with its purest form came into being. This attachment can be seen in all forms of art, such as in painting, literature, tea ceremony, or architecture. As nature is defined by asymmetry and imperfection, *wabi sabi* becomes a principle that finds beauty in imperfection and appreciates the ephemerality of all things. The linguistic component evokes the principle of *wabi sabi* by using words rooted in the natural world: *snow*, *moon*, and *flower*, whereas the visual component evokes it through delicate brushstrokes that alternate with strongly articulated lines.

The use of strokes with different thickness levels creates depth and gives a three-dimensional look to the shape of the logograms. Three-dimensionality is enhanced through the use of several shades of grey, showcasing how each line dissolves into a subtle gradient. Taking full advantage of the relationship between the white of the paper and the black of the ink, the calligrapher alternates writing with a damp brush to create gradients, with writing with a dry brush that gives rise to small areas where the white of the paper shines through the black of the ink, known as *kasure*. Using the cursive style, the calligrapher manages to create a dynamic rhythm, supported by the alternation between well-defined, thick lines and delicate, thin lines.

The visual irregularity of the line and the skilful use of the asymmetry create balance and give expressiveness to the ink. Whereas in the composition of Western works of art, symmetry is an evocative pivot of beauty, in Japanese calligraphy, even if logograms have a symmetrical appearance, the calligrapher does not explicitly want to emphasize this symmetry.³⁴ This principle is also observable in the present work, as the three logograms have a certain degree of symmetry when written in the *kaisho* style, the most symmetrical being 雪, but elements of symmetry can be observed in the case of 月 and 花 as well. In the present work, however, the balance between the white of the paper and the black of the ink is achieved by deconstructing the symmetrical elements and reconstructing the logograms in such a way as to restore delicacy within the artist's vision. Moreover, in the absence of symmetry, the calligrapher's signature placed at the bottom left of the work becomes an integral part of the piece without distracting the receptor from the expression of the

³³ Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* (Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 1994), 54; Andrew Juniper, *Wabi Sabi. The Japanese Art of Impermanence* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 2003), 2.

³⁴ Christine Flint Sato, *Japanese Calligraphy. The Art of Line & Space* (Osaka: Kaifusha, 1999), 69.

linguistic component, giving the work as a whole an elegant inner balance, created by the rhythm of the composition.

Although the receptor might need to read the note that accompanies the calligraphic work in order to properly distinguish and identify the linguistic component, the written lines are clearly shaped in order to represent the written word. As a result, even if the linguistic component is not accessible at a first glance, this does not affect the internal balance of the work and the way it delivers the artistic message to the public.

5. Conclusions

Calligraphy encompasses a variety of dualities, on the one hand, a duality created by combining a linguistic component (the character, sentence, or written text) and a visual component (the artistic form in which the linguistic component is represented), on the other hand, by the possibility of practicing *shodō* either as a method of remembering *kanji* or as an art that allows the calligrapher to express their inner world. Moreover, calligraphy can be seen both as an art with a strong contemporary influence and as an art that reflects traditional Japanese values. Whichever side the calligrapher focuses on, they cannot completely rule out the opposite side of the spectrum. Subsequently, modern-inspired calligraphic works remain rooted in tradition, as observed in the case of 情 *Passion*, where although the writing style of the radical † cannot be anchored in a consecrated writing style, the overall work displays characteristics of *kaisho*, *reisho* and *tensho* calligraphy styles.

Even if the calligrapher wants to emphasize the visual component and use a highly cursive writing style, the linguistic component cannot be absent, as each calligraphic work must contain a semantic element. If the linguistic component is not present, the result can no longer be considered a calligraphic work. For this reason, even works that seem abstract at a first glance, as seen in the case of the work 雪月花 *Snow. Moon. Flower*, are based on a semantic element that becomes distinguishable upon reading the complementary note of the calligraphic work. In trying to close the gap between enjoying *shodō* and having profound knowledge of the practice of this art, the calligraphers strive to find ways that allow the general public to enjoy *shodō*, regardless of their background.

The link between word and image cannot be broken, this connection supporting the dual function of *shodō*. In the case of the analysed works, although 情 *Passion* was written in an easy-to-read style, it still maintains its aesthetic function, as the way in which the calligrapher made use of the writing style's legibility helps the public later on to understand the calligrapher's perception of the concept represented. Similarly, in 雪月花 *Snow. Moon.*

Flower, although the logograms have been written in a cursive manner, making each character difficult to distinguish, the pragmatic function is still present through the fact that the work is based on words and their meaning for the calligrapher, as well as for Japanese culture. Although the two examined *shodō* works are fundamentally different through the writing style used and their overall composition, the two functions remain prevalent within both examples, becoming important for the work as a whole.

The flexibility of calligraphy is highlighted by its ability to be both a communicative and a creative act at the same time. Having both an expressive function (*bi*) and a pragmatic one (*yō*), *shodō* manages to clearly convey the message to the audience through the communicative act and, at the same time, to make them discover the *transcendent* meaning of a calligraphic piece by assembling all the individual components of a work: the style in which it was written, the type of ink used, the visual and the linguistic components.

An art oftentimes admired for its beauty of form, *shodō* delicately balances artistry and use. Although in certain cases *shodō*'s pragmatic function is not immediately visible, at a closer look the way in which the artistic message is conveyed reveals a deep concern for providing accessible ways through which the public can understand the *transcendent* meaning of a work. As *tooled* and *assembled* communication, *shodō* requires the receptor to piece together several artistic cues that reveal the *transcendent* meaning. In order to balance out this characteristic, calligraphers strive to make their art more accessible to the public and immerse them in the act of creation, as *shodō* shows in a transparent manner the way and the order in which the artist has traced each brushstroke.

The pragmatic and expressive functions of *shodō* have the potential to help the public connect with the artist's ideas and facilitate the transmission of the message in an easy-to-understand manner. Thanks to these functions, the calligrapher has the opportunity to share their creative vision to a larger public, without demanding that they know the language or the ways in which each character can be written in various cursive styles. Without having to restrict themselves, the calligrapher gains freedom of expression, being able to go beyond the consecrated ways of writing and discover new creative ways of displaying their ideas through the black ink.