

Kazuo Shiraga: Tales of the Water Margin**FM Virtual**

July 15 – October 23, 2020

It was already feeling like a very long road trip when we finally caught a glimpse of Mt. Tiantai, and that filled my heart with joy and excitement. We finally arrived at Guoqing temple in orange dim sunlight. I see characters 隋代古刹 on the orange wall reflecting the sun.

—Kazuo Shiraga, May 1981¹

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present *Kazuo Shiraga: Tales of the Water Margin*, featuring twenty-seven inspiring masterworks from the artist's seminal *Water Margin Hero* series, opening July 15, 2020 on FM Virtual, the gallery's fully virtual, fourth location.

The great Japanese painter Kazuo Shiraga (1924–2008) had a life-long interest in the classical culture and religion of China. In 1981, Shiraga made the first of his two trips to the country, visiting the Guoqing Temple at Mt. Tiantai with a group of fellow disciples from the temples of Tendai sect in the Kansai area. Twelve years later he made his second visit to historical sites in China, which corresponded with characters and places described in Luo Guanzhong's 14th century novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. During his childhood, Shiraga's father gave him a picture book version of the 12th century Chinese literary classic *Tales of the Water Margin*, otherwise known as *Suikoden* in Japanese. Years later, Shiraga reflected that he was "so mesmerized by the story that I bought a book published by *Shoumuin Shokan* for Chinese children and eventually started trying to read the original literature as I got older."²



The Chinese characters carved into the orange colored wall 隋代古刹 translate to "Ancient Temple Built in the Sui Dynasty." In 598 AD, the Guoqing Temple was established as a Buddhist temple in China. During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), Japanese diplomats regularly visited the site, however it was not until a year-long visit by the Japanese monk, Saicho, in 804 AD, that first registered the Guoqing Temple and Mt. Tiantai in Japanese minds as an irrevocable bond between the two territories. Upon his return to Japan, Saicho founded the Enryakuji Temple on Mt. Hiei located across Kyoto and Shiga Prefectures, which would become the headquarters of the Tendai Buddhist sect, and where twelve centuries later, in 1971, Kazuo Shiraga would be ordained as a Buddhist Monk with the name Sodo.



1972 was a significant year in Chinese history with President Richard Nixon reestablishing diplomatic ties with the Peoples Republic of China and Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka (1918–1993) of Japan naturalizing Sino-Japanese relations. Tanaka visited Beijing that year and, as a gesture of cultural diplomacy, asked whether he

might visit the Guoqing Temple complex to pay his respects, as the temple represented the transmission point for Tendai Buddhism from China to Japan. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) received Tanaka’s request and asked that a visit be postponed so the Guoqing Temple could be restored after many years of neglect. What was unsaid was that the Cultural Revolution, which spanned 1966 to 1976, had encouraged the destruction of the



Guoqing Temple and, as a result, many important buildings and relics had been destroyed. Premier Zhou set 1975 as the restoration date for the Guoqing Temple and enabled national treasures to be transferred from all over China to reestablish the cultural and religious significance of the temple after years of looting. At the same time, in September 1974, commercial airline flights between Japan and China began. While Prime Minister Tanaka left office in 1974, a group of Japanese diplomats fulfilled Tanaka’s mission and visited the Guoqing Temple in October 1975. The expressed intent of the refurbishment of the temple was to establish a symbol of friendship between Japan and China for generations to come.

Stepping back to the late 1950s, Kazuo Shiraga was faced with a dilemma. Shiraga had joined the avant-garde Gutai Art Association in 1955, whose leader was the inspirational but controlling Jiro Yoshihara. While Yoshihara challenged his understudies to create art that had never been seen before, he insisted upon a rigidly formalist interpretation of art, which excluded any references to history or personal events. Artworks by Gutai artists were routinely titled *Sakuhin* (Japanese for “Work”), which started to create a nomenclature problem for Shiraga. In 1959, he had signed an exclusive contract with Galerie Rudolph Stadler in Paris to represent him worldwide, but there was no way of distinguishing one *Sakuhin* painting from another *Sakuhin* painting. Thus, in 1959, Shiraga began titling his works after heroes from the *Suikoden / Tales of the Water Margin* as a means of identifying individual paintings. Shiraga stated, “I was wondering what would be good for the titles, and came up with an idea to title the large works with the names of 36 heroes of *Tenkosei* class, and 120-go and 100-go paintings with heroes of *Chisatsusei* class from *Water Margin*. That would give me 108 names and enough titles.”³

Shiraga had several translations and editions of the *Suikoden / Tales of the Water Margin* in his



library, which are a testament to his study of the individual characters in the novel; however, Shiraga warned us not to take the relationship between the structure, composition, and color of a painting and the chosen title too literally: “Please everyone don’t think too much about the titles. It is all by instinct. I would look at the list of the heroes, and then would come up with ideas like ‘this painting has lines as somethings is running or thrown, so let’s title it *Botsuusen chousei* which is the nickname of a hero who is

good at throwing stones like a baseball pitcher' or 'as it looks like white waves in blueish field this should be *Rouri Hakucho* who is the hero and a good swimmer from marine army...'"⁴

The *Suikoden / Tales of the Water Margin* was not the only classical Chinese literature source that Shiraga turned to in order to title paintings; and beginning in 1979, many works were titled after characters and sites from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. It is interesting to note that characters and sites from that novel had inspired the titles of his paintings as early as 1979 and as late as 1990.

What is critical to acknowledge is the profound intellectual links between the greatest Japanese painter of the 20th century and Chinese classical culture. During his lifetime, Shiraga was an ambassador for Sino-Japanese relations and his surviving paintings serve as a reminder of the deep and undisputed cultural bonds between these two great cultures.

About Fergus McCaffrey

Founded in 2006, Fergus McCaffrey is internationally recognized for its groundbreaking role in promoting the work of postwar Japanese artists such as Sadamasa Motonaga, Kazuo Shiraga and Jiro Takamatsu. The gallery also exhibits the work of emerging and seminal Western artists including Marcia Hafif, Martha Jungwirth, Richard Nonas, Sigmar Polke and Carol Rama. In keeping with the gallery's commitment to Japanese art and culture, McCaffrey opened its Tokyo outpost in March 2018. Its recently launch virtual space, FM Virtual, represents a new benchmark in online gallery experiences, with a mission to achieve the same quality of encounter that we insist upon in the physical world to our digital platforms 24 hours a day.

For press inquiries, please contact:

Tel: + 1 (212) 988-2200

Email: press@fergusmccaffrey.com

Images:

1. Kazuo Shiraga, *Tenisei Sekihatsuki (Deviance Star Red Haired Devil)*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 71 3/4 x 107 1/3 inches (182.3 x 272.6 cm) © Estate of Kazuo Shiraga; courtesy Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art (Yamamura Collection)
2. Kazuo Shiraga in his studio in 1960; © Estate of Kazuo Shiraga; courtesy Amagasaki Cultural Center
3. Kazuo Shiraga, *Ni (Tenkosei Roshi) (Skillful Star Wanderer)*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 71 1/4 x 108 3/5 inches (181 x 276 cm) © Estate of Kazuo Shiraga; courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture Image Archives
4. Kazuo Shiraga, *Tenpusei Hakutencho (Weather Star Striking Hawks)*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 72 1/2 x 108 3/5 inches (184 x 276 cm) © Estate of Kazuo Shiraga; courtesy Amagasaki Cultural Center

¹ *Center*, a regional information magazine in Kobe, No. 350, March 1984

² Lecture by Kazuo Shiraga, *How I became to paint with my feet*, Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art, June 16, 1985. *Kazuo Shiraga, the record of lectures 1985 – 2001*, Hiroshi Ikuta

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*