



# A Lesson From the East

Unite Asian traditions with Western materials and techniques to create evocative still lifes in pastel.

BY JUNKO ONO ROTHWELL

**S**ome artists consider pastel to be a drawing medium, but I consider pastel a form of painting. Working with pastel is more than drawing—more than a linear approach. Rather it's an exploration of color. After all, a pastel is a stick of dry pigment, pure color. A pastelist puts color on top of or next to a color, and the eye registers the vibration. How exciting that is! I paint in pastel, watercolor and oil, but I prefer pastels for flowers, because I can start and finish a painting in one session while the flowers are fresh, and my feeling about them is fresh, too.

An artist who works in the Asian tradition paints flowers not only because they're beautiful but also because they're symbolic, representing both virtues and seasons, the progress of

## Uniting elements from two cultures

The red toy in *Still Life With Chinese Calligraphy* (pastel, 21x27) is a miniature head of a *shishi*, a mythical animal like a lion, who appears at Japanese New Year celebrations. I set the calligraphic scroll on the table with two pots in the middle. One is an American pot made by my sister-in-law; the other is Japanese. With the woven red cloth, I tried to make an interesting abstract shape of color.

time. A painting of a plum blossom (spring) has a different meaning than a painting of a chrysanthemum (fall), for instance. Although I was born and grew up in Yamaguchi, Japan, I primarily learned Western techniques while I was in school. When I started to live and paint in the United States, I noticed that I have a strong Japanese aesthetic. Living in this country opened my eyes to Japanese culture. My journey as an artist has entailed paying homage to my roots in Asia, even while I continue to paint in the idiom of the West.

### Journey back

My mother says that as soon as I could walk, I drew on *fusuma*, the paper screen doors that separate rooms in a conventional Japanese home. My first memory is that I'm 3 years old and my grandmother has just brought me a giant box of crayons. I'm amazed to see so many colors! I remember thinking that the crayons in all their dozens of colors were treasures. My love of and fascination with color began then.

I go back to Japan every other year. When I return to my parents' house, I feel as if I've entered a time machine. I have the same room I had until I left for college. I find the same books on my desk. The landscape I can see from my window is the same. I feel as if time has stopped, as I recall the feelings, desires and ambitions I had when I was young. I feel energized from this contact with my home. Rather than

### Playing off transparent and opaque

If you choose to paint pastel on a toned paper, your next choice is whether to make the underlying surface transparent or opaque. Ideally, the undertone plays off the paint application lying nearer to the surface, so that passages of opacity will alternate with areas of transparency, as in *Lilies* (pastel, 27x21).



abandon my Asian past, I seek to incorporate it into the life I live now.

### Using elements of calligraphy

The Asian art of *sumi-e* requires that the artist use *sumi* ink (derived from soot) and a brush (usually ox hair) for calligraphy. All traditional Asian art is based on ink rubbed from an ink stick (burnt wood) and watercolor, derived from similar cakes of pressed pigments drawn from nature. *Sumi-e* ink paintings are black and white, like calligraphy, containing no color (the Chinese say that black ink contains all colors). From my childhood on, I've thought that calligraphy by itself was beautiful—not only as a means of communication but as an aesthetic both abstract and compelling. To make the pictographs or ideograms I find it doesn't matter whether I use a brush and ink in the traditional



### Links to the past

When I compose still lifes, I use ordinary things around me. Most of them are from Japan, like a bamboo basket or an old kimono. Most of the flowers I paint come from my garden: azaleas, hydrangeas, lilies, asters—the same kinds of flowers I saw at my house in Japan. Painting those flowers brings back memories of childhood. *Playing With Marbles* (above; pastel, 27x21) is a scene from my childhood.



## Spring and the idea of departure

I had the composition for *Still Life With Azaleas* (pastel, 27x21) in mind before the red azaleas in my garden bloomed. The calligraphy is a poem by the Chinese poet Li Po (A.D. 701-762). The poet tells of seeing his friend and fellow poet go away on a voyage by ship, going down the river in spring. It occurred to me that azaleas would be good for this theme, and I wanted to paint the contrast in color between the black script and the red flower. Azaleas go well with calligraphy, perhaps because the stem is straight and simple, like a brushstroke. The blue cloth drape is the color of an old-fashioned indigo dye; the pattern is a bird on a plum tree, another typical symbol of spring.

way, or use a dry pigment like pastel. I incorporate these columns of calligraphy into my pastel still lifes because I enjoy creating an Oriental atmosphere, one that reflects who I am.

### How I work

For most still life paintings, I use either Ersta sanded pastel paper or Wallis sanded pastel paper; neither deteriorates when I apply turpentine to the surface as a wash. My first step is to draw the basic composition with vine charcoal. I don't draw details, but instead try to establish the composition and the flow of light. Then I lay down the basic colors using Nupastel and Rembrandt pastels. Next, I wash with turpentine using a 2-inch brush. With that brush I endeavor to establish the masses of color, shadow and light and the basic movement of the composition. I don't block each

color, but try to flow colors over the entire paper to create the feeling of movement. Then I wait for about 10 to 15 minutes, until the surface is dry. After it's dry, I add more colors (Rembrandt, Schmincke or Sennelier), painting the darkest areas first. I try to paint all over the paper rather than work one part of the painting at a time. I concentrate on using more colors of the same value—to achieve complex, multifaceted color. Finally, I add highlights with the softest pastels, either Schmincke, Sennelier, Unison or Mount Vision—depending on the color I want and on what is available. I often use pastel pencils made by Bruynzeel, Conté, Derwent or Carbothello as well.

### Zen and the art of art

I was brought up in the tradition of Buddhism, which is more a set of customs than a religion.

### Making connections in color

I've painted several still lifes with this woven bamboo basket, which I brought back from my hometown in Japan. Here it's in *Still Life With Basket* (below; pastel, 27x21) and in *Basket of Asters* (at right; pastel, 27x21). For the latter painting I set the asters in the middle. To balance the composition I positioned a light in my studio so that it would produce a strong blue shadow on the left. The purple of the asters makes a connection to the blue shadow, since purple and blue are analogous colors. The red cloth complements the green of the leaves. The scroll is primarily an element of the composition; it provides a visual echo to the arched forms of the flowers.



When I was in high school in Yamaguchi, I visited a Zen temple on early Sunday mornings to meditate. I learned about the

*mushin*, which Zen Buddhists consider the creative state, translated in English as "the state of no mind." I'm not sure I understood or got it then and I'm not sure I feel it now except when I'm painting.

When I'm painting, there's a moment at which I'm not thinking about anything; I'm completely focused on the work itself. When I'm painting a still life, I feel as if I'm sharing the same space as the elements in the still life. (In a similar way, when I'm painting *en plein air*, I don't think about myself; I feel suddenly that I'm part of nature.) I think all artists—whether they're working in the Eastern or Western tradition—feel this way.

When someone asks me what I would have been if I hadn't been an artist, I can only say that I'm interested in anthropology and history. But even if I had some other job, I would have become an artist eventually. I'm happiest when I'm completely focused in the moment, when I'm painting. ♦



### About the Artist

JUNKO ONO ROTHWELL was born in Yamaguchi, Japan. "I studied traditional calligraphy with sumi-e ink when I was in elementary school, but the art classes in Japan are like the art classes in



this country—working in crayons and watercolor and looking primarily at Western-style painting." A signature member of the Pastel Society of Japan and a master pastelist of the Pastel Society of America, Rothwell lives in Atlanta, Georgia.