

## LACQUER BOX FOR WRITING IMPLEMENTS

Ogata Korin (1658–1716), another great master of the Rimpa school, originated many remarkable works, including colorful golden screens, monochrome scrolls, and paintings in glaze on his brother Kenzan's pottery. He also designed some highly prized works in lacquer. His writing box is a lidded container designed to hold tools and materials for calligraphy. Korin's design for this black lacquer box sets a motif of irises and a plank bridge in a dramatic combination of mother-of-pearl, silver, lead, and gold lacquer. For Japanese viewers the decoration immediately recalls a famous passage from the tenth-century *Tales of Ise*, a classic of Japanese literature. A nobleman poet, having left his wife in the capital, pauses at a place called Eight Bridges, where a river branches into eight streams, each covered with a plank bridge. Irises are in full bloom, and his traveling companions urge the poet to write a *tanka*—a five-line, thirty-one-syllable poem—beginning each line with a syllable from the word for “iris”: *Kakitsubata* (*ka-ki-tsu-ba-ta*). The poet responds (substituting *ha* for *ba*):

*Karagoromo  
kitsutsu narenishi  
tsuma shi areba  
harubaru kinuru  
tabi o shi zo omou.*

When I remember  
my wife, fond and familiar  
as my courtly robe,  
I feel how far and distant  
my travels have taken me.

(Translated by Stephen Addiss)

The poem brought tears to all their eyes, and the scene became so famous that any painting of a group of irises, with or without a plank bridge, immediately calls it to mind.

Lacquer is derived in Asia from the sap of the lacquer tree, *Rhus Verniciflua*. The tree is indigenous to China, where examples of lacquerware have been found dating back to the Neolithic period. Knowledge of lacquer spread early to Korea and Japan, and the tree came to be grown commercially throughout East Asia.

Gathered by tapping into a tree and letting the sap flow into a container, lacquer is then strained to remove impurities and heated to evaporate excess moisture. The thickened sap can be colored with vegetable or mineral dyes and lasts for several years if carefully stored. Applied in thin coats to a surface such as wood or leather, lacquer hardens into a smooth, glasslike, protective coating that is waterproof, heat- and acid-resistant, and airtight. Lacquer's practical qualities made it ideal for storage containers and vessels for food and drink. In Japan the leather scales

of samurai armor were coated in lacquer, as were leather saddles. The decorative potential of lacquer was developed in the manufacture of expensive luxury items.

The creation of a piece of lacquer is a painstaking process that can take a sequence of specialized artisans several years. First, the item is fashioned of wood and sanded smooth. Next, layers of lacquer are built up. In order to dry properly, lacquer must be applied in extremely thin coats. (If the lacquer is applied too thickly, the exterior surface dries first, forming an airtight seal that prevents the lacquer below from drying.) Optimal temperature and humidity are also essential to drying, and artisans quickly learned to control them artificially. Up to thirty coats of lacquer, each dried and polished before the next is brushed on, are required.

In China, lacquer was often applied to a thickness of up to 300 coats, then elaborately carved. In Japan and Korea, inlay with mother-of-pearl and precious metals was brought to a high point of refinement. Japanese artisans also perfected a variety of methods known collectively as *maki-e* (“sprinkled design”), in which flaked or powdered gold or silver was embedded in a still-damp coat of lacquer.



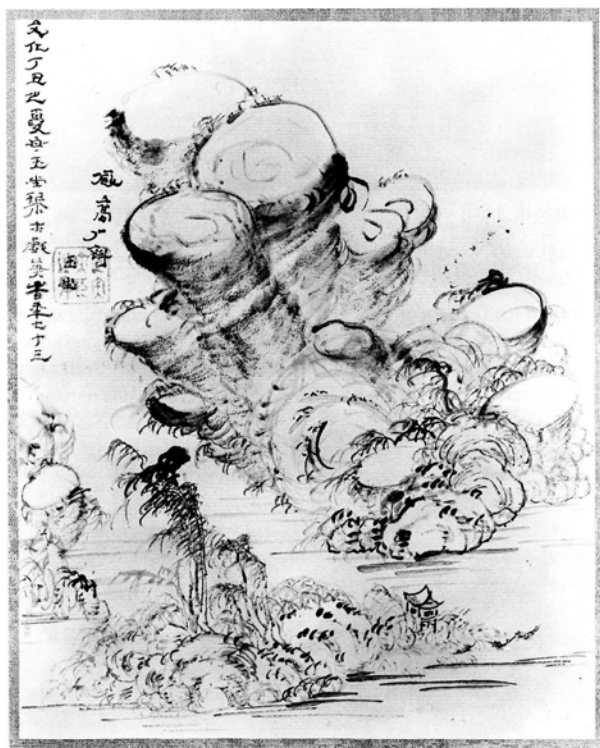
Ogata Korin LACQUER BOX FOR WRITING IMPLEMENTS  
Edo period, late 17th–early 18th century. Lacquer, lead, silver,  
and mother-of-pearl, 5 7/8 × 10 1/4 × 7 1/4"  
(14.2 × 27.4 × 19.7 cm). Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo.

organic, amoebalike form in gold surrounded by mottled ink. This mottled effect was a specialty of Rimpa school painters.

As one of the “three famous beautiful views of Japan,” Matsushima was often depicted in art. Most painters, however, emphasized the large number of pine-covered islands that make the area famous. Sotatsu’s genius was to simplify and dramatize the scene, as though the viewer were passing the islands in a boat on the roiling waters. Strong, basic mineral colors dominate, and the sparkling two-dimensional richness of the gold leaf contrasts dramatically with the three-dimensional movement of the waves.

### Nanga School Painting

Rimpa artists such as Sotatsu and Korin are considered quintessentially Japanese in spirit, both in the expressive power of their art and in their use of poetic themes from Japan’s past. Other painters, however, responded to the new Confucian atmosphere by taking up some of the ideas of the literati painters of China. These painters are grouped together as the Nanga (“Southern”) school. Nanga was not a school in the sense of a professional workshop or a family tradition. Rather, it took its name from the southern school of amateur artists described by the Chinese literati theorist Dong



25-II | Uragami Gyokudo **GEESE ASLANT IN THE HIGH WIND**  
Edo period, 1817. Ink and light colors on paper,  
12 3/16 × 9 3/8" (31 × 25 cm). Takemoto Collection, Aichi.

Qichang (Chapter 24). Educated in the Confucian mold, Nanga masters were individualists, creating their own variations of literati painting from unique blendings of Chinese models, Japanese aesthetics, and personal brushwork. They were often experts at calligraphy and poetry as well as painting, but one, Uragami Gyokudo (1745–1820), was even more famous as a musician, an expert on the seven-string Chinese zither called the *qin*. Most instruments are played for entertainment or ceremonial purposes, but the *qin* has so deep and soft a sound that it is played only for oneself or a close friend. Its music becomes a kind of meditation, and for Gyokudo it opened a way to commune with nature and his own inner spirit.

Gyokudo was a hereditary samurai official, but midway through his life he resigned from his position and spent seventeen years wandering through Japan, absorbing the beauty of its scenery, writing poems, playing music, and beginning to paint. During his later years Gyokudo produced many of the strongest and most individualistic paintings in Japanese history, although they were not appreciated by people during his lifetime. **GEESE ASLANT IN THE HIGH WIND** is a leaf from an album Gyokudo painted in 1817, three years before his death (FIG. 25–11). The creative power in this painting is remarkable. The wind seems to have the force of a hurricane, sweeping the tree branches and the geese into swirls of action. The greatest force comes from within the land itself, which mushrooms out and bursts forth in peaks and plateaus as though an inner volcano were erupting.

### Zen Painting

Deprived of the support of the government and samurai officials, who now favored neo-Confucianism, Zen initially went into something of a decline during the Edo period. In the early eighteenth century, however, it was revived by a monk named Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1769), who had been born in a small village not far from Mount Fuji and who resolved to become a monk after hearing a fire-and-brimstone sermon in his youth. For years he traveled around Japan seeking out the strictest Zen teachers. After a series of enlightenment experiences, he eventually became an important teacher himself.

In his later years Hakuin turned more and more to painting and calligraphy as forms of Zen expression and teaching. Since the government no longer sponsored Zen, Hakuin reached out to ordinary people, and many of his paintings portray everyday subjects that would be easily understood by farmers and merchants. The paintings from his sixties have great charm and humor, and by his eighties he was creating works of astonishing force. Hakuin’s favorite subject was Daruma (Bodhidharma), the semilegendary Indian monk who had begun the Zen tradition in China

## Technique

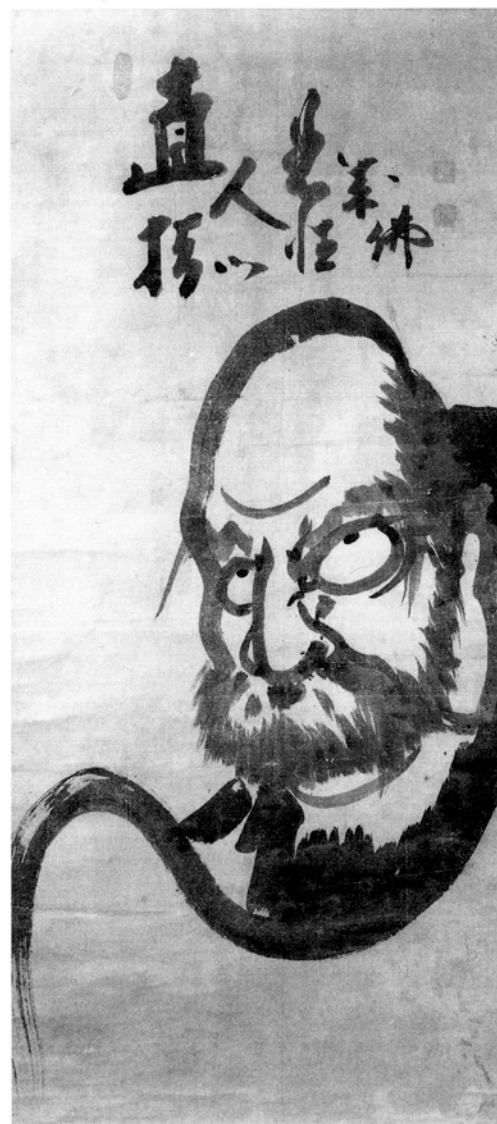
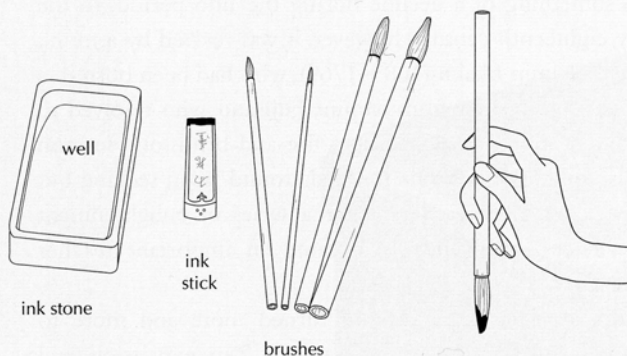
### INSIDE A WRITING BOX

The interior of a writing box is fitted with compartments for holding an ink stick, an ink stone, brushes, and paper—tools and materials not only for writing but also for **ink painting**.

Ink sticks are made by burning wood or oil inside a container. Soot deposited by the smoke then is collected, bound into a paste with resin, heated for several hours, kneaded and pounded, and finally pressed into small stick-shaped or cake-shaped molds to harden. Molds are often carved to produce an ink stick (or ink cake) decorated in low relief. The tools of writing and painting are also beautiful objects in their own right.

Fresh ink is made for each writing or painting session by grinding the hard, dry ink stick in water against a fine-grained stone. A typical ink stone has a shallow well at one end sloping up to a grinding surface at the other. The artist fills the well with water from a waterpot. The ink stick, held vertically, is dipped into the well to pick up a small amount of water, then is rubbed in a circular motion firmly on the grinding surface. The process is repeated until enough ink has been prepared. Grinding ink is viewed as a meditative task, time for collecting one's thoughts and concentrating on the painting or calligraphy ahead.

Brushes are made from animal hair set in simple bamboo or hollow-reed handles. Brushes taper to a fine point that responds with great sensitivity to any shift in pressure. Although great painters and calligraphers do eventually develop their own styles of holding and using the brush, all begin by learning the basic position for writing. The brush is held vertically, grasped firmly between the thumb and first two fingers, with the fourth and fifth fingers often resting against the handle for more subtle control.



25-12 | Hakuin Ekaku **BODHIDHARMA MEDITATING**  
Edo period, 18th century. Ink on paper, 49 ½ × 21 ¾"  
(125.7 × 55.3 cm). On extended loan to the Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Lawrence.

Hakuin had his first enlightenment experience while meditating upon the *koan* (mysterious Zen riddle) about *mu*. One day a monk asked a Chinese Zen master, "Does a dog have the *buddha* nature?" Although Buddhist doctrine teaches that all living beings have *buddha* nature, the master answered, "*Mu*," meaning "has not" or "nothingness." The riddle of this answer became a problem that Zen masters gave their students as a focus for meditation. With no logical answer possible, monks were forced to go beyond the rational mind and penetrate more deeply into their own being. Hakuin, after months of meditation, reached a point where he felt "as though frozen in a sheet of ice." He then happened to hear the sound of the temple bell, and "it was as though the sheet of ice had been smashed." Later, as a teacher, Hakuin invented a *koan* of his own that has since become famous: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

(FIG. 25-12). Here he has portrayed the wide-eyed Daruma during his nine years of meditation in front of a temple wall in China. Intensity, concentration, and spiritual depth are conveyed by broad and forceful brushstrokes. The inscription is the ultimate Zen message, attributed to Daruma himself: "Pointing directly to the human heart, see your own nature and become Buddha." 禪





25-13 | Maruyama Okyo **PINE TREE IN SNOW**  
Edo period, 1765. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk,  
48 ½ × 28 ¼" (123 × 71.75 cm). Tokyo National Museum.

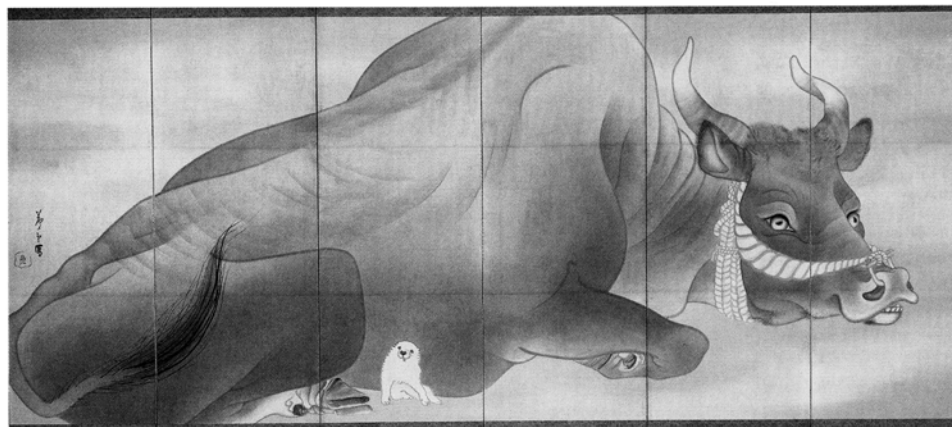
Hakuin's pupils followed his lead in communicating their vision through brushwork. The Zen figure once again became the primary subject of Zen painting, and the painters were again Zen masters rather than primarily artists.

### Maruyama-Shijo School Painting

Zen paintings were given away to all those who wished them, including poor farmers as well as artisans, merchants, and samurai. Many merchants, however, were more concerned with displaying their increasing wealth than with spiritual matters, and their aspirations fueled a steady demand for golden screens and other decorative works of art.

**MARUYAMA OKYO.** One school that arose to satisfy this demand was the Maruyama-Shijo school, formed in Kyoto by Maruyama Okyo (1733–95). Okyo had studied Western-style "perspective pictures" in his youth, and he was able in his mature works to incorporate shading and perspective into a decorative style, creating a sense of volume that was new to East Asian painting. Okyo's new style proved very popular in Kyoto, and it soon spread to Osaka and Edo (present-day Tokyo) as well. The subjects of Maruyama-Shijo painting were seldom difficult to understand. Instead of legendary Chinese themes, Maruyama-Shijo painters portrayed the birds, animals, hills, trees (FIG. 25-13), farmers, and townsfolk of Japan. Although highly educated people might make a point of preferring Nanga painting, Maruyama-Shijo works suited the tastes of the emerging upper middle class.

**NAGASAWA ROSETSU.** The leading pupil of Okyo was Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754–99), a painter of great natural talent who added his own boldness and humor to the Maruyama-Shijo tradition. Rosetsu delighted in surprising his viewers with odd juxtapositions and unusual compositions. One of his finest works is a pair of screens, the left one depicting a bull and a puppy (FIG. 25-14). The bull is so immense that it fills almost the entire six panels of the screen and still cannot be contained at the top, left, and bottom. The puppy, white



25-14 | Nagasawa Rosetsu **BULL AND PUPPY**  
Edo period, 18th century. One of a pair of six-panel screens, ink and gold wash on paper,  
5'7 ¼ × 12'3" (1.70 × 3.75 m). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California.  
Joe and Etsuko Price Collection (L.83.45.3a)

against the dark gray of the bull, helps to emphasize the huge size of the bull by its own smallness. The puppy's relaxed and informal pose, looking happily right out at the viewer, gives this powerful painting a humorous touch that increases its charm. In the hands of a master such as Rosetsu, plebeian subject matter could become simultaneously delightful and monumental, equally pleasing to viewers with or without much education or artistic background.

### **Ukiyo-E: Pictures of the Floating World**

Not only did newly wealthy merchants patronize painters in the middle and later Edo period, but even artisans and tradespeople could purchase works of art. Especially in the new capital of Edo, bustling with commerce and cultural activities, people savored the delights of their peaceful society. Buddhism had long preached that pleasures were fleeting; the cherry tree, which blossoms so briefly, became the symbol for the transience of earthly beauty and joy. Commoners in the Edo period did not dispute this transience, but they took a new attitude: Let's enjoy it to the full as long as it lasts. Thus the Buddhist phrase *ukiyo* ("floating world") became positive rather than negative.

There was no world more transient than that of the pleasure quarters, set up in specified areas of every major city. Here were found restaurants, bathhouses, and brothels. The heroes of the day were no longer famous samurai or aristocratic poets. Instead, swashbuckling actors and beautiful courtesans were admired. These paragons of pleasure soon became immortalized in paintings and—because paintings were too expensive for common people—in **woodblock prints** known as *ukiyo-e*, "pictures of the floating world" (see "Japanese Woodblock Prints," page 867).

**HARUNOBU.** At first prints were made in black ink, then colored by hand when the public so desired. The first artist to design prints to be printed in many colors was Suzuki Harunobu (1724–70). His exquisite portrayals of feminine beauty quickly became so popular that soon every artist was designing multicolored *nishiki-e* ("brocade pictures").

One print that displays Harunobu's charm and wit is **GEISHA AS DARUMA CROSSING THE SEA** (FIG. 25-15). Harunobu has portrayed a young woman in a red cloak crossing the water on a reed, a reference to one of the legends about Daruma. To see a young woman peering ahead to the other shore, rather than a grizzled Zen master staring off into space, must have greatly amused the Japanese populace. There was also another layer of meaning in this image because geishas were sometimes compared to Buddhist teachers or deities in their ability to bring ecstasy, akin to enlightenment, to humans. Harunobu's print suggests these meanings, but it also succeeds simply as a portrait of a beautiful woman, with the gently curving lines of drapery suggesting the delicate feminine form beneath.



**25-15 | Suzuki Harunobu GEISHA AS DARUMA CROSSING THE SEA** Edo period, mid-18th century. Polychrome woodblock print on paper, 10 7/8 × 8 1/4" (27.6 × 21 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Gift of Mrs. Emile Geyelin, in memory of Anne Hampton Barnes

The second great subject of *ukiyo-e* were the actors of the new form of popular theater known as *kabuki*. Because women had been banned from the stage after a series of scandalous incidents, male actors took both male and female roles. Much as people today buy posters of their favorite sports, music, or movie stars, so, too, in the Edo period people clamored for images of their pop idols.

**HIROSHIGE AND HOKUSAI.** During the nineteenth century, landscape joined courtesans and actors as a major theme—not the idealized landscape of China, but the actual sights of Japan. The two great masters of landscape prints were Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) and Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Hiroshige's *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido* and Hokusai's *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji* became the most successful sets of graphic art the world has known. The woodblocks were printed and printed again until they wore out. They were then recarved, and still more copies were printed. This process continued for decades, and thousands of prints from the two series are still extant.

*The Great Wave* (SEE FIG. 25-1) is the most famous of the scenes from *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji*. Hokusai was already

## Technique

# JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINTS

Woodblock prints are called *ukiyo-e* in Japanese, which can be translated as “pictures of the floating world.” They represent the combined expertise of three people: the artist, the carver, and the printer. Coordinating and funding the endeavor was a publisher, who commissioned the project and distributed the prints to stores or itinerant peddlers, who would sell them.

The artist supplied the master drawing for the print, executing its outlines with brush and ink on tissue-thin paper. Colors might be indicated, but more often they were understood or decided on later. The drawing was passed on to the carver, who pasted it facedown on a hardwood block, preferably cherrywood, so that the outlines showed through the paper in reverse. A light coating of oil might be brushed on to make the paper more transparent, allowing the drawing to stand out with maximum clarity. The carver then cut around the lines of the drawing with a sharp knife, always working in the same direction as the original brushstrokes. The rest of the block was chiseled away, leaving the outlines standing in relief. This block, which reproduced the master drawing, was called the **key block**. If the print was to be **polychrome**, having multiple colors, prints made from the key block were in turn pasted facedown on blocks that

would be used as guides for the carver of the color blocks. Each color generally required a separate block, although both sides of a block might be used for economy.

Once the blocks were completed, the printer took over. Paper for printing was covered lightly with animal glue (gelatin). A few hours before printing, the paper was lightly moistened so that it would take ink and color well. Water-based ink or color was brushed over the block, and the paper placed on top and rubbed with a smooth, padded device called a *baren*, until the design was completely transferred. The key block was printed first, then the colors one by one. Each block was carved with two small marks called **registration marks**, in exactly the same place in the margins, outside of the image area—an L in one corner, and a straight line in another. By aligning the paper with these marks before letting it fall over the block, the printer ensured that the colors would be placed correctly within the outlines. One of the most characteristic effects of later Japanese prints is a grading of color from dark to pale. This was achieved by wiping some of the color from the block before printing, or by moistening the block and then applying the color gradually with an unevenly loaded brush—a brush loaded on one side with full-strength color and on the other with diluted color.



Totoya Hokkei (1780–1850)

### RAIKO ATTACKS A DEMON KITE

Edo period, c. 1825. Polychrome woodblock print on paper, 8 7/8 × 7 1/2" (21.4 × 18.6 cm). Collection of the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, Scottsdale, Arizona. This print, of a luxurious limited-edition type called *surimono*, celebrates the hero Raiko, legendary slayer of demons, and suggests a message for the new year: vanquishing bad luck and ushering in good. The poem in the print reads:

A demon kite  
trails its string  
so high in the sky  
that even young eyes  
lose sight of it in the mist

(Translated by John T. Carpenter)





25–16 | Yokoyama Taikan **FLOATING LIGHTS**  
 Meiji period, 1909. One from a pair of hanging scrolls, ink,  
 colors, and gold on silk, 56 ½ × 20 ½" (143 × 52 cm).  
 The Museum of Modern Art, Ibaraki.

in his seventies, with a fifty-year career behind him, when he designed this image. Such was his modesty that he felt that his Fuji series was only the beginning of his creativity, and he wrote that if he could live until he was 100, he would finally learn how to become an artist.

## THE MEIJI AND MODERN PERIODS

Pressure from the West for entry into Japan mounted dramatically in the mid-nineteenth century, and in 1853 the policy of national seclusion was ended. Resulting tensions precipitated the downfall of the Tokugawa shogunate, however, and in 1868 the emperor was formally restored to power, an event known as the Meiji Restoration. The court moved from Kyoto to Edo, which was renamed Tokyo, meaning “Eastern Capital.”

### Meiji

The Meiji period marked a major change for Japan. After its long isolation, Japan was deluged by the influx of the West. Western education, governmental systems, clothing, medicine, industrialization, and technology were all adopted rapidly into Japanese culture. Teachers of sculpture and oil painting were imported from Italy, while adventurous Japanese artists traveled to Europe and America to study.

**A MEIJI PAINTER.** Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), an American who had recently graduated from Harvard, traveled to Japan in 1878 to teach philosophy and political economy at Tokyo University. Within a few years, he and a former student Okakura Kakuzo (1862–1913) began urging artists to study traditional Japanese arts rather than to focus exclusively on Western art styles and media. Yokoyama Taikan (1868–1958) subsequently developed his personal style within the *Nihonga* (Japanese painting) genre promoted by Okakura. Drawing from Japanese tradition, notably the Rimpa style, Yokoyama avoided outlines and instead defined forms in fields of color. His pictorial space, however, owes something to the Western tradition. Like Okakura, Yokoyama traveled widely. His **FLOATING LIGHTS** (FIG. 25–16) was inspired by a visit to India in 1903, where he observed women engaged in divination on the banks of the Ganges.

### Modern Japan

In the push to become a modern industrialized country, Japan did not lose its sense of tradition, even in the days of the strongest Western influence. In modern Japan, artists still choose whether to work in an East Asian style, a Western style, or some combination of the two. Just as Japanese art in earlier periods had both Chinese style and native traditions, so Japanese art today has both Western and native aspects.