

Higashiyama Kaii – His Life

You might not recognise the name Higashiyama Kaii immediately, but when you see his work, you will probably say, “Oh, it’s that painter!”

Higashiyama Kaii – who is seen as a leading figure in Japanese painting—transcends the so-called categories of Japanese and Western paintings. His work goes beyond borders and ethnicities, resonating deeply and continuing to evoke sympathy in its viewers.

Why is that? To understand, we need to take a look at his life.

Higashiyama Kaii was born in Yokohama in 1891 as the second of three brothers. His family was wealthy, and his father was the manager of the Yokohama branch of a trading company. However, when Kaii was three years old, his father left the company and moved to Kobe, where he started a small company.

From that time on, his parents’ relationship started to fall apart, and Kaii, who was highly sensitive, devoted himself to drawing pictures in order to cope with the problems at home. It is said that this was the period when the darkness in Kaii’s heart first emerged.

At the age of 15 his parents bought him some oil paint, and he started to produce self-portraits in his own style. The self-portraits are pure and straightforward—just like Kaii himself. At that time Kaii felt that “even if it is a path of hardship, [he] should follow this path to become a painter.”

When Kaii first told his father that he wanted to be a painter, his father was opposed to the idea. However, Kaii was allowed to pursue this interest under the condition that he make “Japanese-style paintings”, which was how he embarked on the journey to becoming a Japanese painter.

At the age of 18, Kaii passed the entry exam for Tokyo Fine Art School, now known as Tokyo University of the Arts, but from that point, various misfortunes befell him. His father's company went bankrupt, and his older brother died of tuberculosis. Kaii refused financial support from his family. He was awarded scholarships but also worked to pay for his expenses during his studies. He even had the opportunity to study painting in Germany but had to return to Japan shortly after as his father's health was failing.

After that, things went from bad to worse. His father died, leaving a huge debt behind. Soon after that, his younger brother died of tuberculosis, and his mother died of a cerebral haemorrhage. When Kaii finally repaid the debt, the Pacific War had begun, and he was conscripted into the army. He was forced to undergo rigorous training, not knowing if he would survive.

In the winter of 1946, Kaii was watching the sunset over the mountains at the summit of Mt. Kano in Chiba Prefecture. There, he had a flashback of what his life was like just before the end of the war, and how brilliant life seemed to be when he thought that he was going to die. That moment reminded him of the scenery around him, and he realised that both he and nature were transient. His eyes were opened to beauty of the landscape before him.

His work, *Afterglow*, was born from this experience. At the time, Kaii was 37. The work was purchased by the Japanese government, which signalled that he was finally being recognised as a painter.

Kaii once said, "I am alive. I want to live as much as I can in the destiny of being kept alive." Instead of taking a pessimistic view of this and surrendering to his destiny, he took this to mean that he should be "accepting everything and living his best life which he was given". This view is reflected in his work, *Road*, which cemented his reputation as a painter.

As a sensitive child overwhelmed by a complicated family life, Kaii began drawing to protect himself. After entering the world of art and seeing the difficult future that lay ahead of him, he knew that he needed a strong spiritual support. To him, “To draw a picture is to pray”, and the harsh mountainous landscape of his country became a major factor in guiding his heart and spirit.

Kaii painted many landscapes with not even a single person in sight, and used a deep gradation of blue that is called “Kaii’s Blue”. The quiet mood of his paintings evokes a sense of spirituality, and reflect his belief that the act of drawing is like praying.

By the age of 57, Kaii was a renowned painter who had garnered high praise. He was entrusted with a number of major commissions, such as painting murals at landmarks like the Imperial Palace and Toshodaiji Temple. The latter took almost a decade to create, culminating in a masterpiece that became one of the highlights of his career.

Kaii continued to draw until he died at the age of 91. He completed and signed his final work, *Evening Star*, but then he erased his signature and continued working on it. Perhaps he knew that this was possibly his final work and used a different tone of blue from his previous works. In *Evening Star*, Kaii depicted four trees of different heights—perhaps representing his parents and his brothers, while the lone star in the sky is Kaii himself.

Even after achieving success, Kaii’s close friends and family were no longer there to celebrate with him, and he endured his loneliness until the end of his life. However, he was not pessimistic about this. Kaii was a painter who embodied his personal belief of accepting everything and making the most out of the life that he had been given.

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