The early rulers of the Koryo period reinforced the Chinese practice of holding Civil Service examinations which (as in China) put stress on an applicant’s ability to write a good hand, thus providing the upper classes with a stimulus for improving their handwriting. In addition, Buddhism flourished as the state religion and a good many more objects which have survived from this period (tombstones, woodblock prints, fragments of handwritten copies of the Buddhist sutras, epitaphs on memorial stupas) allow us to judge the standard of contemporary calligraphy. The best calligraphers of this period are generally thought to have been Yi Am (1297–1364AD), Yi Che-hyon (1327–1367AD) and Han Yun.

During the early part of the succeeding Choson (Yu) dynasty (1392–1910AD), Korean calligraphers followed the elegant Zhao style; indeed Prince An’pyong, also known as Yi Yong (1418–1453AD), the third son of King Sejong, the creator of the Hangul script, was considered a great expert in this style. Another well-known calligrapher was Han Ho (1543–1605AD) whose devotion to the Chinese master Wang Xizhi did however prevent him from fully developing a style of his own. At the beginning of the 16th century a more mannered and less imaginative mode of writing began to dominate, and overall Korean calligraphy entered a period of sterility. But in the 19th century (see Plate XI) individual styles emerged again; most of them looked for inspiration to the Chinese calligraphers of the 16th and 17th centuries. This new trend evolved as a result of Korea’s closer cultural contact with Qing China, a contact ardently pursued by Korean intellectuals and scholars who looked for role models to solve social and political problems.

The most famous calligrapher of the later Choson period was Kim Ch’ong-hui (1786–1856AD), a member of a group which called itself “School of Practical Learning” (Sŏrkak), who invented a new style called ch’osa (so named after the king’s Nam de plane). Though he derived his calligraphy from (Chinese) Lishu, Kim Ch’ong-hui showed great originality in the powerful execution of his strokes, and the harmony he was able to create within asymmetrical compositions.

After the Second World War traditional calligraphy, based mostly on Choson models, temporarily lost its importance and calligraphy itself became a minor art form. But the 20th century saw the emergence of two new trends, One, the influence of Japanese calligraphy from 1920 onwards, was again derivative. The other, which has gained momentum since the 1960s, is based on the calligraphic exploitation of the Sejong’s Korean alphabet (Hangul). It represents, for the first time, an attempt to create a genuinely indigenous form of calligraphy.
JAPAN

Do not think that calligraphy is simply the copying of Chinese characters.

THE MEIJI CALLIGRAPHER NAKABAYASHI Gochiku, 19TH CENTURY

Japan came into contact with the more advanced Chinese civilization, and the Chinese form of writing, through the intermediacy of Korea. No definite records exist as to when exactly the Japanese first began to use Chinese characters but in 307 AD Japan invaded Korea and successfully held some of the newly acquired territories until 562. In consequence, the forerunner contacts between the three countries (Japan, Korea and China) increased. In the middle of the 6th Century Buddhism became the official religion of Japan, and from then on Japanese scholars went regularly to China for further studies. With no script of their own, the Japanese accepted the Chinese (convent) script, Chinese writing techniques (brush, ink and ink-stone) and, after 600 AD, the use and manufacture of paper (see p.39). Since there exist, however, hardly any similarities between the agglutinative, polysyllabic Japanese and the largely monosyllabic Chinese language, the adoption of the Chinese script did present serious problems. This situation was resolved, successfully, in a number of ways. At first the Chinese characters (in Japanese referred to as kanji) were simply read in Japanese, but, since Japanese syntax is vastly different from Chinese, special notations were needed to indicate the order in which the individual characters had to be read. A solution was eventually found by the addition of simplified Chinese characters used in a syllabic manner. The next step was the modification and simplification of these phonetic Chinese characters to form a systematic syllabary (kana) with fixed phonetic values. Between the 8th and the 10th centuries two such syllabaries evolved: katakana (formed from isolated parts of Chinese characters) and hiragana (derived from the cursive form of whole Chinese characters), Japanese could now (and still can) be written in more than one way: in Chinese characters, in syllabic characters specially designed to represent the Japanese language, and in a combination of both. This multiplicity of forms greatly increased the range of calligraphic possibilities and allowed for the creation of uniquely Japanese elements.

Japanese calligraphy begins noticeably in the Nara period (710-794 AD). A good number of Chinese monks who came to live and work in Japan were not only sound Buddhist scholars but also accomplished calligraphers; their work inspired the new converts who tried to emulate them. As a result, many Japanese, including some early Buddhist emperors, became masters of kanji. The style of writing which consequently developed was largely based on Tang models and on the calligraphy of such renowned earlier Chinese masters as the 'two Wangs' (see p.131) and Ouyan Yun. A leading role in the development of the new art form was played by the Japanese monk Kukai (in Japanese, Kobo daishi, 774-835 AD) who, after studying in China, not only brought back important calligraphic specimens, mainly in the style of Yan Zhenqing (709-785 AD), but also succeeded in establishing an awareness of the theoretical aspects of calligraphy as a major art form. Another important early stimulus was the doubt that practitioners of sutra copying which was introduced to Korea by Buddhism and was eagerly taken up by the ruling family of Japan. In 673 AD the entire Buddhist canon was systematically copied by Japanese scribes and in 728 a special sutra-copying bureau (Shakuyopa) was established in Nara by Imperial order. Scribes employed there had to pass a test for accuracy, style and clarity and were paid per sheet copied; a certain sum was deducted from their pay if they made a mistake. This office stayed open until 794 and was probably a contributory factor to the sudden (if short-lived) burst of printing activities [81] soon afterwards. Sutra copying, as an act of merit, is still practised and even after the development of more indigenous Japanese calligraphic traditions, Buddhist literature continued to prefer the kanji styles such as Kaishi, Gyoshu and Sohaku. The sutras themselves were, and are, usually written in Kaishi, in a manner largely devoid of
individual interpretation, since in this type of literature written characters are looked upon as manifestations of the Buddha, and are not meant to provide the calligrapher with a means for self-expression.

In the course of time a variety of styles using kanji developed, all of them based on earlier Chinese counterparts. The first one, already in vogue during the Nara period, was Tensho (based on Dazhujuan, the Great Seal script) with Kukai as its most famous exponent [82, a]. Another style, Reisho (the scribe’s script based on Lishu and used mainly for official documents), evolved in the Muromachi period (1392–1573AD) and found much appreciation during the Edo period (1603–1868AD) when the calligrapher Ishikawa Jozan (1583–1672) used it with great skill [82, b]. Other such styles were Kaisho (the block script based on Kaishu [82, c]), a popular style with easily recognizable characters, also used for modern movable type, Sosho (based on the Chinese brush script, cursive, with linked characters [82, c]), and Gyoshu (the ‘running script’, written with quick brush movements and, often running together the

strokes within certain characters) which was used mostly for informal writing [83, d].

This Chinese-based tradition (karaya) monopolized Japanese calligraphy until the Heian period (794–1185AD); it produced many outstanding examples but, compared with Chinese originals, most lacked distinction. The three great masters of this era were the monk Kukai, the Emperor Saga (786–842AD) and the courtier Tachibana no Hayanari (died 842AD) who eventually became known as the Sanpitsu, the ‘Three Brushes’ of this period.

At the end of the 5th century Japan officially terminated the embassies to China and a period of ‘Japanization’ commenced. Calligraphers began to interpret Chinese models instead of simply imitating them, and, by doing so, became more inventive. The final break was brought about by Koei (972–1029AD) who perfected a new Japanese (wayo) tradition and established
models which were followed by courtiers and calligraphers for the rest of the Heian period.

The time of the Heian dynasty was a period of great sophistication and artistic refinement which saw the development of a number of highly original trends including Waka poems and novels written by women writers. Translations of literary works like Murasaki’s Tale of Genji (see p.136) and Sai Shonagon’s Pillow book allow us glimpses of a courtly society where the lives of a small number of men and women seem to revolve almost exclusively around the planning and execution of love affairs, the composition of music, poetry [83], and above all, calligraphy. While serious matters of state and religion were conducted by men who continued to write in kana or onna (men’s writing), women composed their novels, poems and the all-important love letters in an elegant and graceful hiragana which was known as onnaide (women’s writing) [84].

Hiragana calligraphy became one of Japan’s great artistic achievements. It introduced a number of new and highly effective elements. Whereas in kanji each character seems to be written within an imaginary square, hiragana characters are usually written in connected form. Lines are irregularly positioned and blank space is used to give the effect of a painting. This creates a beautiful feeling of freedom, a trend especially noticeable in Heian calligraphy. The two most noted styles of this genre are Remmen-tai, where the hiragana characters are continuously connected without break. Another such style is Shoya-tai, here kanji characters, written in kaisho, are interchanged with hiragana. This style was popular for letters and poems, which, for heightened effect, were often written on coloured or decorated paper. The individual lines on a page can be of different lengths, the strength of the ink may vary, and a variety of brush strokes can be employed.

At first sight these two styles seem to resemble Caoshu, the Chinese grass script, but they are in fact easily distinguishable from it. In Caoshu individual words retain their regular spacing within the imaginary square, but hiragana cannot be spaced so evenly. In consequence a piece of Remmen-tai looks like a bundle of beautiful silk strings hanging down in artistic confusion, apparently arranged without conscious effort on the part of the calligrapher. Characters cascade over the page, individual dots and strokes have no distinct shape but join others in the next character. Unlike the strokes in Chinese characters, hiragana strokes are not meant to recall the shape of living things; they are also not of even thickness, though they must be spaced in a manner designed to avoid confusion. Such a piece of calligraphy has to be executed with great speed; to achieve this much training and artistic insight is needed.

The Heian mode of calligraphy, developed by Kozei, retained its dominant position throughout the Kamakura period (1185–1333AD) when it became known as the Sesonji style, after the temple associated with Kozei. It was eventually monopolized by Kozei’s family and handed down by his descendants. This led to a growing mannerism during the following Muromachi period (1333–1568AD), and, already at the beginning of the 14th century, a decline becomes noticeable in Japanese calligraphy. In the 16th century the wase tradition seems to have stagnated altogether as changes in the economic condition of the country forced members of the once privileged classes to sell their calligraphic skills for writing documents, letters, merchants’ inventories and trade signs. The 16th century also saw an increase in Chinese influence; the establishment of the Obaku sect of Zen Buddhism in Uji in 1661 once more encouraged closer contacts with the mainland. New waves of Ming-dynasty styles (1368–1644AD) were taken up by men of letters, and the karyo style managed to overshadow wase from the late Edo to the Meiji period (1603–1912AD). A century later the pendulum swung back and Japanese calligraphy received a new orientation, largely through the three masters of the Kan’ei period (1624–1644AD): Hon’ami Kōetsu, Shokado Shojo and Konoe Nobutada. This movement coincided with the re-unification of Japan under the first Shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, in 1600, an event which
greatly reawakened national self-confidence. Ieyasu, who was a great patron of the arts, made substantial land grants in the north of Kyoto to Hon'ami Koetsu (1558–1637AD). An artists' colony grew up there which became (and still is) a cultural centre where calligraphy based on the Heian style has been able to blossom.

Apart from the wave tradition Japan can boast another, highly original and individualistic style of calligraphy. This form of writing traces its origin back to the 13th century when Chinese Chan Buddhism was introduced to Japan, and an established Zen Sect was formed by the monks Eisai (1141–1215AD) and Dogen (1200–1253AD). In the newly-founded Zen monasteries a special type of calligraphy developed, referred to, especially after the 14th century, as Bokuseki (traces of ink); it greatly differs from other styles of Japanese calligraphy.

Bokuseki calligraphy has connections with the aesthetics of the tea ceremony; a hanging scroll with a choice example of calligraphy, written perhaps by the host's own master, forms a focal point in the environs of the actual ceremony. It was an important part of Zen literary tradition and artistic movements of the Muromachi period. A young monk, anxious for promotion within the monastic community, had to be a poet and calligrapher and many prominent Zen monks, such as Muso Soseki (1275–1351AD), Sensoon Yubai (1290–1346AD) and Zekkai Chushin (1336–1405AD), to name but a few, were indeed leading calligraphers. Their scrolls became prized possessions of their communities and in time highly valued collectors' items. The Zen calligrapher does not adhere to traditional aesthetic values, but places the ability to communicate an inner state of mind above mere technical considerations. Zen calligraphy is not an accomplishment but an essential part of life. In the training halls attached to Zen monasteries the students are taught calligraphy, swordsmanship and zazen (seated meditation), each discipline complementing the others. The work of the Zen calligrapher is illuminated by the overwhelming force of enlightened vision. This force is ki, and the essence of the cosmos, ki, is incorporated in it; in the ink it is kokki which reveals the calligrapher's inner light. Without kokki his work may well be brilliant but it will remain essentially lifeless. When the brush is fully raised it should be rooted in konton kokki 'pristine existence', the state before the separation of heaven and earth, before there was differentiation between things and essence. It is the place from which all things emerge. The strokes of the calligrapher originate there and return to it, they arise from nothingness which is gathered in his brush.

In Japan shodo (the way of writing), is not just a means to communicate verbal information. A piece of calligraphy is an event which exists in its own right. The merit of the content does not improve having written. To a large extent the content is immaterial. Calligraphy opens a direct channel between the writer and the onlooker; it must be contemplated, not just read. It thus allows visions far beyond the mere corporeal.

**Chinese Calligraphers**

**A MARK OF DISTINCTION**

Courtiers, warriors, priests, poets, and painters

When you have no intention to make your calligraphy good, then it is good.

300 BCE, 509–489AD

Throughout China's history the Chinese script, representing sense elements rather than linguistic units, has been a major unifying factor; indeed the political and administrative hegemony of China (a vast country inhabited by people speaking many different dialects) largely depended on it. Under those circumstances the ability to write (and write well) has always held central stage in Chinese thinking. Already in the 12th century BC during the Zhou period, writing was a basic element of formal education. The Rites of Zhou states that the sons of aristocratic families must be taught how to write Chinese characters from the age of eight (no mean feat if one considers the nature of the Chinese script); writing was part of the 'six arts': rites, music, archery, chiseling, writing and mathematics. Much has often been made of the fact that in China calligraphy was not a profession one entered for gain but an essential means of self-expression (albeit self-expression within strictly prescribed boundaries). Indeed, during the Han period, which saw the flowering of Chinese calligraphy, its best exponents were aristocrats: philosophers, priests, scholars, monks, monks, statesmen, courtiers, princes and princesses, emperors, and warriors. Calligraphy was an art practised by the elite for the elite; the artist was in most cases not a paid artisan, he (or very occasionally she) belonged to the same social circle as the audience, and audience and performer were in fact often interchangeable. The lifestyle of literary men had for long centred on such culturally acceptable activities as writing poems, playing chess, drinking wine, and, most important, using the brush for painting and calligraphy. Their environment reflected this attitude: there were tasteful gardens, libraries, books, paintings, and (last but not least) there were examples of calligraphy displayed in every room [85]. Their writing implements were well made; some (such as the expensive and always beautiful seal stones) could become collectors' items. Calligraphy greatly stimulated the intellectual life, and its appreciation contributed to no small way to the development of art criticism. When in 320AD the Lady Wei Shao (see p.33) wrote her treatise on calligraphy she laid down aesthetic norms which are still honoured today. Essays on the theory of calligraphy continued to be composed; in 849AD, for example, a 10-volume encyclopaedic compilation of such writings entitled Zhuo Yuzhi appeared which included all relevant
works composed between the time of the Later Han and publication.

Calligraphy was also instrumental in the development of art markets. Already during the time of the Eastern Han (25–220 AD) the occasional notes of accomplished calligraphers were considered valuable collectors' items. In 316 AD, when the capital of the Western Jin dynasty was besieged by invading nomads, the Prime Minister fled south to safety across the Yangtze River carrying in the folds of his garment his most prized possession: the calligraphy of Zhong Yu (c. 170–230 AD). The Emperor Wu (reigned 502–490 BC) of the Liang dynasty was probably the first Chinese ruler to collect the calligraphy of old masters in a systematic manner; carefully mounted they became part of his private collection and it is said that he took great pleasure in discussing their artistic merit with his friends at court. Many Chinese Emperors and dignitaries were not only accomplished calligraphers but also well-known collectors. Sometimes they would write a note in the colophon of a particular work, praising its excellence (or employing an established calligrapher if they did not have sufficient confidence in their own handwriting); nearly always they would add their own personal seal next to those of previous owners, thus providing us with a valuable record of a particular work's provenance. The value of Chinese calligraphy was well recognised in neighbouring countries. During the Tang period, envoys from the Courts of Korean kings travelled to China to acquire the works of famous calligraphers in an attempt to stimulate the development of calligraphy in their own country.

One reason why (certainly nowadays) painters and calligraphers want to be remembered for their calligraphy rather than their painting is perhaps not totally unrelated to the fact that calligraphy fetches (and fetched) much higher prices.

But apart from being an art practised by the elite for the elite, entirely for art's sake, writing and calligraphy without doubt also had practical uses. Indeed, the teachings of Confucius (died 479 BC), which became the official orthodoxy during the Han period, included calligraphy as one of the basic skills taught in childhood. Students learned how to write beautifully by studying and copying the works of famous masters. The political and administrative developments which accompanied the unification of China in the 3rd century BC created a need for documents and archives; a prince enfeoffed as a feudal lord was given land, slaves, goods – and also books and scribes. During the Han period, writing a good calligraphic hand in the established clerical style (see p. 123) became an essential prerequisite for young and talented men (including those of a quite modest family background) who wanted to enter the Civil Service. A good hand could ensure advancement. After all, handwriting was thought to reflect a man's character, and for many families the aim of educating a son was to make him fit for Government service. The office of Court historian or scribe was usually hereditary and a number of modern surnames still relate to this profession: Shi (scribe), Dong (custodian) or Jian (tablets) and so on (ibid. p. 8).
The training of the calligrapher was the same as that of the painter; years of studying under a master, years of copying the style of the master (and his master), and years of practising. Like his Islamic counterpart the Chinese calligrapher continuously practised his art [86], not only from fear of losing his skill, but because he was simply unable to do otherwise. In his Random Notes on Calligraphy, the Emperor Gozsong (reigned 1237–62AD) wrote: ‘since my youth I have liked to pick up my brush to do calligraphy. I cannot pass a single day without doing so, except when I must tend to the offices of State’; and the Song artist Mi Fu (1051–1107AD) agrees, ‘I cannot pass a single day without doing calligraphy, otherwise my thoughts would dry up’ (LLC/PM p.1). One story tells of a painter who for many years diligently practised writing his name before he felt the result was good enough to serve as signature for his work. Calligraphy is (like painting) a highly disciplined art form, and originality comes, if at all, only after long and careful study. The preparation for work is equally important. The calligrapher must consider the mood of the moment – the same piece of calligraphy executed again at a different time of the day will differ considerably from the first one (even the great Wang Xizhi found it impossible to make an exact copy of his Lang ting zu the day after the Spring Festival). In order to succeed the calligrapher must try to attain a state of harmony with nature: the sound of the leaves in the spring wind, the fragrance of the blossoms – all these will influence his calligraphy. Then comes the rubbing of the ink stone (a time for reflection), followed by contemplation of the quality and the tone of the ink. Finally, he will concentrate on the piece of writing he has planned, visualize it, and complete it in his mind, before the brush touches the paper. Having reached this state of inner calm he will execute the first line, decisively and in one swift movement, because once done no correction is possible. As Wang Xizhi put it, ‘only if the thought precedes the brush does one write calligraphy’.

A rich and extensive collection of biographies and anecdotes has been handed down about famous calligraphers [87] which demonstrates not only their social position (some rose to high office), their background (many belonged to ruling clans) and the esteem in which they were held by their contemporaries, but also the sometimes almost supernatural power of their calligraphy.

Many stories surround the most famous and influential of all Chinese calligraphers, Wang Xizhi [88], a member of the Jin dynasty (265–366AD), and his seventh son; together they were known as the ‘two Wangs’, wang meaning king, a reference to the excellence of their calligraphy. One day, so a certain story goes, Wang Xizhi visited a pupil who proudly told him that he had just made a table, asking whether the master would like to see it. Wang Xizhi agreed and, impressed by the craftsmanship, took out a brush and wrote some poems on it. When the two men went next door the pupil’s father came into the room and, shocked to see the newly-made table covered with ink, he tried to shave off the top. But such, we are told, was the power of Wang
Xizhi’s calligraphy that he was unable to remove any of the writing.

The monk Kukai (see p.121), who played such an important part in the establishment of Japanese calligraphy, once received a commission to inscribe a plaque for the temple of Ottenmon. As the plaque was just about to be raised to the lintel of the gate he noticed that a crucial dot was still missing from one of the characters. Quickly Kukai filled his brush with ink, threw it into the air, and to everybody’s amazement it landed just on the right spot to make the missing dot.

Zhuo Meng (1254–1322AD), who was widely admired not only in China but also in Korea (see p.117) and Japan was a distant descendant of the Song Emperor Taizu and one of the most accomplished calligraphers of the Yuan period (1260–1368AD). Born in the province of Zhejiang, he had completed
his education and been appointed an Imperial guard by the time the southern Song dynasty fell to the Mongols in 1279. In 1267 Cheng Juji, a censor from the Yuan court in Beijing, discovered him and recommended him as one of the ‘eight talented young men of Wuxing’ (Zhao Mengfu’s birthplace) to the Emperor Kublai Khan (reigned 1260–93AD). Zhao Mengfu’s talent in administration and art quickly brought him to the Emperor’s attention and before long he became a favoured official.

One of the leading calligraphers of his century was Song Ke (1327–87AD). Born into a wealthy family in the cultured city of Suzhou he showed an early talent for painting, calligraphy and literature. His knowledge of strategy gained him the position of ‘military advisor’ in Hebei at the end of the Yuan period. Having travelled widely he returned to Suzhou in 1356, where, as a result of his literary activities, he became known as one of the ‘Ten Friends of the North Wall’, a group which included many famous poets and painters. During Zhang Shichen’s occupation of the city, Song Ke shrewdly kept well away from any political involvement, concentrating instead on his poetry and calligraphy. His prudence paid off and eventually, during the early Ming period (1368–1644AD), he became Calligrapher-in-waiting at Beijing Hanlin Academy, and later Deputy Prefect of Fengxiang in Shaanxi.

In Japan, excellence in calligraphy was an important requirement for monks anxious to rise within the hierarchy of their Zen monastery, just as it was an essential accomplishment for members of the upper classes, especially the gentlemen and ladies of the court. In 10th-century Japan, at the Heian Court, the way a person handled the brush was considered a better guide to his breeding, character and sensibility than what he or she actually said or wrote. To write a poor hand, and to be indifferent at poetry spelled social ruin and set the victim up for ridicule and contempt. In her Pillow book, Sei Shonagon gleefully, and with a good deal of satisfaction, describes an episode when a young official from the Ministry of Ceremonial boasts that he can write a poem on any subject:

‘Hearing the boast the Empress herself proposed a subject, at which Nobutane promptly took his leave saying ‘Dear me, how frightening! I’d better be off.’ ‘He has an appalling hand,’ somebody explained after he had left the room. ‘Whether it’s Chinese characters or Japanese script, the results are equally poor. People are always laughing about it. That’s why he had to escape.’ One day when Nobutane was serving as Superintendent in the Office of the Palace Works he saw a sketch to one of the craftsmen explaining how a certain piece of work should be done. ‘Kindly execute it in this fashion,’ he added in Chinese characters. I happened to notice the piece of paper and it was the most preposterous writing I had ever seen. Next to his message I wrote, ‘If you do the work in this style, you will certainly produce something odd.’ The document found its way to the Imperial apartments and everybody who saw it was greatly amused. Nobutane was furious and after this held a grudge against me.’

One can hardly blame him.

89 The Japanese calligrapher and painter Ushi da Genjii (1749–1822AD) persuaded a number of friends to contribute drawings and calligraphy in celebration of his 70th and 74th birthdays. Such ‘communal albums’, privately printed and with the seals of the various artists affixed to their work, enjoyed considerable popularity and at times introduced as yet little-known artists to a wider audience. The above opening from Shonin kikai shōhō (An album of Calligraphy and Paintings by various Masters) shows a composition of pomegranates and iris with a poem written in square Chinese characters and composed by Ushi da Genjii, and a nōge (in a more curvilinear style) by another artist, calligrapher, Nanzan, on the right. Probably Tōka, Edo period, 19th century. BRITISH LIBRARY, ORIENTAL AND INDIA OFFICE COLLECTIONS, OR.14.C.15

In China (and in the countries of the Far East which follow Chinese traditions) calligraphy was never just a leading visual art form; it was, and is, the most important of the ‘three perfections’ – poetry, calligraphy and painting. To be a ‘master of the three perfections’ has always been the mark of a truly cultured, truly educated, indeed truly superior human being. Being a medium of direct communication between performer and onlooker it allows deep insight into the personality of the practitioner. A single stroke, a single dot can reveal the calligrapher’s inner spirit (his ‘breath’), insight, learning and talent. In Japan, to praise a person for his beautiful handwriting is tantamount to calling him graceful and endowed with inner beauty [88]. The calligrapher is thus in many ways a role model. He is part of an elite because of personal inner merit and not simply as the result of inheritance or birth.
WOMEN CALLIGRAPHERS

In the Far East women calligraphers have always been accorded serious consideration. The first Chinese treatise on calligraphy, published in 320 AD, which established definite criteria for writing and for the appreciation of calligraphy which are still valid today, was written by a woman, the Lady Wei Shao, and it is thought that none other than the great Wang Xizhi himself was one of her students. Calligraphy was an essential accomplishment for ladies of noble birth and during the Han period, when calligraphy flourished and developed, the cultural elite which practised and understood this art form included women, from aristocratic ladies to Buddhist nuns, as well as men. Even though for a woman calligraphy was in many ways more an accomplishment than a source of power and influence, it did enable her to gain 'promotion' within her own sphere of activity: a more advantageous marriage, a better position at Court.

A similar situation prevailed in Japan during the Heian period. In the sophisticated atmosphere of the Imperial Court, calligraphy and the art of writing poems (naturally in a fine calligraphic hand) not only occupied a special place but constituted a form of everyday communication. A fine calligraphic hand came close to being considered a moral virtue, and being a mirror of a person's inner self, it also played an essential part in the complex games of courtship which occupied so much of the leisurely time of the people of Heian. Often it was the sight of a lady's (or gentleman's) handwriting which first gave rise to romantic speculations and the desire to meet the writer in person. Calligraphy was a powerful aphrodisiac and during the initial stages of a love affair both partners awaited the first written communication from the other with a good deal of apprehension, since an indifferent hand would invariably have meant the end of the affair before it had even started. Sending a letter was therefore an act of great (and dangerous) importance and surrounded by strict conventions. First the right paper had to be chosen; size, thickness, design and colour had to be chosen; size, thickness, design and colour had to be harmonize with the time of day, the season, and the weather, so as to evoke the desired mood in the recipient. The handwriting was as anything more important than the actual message, which usually took the form of a poem. After the letter had been completed the paper had to be folded in one of the prescribed styles – ignorance or lack of sophistication could betray itself at any one of these stages.

At one point in Murasaki's Tale of Genji, Prince Genji receives a letter from a lady he had known in Akashi. His favourite companion, Murasaki, is consumed with anxiety, not about the contents of the letter, but about the lady's handwriting. When she finally manages to catch a glimpse of it she at once realizes 'that there was a great depth of feeling in the penmanship. Indeed it had style that might give pause to the most distinguished ladies of the Court', accepting sadly that it was 'small wonder that Genji felt about the girl the way he did'. Years later Genji takes the 13-year-old Princess Nyosan as his official wife and again Murasaki waits anxiously for the first glimpse of the girl's handwriting, knowing that her own future might depend on it. But this time the handwriting turns out to be unformed and childish, and both Genji and Murasaki are embarrassed that somebody of the princess's rank could have reached this age without developing a more polished style. Tactfully Murasaki, who wrote a fine hand and was also a scholar, pretended not to have noticed and made no comment. Genji also kept silent. If the letter had come from somebody else he would certainly have whispered something about the writing, but he felt sorry for the girl and simply said, 'Well now you see that you have nothing to worry about'.

Not only calligraphy, but also the implements connected with it, the way they were kept, and the whole process of writing, all mirrored the owner's
personality and offered important clues to character. Murasaki's contemporary, the Lady Sei Shōnagon, ever critical, writes with distaste:

I hate seeing a dusty, dirty-looking ink stone with an ink stick that has been used in a slovenly way so that it is rubbed down on one side only... one can judge a woman's nature by looking at her mirror, her ink stone, or any other belongings of that kind.

And later, reflecting on some love affair which had obviously gone awry: 'I find it painful to be scolded by someone when I have been peeping at his calligraphy', adding wistfully, 'this sort of thing does not happen with a man one loves'.

It is perhaps no accident that during the Heian period two styles were in use: one, onokode (men's writing) using kanji (Chinese characters) and the Chinese language was considered suitable for administration, scholarship, religion and the execution of power in general; the other was onnaide (women's writing) written in hiragana, the phonetic script, and it was in this style that women authors wrote their novels. In other words, the indigenous Japanese language and script was more or less used mainly by women. To write in Chinese, using Chinese characters, was indeed deemed highly unsuitable for ladies, and those who had somehow acquired such knowledge, like Murasaki [91] who came from a family of scholars, took great care not to emphasize this fact.
The ability to write beautiful calligraphy was an essential part of a woman’s sexual attraction and those responsible for her upbringing took great care to foster it. (A 10th-century Fujiwara statesman to his daughter: ‘first you must study penmanship.’) Women were valuable objects of barter in the political power game; it was through the advantageous marriage of one of their daughters that a family could hope to reach the highest circles (a daughter married to an imperial prince might even give birth to the future emperor). To make such a marriage possible a girl had to be well-versed in the prescribed accomplishments which included music, poetry, the ability to fold and choose the right kind of paper and, of course, calligraphy; an indifferent hand would indeed have quickly disqualified her whatever her other charms might have been. This attitude to calligraphy remained the same throughout Japanese history, drawing different parts of society into its fold. Women of all classes [90] continued to compose poetry and write their letters and notes in a fine calligraphic hand. Seven hundred years after the Heian ladies had written their love letters, the great courtesans of ‘Floating World’ were just as carefully trained in music, calligraphy and conversation. An essential part of their daily duties was the writing of love letters to their clients the morning after, and a special hour of the day, the ‘Hour of the Dog’, was set aside for this task. [94].