Shades of Black
Introduction

Shades of black is a characteristic feature of both a suiboku\(^a\) painting and a mezzotint print.

**Suiboku** (水墨) is a Japanese word which literally means ‘water( 水) black ink (墨) ’. When used with reference to painting it refers to a style in which objects are drawn using only shades of black ink. Different shades of black, ranging from black to gray to almost white, are achieved by adding black ink unevenly to the paint brush and (or) by varying hand pressure when using the paint brush to draw the shape of an object on paper or silk. The artist’s objective is to create a sense of light and shade, as well as a sense of volume and rhythm, by applying different shades of black ink. This painting technique was first developed in China during the Sung dynasty (960–1274) and taken to Japan by Zen Buddhist monks in the mid-1300s. The same technique was also used in Japan during the 1700s and 1800s by artists who adopted a closely related style of Chinese painting called nanga (南画). The shared goal of nanga and suiboku painters was to capture the essence (i.e., spirit) of the object being depicted by eliminating unnecessary details which, in their view, included the object’s true colors. In Japan, copies of suiboku and nanga paintings were often included in woodblock-printed picture books which were sold to aspiring artists and art devotees. Ten examples of suiboku/nanga art which depict flowers and (or) birds were chosen from picture books in the Reader Collection of Japanese Flower and Bird Art and included in this exhibition.

The word **mezzotint**, derived from the Italian words mezzo (half) and tinta (tone), is used to describe a method of printmaking which emphasizes tonal variation in the color of the object depicted. To create this tonal variation the entire surface of a metal plate is first roughen using a metal tool. Then portions of the plate are smoothed to reduce the depth of cut to differing degrees. When black ink is added to the plate the deepest cuts hold the most ink and will print darker than shallower cuts. To transfer these different shades of black ink to paper it is pushed into the cuts using a mechanical press. The first mezzotint prints were made in Europe in the mid-1600s. In Japan, artists only adopted this method of printmaking in the mid-1900s when a variety of European printing methods were introduced into the curriculum of art schools. Ten examples of mezzotint prints which depict flowers and (or) birds were chosen from prints in the Reader Collection of Japanese Flower and Bird Art for inclusion in this exhibition.

\(^a\) also called **sumi** (墨) painting
1 Suiboku - Sacred lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*), knotweed (*Polygonum* sp.) and barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), included in Sessa Bokugi (i.e., Polished Ink Play), edited by Shinroku Yano, published in 1881, woodblock print 145 x 235 mm
2 Suiboku – Camellia (*Camellia japonica*) and Java sparrow (*Padda oryzivora*) by Unzan Yamazaki, included in Unzan Gafu (i.e., Picture Album by Unzan), published in 1880, woodblock print, 180 x 150 mm
Suiboku – Pine (*Pinus* sp.) and Eurasian jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) by Kazan Watanabe, included in Kazan Gafu (i.e., Picture Album by Kazan), published in 1880, woodblock print, 200 x 145 mm
Suiboku – Common reed (*Phragmites australis*), aster (*Aster* sp.) and white-fronted goose (*Anser albifrons*) by Chikutō Nakabayashi, included in Yūsai Gafu (i.e., Picture Album by Yūsai), published in 1846, woodblock print, 370 x 285 mm
5 Suiboku – China rose (*Rosa chinensis*) and yellow-throated bunting (*Emberiza elegans*) by Gessai Numada, included in Gahō Hikketsu (i.e., Brushwork as a Principle of Painting), published in 1799. woodblock print, 350 x 260 mm
Suiboku – Barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) by Masamori Matsuoka, included in *Kanga Hitori Rakufu* (i.e., Spontaneous Chinese Drawings for Pleasure), published in 1883, woodblock print, 310 x 230 mm
7 Suiboku – Florist’s chrysanthemum (*Chrysanthemum grandiflorum*) by Kyōshō Tachihara, included in Meika Gafu (i.e., Picture Album by Celebrated Artists), edited by Tōkei Mano, published in 1814, woodblock print, 190 x 255 mm

8 Suiboku – Plum (*Prunus mume*) by Meimon Suzuki, included in Meika Gafu (i.e., Picture Album by Celebrated Artists), edited by Tōkei Mano, published in 1814, woodblock print, 190 x 255 mm
9  **Suiboku** – Plum (*Prunus mume*) and light-vented bulbul (*Pycnonotus sinensis*) by Sekisui Watanabe, included in Meika Gafu (i.e., Picture Album by Celebrated Artists), edited by Tōkei Mano, published in 1814, woodblock print, 190 x 255 mm

10  **Suiboku** – Cherry (*Prunus sp.*) and light-vented bulbul (*Pycnonotus sinensis*) by Shokatsukan Shimizu, included in Meika Gafu (i.e., Picture Album by Celebrated Artists), edited by Tōkei Mano, published in 1814, woodblock print, 190 x 255 mm
11 **Mezzotint** – Japanese-lantern (*Physalis alkekengi*) and Japanese quail (*Coturnix japonica*) by Toshio Suda, 400 x 480 mm
Mezzotint – Willow (Salix sp.) and willow tit (Poecile montanus) by Akira Fujie, 265 x 370 mm
13 **Mezzotint** – Penstemon (*Penstemon* sp.) and hermit hummingbird (*Phaethornis* sp.) by Shigeki Kuroda, 180 x 215 mm
Mezzotint – Iris (Iris sp.) by Shinji Andō, 160 x 145 mm
15 **Mezzotint** – Scops owl (*Otus* sp.)
by Kōichi Sakamoto, 185 x 150 mm
Mezzotint – willow tit (*Poecile montanus*) by Kazuyoshi Kurahashi, 150 x 150 mm
Mezzotint – Blakiston’s fish-owl (Ketupa blakistoni) and scops owl (Otus scops) by Kōji Ikuta, 460 x 260 mm
Mezzotint – Eurasian tree sparrow (*Passer montanus*) by Ryōnosuke Shimomura, 115 x 140 mm
Mezzotint – Ural owl (*Strix uralensis*) by Tadashi Ikai, 195 x 225 mm
Mezzotint – Hawk (Accipiter sp.) by Bin Takaba, 225 x 305 mm

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