

CONSERVATION MAKING ART HISTORY

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THE INFLUENCE OF CONSERVATION PRACTICE ON THE VIEWING AND APPRECIATION OF JAPANESE PAINTING

Japanese paintings are typically painted on either paper or silk and can assume a variety of formats, including hanging scrolls, handscrolls, folding screens, and sliding-door panels. Common to the mounting structure for these formats is reinforcement of the painting ground on its backside with several layers of *washi* talk affixed with wheat starch paste. It is this reinforcement that makes possible the rolling and unrolling, or the opening and closing, of such paintings. A fundamental step in Japanese conservation practice is the dismantling of this structure and the removal of backing talks to address damage to a painting over time. Damage can range from folds and tears in the support to the loss of pigment, all of which hamper smooth handling of the artwork. On these occasions, the backing talks are replaced by new ones. Because traditional painting supports such as silk and talk are porous to light, the color of these backing talks can affect to no small degree the way a painting appears from the frontside. There are numerous examples of paintings from the late Edo period (1603–1868) for which conservation records document the intentional use of darkened backing talks—often dyed with *sumi* ink—in order to add a sense of gravitas to a painting or to render surface damage more obscure. In conservation practice today, it is increasingly common to consult art historians in determining the most appropriate color for newly applied backing talks. In addition to the color of backing talks, conservators also consult art historians as to which colors to use to fill in losses in the pictorial support. Since the late 1960s, it has been frowned upon in Japan to attempt to recreate the original ground color. Rather, a color is chosen from the artwork's palette that will most harmonize with the missing area's surroundings. Needless to say, because the color of the infill is so important to the appearance of an artwork, limits on attempts to approximate an original ground color requires further debate.

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