

From its shining glass towers to its quiet, intimate shrines and gardens, Tokyo is famous for bringing together new and old, modern and traditional, international and distinctly Japanese. These contrasts make Tokyo the rich and exciting experience it is, and everyone experiences them in their own way. Artist Ilan Yanizky's journey began in his home of Israel and took him along the path of *sumi-e* ink wash painting, gaining a reputation for his modern take on the traditional art. He was recognized for his work by the city in 1997, when he received the currently nonprofit organization, the Nangain Tokyo Governor's Award, and he has now established himself as an artist and teacher in this most Japanese field.

Ilan Yanizky: Connecting Worlds through *Sumi-e*

How an Israeli artist found inspiration bringing together old and new in a traditional Japanese artform.

by **Ian Martin**

Yanizky's background was in Western art, studying in Tel Aviv, Rome, and London, and he had been planning to study visual arts in New York as his next step. It was a chance moment of inspiration in 1983 that upended his plans and brought him to Japan.

"Everything was ready for me to go to New York," Yanizky explains. "Just two months before that, things happened. *Time* magazine dedicated a whole issue to Japan. I saw that and that was it!"

From sushi to pop idols, the feature hooked him in with its lively depictions of a world he had never seen before, and soon after, he was in Japan. What he discovered after he arrived turned that moment of inspiration into a lifelong journey, and an important part of that was his discovery of the artist Ito Jakuchu on a visit to the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum.

Coming from a background in Western art traditions, Yanizky was struck in particular by Jakuchu's use of large areas of white space on the canvas—something he realized was extremely rare in European and American art, where artists tended to fill every inch of the canvas with detail.

"I saw a white crane and black tail, and the crane was standing like this, and a lot of white," Yanizky explains, standing up to demonstrate the bird's pose. "The white space is so important."

The idea of space or absence is one that Yanizky touches on in various ways when he talks about his experience of Tokyo and Japan. It is present in the zen gardens that inspired him when he first came to Japan. It is in his *sumi-e* training, where he had to learn by observing carefully rather than through detailed explanations from his teacher. It is there in daily interactions through the philosophy of *ishin denshin* or communication without words. In his Shibuya studio, he has on display two calligraphy works depicting the Japanese character *ma*, signifying the space between things or people. "We need a lot of space!" he declares. "It's a very important concept in Japanese culture."

Through his passion for *sumi-e*, Yanizky forged his connection to Japan by throwing himself into a centuries-old Japanese tradition. He found a teacher and entered into years of rigorous training, repeating the same motifs again and again to hone his technique and learning to grind his own paints from natural materials in the traditional way. As well as embracing tradition, though, he also

brought his own modern take to *sumi-e*, bringing bold, vivid colors to a form with a reputation for having a more muted, monochrome style. It is this bold approach to the art that Yanizky believes may have encouraged more Japanese people to reconnect with their own culture and tradition through *sumi-e*.

"I have many young people coming here and studying because they say, 'This is the kind of *sumi-e* I want to study!' or 'This kind of modern *sumi-e* is something I would like to learn!'"

As a foreigner studying *sumi-e* in 1980s' Tokyo,



Yanizky's art brings vivid color to the *sumi-e* form, which is often seen as muted and monochrome.

Yanizky learned from Japanese tradition. As an artist and teacher, his modern take on tradition helps Japanese people reconnect with that same culture. Like the city he now calls home, through his work new and old, modern and traditional, international and Japanese all exist together.



At work in his studio, Ilan Yanizky combines bold strokes with extraordinary control.