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A Cézannisme in Japan – in the case of Ryusei Kishida (1891-1929)

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Introduction

In 1907, a large scale of retrospective commemorating the first anniversary of a painter's death was held at the Salons d'Automne in Paris, namely, the first major retrospective of Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). It is well-known that this 1907 retrospective inspired many young artists like Henri Matisse (1869-1954), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Georges Braque (1882-1963). In the same year, Emile Bernard published his *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne*¹ and it is needless to say that one of the letters in it included a phrase on which Cubism would base: "treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone." From the year on, Cézannisme, that is the absolute praise for the artist as a messiah of a modern art, extended so far that its influence would be seen in a nation in the Far East, in Japan.

In Japan, in the same year of 1907, the Bunten, a show sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Education, the Japanese version of the Paris Salons, was established. Then, around 1910, Japanese painters studying in Paris began to return to Japan one after another, some of whom saw the 1907 Cézanne retrospective and were inspired by his art. Most of them became not satisfied with the academic painting any more, and they began to study both his life and work, praising him as an ideal artist for them. They prepared establishment of groups against academism in Japan.

In the following discussion, I will treat the problem of Cézannisme in Japan by regarding the influence of the French master on the art of a *yoga-ka*, the Western style Japanese painter Ryusei Kishida as a special Cézannisme.

Ryusei – it is usual in Japan to call him by his first name– was born at Ginza in Tokyo, in 1891. He started his artistic education in the first decade of the 20th century when many Japanese students went abroad, above all to Paris, to study art. It is said that in his late years he was saying, “I'd like to go to France to teach painting to French painters instead of learning it there.” But he never went there and died in 1929 aged 38. His father Ginko Kishida was a journalist and known as one of the editors of a Japanese-English dictionary. And he was also a dealer of the eye-drops *Seikisui* and often went to China to sell it. So, Ryusei was grown up coming touch with both Western culture and Eastern culture. In 1906, a year after the death of his parents, he decided to leave school and being baptized, began to teach at the Sunday school of the Sukiyabashi Church. In 1908, he entered the Aoibashi art center to master the Western-style painting under Seiki Kuroda, who was one of the founders of the Academy of Art in Japan contributed to establish the academism through activities such as organization of official education of art and exhibition such as the Bunten. Ryusei mastered a kind of Impressionistic plein-air

painting as Kuroda had learned under the French painter Raphael Collin. In 1912, at the age of 21, Ryusei made a debut as a professional painter by organizing his first one-man show at the art gallery *Rokando*. The colleagues at the *Aoibashi* art center such as Shohachi Kimura (1893-1958) and Hitoshi Seimiya (1886-1969), and the members of the group *Shirakaba*, a group which is very famous for the introduction of Post-Impressionism into Japan, lead him to studying modern European paintings.

In the year of debut, in 1912, he painted one of his self-portraits in a Fauvist style (fig. 1) and next year, *Portrait of Bernard Leach* (fig. 4). While the former shows the influence of van Gogh and Henri Matisse in coloration with strong contrast of red and green and in simplification of forms, the latter, portrait of his friend Leach shows his adoption of Cézanne's artistic inventions, as it will be analyzed below. He abandoned his master Kuroda's style. Recollecting these independent years, Ryusei himself wrote more than once that he was an admirer of Post-Impressionists, especially van Gogh and Cézanne. Therefore, at least in this sense, as many studies on him have been pointed out, the very young Ryusei was a Cézannist in so far as he was a passionate admirer of Post-Impressionism, even if a young Japanese painter might not yet really be aware of the master's historical position, not yet understand it as an open-the-door towards new pictorial reality for the 20th new art, above all for Cubism in the history of art.

It is well-known that Ryusei abandoned his early Fauvist style around 1914. After breaking up of the group *Fyuzan-kai* for Japanese Fauvist painters, he established and headed another artists' group the *Sodo-sha*, and his creation as a realist started. He exhibited in the first and second group exhibition the paintings on observation of nature with depiction of details of natural with minute brushstroke such as *Shasei of a Road Cut* (fig. 2). He called the style of it 'realism' or 'shajitsu' or 'shasei' in Japanese. He stopped simplifying forms of natural objects and being a colorist to establish his own style. In short, he turned him against the modern tendency towards abstraction which is thought to originate from the art of Cézanne. This turning from a modern painter to a realist has often made call Ryusei an 'anti-modern' artist, although he was followed by the members of the group who painted in the common style modeled on Ryusei's, which called *Sodo-sha* style and dominated the art world in Japan.

The point of my paper is to reconsider the problem of Ryusei as a Cézannist, or Ryusei's Cézannisme in the wider context than ever, putting not only his early period but also the subsequent period to it into consideration. In the first section, his work of 'realism' and its theoretical thinking of 'inner beauty' will be seen. In the second section, his typically Cézannist work *Portrait of Bernard Leach* of 1913 (fig. 4) will be analyzed, and in relation of the date of 1913, a short history of the introduction of Cézanne into Japan around the year will be added in order to know better what background was given to the making of the portrait. In the last section, a formalistic analysis on Ryusei's still life paintings after 1916 will be done and it will reveal that Ryusei was also a passionate Cézannist, even after he had become a realist.

Although the influence of Cézanne on them was already pointed out by the art historian Teiichi Hijikata,² each of the compositions has been given only little analysis. Therefore, on one hand, my analysis on them is an attempt to reveal a new aspect of Ryusei's Cézannisme, in other words its diversity in the case of Ryusei. That will force us to bring it into question whether his famous turning to a realist can be easily defined anti-modern, or if the denial of the abstractness in a work of art – which he called the decorative in his

terms – or its lessening into the least can be regarded as anti-modernity. On the other hand, consequently, my consideration based on some formalistic analysis will call another view point for study on Cézannisme in the case of Ryusei in need: an iconographic and iconological point of view. A new study from the point of view will tell us that Ryusei intended a kind of historical contextualization of locating his art in the history of Western painting.



Figure 1. Ryusei Kishida. Self-Portrait in a hat 1912 Oil painting 33.0 x 24.0 cm

1 Ryusei's 'Shasei' of a Road Cut and Smiling Reiko with a Green Fruit in her Hand – the beginning of his mature style of realism and his notion of 'inner beauty (uchinaru-bi)

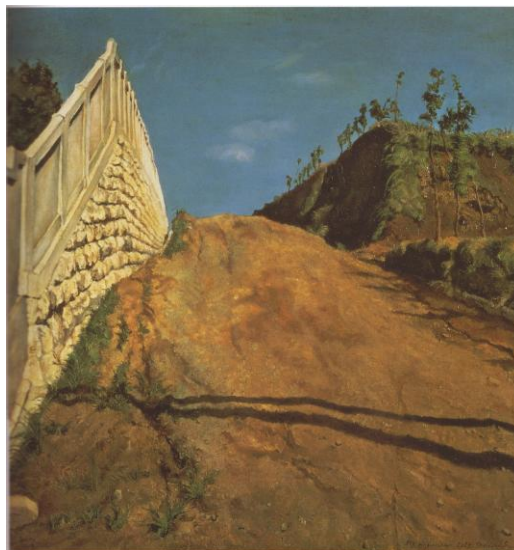


Figure 2. Ryusei Kishida. 'Shasei' of a Road Cut 1915 Oil painting 56.0 x 53.0 cm

Ryusei, as a very young painter, has been regarded as a Cézannist in so far as he was a passionate Post-Impressionist admirer. But later, he became a realist. His essay "Why and

how I shifted away from the modernity of painting," first published in 1915 explains this turning:

My early works are much influenced by the Post-Impressionists, especially by van Gogh and Cézanne, because I believed that they had given me awareness of being as an artist. As I admired not only their works but also their art theory, I imitated their simplification of colors and forms, their way of reducing the color and form to the essentials. But, the harder I tried to paint imitating on their way, the stronger my demand of being a realist grew. Due to the demand, I became unsatisfied with their painting style, and when my demand freed me from their influences, I had become what I am, a realist who can create on the observation and sensation of his own.³

As one of his most early self-portraits, *Self-portrait in a black hat* (fig. 1) shows, he painted in a Fauvist, expressionist manner. But, in his '*Shasei*' of a Road Cut (fig. 2) painted just three years after it, in 1915, we can see a mature style of 'realism'.

This landscape, depicting the newly broken hill to construct a road, the white stone wall and the blue sky in winter, was painted in 1915 as the essay just quoted above was written, and was exhibited next year on the second exhibition organized by the artists' group *Sodo-sha* (*Sodo* means plans and earth in Japanese) headed by Ryusei. At that time, it was exhibited under the more objective title of *Road, Bank, and Wall* than the present one. The present title was given later by the author himself, and this is the only one picture of his works to which the word '*shasei*' was given. By this renaming, Ryusei must have intended to show that a mature style of his own realism could be typically seen in this work.

Another painting, *Smiling Reiko with a Green Fruit in her Hand* (fig. 3), finished in 1921, depicts his daughter in variously nuanced red. Although to deal with his much later work such as a series of Reiko portraits including this one would take us beyond the scope of this paper, the observation of it helps us to know what he by '*shajitsu*' or '*shasei*' meant, because this portrait can show the more advanced stage of his art of realism than what we have just seen in the landscape. It is not merely a naturalistic painting on observation of nature in which details of natural objects depicted with minute brushstroke. We have to perceive something 'mystic,' 'invisible beauty (*mukei-no-bi*)' in his terms.



Figure 3. Ryusei Kishida. Smiling Reiko with a green fruit in her hand 1921 Oil painting 45.5 x 38.0 cm

Although the conception of '*shasei*' or '*shajitsu*' is not only a key word for Ryusei, but also one of the key conceptions in the art of late Meiji and the Taisho period in Japan, it cannot be discussed here for the lack of space and of my knowledge on the history of the idea. If literally translated, it means copying the truth, copying the essence, in that '*sha*' of it means copy and '*sei*' life or nature, and '*jitu*' means something essential.

But what is more important in our context is to know that the conception is related in Ryusei's thinking to his own conception 'inner beauty (*uchinaru-bi*).'⁴ By the word 'inner beauty' he understood a kind of instinctive, creative drive, which consists of two poles: 'imitative beauty (*shajitsu-no-bi*)' and 'decorative beauty (*soshoku-no-bi*).' The former is the imitative drive which is activated when one imitates nature, and the latter, the decorative one, which is active when purely plastic, abstract elements such as a line are realized. He believes that, if a painter can activate the drive of 'inner beauty' in creation to the fullest, the picture deserves the masterpiece made by a true creator. And he explains that both of them are indispensable to his art of 'realism'. He insisted that, in so far as a painting is an artificial object and not a natural object itself, even for a painter of imitation of nature, the decorative drive is indispensable. When he tries to define the nature of his art, he often uses the word 'invisible beauty (*mukei-no-bi*).' Although Ryusei continued to define and redefine his key conceptions in his writings through his life, it seems to me that he always uses the word '*sha*' to mean something artificial, more than copying of nature. This consciousness of the plastic must have correlated to his continuous interest to the art of Cézanne. Even in his late period when he regarded Eastern art as much superior to Western art, he highly estimated the art of the French master.

Now, let us go to the problem of Cézannisme in his early period

2 Ryusei's early Cézannisme – *Portrait of Bernard Leach* and a short history of the introduction of Cézanne into Japan

He painted *Portrait of Bernard Leach* (fig. 4) in 1913, one year after his self-portrait (fig. 1) in his Fauvist manner. The Portrait of his friend has been taken one of the typical examples which show that he owed technically Cézanne's artistic inventions. For example, we can observe many cobalt blue brush strokes to express shadows of foliage seen in its background. Cézanne's 'constructive strokes'⁵ must have been studied by the painter, and he must have done the French master's later works in order to realize watercolor-like transparency of those strokes. The date of 1913 when the portrait made is to be noticed. I have already mentioned that Japanese artists, who were studying abroad, came back to Japan around 1910. It was the same year in which the group *Shirakaba* was established and its magazine *Shirakaba* made its appearance, through which Ryusei got to know Post-Impressionism and other different kinds of European art.

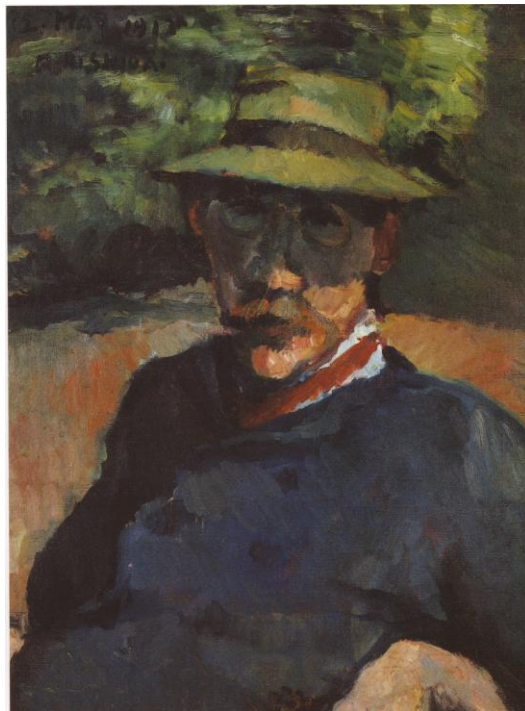


Figure 4. Ryusei Kishida. *Portrait of Bernard Leach* 1913 Oil painting 61.5 x 46.0 cm

No space is given in this paper to put it into consideration what indispensable role the group *Shirakaba* and its magazine played in introducing Western art into Japan. Nevertheless, we should pay a little attention to the work by one of the members, the yoga painter Mibuma (later, Ikuma) Arishima because it must have helped Ryusei's Cézanne reception. It was in also 1910 in which his biographical essay "A painter Paul Cézanne" appeared in the magazine *Shirakaba*. It was the first Japanese biographical essay on the master. Moreover, in 1913, he translated Emile Bernard's *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne* into Japanese and it appeared also in the magazine. Arishima came back from Paris after five year study in Europe after Yori Saito did, who is one of the earliest Henri Matisse interpreter in Japan as the sculptor and poet Kotaro Takamura. Arishima as well as the other two artists contributed to the introduction and reception of Cézanne and the other modern Western artists not only by their artistic activities as a painter but also their Japanese translations of many primary materials on them, which were indispensable

to their reception through late Meiji period and the Taisho period. What is more important is that Arishima and Saito had seen the 1907 retrospective, which inspired and moved them to organize artist groups against the Academism of the Bunten. In 1912, Saito went to see the first one-man show of Ryusei. The meeting of them had led to the establishment of the Fyuzan (named after a French word 'fusain') society and realization of its exhibition. The first exhibition of the group is to be noticed in the history of Japanese yōga paintings because it was the first exhibition on which only Japanese Fauvist painters exhibited their works.

I'd like to avoid continuing the theme because many studies have been devoted to it.⁶ Nevertheless it is useful to know that as early as in 1909 Japanese translation of Henri Matisse's *Notes of a Painter* published in the magazine *Subaru*, the translator of which was the sculptor and poet Kotaro Takamura, who advised Ryusei and helped him in his artistic activities. In Japan the introduction of Cézanne and his followers inspired by him began almost at the same time. Ryusei also belonged the generation who could understand the art of Cézanne in a historical perspective, even if it was very premature. And in 1913, Japanese translation of Julius Meier-Graefe's *Cézanne*, and that of Théodore Duret's text about Cézanne appeared, and the translator of them was a yōga painter Shohachi Kimura (1893-1958), one of the best friends of Ryusei.

Let's us now return to the portrait of Leach. It is painted in the very year of 1913, when those translations appeared, some of which with reproductions of works of the French master.

Madame Cézanne (fig. 5), one of the most famous portraits of Cézanne's wife by the master was reproduced in the fourth volume *Shirakaba* of 1913 when Leach's portrait was painted by Ryusei. A compositional analysis by Erle Loran⁷ (fig. 6) can help us to detect what compositional devices Ryusei observed in it and used for his composition (fig. 4). The point is 'the tipping of a vertical axis' of Madame Cézanne's body and head in the picture. It tilts to the left in the picture plane. In Ryusei's Leach (fig. 4), the model, leaning backward, seems more natural than the other, for the axis of Leach's body and that of his head are not in a line. Probably, that makes possible to avoid such hardness as the body of *Madame Cézanne* strongly impresses us. Nevertheless, it seems us that Ryusei composed this painting with more clear awareness of the visual effect of axis in a picture plane than ever. It is probably due to the fact that reproductions of Cézanne's works as well as above mentioned translations on him appeared. Ryusei sometimes described the influence of Cézanne on his paintings. For example, about his landscape *Path in Early Summer* painted in 1917 (fig. 7) and awarded in an exhibition, he explained that the technique of making layers of washes of pigment owed to the technique of the French master's. But he never mentioned the device of the tipped axes. In the next section, we are soon looking at this technique repeated in Ryusei's still life paintings.



Figure 5. Paul Cézanne Madame Cézanne (R. 683)⁸ 1888-90 Oil painting 90 x 71.7 cm

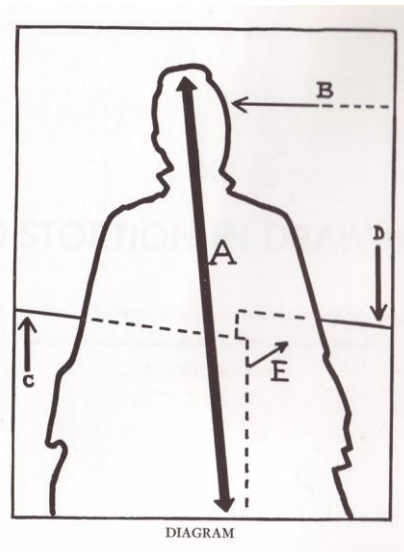


Figure 6. Erle Loran Diagram of Madam Cézanne of fig .5⁹

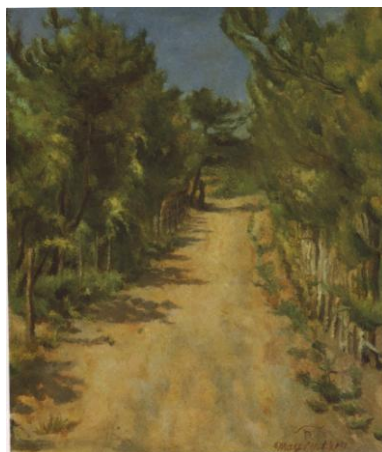


Figure7. Ryusei Kishida Path in Early Summer 1917 Oil painting 45.3 x 37.9 cm

3 An analysis on Ryusei's still life paintings

In this section, I would like to compare still life paintings of Ryusei and those of Cézanne, and I will take as materials for the comparison only the works of Cézanne whose originals or reproductions were probably known to Ryusei.¹⁰

In his *Tea Cup, Tea Bowl and three green Apples* (fig. 8), painted in 1917, Ryusei adopted again the method of tipping axis. All objects were represented with their vertical axes tipped. Another comparison of a Ryusei with a Cézanne may show much clearly how he approached the French master's pictorial devices.



Figure 8. Ryusei Kishida. *Tea Cup, Tea Bowl and Three Green Apples* 1917 Oil painting 38.0 x 44.5 cm

Ryusei's *Two Red Apples, Tea bowl, Tea Cup and Bottle* (fig. 9) and Cézanne's *Still Life with a Basket of Apples* (fig. 10) may be one of the best examples to show both their similarities and differences. For example, blue background, brown table top, and red-yellow apples can be seen in both of them, while the darkness of its blue tones of Ryusei's contrasts the brightness of Cézanne's.



Figure9. Ryusei Kishida. *Two Red Apples, Tea-cup, Tea-bowl and a Bottle* 1917 Oil painting 33.7 x 45.8 cm



Figure10. Paul Cézanne. Still Life with a Basket of Apples (R. 800) c.1895 Oil painting 65 x 80 cm

The technique of distortion seems to have interested Ryusei. At a first glance, the shape of the tea cup and the tea bowl seems only slightly distorted. But compared it with other still life painted by one of the members of the group Sodo-sha Kakujiro Yokobori (1897-1978), Ryusei's peculiarity can be more clearly visible (compare fig. 9 with 11, fig. 12 with 13).



Figure11. Kakujiro Yokobori. Still Life 1922 Oil painting 41.0 x 31.9 cm

If a tea cup painted by Yokobori is compared with the one painted by Ryusei, it can be visible that Ryusei distorted its shape more consciously than the other did. In addition, he combined the device of distortion, *déformation*¹¹, with that of tipping axis.



Figure 12. Ryusei Kishida. Detail of fig. 9



Figure 13. Kakujiro Yokobori. Detail of fig. 11

Erle Loran pointed out in his *Cézanne's Composition*, that one of the most typical devices invented by Cézanne is "the incorporation of several eye levels in one picture." Ryusei incorporates at least two different eye levels in those still life paintings, as seen characteristically with the tea-cup and the tea bowl (fig. 12).

Ryusei united systematically several – at least three kinds of them we have just observed – artistic devices, which Loran characterized as those of abstract art in his still life paintings. They seem to be very naturalistic at a first glance, and they are really not so. The use of such Cézanne's innovative techniques may be called Ryusei's Cézannisme on the technical level. His technical Cézannisme continued to lead not only the work of his early years represented by Portrait of Bernard Leach, but also that even after his turning to realism. What is special about Ryusei's Cézannisme is enlivened by detailed naturalistic representations of nature with tiny touches. In his terms, the imitative derive is activated at the most and the decorative one at the least. For him, a work is a result of the cooperation of these drives named an act of 'inner beauty' by him.

The analysis just done must have ascertained what Teiichi Hijikata had pointed out, of which I have mentioned in the part of introduction. He said that the influence of Cézanne on Ryusei's still lifes could be perceived only 'slightly',¹² but it could surely 'amaze' us. Probably, by the oxymoronic expression with 'slightly' and 'amaze,' the art historian meant what we have just seen above: the Cézannien was enlivened by the art of Ryusei.

My analysis, on one hand, can reveal a new aspect of Ryusei's Cézannisme, or its diversity, on the other hand, it seems to betray its own limitation: the lack of an iconographic and iconological point of view.

It is needless to say that objects such as apples or a white comport were symbolic of the art of Cézanne and the new art after it. They had given some special connotation. Especially, a white comport had been symbolic after Maurice Denis exhibited his *Hommage à Cézanne*¹³ in which *Still Life with Comport*¹⁴ of Cézanne (R. 418.1879-80 Oil painting 46 × 55 cm) was painted as a painting-in painting.

It is sure that Ryusei was aware of the expression of 'Cézanne's apples' as well as the historical fact, because he composed them in some of his still lifes. A white comport with an apple is composed in a very strange setting in his *Still Life* (fig. 14), with red and blue curtains and a kind of praying beads. The composition seems like a religious picture.



Figure 14. Ryusei Kishida. Still life 1918 Oil painting 50.0 x 61.0 cm

I will end it by citing some lines from the ending part of Bernard's *Souvenirs*, because, after having seen Ryusei's technical Cézannisme, the painted object reminds me, a Cézanne researcher, of these lines:

It is necessary for me to speak now about the shameful imitation of this master, distortions committed in his name, and the total incomprehension of self –interested imitations. Those who understood him are to be praised. But how many of us are there? How many are there who decided to study this work and find something in it other than anomalies? It has become stylish to place compotes askew, to imitate wooden-looking, napkins to have lopsided glasses, and to place flat apples against a background of flowers (emphasis added).¹⁵

Citing Cézanne's motto that "we must become classical again through nature," Bernard concluded that "only through contact with nature and through constant observation of nature does the artist become a creator." This is also the motto of Ryusei as a realist. Those Japanese translations, which I have mentioned in part 2, must have helped Ryusei's interpretation of the art of the French master.

To examine an attempt of a Japanese painter, who would say that he would like to go to Paris to teach French painters how to paint instead of being taught by them, and died aged 38 without fulfilling his will, would another paper. An iconographic and iconological study will reveal that an attempt was made in Japan, by a yoga painter, to locate him in the history of European painting, or of French painting.

Not only Ryusei's Cézannisme but also his contextualization of locating his art in the history of Western painting must be a fruit of the cultural interchange between Europe and Japan.

1 Bernard, Émile. "Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne et lettres inédites." *Mercure de France* 1 Oct. 1907: 384-404; 16 Oct. 1907: 606-27.

2 Teiichi, Hijikata. "Cézanne in Japan." *Complete Works of Teiichi Hijikata*. 12 vols. Japan, 1976. 6: 260-277.

³ Ryusei, Kishida. "Why and how I shifted away from the modernity of painting (Jibun-ga-kindaiteki-keikou-wo-hanareta-riyu)." *Complete Works of Ryusei Kishida*. 10 vols. Japan: Iwanami Shoten, 1979. 2: 463.

⁴ Ryusei, Kishida. "Ryusei's works and theoretical writings (Ryusei-gashu-oyobi-geijutsukan)." *Complete Works of Ryusei Kishida*. 10 vols. Japan: Iwanami Shoten, 1979. 2: 349-582.

⁵ Reff, Theodore. "Cézanne's Constructive Strokes." *Art Quarterly* 25 Autumn 3 1962: 214-27.

⁶ For the introduction and reception of the art of Cézanne into Japan, see Takanori Nagai. *Research of Cézanne – Cézanne in Japan 1902-1945*. Tokyo: Chuo-koron bijutsu shuppan, 2007. See also Yokohama Museum of Art and Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art org. catalogue of the exhibition *Cézanne and Japan*. Japan, 1999.

⁷ Loran, Erle. *Cézanne's Composition*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press; London: University of California Press, 1943/1997. 84f.

⁸ The number with R. means number given to Cézanne's work by John Rewald in his work: *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne. A Catalogue Raisonné*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996. The painting was reproduced in one of the volumes of the magazine *Shirakaba* of 1913.

⁹ Loran, Erle. *Op. cit.* 85.

¹⁰ About this identification of works, I owe much the studies mentioned in note 6.

¹¹ Ryusei mentions 'a distorted vase of Cézanne' in one of his essays written in 1922. According to it, a distorted vase painted by the French master can give vividness to his art which avoid the primitive and naive in a negative sense. Ryusei Kishida. "By-Talk of a painter (Seisaku-yodan)" *Complete Works of Ryusei Kishida*. 10 vols. Japan: Iwanami Shoten, 1979. 3: 95.

¹² Teiichi, Hijikata. *Op. cit.*, 6: 277.

¹³ Denis, Maurice. *Hommage à Cézanne*. 1900-1901 Oil painting. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

¹⁴ R.419 and 420 contain a white 'compotier'. Another yoga painter, Narashige Koide (1887-1931), also composed a white compot with apples in it in his paintings. In one of his portrait of his family with his wife and son, a white compot was set in its foreground, and his son gazes at it.

¹⁵ Bernard, Émile. "Memories of Paul Cézanne." *Conversations with Cézanne*. Ed. Michael Doran. Trans. Julie Lawrence Cochran. Berkley: University of California Press; London: University of California Press, 2001. 79.