

Kansai in Focus: Japanese-style painter Senju seeking to foster students into worldwide artists

Hiroshi Senju, a 46-year-old Japanese-style painter based in New York, was invited to become vice president of Kyoto University of Art and Design, stirring strong public interest. Senju is one of the Japanese artists who are now at the center of worldwide attention.

As the head of the International Research Center for the Arts of the university, he is seeking to nurture fellows and researchers from around the world into worldwide artists under a 'big-boned' program. 'Arts have a big role to play in the 21st century. Let's dispatch messages of world peace from Kyoto with a new style of art education,' he says referring to great expectations he pins on the university.

Hiroshi Senju is the eldest son of the family. His younger brother Akira is a composer and his sister Mariko is a violinist. Based in New York, he spends two-thirds of the year abroad. An interview with him took place in early October soon after he became vice president of Kyoto University of Art and Design. He is a handsome man with a Kabuki player-like face. Despite his handsome look, he can be described as a gutsy artist devoting

his full energies to art.

Essence of arts

He believes that Japan has been dominated by materialism since the end of World War II, with little attention paid to aesthetics and art. Feeling beauty and imagining the mysteries of the universe are the essence of arts, he says. Japan's 50-year postwar period can be characterized as a history of imagination loss.

The art world is not an exception, he says, citing such egoistic movements as modernism. Such movements resulted in the terrorist attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001. The 9/11 incident led him to believe the primary aim of the arts is to create peace and that silence is no longer allowed. When he made up his mind to break his silence, he was invited to become vice president of Kyoto University of Art and Design.

The International Research Center for the Arts invited public participation this summer. Applicants for research center fellows reached 78 people from 20 countries. Five fellows were selected from among them - one South Korean, a German and three Japanese. Two modern art painters -

Tatsuo Miyajima and Yasumasa Morimura - joined the professor team at the request of Senju. All three are extremely busy, frontline artists. The five fellows are scheduled to stay in Kyoto for one year and receive guidance from the three professors concerning creative work. The upcoming program is drawing keen interest in and outside the university because it is expected to become a model for fostering artists.

Soulful art works

The method of selecting fellows is interesting. The selection process centers on comments on each other's work. First, participants recognize each other's differences. Based on that, how to express their own cultures is the next question. Seemingly, it looks easy. But it is actually no easy task to respond to the question, because the belief that exclusiveness and remaining aloof from others are the essence of the arts has taken firm root not only in the old but younger generations as well, Senju says.

Soulful art works stir people's hearts beyond time, national border and religion and remind us that human beings are all the same.

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Senju says the best and foremost education is for professors to continue creating their best works because artists can be recognized as worldwide ones only when their works have been publicly recognized as those which have a clear-cut philosophy and vision toward world peace and environmental conservation. He hopes such a stance of professors will penetrate into fellows in the upcoming program, thereby creating one of the world's biggest art centers in Kyoto.

Next autumn, Senju will hold a world artists summit in Kyoto, the first forum of its kind to discuss a variety of problems in the world. 'The strength of arts will change society in the 21st century,' he says.