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Representations of Original Sin in Modern Japan: Ryūsei Kishida's Acceptance and Recreation of William Blake

Since Japan opened its borders to the rest of the world in the mid-19th century, the country has actively ingested Western culture, not only literature and art styles, but also religion, and has undergone rapid modernisation. Due to a lack of foundation in Christianity and Western classicism, Japanese art in the Taishō period (1912–1926) shows a deviated expression from Western norms. In particular, Ryūsei Kishida's religious paintings from the year 1914 are interesting in that they suggest a peculiar Japanese reception of Christianity and European art at that time. In his ink on paper *Study for Striving of Humanity*, Kishida referred to William Blake's pictures and represented Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel in a unique manner. In this work, he attributed a celebration of productivity to Eve's female body, related to the natural image of the earth. The lower corpse, linked to Adam's birth and Abel's murder, represents the materiality of nature that results in the extinction of the body. Kishida believed there to be a direct connection between the qualities of nature and original sin in terms of both bringing about new life while also leading to inevitable death. The cyclical image of the earth in this work expresses the value of nature and original sin. Furthermore, Kishida considered original sin to have a positive aspect, in that the spiritual conflict it entails promotes inner growth, and nature as positive in that it provides material for art. Projecting his self-image as an artist, Kishida portrayed Cain, who labours in the earth and struggles with his cursed fate.

Kishida shared with the Shirakaba school the belief that sin and nature had ambivalent value. This perception was one of the typical characteristics of Romanticism in Japanese literature during the 1910s. The school praised Blake as a representative of their humanism. Kishida adopted Blake's art as a model for the religious expression he conceptualised in the school, and Kishida's religious paintings, which illustrate the literary thought of the early Taishō period, are notable examples of the Japanese acceptance of Christianity in the 1910s, which was tied to modern concepts of romantic love and individualism.

Keywords: Modern Japanese Christian art, Taishō period, Shirakaba school, Ryūsei Kishida, William Blake

Introduction

Around 1910, William Blake, still regarded with suspicion in British academia, was among the artists accorded special attention in Japan. As Japan lacked a foundation in Christianity and Western classicism, foreign teachers, such as Patrick Lafcadio Hearn, openly praised this unorthodox artist in prominent academic circles.¹ Bernard Leach (1887–1979), who became familiar with Ruskin’s writings in Edwardian London, also arrived in Japan with Blake’s poetry collections.² He joined the literary magazine *Shirakaba* (白樺, 1910–1923), which triggered the Blake boom in Japan. Young readers were fascinated by Blake’s Romanticism, which offered a profound exploration of the inner self through its intense expression of the ego.³

Ryūsei Kishida (岸田劉生, 1891–1929), a painter from the *Shirakaba* school, was a typical Japanese Blakean.⁴ Kishida, who spent his entire life in Japan yet actively sought out a broad range of European art from publications and foreign residents, is known as a leading painter of the Taishō period (大正, 1912–1926).⁵ He is well known for his realistic portraits in the late 1910s that referenced Michelangelo, Leonardo,

¹ Patrick Lafcadio Hearn lectured in English literature at Tokyo Imperial University from 1896 to 1903. See Yura (1981): 691–693. A Greek-born Englishman, he changed his name to Yakumo Koizumi after naturalisation in Japan. He is also known as a writer of Japanese ghost stories, and he influenced Bernard Leach before he came to Japan.

² Bernard Leach was an English painter and potter who studied etching in London before coming to Japan in 1909. He is also known as a collaborator with Muneyoshi Yanagi’s *mingei* [folk crafts] movement in Japan.

³ *Shirakaba* [White Birch] is a literary magazine that Rakuyō dō published from April 1910 to August 1923. The magazine was launched by the *Shirakaba* school, including writers who were graduates of Gakushūin Junior High School, as well as Saneatsu Mushanokōji, Naoya Shiga, Muneyoshi Yanagi, Takeo Arishima, Ton Satomi, and others.

⁴ Michisei Kōno’s and Kōshirō Onchi’s Christian paintings and Kagaku Murakami’s Buddhist paintings also reflect the Blakean taste of the Taishō period.

⁵ Having studied in Venice, Rome, Munich, and Paris, artists of the late Meiji period had made academic oil paintings since the 1880s. See Miura (2021): 258–290. In contrast, artists of the Taishō period such as Kishida, Kaita Murayama, Tsune Nakamura, and others accepted European art via imported reproductions without studying abroad, and painted with individual interpretations and indigenous artistic expressions.



1. Ryūsei Kishida, *Study for Striving of Humanity*, c.1914, Ink on paper, 29.8 × 19 cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

and Dürer, yet his interest in Renaissance art was shaped through the Shirakaba school's discourse on Blake.⁶ He was most prolific in religious paintings around 1914, just before his representative classical and realistic style. Interestingly, his unique depiction of Adam and Eve suggests a particular Japanese reception of Christianity at the time. Recalling their friendship, Leach described Kishida's artistic influences as follows: 'particularly, the British artist Blake seems to have aroused Kishida's fancy, and some of his works, though well-digested, show Blake's effect.'⁷ Based on Leach's recollection, previous studies have discussed the relationship between Kishida and Blake's religious paintings.⁸ However, there is little information on

which of Blake's artworks Kishida referenced and from what perspective he adapted them.

This article examines in detail the background and iconology of Kishida's paintings, inspired by Blake, in contrast to the thought of the Shirakaba school. It primarily focuses on *Study for Striving of Humanity*,

⁶ The Shirakaba group's interest in Renaissance art came about through their acceptance of Blake. Blake's admiration for Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Dürer was well known within the group. See Yanagi, *Wiriāmu Bureiku* (Tokyo: Rakuyō dō, 1914), in Yanagi (1981): 243. After introducing Blake, Shirakaba began to feature these Renaissance artists extensively. Kishida's paintings are notable for adapting the Northern Renaissance, which was neglected by Japanese academics at the time.

⁷ Leach (16 April 1955).

⁸ Tomiyama (1986): 87–88.



2. Ryūsei Kishida, *Study for Striving of Humanity*, c.1914. Oil on canvas, 78.5 × 60.5 cm, Private collection

circa 1914, in which Kishida gathered several of his religious images.

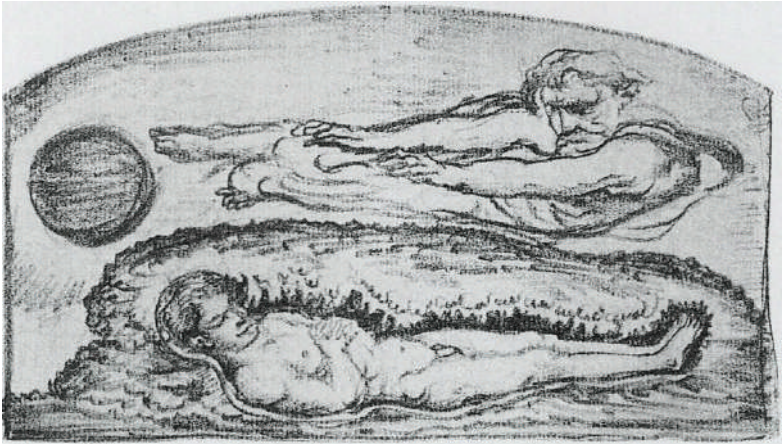
Analysing this drawing will clarify the development of a distinctive representation of Christian imagery within the context of Japanese modernisation. The first part of this article provides an overview of *Study for Striving of Humanity*. Through an image description, it situates this drawing within Kishida's contemporaneous works, and identifies its iconographic source in Blake's pictures. The second part analyses Kishida's unique interpretation of original sin in his essays. The background of his religious perspective was the ideology of the Shirakaba school and their acceptance of Blake. The third part examines the iconology of Kishida's religious paintings to discuss his particular subject matter and the expressions of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the earth in his work.

I.

Kishida's religious paintings can be divided into two types: those based on biblical stories and those that express his own religious views through allegorical figures. *Study for Striving of Humanity*, which depicts Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, can be classified as the former and suggests semantic continuity with his series on the same theme. Kishida created an oil painting with the same title as the drawing, and the two works have corresponding depictions.

In January 1915, Kishida mentioned his plan for 'painting the striving of humanity' and noted that such paintings were still 'schematic'.⁹ Based

⁹ Kishida, 'Danpen,' *Tatsumi* (March 1915), in Kishida 1 (1979): 493–494.



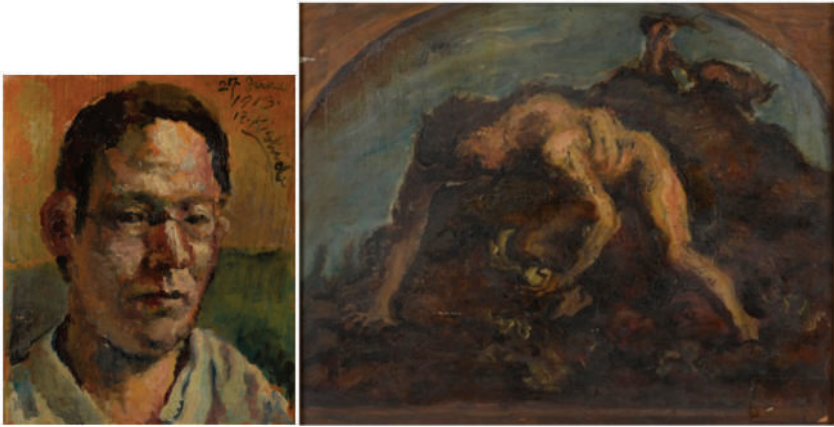
3. Ryūsei Kishida, *God Created Man from the Earth* [Illustration for *Ego* 3, no. 1], 1914.
Charcoal on paper, 8.1 × 14.7 cm, National Diet Library, Tokyo

on this description, it seems that both the drawing and oil painting were studies with the same title.¹⁰ However, compared to the oil painting, which roughly shows the outline and placement of motifs with large brushstrokes, the drawing shows finer details and a more organised composition of multiple scenes. As these aspects allow for a clearer interpretation of the painter's intentions, this article will mainly discuss the drawing *Study for Striving of Humanity*.

Kishida created this work by combining various images that he had drawn. For example, a drawing in *Ego* in January 1914 corresponds to this work in terms of its depiction of Adam and God the Father, except for the sun on the left (Fig. 3).¹¹ The representation of Cain and Abel in this work also overlaps with a picture Kishida drew on the back of his 1913

¹⁰ This title derives from Saneatsu Mushanokōji. Under the influence of Maeterlinck and Schopenhauer, he regarded the desire within each individual as the will of nature and God, and called the orientation of grasping one's own ego through others' egos to harmonise this will the 'striving of humanity'. See Kitazawa (1993): 18–21.

¹¹ *Ego* was a satellite magazine belonging to *Shirakaba* published by Nihon Yōga Kyōkai from November 1913 to January 1915. Saneatsu Mushanokōji, Ryūsei Kishida, Motomaro Senke, and others participated, introducing Van Gogh, Blake, and Dürer to the magazine's audience.



4. [Left] Ryūsei Kishida, *Self-Portrait*, Jun. 27, 1913, Oil on panel, 41.1 × 34 cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto. [Right] Ryūsei Kishida, *Back of the Self-Portrait*, c.1914, Oil on panel, 30.6 × 38.7 cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto

self-portrait (Fig. 4). This work shows Eve in a unique posture: crawling on the ground. This type of nude female figure, with her body closely pressed to the earth, is an image that Kishida repeatedly drew in his works featuring Adam and Eve in Paradise (Fig. 5), and in his religious imagery (Fig. 6). Thus, this work, which is a collection of Kishida's religious images, suggests the painter's intention to summarise his own religious conception and represent it completely.

Kishida's religious paintings highlight Blake's and Michelangelo's influence.¹² As Shūichi Kajioka points out, the composition of this drawing is similar to Blake's illustrations of the Book of Job (Fig. 7).¹³ Kishida represented each section of the work with reference to Blake. First, Kishida's depiction of Elohim's pose at the top, with his body horizontal and arms outstretched, is consistent with Blake's painting on the same subject (Fig. 8). Second, like the depiction of Cain preparing an offering in the lower right of the middle section, the use of fine lines to emphasise the

¹² Segi (1998): 102.

¹³ Kajioka (2022): 19.



5. Ryūsei Kishida, *The Earth*, c.1914, Ink on paper, 14.3 × 18 cm,
The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

nude body's muscular and skeletal ridges and the use of simple shading mirror the physical representations in Blake's early works, such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Fig. 9).¹⁴ All Blake's works mentioned here were included in *Shirakaba* in April 1914, as well as in Bernard Leach's library.¹⁵ As will be discussed in the second part of this article, considering Blake's interest in the Shirakaba school since 1913, his works must have been Kishida's iconographic source.

In this drawing, each section is delimited and intricately arranged. The upper section portrays Adam's creation from dust. The lower part shows Abel as a corpse on the earth, Cain fleeing, and Adam and Eve lamenting the tragedy that has befallen their son. The right side of the lower middle depicts Cain harvesting crops, while Abel catches a sheep on a cliff. The left side of the lower middle depicts Cain burying the slain Abel. The left and right sides of the upper middle show the offerings of

¹⁴ The different intensities of the shading on the left and right sides are considered to have resulted from interruptions of the painter's work on the dominant hand side.

¹⁵ Yanagi, *Wiriamu Bureiku* (Tokyo: Rakuyō dō, 1914), in Yanagi (1981): 11.

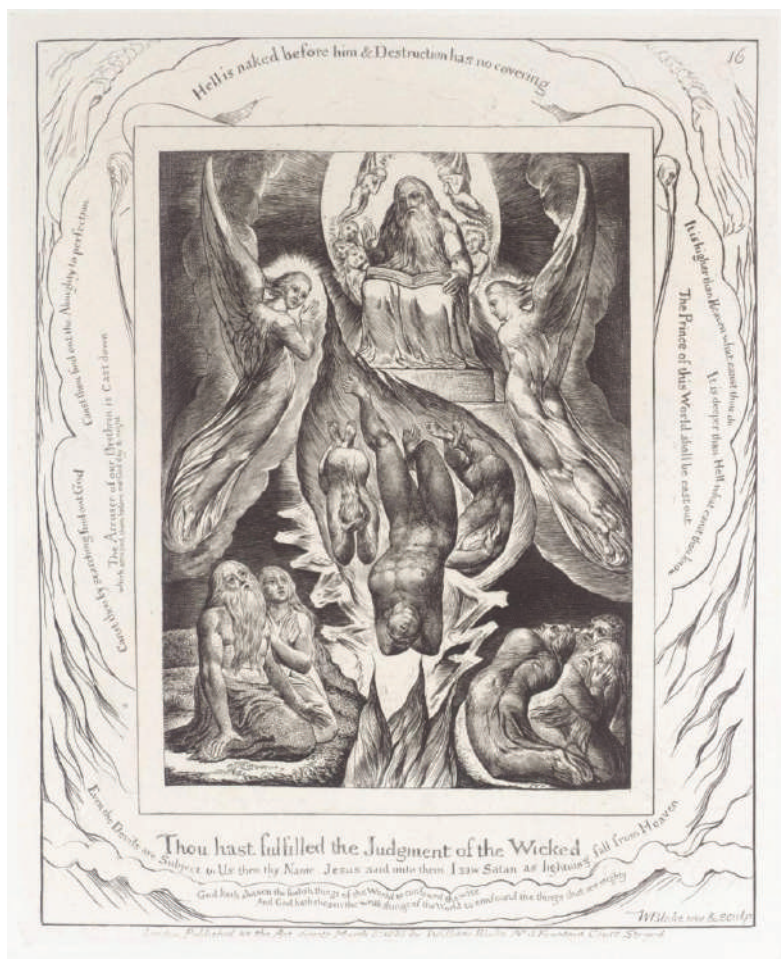


6. Ryūsei Kishida, *The Creation: Naked Woman*, c.1914, Oil on canvas, 31.4 × 40.8 cm, Kasama Nichido Museum of Art

Cain and Abel, respectively. The central circle that these sections surround represents Eve after the original sin, along with the serpent.

This elaborate composition indicates Kishida's intention to precisely express his interpretations of Adam and Eve and of Cain and Abel. However, each image in this work exhibits a deviation from the Western iconographic system. As Michelangelo's *The Creation of the Sun, Moon, and Planets* shows, the sun motif in Genesis should be represented in a separate subject, 'the creation of the sun, moon, and stars'. Therefore, Kishida's depiction of it with Adam and Eve in the same image is unusual.¹⁶

¹⁶ Hall (1974).



7. William Blake, *The Fall of Satan* [Illustration for the Book of Job], 1825, Line engraving on paper, 20.1 × 16.4 cm, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

Furthermore, Cain and Abel are most often represented in scenes of offerings or murder, while the rest of the scenes are rarely represented.¹⁷

¹⁷ 'Abel und Kain', in Kirschbaum (1968).



8. William Blake, *Elohim Creating Adam*, 1795–c.1805, Colour print, ink, and watercolour on paper, 43.1 × 53.6 cm, Tate Britain, London

However, this work presents Cain's burial of Abel rather than the murder, and emphasises the preparation of the offering rather than the dedication. Moreover, this work is distinctive in representing Abel's dead body in the earth. In *Shirakaba*, Blake's painting would have inspired the lower part of Kishida's drawing in its depiction of Abel's grave and Cain fleeing behind their seated mourning parents (Fig. 10). However, in contrast to Blake's painting of Abel as a corpse lying on the ground, Kishida's expression shows further deviation. Given the significance of the resurrection of the body, it is unusual in Christian paintings to represent a dead body in the earth, which anticipates its decomposition. Furthermore, this depiction is particularly unusual with respect to Abel, which references the typology of Christ's sacrifice.¹⁸

¹⁸ The combination of a slain Abel and the figures of Adam and Eve mourning him is usually portrayed as a typology of the Descent from the Cross.

9. William Blake, Illustration for *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 21, 1789–1793, Relief etching and watercolour on paper, 26.8 × 18.9 cm, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC →



I have always found that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning;

Thus Swedenborg boasts that what he writes is new; tho' it is only the Contents or Index of already published books

A man carried a monkey about for a shew, & because he was a little wiser than the monkey, grew vain, and conceiv'd himself as much wiser than seven men. It is so with Swedenborg; he shews the folly of churches & exposes hypocrites, till he imagines that all are religious, & himself the single
 one



10. William Blake, *The Body of Abel Found by Adam and Eve*, c.1826, Ink, tempera, and gold on panel, 32.5 × 43.3 cm, Tate Britain, London

These unique expressions, which are also recognisable in Kishida's oil studies, would have been important to his theme of the 'striving of humanity'. These iconographic deviations suggest that Kishida fashioned this work on the basis of his religious understanding. In *Shirakaba*, Muneyoshi Yanagi (柳宗悦, 1889–1961) introduced Blake as an artist who relativised Christianity.¹⁹ Blake's thoughts and pictorial expressions may be related to Kishida's religious perceptions.

¹⁹ Yanagi, 'Wiriamu Bureiku,' *Shirakaba* (April 1914), in Yanagi (1981): 517–518.

II.

Kishida's adoption of Old Testament themes is limited to the stories of Adam and Eve and of Cain and Abel.²⁰ This fact indicates the significance of the subject of original sin for Kishida. He was a devoted Protestant until the age of twenty-one, but abandoned his faith in the process of becoming a painter.²¹ However, even after Kishida stopped attending church, he referred to sin as stemming from humans' innate impurity.²² This recognition was based on a general understanding of original sin in Christianity. In particular, the prominence of innate sexual desire in Kishida's understanding of sin indicates the legacy of the perception of original sin from his Protestant days. However, Kishida wrote, 'I am too much of a sinner, my sin is horrible. I am too carnal a person. I am a person who can unconcernedly blind his conscience for his lust [...] I long to be saved. But who will save me? [...] It's me.'²³ Original sin is essentially atoned for by the Passion of Jesus. Kishida's awareness is divergent in that he views original sin – sin caused by instinctive desires – as conquerable by the individual. Furthermore, his understanding is unique in that he gives positive significance to the desires linked to original sin. While sin and desire brought him anguish, Kishida also stated:

The man who is not stimulated to grow by suffering is an ordinary man. Those who grow will taste much pain. As the ego grows, so does agony. And the growing agony forces further ego growth [...] Despite the fact that I find carnal desires quite hideous, I have rarely been motivated to abstain from them [...] This is due to my nature, which benefits more from the free use of self-instinct than from abstinence.²⁴

²⁰ Kishida produced ten paintings of Adam and Eve and four paintings of Cain and Abel around 1914 (three of which include both themes).

²¹ Kishida, 'Sainō oyobi gikō to naiyō ni tsuite,' *Gendai no yōga* (July 1915), in Kishida 1 (1979): 536. However, it should be noted that Naomi Tamura, who baptized Kishida, was a unique pastor who preached the ambivalence of sin. Tamura was dismissed by the Japanese Presbyterian Church and considered a heretical figure.

²² Kishida, 'Tenrankai no tame ni,' *Takujyō* (May 1915), in Kishida 1 (1979): 520.

²³ Kishida, 'Futatsu no chikara,' *Ego* (Sept. 1915), in Kishida 2 (1979): 11–15.

²⁴ Kishida, 'Kutsū ni tsuite no zakkan,' *Ego* (July 1914), in Kishida 1 (1979): 426–439.

In the mid-1910s, Kishida regarded overcoming conflict, which entailed anguish and solitude, as a means of stimulating the development of the ego. In this interpretation, the sin and desire that bring about conflict are eventually given positive value as indispensable elements of personal growth. For Kishida, original sin was an ordeal he had to surmount by himself.

According to Kishida, the ego is raised through a struggle with sin and disclosed in artworks. In his words, ‘art is the purification of the ego’, and he associated artistic acts with purifying the innately sinful ego.²⁵ For him, artwork has spiritual value based on the material, yet is embodied by the artist’s imagination and technique.²⁶ He believed that artists also maintained their spiritual value by acting on the minds of others through their work, despite their physical bondage.²⁷ Kishida’s artistic practice was significant for him as a means of giving his spirituality, which suffered conflicts stemming from sinful desire, a perceptible form in the real world and allowing his works’ spirituality to influence its viewers. He sought to overcome the death of physical materiality not through apocalyptic resurrection, but through artistic creations. He had already discarded the transcendent nature of Christ, who brought eternal life to humanity through His Passion and Resurrection.

Thus, Kishida’s uniqueness in perceiving original sin lies in giving it ambivalent value and then seeking the basis for overcoming it in individual worldly endeavours. These particular religious perceptions have a strong connection to the thoughts of the Shirakaba school, with which he was involved at the time. Kishida’s encounter with the school marked a turning point in his career that he called his ‘second birth.’²⁸ He revealed his strong ideological inspiration drawn from the school’s spokesperson Saneatsu

²⁵ Kishida, ‘Tenrankai no tame ni,’ *Takujyō* (May 1915), in Kishida 1 (1979): 520.

²⁶ Kishida, ‘Gaka to kane ni tsuite zakkan,’ *Kagaku to bungei* (Sept. 1915), in Kishida 10 (1980): 678.

²⁷ Kishida, ‘Eisei ni tsuite: jinrui no shi to shizen,’ *Zakkō* (July 1916), in Kishida 10 (1980): 574–576.

²⁸ Kishida, ‘Omoide oyobi kondo no tenrankai ni saishite,’ *Shirakaba* (April 1919), in Kishida 2 (1979): 235.

Mushanokōji (武者小路実篤, 1885–1976).²⁹ In particular, Kishida adopted as his ideal Mushanokōji's concept of ego development through overcoming solitude and fear. According to Mushanokōji, 'a person with strong growth power, whenever he encounters all sin and all enemies, he knocks them into the fire of growth into the ego. For such a person, sin is not sin, and the enemy is not the enemy. Nay, sometimes it is better than the good, and the enemy is friendlier than the friend'.³⁰ His understanding of 'sin', which he described as 'better than the good' in terms of spurring the growth of the ego, mirrors Kishida's. Furthermore, Mushanokōji's essay, in which he remarks that Leonardo and Michelangelo bring 'the fountain of life', illustrates his idea that genius painters and literary figures save and guide people through their artistic endeavors.³¹ This tendency toward Mushanokōji's humanism coincides with Kishida's model of the influence of artistic practices on others.

Within the Shirakaba school, interest in Christianity deepened considerably in the early 1910s, and the school produced numerous literary works on the Bible.³² However, their understanding of Christianity was restricted to the scope of their humanism, which was led by Mushanokōji and Yanagi Muneyoshi. In Japan, after the Russo-Japanese War, increased social inequality and controls on speech bred widespread distrust of the government and reduced state nationalism.³³ At that time, the Japanese sought their modern identity in the self, that is, as individuals, not as a nation. This period of Romantic humanism reached its peak in the Shirakaba school, which participated in the rebellion against the High Treason Incident and the accompanying violent crackdown on intellectual freedom.³⁴ They emphatically voiced the expression of their inner selves and a candid sexuality. In the group's attempt to acquire originality by

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Mushanokōji (July 1912): 95.

³¹ Mushanokōji (August 1912): 47–50.

³² *Shirakaba* published eleven plays and two novels featuring biblical characters from January 1911 to June 1914.

³³ Suzuki (1996): 101–104.

³⁴ Several socialist or anarchist writers, including Shūsui Kōtoku, were arrested and executed upon a false accusation of plotting to assassinate the Meiji Emperor in 1910.



11. Bernard Leach, Cover of *Shirakaba* 4, no. 1, 1913, Woodcut on paper, 19.9 × 15.2 cm, Private collection

participation of Bernard Leach, a member of a circle of Blake enthusiasts in London in the 1900s, was a key catalyst for the school's familiarity with Blake.³⁷ In the early 1900s, Blake's poetry was introduced to Japan in the field of English literature.³⁸ However, it was *Shirakaba* that spread tangible familiarity with his pictures and thoughts. The cover of the magazine on which Leach worked throughout 1913 was inspired by Blake's poem, 'The

following Western historical thinkers, Christ was another ideal model. In their affirmation of Jesus's love affair with Mary Magdalene, and their admiration for him, which equaled their admiration of other writers or thinkers, we find that they revered him as a secular genius and disregarded his nature as the Son of God. Yanagi wrote of his longing not for Christ's miracles but for the romantic love between Christ and Mary Magdalene.³⁵ Mushanokōji named Jesus, along with Tolstoy, Maeterlinck, and Nietzsche, as people who fully utilised the ego.³⁶ Thus, their perception of Christ has commonalities with that of Kishida, who rejected Christ's transcendent nature as the redeemer.

Shirakaba introduced William Blake as an artist who embodied ideas of respecting individuality, worshipping genius, and affirming sexual desire. The

³⁵ Yanagi (July 1910): 55–60.

³⁶ Mushanokōji (April 1911): 29.

³⁷ There was a tendency in 1900s London to associate Blake with bohemianism, Japonisme, and socialism as a signifier of freedom from a society maintaining Victorian moralism. See Satō (2015): 157–182.

³⁸ Satō (2015): 40–43.

Tyger' (Fig. 11). Furthermore, the special issue of *Shirakaba* on Blake in April 1914 was the first publication in Japan to include several of his illustrations. Notably, Yanagi's article in this issue, and his book *William Blake*, published in December 1914, were the first in-depth studies of Blake in Japanese, and they garnered wide support among young artists of the time.³⁹

As Leach stated in the quote in the Introduction, Blake's works were a primary source of inspiration for Kishida. He also positively ingested Blake's thought. In particular, Kishida's interpretation of original sin relates to Blake's religious awareness, as described in Yanagi's writings. Citing Blake's accusation that 'all the Scripture' seeks to punish the energies arising from the body,⁴⁰ Yanagi repeatedly celebrated Blake as a 'poet of the body' who fully affirmed instinctual desires.⁴¹ According to Yanagi, in Blake's conception of all 'affirmations of existence', sinful desires have their proper significance and value.⁴² Furthermore, Yanagi explained the need for a dichotomy in which conflict leads to development as the essence of Blake's philosophy. He wrote,

People have long called our desires sin. Moreover, the doctrine preaches eternal condemnation and recompense for sin. Yet where shall we find the eternal sinner? [...] There is no reason for absolute evil and sin to exist in this world, which is God's creation. Moreover, even such acts always carry a shining aspect [...] He [Blake] advocated a 'Theory of Contrary' in contrast to the existing dualistic thought [...] What receives the grace of God are the heavens, the spirit, and the good deeds. Meanwhile, what receives eternal punishment is hell, the body, and misdeeds [...] These opposites should be affirmed in their existence. There is no progress where there is no conflict.⁴³

This framework of Yanagi's interpretation of Blake overlaps with Kishida and Mushanokōji's ascription of positive significance to desire,

³⁹ *William Blake* is dedicated to Leach. Yanagi's study started in 1913, and by the time Kishida was working on *Study for Striving of Humanity* in 1914, enthusiasm for Blake had considerably deepened in the group. See Yura (1981): 691.

⁴⁰ Yanagi, 'Wiriamu Bureiku,' *Shirakaba* (April 1914), in Yanagi (1981): 538.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 604.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 600.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 574–601.

which originally had a negative value by virtue of its stimulation of growth through conflict.

Furthermore, Blake rejected atonement as a dogma because of his idea that there is no absolute sin.⁴⁴ Given that he preached a dichotomy for mutual progress and did not regard originally sinful desire as punishable, Blake denied the need for Jesus's atonement. This Blakean thought echoes that of the Shirakaba school, which espoused the nullification of the negative values of sin and desire through the struggles of the individual, rather than relying on Christ's sacrifice.

Kishida shared this line of thought with *Shirakaba*, affirming worldly desires and regarding them as the basis for the growth of the ego. In doing so, he formed a unique interpretation of original sin as conquerable through one's own efforts in this life. Blake's thoughts and pictorial expressions, which were supported in this circle, became a concrete model for Kishida to further clarify his understanding. Kishida's recognition of the ambivalent value of sin and desire, and the dichotomous dynamic as grounds for development, were also reflected in his perspectives on nature and women. The third part of this article examines how Kishida's religious views, encompassing his views on nature and women, relate to the iconography of his work.

III.

Kishida's recurrent use of an earth motif in the mid-1910s evokes a particular symbolism. In *Study for Striving of Humanity*, the birth of Adam, the offerings and burials of his children, and the circulation of the dead body revolve around the image of the earth. In particular, the body returning to the earth in the lower part indicates Abel's buried corpse, while implying the retribution decreed for Adam. In this work, Eve, in the centre with the serpent, symbolises original sin as the root of each surrounding scene, excluding the creation of Adam. As an aggregate image of human mortality and the consequences of murder motivated by jealousy and resulting from

⁴⁴ Ibid., 603.



12. Ryūsei Kishida, *The Creation*, 1914, Etching on paper, 12.5 × 12.5 cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

original sin, Kishida might have presented a material body assimilating with the soil.

In the mid-1910s, Kishida used a similar texture to paint both the ground in his landscapes and human skin in his self-portraits and portraits.⁴⁵ This suggests that he superimposed material images of nature onto the earth. According to Mika Kuraya, textural similarities between his landscapes and portraits suggest that Kishida associated the earth with the body as an element symbolising the material aspect of nature, which he considered an object of human struggle for control.⁴⁶

However, Kishida had already attempted to link earth and the body in his religious paintings of 1914 (Fig. 12).⁴⁷ For example, the bodies of the men and women in *The Creation*, with an emphasis on their muscular bulges, are depicted as having a texture assimilated into the surrounding rugged rock. Furthermore, the peculiar representation of Adam biting a rock in this series conveys his becoming one with the ground from inside the body. Compared to landscapes and portraits that show the earth and the body in separate works, the existence of religious paintings showing these elements in the same picture suggests a

⁴⁵ These paintings used bitumen, a brownish pigment derived from asphalt. See Sadao Tsubaki, 'Sōdoshia jidai no Kishida shi,' *Atorie* (Febr. 1930) in *Azuma* (1976): 155.

⁴⁶ Kuraya (2019): 54–55.

⁴⁷ Iwama (2022): 91–93.

closer semantic linkage between the two. In the lower part of *Study for Striving of Humanity*, a body returning to the earth directly reflects the material image of nature that ties these two elements together. After his apostasy, Kishida came to believe that the mortal body does not await resurrection, and that a person can only live within physical limitations. By adopting the stories of the original sin of Adam and Eve and of Cain and Abel, Kishida seems to have represented his materialistic perspective on nature, making death or the extinction of the body inevitable. However, he also remarked that ‘it is only “nature” that I truly fear. And it is only “nature” that I truly love [...] I cannot help but feel deep gratitude and awe before nature that forces me to grow.’⁴⁸ Hence, Kishida might have expressed the positive side of nature, which he both feared and adored, and of original sin, which he valued ambivalently, under the influence of the Shirakaba school. In this work, original sin, the woman who brings it about, and nature, which imposes the doom of death as a consequence of original sin, are directly related in meaning. The positive aspects of these three elements are acutely represented in the central figure of Eve.

Eve’s posture in this work, with her body in close contact with the ground, suggests a semantic association between her body and the earth, as do Eve in *The Earth* and the female figure in *The Creation: Naked Woman*, both of which Kishida drew in the same period.⁴⁹

In an oil study in which the central figure was altered, the flat colouring with rough brushstrokes does not reveal textural details suggestive of a connection between Eve’s body and the earth.⁵⁰ However, in light of the fact that Kishida depicted the body and the earth in the same sense as the materiality of nature, we may consider these female representations as synthesising his field landscapes and the nudes of his wife, both painted in the period 1913–1914 (Figs. 13 and 14). The soft brown gradations of the skin in the nudes and the somewhat coarsely

⁴⁸ Kishida (4 Nov. 1913).

⁴⁹ These two works feature Eve before original sin; she is depicted with her arms and legs folded. Meanwhile, in *Study for Striving of Humanity*, a post-original sin Eve is depicted with her arms and legs outstretched, corresponding with the form of the serpent.

⁵⁰ In the oil-painted version, Adam, Eve, and the sun are depicted at the centre.



13. Ryūsei Kishida, *Near Yoyogi*, Feb. 1, 1914, Oil on canvas, 38.2 × 45.5cm, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

layered and viscous brushstrokes show textural similarities to those of the fields in his landscapes. Specifically, his portrayal of his new wife's body in this way evokes fluffy ploughed ground in sunlight. Moreover, one of the variants of *The Creation: Naked Woman* is on the reverse of a portrait of his wife after giving birth. These works imply forthright images of the mother and the soil as creating and nurturing new life. In this work, adopting a grovelling pose, Kishida might have celebrated women's and the earth's productivity by depicting these two elements in the same scene. Yanagi, whom Kishida referenced, praised libido as the foundation for the birth of all life, arguing that 'all women, all men, all nature, and all



14. Ryūsei Kishida, *Nude*, Jul. 21, 1913, Oil on canvas, 44 × 59 cm, Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki

the universes are all manifestation[s] of sexual power'.⁵¹ Further, Yanagi's writings discuss Blake's affirmation of the serpent bringing original sin as a symbol of 'energy', along with dragons, eagles, and lions.⁵² Based on the above, Kishida's Eve crawling on the earth with the serpent expresses his positive awareness of original sin, not only for its value in urging his own growth, but also as ground to create life.⁵³

⁵¹ Yanagi (1981): 56.

⁵² Yanagi (1981): 543–544.

⁵³ Kishida's association and celebration of original sin and female fertility also appear in his allegorical female figures; he referenced the Madonna and projected the facial features of his first lover and wife. The crops and black soil indicate these transcendental female figures' productivity. However, although they are not accompanied by a baby, their breasts are exposed. Blake's denial of the Virgin Birth was known within the Shirakaba school. For Kishida, the image of a woman as a flesh-and-blood mother acknowledged as having had real sexual relationships could have constituted praise.

In *Study for Striving of Humanity*, the soil's productivity and its connection to femininity are further linked to the image of the earth at the bottom. The root of a plant reaching out to the left of a dead man anticipates the physical decomposition of his body. However, the earth and grass in this iconology are not only cursed beings destroying the mortal body, but also maternal beings producing new life through the same act. Kishida repeatedly represented similar earth imagery. In the woodcut *The Earth*, a figure huddled in the ground evokes a flexed buried corpse, while its shape references a fetus or seed, evoking a semantic connection to the plants on either side (Fig. 15). In Japan, around 1912, the rural earth was one of the major literary motifs against a backdrop of rapid urban development and the popularity of Russian literature from Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, giving special meaning to the earth. In particular, Roka Tokutomi's poetry, which Kishida read before encountering *Shirakaba*, describes the earth as a place of return and the maternal nurturing of life,⁵⁴ precisely echoing Kishida's image of the earth.⁵⁵



15. Ryūsei Kishida, *The Earth*, 1915,
Woodcut on paper, 41.5 × 30 cm, The National
Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

⁵⁴ Roka Tokutomi, 'Nō,' in *Mimizu no tawagoto* 1 [1913] repr. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1938): 210–215. Kishida described his excitement at Tokutomi's report of his pilgrimage to visit Tolstoy in *Junrei kikō* (Tokyo: Keisei sha, 1906). See Kishida, *Diary* (26 Febr. 1907) in Kishida 5 (1980): 27–28.

⁵⁵ In the early 1910s, Kyōkichi Tanaka also expressed the ambivalent value of the maternal earth by combining a figure in the ground and growing plants. These paintings were relevant to the literature of the time as well.

Considering that Kishida embedded maternal significance in the iconology of the earth, it is no wonder that he depicted the grass growing there as a metaphor for human life. Through the earth and grass at the bottom of this work, he projected the sequence of the creation of life through the female body. Through the cyclical image of the earth, Kishida sought to simultaneously express the ambivalent value ascribed to original sin and nature, that is, the basis of birth as well as the fate of death.

However, he regarded such productivity of the earth and women as material matter extracted solely through the efforts of human males. His premarital diary nakedly describes his realisation of ‘creating’ his wife’s nature through sexual intercourse.⁵⁶ Male-centred genius worship was one of the features of *Shirakaba*’s humanism. Kishida’s marriage and his wife’s pregnancy were occasions on which he realised this kind of heroism. Further, he ascribed the highest value obtained through artificial means with respect to the material nature of artwork. Having stated that ‘painting is material’, he considered the medium, like the pigments comprising it, as part of nature and regarded the painter’s creativity as working through these media toward a picture conveying spirituality.⁵⁷ Kishida’s later writings defined his orientation to such an artistic act using the very term the ‘striving of humanity’ that is the title of this work.⁵⁸

It is believed that the painter’s self-image as the creator of such artwork was superimposed on Cain in this work. On the back of Kishida’s self-portrait, dated the 27th of June 1913, is a picture of Cain, as seen in the lower-middle right of this work (Fig. 4). The earth was a special motif for Kishida, symbolising all the material aspects of nature, including the medium for art. In this regard, it is quite conceivable that Cain, as a cultivator of the soil, attracted Kishida’s interest. In particular, Kishida’s iconology indicates the tight association between Cain and the earth through his posture of stooping close to the ground and gazing at the

⁵⁶ Kishida, *Diary* (29th May 1913) in Kishida 5 (1980): 133.

⁵⁷ Kishida, ‘Gaka to kane ni tsuite zakkan,’ *Kagaku to bungei* (Sept. 1915), in Kishida 10 (1980): 678.

⁵⁸ Kishida, ‘Uchi naru bi,’ in *Ryūsei gashū oyobi geijyutukan* (1920), in Kishida 2 (1979): 366–369.

crop, the fruit of his labour, that he holds in his hand. Moreover, based on Kishida's belief in the necessity of conflict to further one's personal development, it is reasonable to argue that Kishida empathised with Cain's anguish over murdering his brother in jealousy. The depiction of Cain's struggle in *Study for Striving of Humanity* entails a complex psychology involving not only despair over the sin of commission, but also penance and compassion for the victim through a unique representation of Cain covering the dead Abel with dirt. In Cain's struggle with his cursed doom, Kishida might have seen his own struggle with desire sublimated into art.

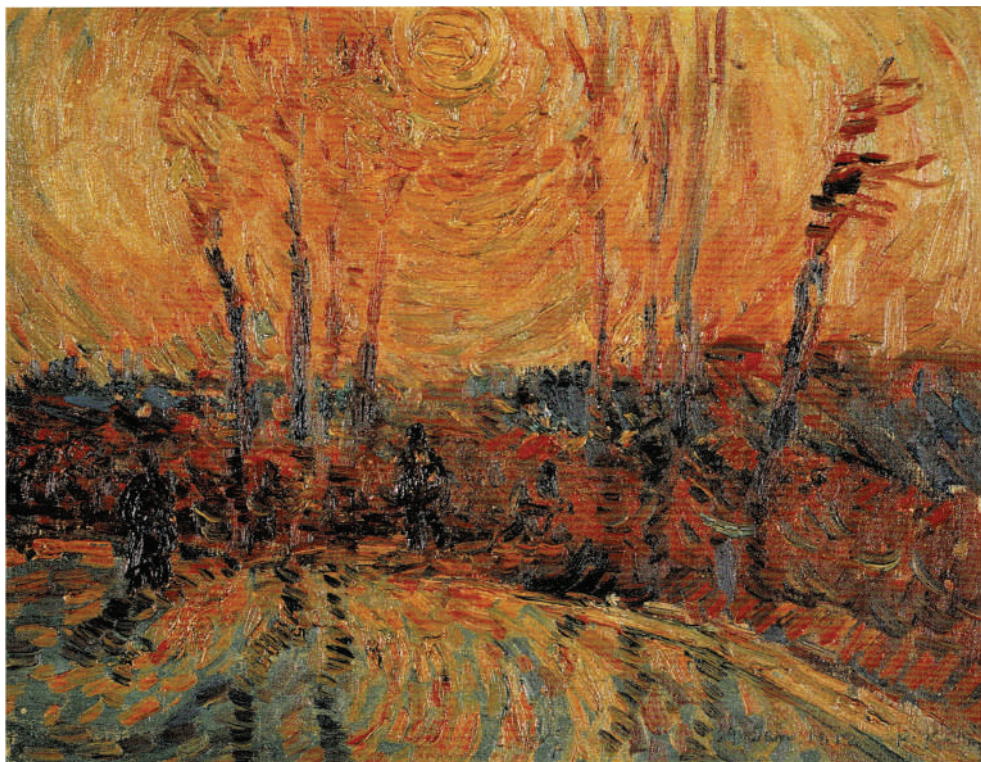
According to the Bible, Cain's descendants were the first musicians and metal workers.⁵⁹ It is probable that such biblical descriptions inspired Kishida to cast his self-image as an artist onto Cain. Furthermore, behind these expressions was the introduction of the image of Cain as a Romanticised hero in the Japanese literary world around 1910. Particularly remarkable is Takataro Kimura's 1907 translation of Byron's play *Cain*,⁶⁰ which dramatically portrays Cain as a protagonist suffering his fate but acting with strong subjectivity. Kimura described Byron's Cain as 'a man of perseverance and stamina struggling against the wilderness of harsh life'.⁶¹ This literary representation of Cain is compatible with Kishida's.

Thus, borrowing the stories of Adam and Eve and of Cain and Abel, *Study for Striving of Humanity* illustrates Kishida's conception of original sin, nature, and art through images portraying fundamental human activities such as birth, death, and labour. The sun at the centre of this work symbolises the Absolute observing these activities. The sun was one of Kishida's main motifs from the beginning, as evidenced by his *Sunset* of 1912, which was strongly influenced by Van Gogh (Fig. 16). Van Gogh repeatedly represented the sun, symbolising the Christian God in the traditional Western iconographic system. However, Van Gogh's sun was introduced into Japan with an additional meaning: *Shirakaba* was

⁵⁹ Gen. 4:21–22 (ASV).

⁶⁰ Additionally, Bin Ueda's collection of European symbolic poems *Kaichōon* (Tokyo: Hongō shoin, 1905) includes a translation of Victor Hugo's poem *La Conscience*, which tells of Cain's remorse after committing murder.

⁶¹ Byron (1907): 34–36.



16. Ryūsei Kishida, *Sunset*, Jan. 29, 1912, Oil on canvas, 32 × 41 cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto

the first Japanese magazine to cover post-impressionism, and its articles, based on Meier-Graefe's writing on Van Gogh, contributed to shaping his image in Japan.⁶² They presented Van Gogh as a fervent artist who continued painting single-mindedly, even after all his hair had burned off under the sun.⁶³ For Japanese artists, Van Gogh's painting of the sun was simultaneously evocative of God, the Absolute, and an artist/seeker

⁶² Leach also knew of and was devoted to Van Gogh within the Shirakaba circle after his coming to Japan. See Yanagi (1914): 22.

⁶³ Van Gogh never actually became bald in his lifetime. Graefe's book that *Shirakaba* referenced conveys a dramatic portrait of Van Gogh with the addition of fictional elements. See Meier-Graefe (1904): 128; and Nomura (2019): 133–140.

following Him, regardless of the physical damage sustained during the journey. Furthermore, the sun symbolised absolute value in various domains, including art, literature, and social thought, in Japan around 1910.⁶⁴ As Akihisa Kawata noted, Kishida and other painters' combination of the sun and the road indicates that the sun was an object of devotion at the end of their path.⁶⁵ Kishida wrote, 'my religious spirit rooted in childhood did not wither with abandoning Christianity [...] I still could not help seeking a God inside.'⁶⁶ Hence, even after realising his apostasy, Kishida did not lose faith in the transcendent God. In the same year in which he created *Study for Striving of Humanity*, Kishida experienced the birth of his first child. The sunrise metaphor for his daughter's arrival, found throughout his diary, is not unrelated to his representation of the sun in this drawing.⁶⁷ In this work, Kishida depicted the sun as equivalent to the Creator watching over the activities of Adam, Eve, and other creatures.

However, Kishida referenced Blake's expression in his singular rendering of Adam, Eve, and the sun in the same image. Blake drew an uncommon representation of Elohim, creating Adam while backdropped by the rising sun (Fig. 8).⁶⁸ Apart from the fact that this work includes the same depiction at the top, a drawing in *Ego* also reveals Kishida's reference to Blake by combining the three elements of God: the Father, Adam, and the sun (Fig. 3). The juxtaposition of God, the Father, and the sun on parallel lines in this work implies their semantic identity and demonstrates that the sun was, for Kishida, an absolute motif comparable to the Creator in the Old Testament. In this work, Adam and Eve are in separate sections, and the image of the absolute is represented differently in each scene. The

⁶⁴ Representative texts include Kōtarō Takamura's 1910 essay 'Midoriiri no taiyō', which discusses the significance of expressing one's inner self in painting, and Raichō Hiratsuka's 1911 essay 'Genshi jyosei ha taiyō de atta: *Seitō* hakkann ni saishite', which discusses women's rights and emancipation.

⁶⁵ Kawata (2005): 539–540.

⁶⁶ Kishida, 'Sainō oyobi gikō to naiyō ni tsuite,' *Gendai no yōga* (July 1915), in Kishida 1 (1979): 539.

⁶⁷ Ryūsei Kishida, *Diary* (10th April 1914) in Kishida 5 (1980): 135–141.

⁶⁸ Another of Blake's paintings that appeared in *Shirakaba* depicting the sun chasing the fleeing Cain (Fig. 10) is also considered to have been referenced.

symbolism of the sun and post-original sin Eve as a mother is particularly heightened in the central circle. Various activities around the circle are portrayed as circulating this image of the creation of life.

Conclusion

Kishida developed his unique religious expression by adapting Blake's art. In *Study for Striving of Humanity*, Eve's body represents a celebration of productivity related to the materiality of nature, as expressed in the earth motif, while the corpse, tied to Adam's birth and Abel's murder, represents an objective view of nature in which physical disappearance is inevitable. The materiality of nature and the story of original sin – simultaneously imposing the doom of death and bringing life – are directly connected in this work. They are summarised in the cyclical image of the earth at the bottom, where the body decomposes and new life grows. Furthermore, for Kishida, original sin had a positive value not only in driving the cycles of life and death, but also in encouraging the artist's inner growth. He affirmed nature as well for providing material for works in which the ego, developing through the internal conflict between sin and desire, is revealed. His self-image as such an artist was superimposed onto Cain, who can be seen labouring in the soil and struggling with destiny.

This positive interpretation of original sin as the basis for birth and the development of the ego was grounded in the humanism of the Shirakaba school. In particular, the framework of Yanagi's essay on Blake is consistent with Kishida's ascription of ambivalent value to sin and nature and his recognition of dichotomous conflict as the ground for development. He further embraced Blake's thoughts, reinforcing the religious awareness formed in his ideological communion with the Shirakaba school. To concretely express his own religious understanding, Kishida modeled Blake's pictures, as seen in the books Leach brought from Britain and those imported to publish *Shirakaba*.⁶⁹ Kishida's religious

⁶⁹ The lists of references at the end of Yanagi's writings include Blake's poetry collections, as well as art books and research books that were not available in bookstores in Tokyo, including the following: Russell (1912); Swinburne (1906); and Wallis (1914): 11.

paintings, which visualise the literary thought of the Shirakaba school, are important illustrations of one aspect of the Japanese acceptance of Christianity in the 1910s, which was associated with modern concepts of romantic love and individualism. Kishida's expression is also linked to Roka Tokutomi's adoration of the earth and Byron's image of Cain as an independent hero. His works might have mirrored the Japanese mentality after the Russo-Japanese War, which was torn between contradictory orientations like ego and society, and urbanisation and nature.

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Gimtosios nuodėmės reprezentacijos modernioje Japonijoje:
Williamo Blake'o kūrybos priėmimas ir perkūrimas
Ryūsei Kishidos dailėje

Santrauka

Nuo XIX a. vidurio atvėrusi savo sienas likusiam pasauliui Japonija aktyviai įsisavino Vakarų kultūrą – ne tik literatūros ir dailės stilius, bet ir religiją, sparčiai modernizavosi. Dėl nepakankamo krikščionybės ir vakarietiškosios klasikos pagrindų pažinimo Taishō laikotarpiu (1912–1926) Japonijos dailė pasižymėjo nukrypimais nuo vakarietiško normų. Ypač įdomūs 1914 m. sukurti Ryūsei Kishida religiniai paveikslai, perteikiantys krikščionybės ir Europos dailės receptijos to laiko japonų dailėje savitumą. Tušu ant popieriaus sukurtoje „Žmonijos siekių studijoje“ Kishida referavo į Blake'o kūrybą ir savitai pavaizdavo Adomą, Ievą, Kainą ir Abelį. Savo kūrinyje jis šlovino Ievos moteriško kūno vaisingumą, susijusį su gamtiniu žemės įvaizdžiu. Žemiau pavaizduotas kūnas, susijęs su Adomo gimimu ir Abelio nužudymu, simbolizuoja gamtos materialumą, kuris lemia kūno išnykimą. Kishida manė, kad gamtinės savybės ir gimtoji nuodėmė tiesiogiai susijusios, nes jos abi atneša naują gyvybę ir kartu lemia neišvengiamą mirtį. Ciklinis žemės vaizdinys jo kūryboje perteikia gamtos ir gimtosios nuodėmės reikšmę. Be to, Kishidai gimtoji nuodėmė atrodė teigiamas dalykas, nes jos sukeltas dvasinis konfliktas skatina vidinį augimą, o gamta tuo požiūriu vaidina teigiamą vaidmenį, nes suteikia medžiagos meninei kūrybai. Apmąstydamas savo, kaip menininko, įvaizdį, Kishida pavaizdavo Kainą, kuris dirba žemę ir grumiasi su savo praeiksmu.

Kishidos įsitikinimas, kad nuodėmė ir gamta turi kelialypę prasmę, sieja jį su Shirakabos mokykla. Toks požiūris buvo vienas iš būdingų XX a. antrojo dešimtmečio japonų literatūrinio romantizmo bruožų. Mokykla šlovino Blake'ą kaip jų humanizmo atstovą. Kishida rėmėsi Blake'o kūrybą kaip mokykloje įgyto religinės raiškos supratimo modelį, ir Kishidos religiniai paveikslai, iliustruojantys ankstyvojo Taishō laikotarpio literatūrinę mintį, gerai perteikia japonų XX a. antrojo dešimtmečio krikščionybės suvokimą, susijusį su moderniomis romantinės meilės ir individualizmo sampratomis. Reikšminiai žodžiai: modernusis japonų krikščioniškasis menas, Taishō periodas, Shirakaba mokykla, Ryūsei Kishida, William Blake