

JAPAN'S art world was rocked this spring by the alleged plagiarism of famed Italian painter Alberto Sughi's works by a Japanese painter, Wada Yoshihiko, who had just won the Minister of Education Award of Art, which is awarded for outstanding artistic achievements. Many of Wada's works were found to closely resemble Sughi's works. Wada steadfastly denies plagiarism, but by all appearances, his paintings are strikingly identical to Sughi's in all details such as a model's costume and position.

Media Frenzy

As soon as Wada's suspected plagiarism was uncovered by the media in late May 2006, they went into a frenzy over the case, reporting on the close similarities between Wada's and Sughi's paintings, and on the great number of Wada's works that appeared to be copies of Sughi's.

In the process, it transpired that an anonymous letter about Wada's suspected plagiarism had been received at the end of 2005 by a museum where Wada's private exhibition was then under way,

After probing the matter, the Agency for Cultural Affairs announced that there was no choice but to recognize that Wada's works were copies of Sughi's. The Agency's judgment prompted the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology to revoke the prestigious award it gave Wada in March. It marked the first time for the Minister of Education Award of Art to be revoked since it was set up half a century ago. The Ministry then decided to revamp the award selection system by adding more people to its selection committee. Incidentally, Wada was also stripped of the Seiji Togo prize and lost his membership of the influential artists' group Kokugakai (Society of National Paintings).

Since the suspicion arose over his works, Wada has insisted that he had such a close relationship with Sughi that they often exchanged opinions on art, that they have painted in collaboration using the same motifs to produce works in different colors and that his works represent an homage to the artist he respects. Sughi, for his part, countered Wada's contention, saying he had never collaborated with Wada and that when he met Wada, he did not even know Wada was a painter.

Plagiarism or Not?

– Japanese Painter Allegedly Copied Italian Master's Works –

By Ogata Shinichi

and that the very work of Wada's that earned him the coveted Togo Seiji Memorial Sompō Japan Museum of Art Grand Prize, named after the late Japanese modern painter, was found to have close similarities to one of Sughi's paintings.

Photo: Kyodo News



Sughi (left) and Wada with their paintings.

Picasso and Braque

Wada likened his relationship with Sughi to that between Pablo Picasso and George Braque, both of whom are credited as the originators of Cubism and had a great impact on the entire art world in the early 20th century. Some of Picasso's and Braque's paintings are so similar that it is difficult to tell which is which. Wada cited the case of the two great painters perhaps because he wanted to say that his works naturally resemble Sughi's because he and Sughi exchanged opinions and painted in collaboration. But Wada's contention can hardly be accepted since Sughi denies any form of collaboration.

Speaking in generalities, one may say that an artist can create his own original work by injecting new creativity into a work by another artist. But are Wada's paintings at a level worthy to be discussed in such terms? I do not think so. In comparing the works of both men, I actually printed some of Wada's paintings and the counterpart works of Sughi's at full size and then superimposed them on one another. I was surprised to find that the two painters' works are thoroughly identical in every detail, not only the model's figure, pose and position but also in the finely drawn lines which are supposed to reflect a painter's propensity.

Wada is said to have demonstrated outstanding technical skills in copying European classical paintings while studying in Italy in his younger days. I wonder how Wada felt while painting with motifs identical to Sughi's for more than a quarter of a century after returning from Italy.

JS

Ogata Shinichi is the Chief Editor of the Cultural News Section of Kyodo News.