

Japanese Treasure: A Kato Painting Portfolio

By Scott Skinner

It always starts with the most innocent of messages, and this was not an exception. The fax read: “An interesting rarity coming up at auction. See if you have it already or if you are interested?” My interest piqued, I read on:

“Tatsusaburo Kato. *Kites of Japan, A Vanishing Art*. Tokyo 1971. One color-woodcut and 13 colored original drawings on Japan-paper by Tatsusaburo Kato, each with a seal and in an envelope of Japan-cardboard together with a pattern-drawing in two colors and a paper kite. Original folder in cassette. One of only 100 produced copies.”

It was an auction description sent by a German print dealer. I was confused and thought this must be a description of the soft-cover, self-published *Japanese Kites: A Vanishing Art*, by David Kung. I knew Kung’s book was published earlier—in 1962, in fact—but thought this might be another edition of the same material. Kung’s book opens with a modern woodblock print and has 14 color kite paintings included. It just seemed strange that this description sounded so similar. Perhaps something was lacking in the German-to-English translation, but I was confused.

I should note that the David Kung book was one of my first kite-auction purchases. At the 1984 AKA convention in Nashville, my first, during the frenzy of bidding on Hyperkites, Actionkites, Goodwind Stars and the like, this brown-paper-wrapped book was circulated through the gallery. As it passed, I didn’t see much, but I did see that there were color paintings inside and knew that I had to go to the mat for it. I’m really glad not many people saw the inside of this treasure, because I only had to spend \$100 for what is still one of my most cherished possessions. I’m pretty sure there was a second Kung book auctioned that night and I wonder who has it now?

Back to my confusion. I faxed my friend for details and clarification and, without really adding much to the original description, he urged me to obtain this portfolio without fail (he did say that this was number 10 of the 100 originals). I’ve learned to trust this particular friend and his judgment, so, from long distance, I told him: “Get that Kato portfolio!”

I arrived home from vacation and the package had arrived. Inside the cardboard box, made especially for it, was the lush, raw-silk covered portfolio. About 15-by-20-inches in size, it opens to a cover sheet with just a bold Kanji Tako kite image. Then another sheet, with the legend *Kites of Japan, A Vanishing Art*, Edition Unida, Tokyo. Finally, two more sheets, in English, stating, “Original kite painting by Tatsusaburo Kato and colophon: All the paintings are



A classic rendering of a Suruga kite.



A devil figure guzzles sake

executed by Master Kato Tatsusaburo, who has been painting and making kites for more than 60 years. This is an edition of exactly 100 copies. All kites were painted by hand by the master. This is number 10.”

My hands still tremble a little when I reopen this “moment in time” portfolio, made only three decades ago, but at a period when so many of the Japanese master kite makers were passing or finding that no one could continue their tradition. I knew at least one famous kite making family with the Kato name: Suruga kite makers from Shizuoka Prefecture. One look at the portfolio convinced me that I was looking at work from this family, as five of the 18 paintings included are Suruga kites. (I met the granddaughter of this man Kato Tatsusaburo in Daimon, Japan, two years ago.)

Kato-san chose to paint kites from most of the regions of Japan: the Aomori Hiroshi, Kyushu Tobata-dako, Tokyo Semi-dako, Chiba Sode-dako, Tsugaru Rokkaku, and Hamamatsu Tonbi-dako. Interestingly, he also painted the Kyushu Mukade-dako—the centipede-style kite that was extensively imported at about the time the portfolio was

produced. Kato-san’s paintings are at their finest on the kites he professionally made, the Suruga. His versions of the Magoji-dako and Aomori Hiroshi are especially pleasing, as they are renditions seldom seen today.

There is a bonus to the wonderful paintings by Kato-san. A modern reproduction of Hokusai’s famous view of Fuji—the one with the Tonbi-dako flying above clouds—is included along with an actual kite, a Kaku-dako. It is unbridled but sticked and ready to go.

Altogether, this is a wonderful collection of one man’s work, but it is also a time capsule of a period when there was a real danger that this art might be swallowed whole by the rapidly changing Japanese economy and lifestyle. Thankfully, due to the popularity of Japanese kite festivals, the wild popularity of Japanese kites worldwide, and particularly due to the strength of their kite clubs, traditional Japanese kite art continues and in my opinion is very strong today.



An elaborate rendering by Tatsusaburo Kato of a segmented centipede kite.