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“Marked: Shima Seien and the Curse of a ‘Female Artist’”

In her 1918 self-portrait *Untitled*, Shima Seien (1892–1970) depicted herself with a large birthmark on her face. Although she had no such birthmark, Seien used the device to express her feeling that being a woman painter in patriarchal Taishō (1912-1926) society was akin to being permanently marked. As a prominent woman painter, Seien faced severe gender discrimination and sexist vitriol. Seien was expected to adapt her self-presentation to fit the homogeneous and non-threatening feminine stereotype of what I term the “female artist.” I argue that Seien painted *Untitled* as a rebuttal to her misogynistic treatment. She addressed the oppression of the “female artist” stereotype by crafting her painting as a subversive work of *bijinga*, a genre of painting that upheld narrow ideals of feminine beauty and was commonly associated with women artists. She invoked a painting by Kitano Tsunetomi (1880-1947), the male painter she was most often accused of imitating, to address the devaluation of her artistic abilities. Finally, Seien used the device of an unfinished painting in the background of *Untitled* to proclaim an alternative vision of herself as an artist that was rooted in her individuality and not her gender. As a rare, overt commentary on sexism by a Taishō artist, *Untitled* is important evidence of how women artists, despite their disempowered positions, crafted strategies of resistance to patriarchal systems.