

Introduction

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Saburo Hasegawa's suddenly high-profile work and ideas resonated in a mid-twentieth-century American art world that had been largely leveled and restructured by the turmoil of World War II and its geopolitical aftermath. Modernist players and an existential ethos from Europe as well as philosophies from Asia eventually supplanted American scene regionalist artists and figurative and social realism genres. Japanese artists who had established careers in America during the pre-war period were impacted in multiple ways. Ineligible for naturalization until the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, West Coast Issei artists like Chiura Obata struggled to reestablish themselves after wartime internment. Among the most prominent prewar New York artists were Eitaro Ishigaki, who was deported as a Communist in 1951, and Yasuo Kuniyoshi, who, although his work was the subject of the Whitney Museum of American Art's first solo retrospective in 1948, and he was one of four artists selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in 1952, was no longer considered to be at the vanguard. After Kuniyoshi's death in 1953, Saburo Hasegawa was seen as representative of a new generation of Japanese artists who were conversant in timely issues like abstraction and Zen, and wholeheartedly welcomed to America.

When Saburo Hasegawa died in San Francisco in 1957 at the age of fifty, he was among the most renowned contemporary Japanese artists on both the East and West Coasts of the United States. He had achieved this status in three short years, in part because of his charismatic intellectual persona and in part because of the unparalleled critical acclaim generated by his many American solo exhibitions and provocative curatorial projects. His rapid rise to art world visibility in New York and California was also unarguably due in some significant measure to the enthusiastic support he received from artists Isamu Noguchi and Franz Kline, as well as the philosopher Alan Watts. But after Hasegawa's untimely death from cancer of the mouth, awareness of his work and his contributions to bridging the cultures of East and West declined just as precipitously. He became little more than

an arcane footnote in Noguchi's biography, the backstory for the curious title of a painting and a few drawings by Kline, and the subject of an obscure unpublished essay by Watts.

The Saburo Hasegawa Reader aims to help reanimate Saburo Hasegawa's voice, ideas, and legacy. It was conceived as a companion to an anthology of original essays about Hasegawa's relationship with Noguchi that serves as a catalogue for a traveling exhibition that will be on view in both the United States and Japan in 2019, organized by The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum in New York.¹ The images and essays in that richly illustrated volume focus largely on Noguchi's and Hasegawa's creative work as visual artists during the 1950s. This publication, in contrast, highlights the work Hasegawa accomplished as an intellectual, essayist, teacher, and mentor, and is devoted to texts by and about the artist, those written during his lifetime as well as more recent assessments.

Hasegawa's invisibility today understandably relates in part to the artist's early death. But it is also symptomatic of the particular obscurity that often envelops artists whose work was created in the in-between spaces between worlds—in this case, cultures once referred to as Oriental and Occidental.

The intent of *The Saburo Hasegawa Reader* is to construct an art historical locus for reconsidering Hasegawa's complex network of ideas. It features various primary-source materials by and about Hasegawa that have been difficult to read for decades in Japan and the West due to archive inaccessibility and translation issues. The current *Reader*, available as a freely distributed, downloadable e-book and simultaneously as a print-on-demand volume, is a wonderful testimony to the growing potential of new publishing formats and technologies.

Most significant, the first section of the *Reader* features the long-awaited publication of three original essays commissioned in 1957 by Paul Mills, then head of the Oakland Art Museum (now the Oakland Museum of California), for what was initially conceived as a Hasegawa memorial volume to be entitled "Saburo Hasegawa: Artist of the Controlled Accident." In addition to Mills's introductory essay for this ambitious project, the proposed volume was to feature contributions from Alan Watts, Hasegawa's colleague, who was at the time dean of the Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco, and Elise Grilli, a longtime friend of Hasegawa in Japan, where she was the art editor for the *Japan Times*. Mills further planned to include photographs of Hasegawa's art along with some of the artist's own recent writings in English.² Among these was an article published by the *New York Times* in March 1954 on Hasegawa's Zen poetics, drawn from a koan known as "Huineng's Flag," and an apparent follow-up to material presented during Hasegawa's lecture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York a week earlier. Also planned for publication in the volume were Hasegawa's poem "Haniwa," the title of which refers to Kofun-era terra-cotta funerary figures, the unpublished essay "Notes on Painting," and his essay "My House," first published in English by the University of California Press in 1956.³ These writings are included in the *Reader*.

Despite the renown of the authors, the proposed Hasegawa memorial volume languished for several years. It seems the job of gathering photography for the book proved too daunting, publishing grew increasingly expensive, and funding was elusive. Eventually the project was dropped, and until now the manuscript has been accessible only by visiting the archives of the Oakland Museum.

The second section of the *Reader* features two brief essays by figures who knew Hasegawa, written quite recently. These remembrances, by the artists Billy Al Bengston and Mel Strawn, who were Hasegawa's students at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now the California College of the Arts), document very personal artistic engagements with their teacher. Bengston was an undergraduate student; Strawn was a graduate student and also the printer of Hasegawa's *Numbers One to Ten*.

The third section of the *Reader* features letters from Hasegawa to Noguchi. Hasegawa's voice as a friendly provocateur firmly rooted in Japanese aesthetics (and writing in English as a second language) comes through perhaps most directly in these informal letters—always warm and personal yet still didactic.⁴ The six letters featured here date from 1950 and 1951, the first year of their friendship.⁵ One, from late August 1950, shares some of the parables told about the Zen priest Ryokan, who lived during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Another letter, written to Noguchi two weeks later, expresses Hasegawa's sense of isolation in Japan and his admiration for artists like Marcel Duchamp in New York. A month later, Hasegawa tells Noguchi about a new calligraphy journal. Three letters from January 1951 range from a discussion about art journals to a New Year's greeting with an original drawing (see fig. 5) to an extensive compendium of translations of new poems from Hasegawa's ongoing, rurally based haiku class, which first convened just after World War II. Hasegawa's letters to Noguchi illuminate the soul of an honest teacher who was himself contemplating the relationship of Zen, haiku, and rituals like the tea ceremony to contemporary abstract art.

Today it seems ironic that Hasegawa's assertion of the enduring value of classical Japanese sources in the conceptual rebuilding of contemporary culture in Japan would lead to the artist's eventual estrangement there. His Japan-centric teaching was apparently perceived as out of step, an unwelcome evocation of the excesses of nationalism at a highly politicized time. And so Hasegawa left Japan for New York and then San Francisco, where he often wore Japanese kimonos and *hakama* trousers (he had often worn hard-to-find blue jeans while living in Japan). Bert Winther-Tamaki has suggested that Hasegawa's success in the United States was part of a postwar "Japan Boom," with Hasegawa joining the ranks of teachers like D. T. Suzuki for Americans curious about Zen.⁶ Because he promoted the culture of tea and classical sources from Asian philosophy and art history, Hasegawa was even compared to Okakura Tenshin, and indeed he regularly wrote about Okakura in his own essays.⁷ One can imagine the response to Hasegawa's lectures—which

might have included such humble homilies as the ones that appear in his letters to Noguchi—during his multiple appearances at the Eighth Street Club in New York or the Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco.

The final section of the *Saburo Hasegawa Reader* features fifteen articles, essays, and interviews that Hasegawa authored, translated from Japanese for the first time. Almost all of these are from the postwar period, spanning 1948 to 1955. We have emphasized Hasegawa's postwar essays to reinforce one of the major goals for this volume—expanding awareness about Hasegawa's American legacy. In the mid- and late 1930s, Hasegawa also published a number of other texts (not included in the *Reader*)—most important, a 1937 book about abstract art.⁸ This project instead focuses primarily on another moment in his career—the one following his 1950 engagement with Noguchi, which led to Hasegawa's eventual relocation to America. As such, these later essays convey some of the ideas and nuance that helped Hasegawa achieve impact and success in the United States.

One prewar essay is nevertheless included here, on the Muromachi-period ink artist Sesshu (1420–1506). Although his early artistic training in painting was based in fauvism, Hasegawa wrote his 1929 art history thesis for Tokyo Imperial University on Sesshu. After graduation, Hasegawa then left Japan for three years on an extended postgraduation tour of America and Europe, where he was profoundly influenced by the work of abstract painters in Paris, including Piet Mondrian. It is notable that upon his return, the first essay he published, appearing in 1934, was entitled “On Sesshu.”⁹ It is the first published essay in which Hasegawa asserted his professional commitment to engage with classical Japanese sources, but it is also important because Sesshu would remain one of his most favored aesthetic touchstones. In this essay, Hasegawa makes no effort to reconcile or integrate his very different contemporary interests with his art historical appreciation of Sesshu.

Hasegawa's art making and writing stopped abruptly with the advent of World War II, throughout which the artist lived with his family in rural poverty. Hasegawa first emerged from this isolation in 1948, and the *Reader* includes two essays from that moment. One is entitled “New Art,”¹⁰ and the other is simply called “Sesshu.”¹¹ In this later reflection on Sesshu, produced almost fifteen years after his 1934 essay on the same subject, Hasegawa exhibits a much more personal approach in which he recalls his own aesthetic responses to encounters with specific Sesshu works. He compares the “luxuriant” sadness of Sesshu's art to the mood created by Beethoven's music and goes on to address the relative difficulties of assimilating both Chinese and European artistic canons.

This commitment to imagining a complex aesthetic internationalism is at the core of Hasegawa's contribution. In “New Art,” Hasegawa lays out his own anguished ambivalence about the direction of contemporary art. He postulates a new cosmopolitanism for Japanese artists and cautions against seeing abstraction as something “easy to either dismiss, or unconditionally praise and servilely emulate.” Nevertheless, he also envisions a time when his peers can “elucidate the true value

of traditional Japanese art as a reflection of deep, noble Oriental thought.” The use of words like “noble Oriental” may seem awkward when we read them today. But the embedded ideas of promoting a more globally inclusive sophistication about art and philosophy are still powerfully relevant. In his own painting during this time, Hasegawa experimented with imagery referencing landscapes; stylized figures, including his children; and forms drawn from Japan’s ancient past, including—for one department store commission—some of Japan’s earliest coins.

The next group of articles in this last section of the *Reader* is drawn from Hasegawa’s transformational first encounter with Noguchi, in 1950. Two brief newspaper accounts published on consecutive days recount Hasegawa’s impressions of the artist’s first conversations with Noguchi, while Noguchi was recuperating in the hospital from a bout of dysentery that left him physically weak and emaciated—but still restless and eager to learn.¹² The essay “Days with Isamu Noguchi” further documents the mutual excitement and inspiration of their rich cross-cultural conversation about finding ways to activate Japanese sources in abstract contemporary art.¹³ For Hasegawa this meant a commitment to working largely in ink.

Hasegawa’s 1950 essay “Rambling Words on Song-Yuan Flower-and-Bird Painting” reveals the artist’s Sino-centric engagement with the *literati* tradition (referred to as *Nanga* in Japanese).¹⁴ Extolling the philosophies of emptiness, the essay simultaneously explores the ideas of Europeans like Paul Valéry. Although two essays Hasegawa wrote in 1951, “Mondrian”¹⁵ and “Arp,”¹⁶ have European contemporary artists as their focus, his critical approach is nevertheless to again apply a cross-cultural lens. He relates Mondrian’s reductive orientation to Japanese geometries, including the rectilinear simplicity of the seventeenth-century Katsura Imperial Villa outside Kyoto, as well as the tatami mats then ubiquitous in Japanese homes (a theme he would later develop in his American essay “My House”). Hasegawa connects the amoeba forms that typify Arp’s oeuvre to the forms found in the rock garden of the Zen temple Ryoan-ji, and notes the potential of Arp’s dynamic curves to inspire new developments in abstract calligraphy.

A 1951 essay, “Letters from France and America,” was first published in the inaugural issue of the avant-garde calligraphy journal *Bokubi* (Beauty of Ink).¹⁷ Here, Hasegawa relates the work of contemporary abstract painters Franz Kline and Pierre Tal-Coat to Asian calligraphy and Daoism. The same year, in his essay “Making Katsura Imperial Villa Abstract,” Hasegawa describes his aspiration to create works using unique block prints fashioned from *kamaboko-ita*, the boards used for making steamed fish cakes in Japan.¹⁸ He explains his inspiration as a gesture meant to interrelate the models he found in the work of artists like Brancusi and Mondrian with the elegantly reductive aesthetics of the famous Katsura Imperial Villa. In “Calligraphy and New Painting,” from 1952, Hasegawa discusses the relationship of New York School paintings by Lewin Alcock to the new generation of Japanese abstract calligraphers whose work Hasegawa had juried for publication in the “Alpha section” of Japanese calligraphy journals including *Sho no bi*

(The Beauty of Calligraphy) and later *Bokubi*.¹⁹ The 1953 essay “New Photography and Painting” references “the special place in [his] heart” held for photography.²⁰ It appeared at the same moment as Hasegawa’s collaborative reengagement with photography. This opportunity was somehow connected to an invitation to create experimental work that would be published in *Asahi Picture News*, a platform now recognized as one of the most important forums of its time for avant-garde photography in Japan.

Three essays from 1955 complete *The Saburo Hasegawa Reader*. In “The Fate of American Artists,” Hasegawa documents some of the highlights of an amazing year he spent in New York, 1954, and his ambivalence about the growing westernization in Japan.²¹ His essay “Present-Day American Abstract Art” provides background for the contemporaneous exhibition Hasegawa curated at the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, which featured the work of several American artists, including Josef Albers, Ibram Lassaw, and Hans Richter.²² And finally, in a lengthy and melancholic interview published as “Nationalism and Universalism in Japanese Art,” Hasegawa further expounds on the imbalance of contradictory aesthetic and social issues he was then considering—issues that prompted him to relocate to the United States.²³

This is only a limited selection of Hasegawa’s writings. The *Reader* does not include essays by Hasegawa on European artists such as Henri Rousseau, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, or on Japanese artists such as Sotatsu, Narashige Koide, and Ike no Taiga, or on Otsu-e, the folk art that he loved. Nor does it reproduce Hasegawa’s important exhibition reviews, catalogue essays, or letters to other artists. But taken together, we trust this selection of essays will engage the reader in thinking about the challenging and still relevant topics Hasegawa framed.

It is our aim that this collection of writings by and about Saburo Hasegawa will be useful in multiple contexts. First, they offer significantly expanded resources for appreciating the artist’s historical contribution during the 1950s, when Hasegawa rose to postwar prominence in America by interrelating topics including Japanese architecture as well as Zen and Daoist traditions with that period’s existential ethos. Second and more generally, these essays help situate Hasegawa’s contributions within the interstitial space of cosmopolitan transnationalism: his work “in between” East and West, which once helped render his achievement invisible, now throws it into sharp relief. Hasegawa’s goals as an artist were not just “retinal”—as Duchamp would have said, nor based in glib appropriation. For much of the preceding decade of the 1940s, Hasegawa’s art practice had been replaced by a philosophical probing of Chinese and Japanese aesthetic sources; this introspective engagement with the spiritual dimensions of East Asian culture was not superficial. When Hasegawa emerged again as an artist after the war, he redoubled his straddling of theory and art practice, just as he blended classical and contemporary references in art (“The classics are a mirror,” he wrote). His models were the monks who were *literati* scholar-painters, who he claimed were in fact avant-garde.

Hasegawa decried the potential for Western hegemonic modernization and globalization to erase the rich culture and history of Japan, which he saw as profoundly influencing Western modern art, at the same time that his own artistic purview was in fact thoroughly global and modern. That was the tightrope he walked—and why he often used the word “anguish” to describe his personal negotiation of a path between cultures. In his writing and work, Hasegawa embodies a multivalent navigational framework that is temporally and philosophically open to seemingly contradictory threads of inspiration. During his lifetime and today, Saburo Hasegawa can be recognized as a uniquely synthetic theorizer about the deep network of sources for contemporary art—and about the potential for creating a utopian aesthetic vision rooted in different continents, epochs, and cultures in a newly holistic world.