

PART IV

Selected Essays by Saburo Hasegawa

On Sesshu

Not many attempts have been made to address the history of artistic sensitivity in Japan as such, as an evolution of sensitivity with a unique development or transformation of its own, attempts which are distinct from art history as an academic discipline like social history, history of ideas, and cultural history.

The aesthetic quality or value of *haniwa*,¹ *dotaku*² (especially the one in Mr. Ohasi's collection, adorned with line drawings), or the architecture of Ise, Astuta, Izumo, and other shrines, has almost never been given its due. These things demonstrate serenity, freedom, naivety, *lyricism*,³ and an ever-present ability to organize the whole into a tight and magnificent artistic construction. It is precisely these characteristics that constitute the most beautiful tradition inherited by all the finest representatives of Japanese art ever since.

From Buddhist art in the Suiko, Hakuho, Tenpyo, and Konin periods, the Fujiwara clan's aristocratic taste in art, the dynamic art in the Kamakura period, the static art (I think we may call it that) in the Ashikaga period to the decorative art in the Oda–Toyotomi period, *ukiyo-e* in the Tokugawa period, the literati painting, the Shijo school to oil painting in the modern era, despite changes in appearance, the undeniable fact is that all these forms one uninterrupted history, that of the beautiful sensitivity we see in *haniwa*, *dotaku*, and the architecture of old shrines remaining alive throughout its diverse incarnations.

This essay aims to reconsider Sesshu as a major figure in such a history of Japanese artistic sensitivity.

Sesshu worked mainly in ink painting. Also, he was a Zen monk.

Nothing has proven more misleading than these two facts for our choice of criteria to evaluate Sesshu by.

If one is to concentrate on the artistic quality of a work, it becomes clear that there is no correspondence or resemblance between Chinese and Japanese ink paintings, except for the fact that numerous Song–Yuan ink paintings were imported to Japan during the Ashikaga shogunate. Also, the facile interpretation of the Ashikaga-era ink painting in Japan as sharing characteristics like *kotan*⁴, *inton*,⁵ and *chusho*⁶ with its Chinese counterpart only betrays the consequences of an utter lack of serious

confrontation with the actual objects, based as it is on a simplistic association of the fact, evident in the works, that the Japanese ink painting of the time followed a path to pure abstraction as works from China were imported.

Sesshu's is an active art, dripping with lushness.⁷ Except for the most superficial resemblance in appearance, Chinese ink paintings and Sesshu's are completely unrelated.

Also, that Sesshu was a monk only points to his position in society. The simple fact is that he was part of the intelligentsia of the time as well as a painter. While the majority of the Ashikaga-era Zen monks were far more active in their social function as "intellectuals" than as "priests," even these monks regarded Sesshu as an eccentric who devoted all his time to the sole activity of painting. His art is not that of Zen Buddhism.

Sesshu was a painter born in Japan.

—That is all we need to say.

Now, in the authentic history of painting, one that traces the transformation of painting per se, one that is the pure chronicle of painting as a department in the history of Japanese artistic sensitivity, what is it that Sesshu did in that history?

The artistic quality of the *emaki-mono*,⁸ the mainstay of the Kamakura-period pictorial arts, reached its highest achievement in illustration. Whether there was *kotobagaki*⁹ or not, figures in the picture were always characters in an event to be recounted, and as such (this applies to animals as well) their facial expressions, movements, and narrative functions were rendered through the operations of mobile, beautiful lines. Similarly, landscape was nothing but a background and a prop for the event to be told. Nature was beautifully represented, although its role was essentially that of illustrating human life.

While the Kamakura-era *emaki-mono* (together with the contemporary paintings that shared its quality under different guises) attained as much perfection as was possible within its limits, its further continuation produced only stylization and ossification. Ashikaga-era painting veered away from this road to corruption, restoring a pure painting that could be appreciated for its merits alone, an awareness of pure picture plane endowed with a self-contained artistic construction. Nature, too, became for the painter a motif in its own right (not as a background for a narrative or human life). Thus painting in Japan was guided back on its right path, and the solid foundation was laid upon which its diverse early modern styles could flourish.

A crucial development in the Ashikaga era was of course not the doing of Sesshu alone, but he was its most central figure, and it is an undeniable fact that without him this spectacular resurgence would have been impossible.

Take for example the *sansui*¹⁰ in the Manshu-in temple, one of his signature works, and compare it with any Kamakura-period masterpiece. Sesshu's line certainly lacks the fluid beauty of a Kamakura picture, but does it not demonstrate more clearly than anything else the two features mentioned above—the tight,

broad, purely pictorial construction in its full glory, and the solid intensity resulting from working with a motif directly taken from nature?

(To confuse “working with a motif obtained from nature” with “copying nature” is the error stemming from a jejune understating of “painting.” At the base of Sesshu’s work was a deep, direct observation of nature—the powerful intensity of his pictures emerged from it. But he never copied nature.)

Already a man of great reputation during his lifetime, he became after his death an idol in the history of our painting and remains so to this day. He is a presence to be reckoned with for all artists, no matter which school they belong to. And without exception, all the painters attentive enough to reckon with Sesshu learn from his impressive ability to construct as well as the approach to nature at the origin of his intensity. The purer, the larger their respective painterly talents were, the deeper their debts to Sesshu are.

He established a magnificent, beautiful tradition for posterity. At the same time, the highly attuned ability for artistic construction and the direct approach to nature that he demonstrated were precisely what has always incarnated itself in the works by the finest representatives of Japanese art, even though the forms, or sometimes the magnitude this incarnation assumed could be different.

Although he traveled to China, worked in a style that up to his time had belonged to China, and particularly in landscape almost invariably borrowed the Chinese scenes, he was the most (not conventional but) traditional maker of a Japanese art in his talent, sensibility, and approach.

(I am not one to boast the absolute superiority of Japanese art over that of other countries or peoples, let alone consider it inferior to others in an undue modesty. I only have deep affection for and interest in the diverse, ever-changing forms that arts in this island empire have assumed in their continual flourishing throughout many ages and transformations, and am particularly fascinated by the single thread somehow weaving those flowers together as they bloom and fall. My wish is to determine as exactly as possible where the great flower of Sesshu can be situated in this lineage.)

Let us next clarify how Sesshu occupies such a position as has been described above, by observing in further detail various aspects and qualities of his works.

As with every great artist, Sesshu, too, “had to paint.” What to paint welled up in him unceasingly, and unable to control it, he painted unceasingly.

Kyou Ryoshin, who traveled to China on the same ship as Sesshu, had the following to say about the artist’s creative energy in “Tenkai togaro-ki,”¹¹ an account he wrote on Sesshu’s residence in Bungo¹² in Bunmei 8:

Through the open door let us look in at his seat. In every direction, paints and brushes lie disordered among large and small paintings. Some are on finely woven silk and other on coarse paper. There are rolls of finished and unfinished paintings rising to the ridge of the roof, while mounted paintings hang on the walls. Thus he studied colors and painted the seasons all day long.¹³

This was what Sesshu's studio looked like at the time. Paints and brushes are scattered all around, and the room is strewn with large and small, finished and unfinished works, with fine silk and coarse paper, some already begun and others still untouched, rolled up and filling a whole shelf or mounted and hanging on the wall. Amidst it all, Sesshu spends every day playing with painting tools. Furthermore, his pictures comprise all kinds of subjects and manners. To quote from the same account:

He learned the Taoist–Buddhist figures from Wu Daozi of Tang dynasty and Liang Kai of Song dynasty; mountains, water, trees and rocks he sometimes painted in the style of Ma Yuan and sometimes that of Xia Gui. His handling of ink is vigorous, his depiction of nature elegant in the manner of the monk Yu Jian of the lake Xi Hu.¹⁴ He deftly paints clouds and mountains with only a handful of strokes to astound the viewer's eyes, like Gao Yanjing¹⁵ from the Hsi-yu.¹⁶ For water birds and mountain animals, he follows the example of Yi Yuanji of Changsha, for representations of flowers and birds in color, that of Qian Xuan of Zha Xi creek, and for dragons, tigers, monkeys, cranes, reeds, geese, and egrets, that of Fachang (Muqi), emulating nothing shoddy. His ink paintings of demons and Zhong Kui come quite close in grotesqueness to those by Gong Cuiyan.¹⁷

This description is utterly reliable, for throughout “Tenkai Togaro-ki,” Kyou Ryoshin repeatedly demonstrates his acumen as a viewer of painting. Moreover, it is a firsthand account of what he was able to witness. (In general literature on Sesshu is rarely dependable, not just the later accounts but even those written by the contemporary Zen monks of the late Ashikaga era, mostly hagiographic concoctions exaggerating his reputation and virtuosity. Ryoshin's account is an exception, the most trustworthy of all and precious for the author's thorough understanding of Sesshu, together with his unembellished writing style.)

Sesshu's boundless creativity compelled him to translate everything he saw and felt into a quick succession of pictures. This took protean manifestations, as we have seen. Needless to say, he did not just emulate any style unscrupulously, which is evident from the description quoted above as well as the works themselves.

What we are to read between these lines is Sesshu confronting all kinds of motifs with every weapon in his armory. Truly, he painted as though he “ate and drank it.”

The impressive number of works now attributed to Sesshu, amounting to several thousands, seems to be no exaggeration. Even excluding ones that are of dubious authenticity or lesser quality (although there are many inferior works among those solidly attributed to him, I have a peculiar affection for them, for even in those instances Sesshu remains true to himself), one can still count dozens of different pictorial styles.

The best known anecdote about Sesshu, reported in the Honcho-gashi,¹⁸ one that has him paint a mouse with his tears, is of course of dubious veracity and has no value as a historical document (“Even as a child Sesshu loved painting

and completely neglected the reading of sutras. One morning, the abbot, indignant, tied him to a pillar in one of the monastery's halls. As the sun went down, taking a bit of pity on his novice, the abbot went to the hall in person and was about to untie Sesshu when he saw a surprised mouse scurrying out from under the boy's knees. Startled, the abbot rushed to chase it away, fearing that Sesshu might get bitten. The mouse, however, showed no sign of moving, and the priest warily took a closer look. In his day-long sorrow, Sesshu's tears had dropped down and puddled on the hall's floor. Using his big toe as a brush, he had then drawn such a lifelike figure of a mouse in its sprint. Amazed at the drawing's virtuosity, never again did the abbot punish his novice" —Honcho gashi, vol. 3.) Yet, it utterly deserves to be savored as a fable indicating Sesshu's absolutely unstoppable passion for artmaking. Furthermore, given that he lived to the venerable age of eighty or even beyond (documents differ on his age at death, some claiming eighty-three, others eighty-seven, none of them securely confirmed. We only know that he had passed away by Eisho 8); this short essay cannot hope to detail his individual works.

With respect to composition and brushstroke, the Manshu-in *sansui-zu*¹⁹ reproduced in the previous issue is a good example by which to measure the competence of Sesshu in his prime, and the *sansui nagamaki*²⁰ in the collection of the Mori family, at least several tens of feet wide, is the one to be singled out as his largest, highest masterpiece. It is precisely these works that are alpha and omega to an understanding of Sesshu, who knew how to build like a monumental architecture and to sing like a great symphony.

To state my conviction candidly, it is the *sansui-ga*²¹ in the South Song imperial court by the likes of Ma Yuan and Xia Gui that has demonstrated the noblest and deepest achievement in the history of this genre, an achievement unsurpassed to this day. As Kyou Ryoshin describes in his aforementioned text, Sesshu modeled the best of his *sansui-ga* on these painters. However, he never attained their perfection and depth. The history of Japanese painting was too young, indeed far too young to attain their stature. That history, still in development, absorbed the precious nutrients like high formal beauty and profound observation of the natural world from the Chinese examples, but was unable to achieve their perfection. It is here that we find the very nature of painting, or its history as an organically linked chain of pictures, as a life process.

The formal beauty and the observation of the natural world Sesshu absorbed from South Song imperial painting would become the best nutrient for the later history of Japanese painting. At the same time, the youthfulness evident in his works (which prevented him from perfection) was in fact that of the history of Japanese painting itself. This youthful life force went on to manifest itself in all kinds of splendid artistic activities during the subsequent Oda–Toyotomi as well as Tokugawa eras.

Sesshu's *sansui-zu* in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum has a text inscribed by the artist's own hand, which makes it a crucial document, but its aesthetic value as a work of art is no less important. Commonly known under the moniker "*haboku sansui*,"²² the appropriateness of which I will not discuss for the moment (historians still argue over whether the technique here should be called "*haboku*" or "*hatsuboku*,"²³ but we do not need to address it here), the picture represents a corner of nature purely, most simply in ink gradations alone, and yet capturing all its essence.

Let us begin by acknowledging how most astonishing this is as a work. Notice how, with only a few brushstrokes, the number of which one can count on fingers, it represents them all, water, earth, mountains and rocks, trees and houses, air and light, even the breath of nature itself! Transposed on the diachronic line of art history, too, the value and significance of this picture is quite considerable. First, seldom had nature been represented with so much candor, so much richness, with every sensorial organ open to the full. Moreover, not once had such a feat been accomplished like this, with ink gradations alone. Armed with the weapon that was his ink, Sesshu perfectly succeeded in capturing the *tones*²⁴ of nature. Even though Japan before Sesshu had given birth to many beautiful works, never had the depth and the three-dimensional extension of the natural world been made so important a motif as in this picture, and especially, never had they been rendered so well with the varying tonalities of ink (*gradation*).²⁵ By its nature, the predominantly linear art from the Fujiwara to the Kamakura periods in particular had disregarded this. As a consequence, it was on the path to degeneration, all depth and lushness vanished from its picture plane. What a momentous event it was for a work like this one by Sesshu to emerge, brimming with just what was lacking at this moment! It would not be an overstatement to say that with this painting a new leaf was turned in our history of late modern painting. From this moment onward, not only the decorative screen painting in the Oda-Toyotomi era, the early hand-painted *ukiyo-e* Koetsu, Sotatsu, and many others, but all the styles and schools during the Tokugawa era as well, based the construction of their pictorial plane on gradations of ink, until we learned the new way of seeing nature through light from impressionism, introduced to this country by Kuroda Seiki, then took, as our understanding of modern painting in Europe deepened, cues from various solutions offered by modern European painting, solutions to the oldest yet always new problem for pictorial art, namely the relationship between the two dimensions (picture plane) and three dimensions (nature). This is nowhere more evident than in the "atavistic" art, the Tosa school, of course, but including Koetsu, Sotatsu, Korin, Tamechika, and others. The most conspicuous of the differences that emerge from comparison between their works and pre-Ashikaga era examples with identical subjects and methods is that while the older pictures largely turned on color and line, the pictures of these early modern painters possess an altogether different sort of lushness, for they established their tonality by gradations of ink.

Without exception our early modern painting had recourse to ink gradation as the basis for constructing a picture, and Sesshu was the first and the most thorough to demonstrate this approach. This work (the *sansui-zu* in the Tokyo National Museum) is the most eloquent example of that.

There are many other ways to corroborate the important place Sesshu occupies in the history of painting. However, the two points just mentioned, first, the high formal beauty and the profound observation of the natural world that he learned from the South Song court painting and demonstrated in the *sansui-nagamaki* in the Mori family collection, and second, the new solution to the problem of representing three dimensions on a picture plane through gradations of ink, these were precisely the most precious legacy he left for posterity.

Sesshu's achievements were innumerable. The greatest of them, however, is the fact that he "painted good works."

Art history is written by artists, by artworks—above all, "good works." Sesshu managed to rewrite the history of Japanese art.

Lastly, what is the most important lesson for us to learn from Sesshu? "Paint with your feet if your hands are tied," just as he did in that most beloved legend: that passionate, vigorous desire to create.

Translated by Gaku Kondo

Sesshu

As I recall, it was summer. I was looking at a catalogue of antiquities, the *Shobi Documents*, which I had borrowed from my father's bookshelf. I came across "Kato Sansuizu (Summer and Winter Landscapes), pair of hanging scrolls by Sesshu, Collection of Manshu-in" and was brought to a halt. After browsing through a variety of photographs in all ten volumes of this illustrated catalogue, I returned once again to Sesshu's summer and winter landscapes and muttered to myself, "These are like Cézanne." At the time I was still a high school student¹ and a research student at the Shinanobashi Western Painting Research Institute, a know-it-all youngster sporting a few pimples on his face. I had a vague notion that no painter could be as great as Cézanne, and yet in this catalogue I encountered the brilliant paintings by old Japanese painters like Sesshu, Sotatsu, and Korin, whom I had no knowledge of, and was utterly surprised. Above all, I was struck by Sesshu's *Kato Sansuizu*. I then decided to pick out and study only the Sesshus in the ten volumes. The *Kato Sansuizu* was indeed the best, but the other paintings were remarkable too. Of course I was familiar with the name but I had no idea until this time that Sesshu was a man who painted works with such grandeur. Sitting in a room on the second floor of my house where the Rokko mountain alps could be seen from the north side window, I stared intently at the catalogues for the longest time and was deeply moved, hardly bothered by the heat of the evening sun pouring in from the west porch.

It was later that I was finally able to see the work with my own eyes and to my heart's content in the office room of the Kyoto Museum,² thanks to the efforts of Mr. Mochizuki Shinjo. By then I was a lad wearing a college cap, a student at the University of Tokyo.

It was around the time a special summer lecture series was being held where Mr. Fukui Rikichiro spoke about the ink drawings of the Ashikaga period, mainly those of Sesshu. I stayed in Kyoto to attend the lectures every morning. As Mr. Fukui was staying at the same inn, at night I would visit his room and discuss various topics with him.

One time at a second-hand bookstore in Kanda, I found a reproduction (dated Meiji 40,³ published by Shimbi Shoin) of Sesshu's *Sansui Chokan* (Landscape of

the Four Seasons/Long Landscape Scroll, collection of the Mohri Family). I paid a good forty yen for it and enjoyed looking at it day and night. All the while I muttered to myself, "This is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony." It was around this time that special exhibitions commemorating the Gotaiten⁴ were being held, and the very *Sansui Chokan* was on exhibit at the Kyoto Museum. I took another trip to Kyoto, and once again thanks to the kindness of Mr. Mochizuki, I was given the opportunity to look at the work quietly on my own, with the glass display case opened, during the early morning hours before the museum was opened to the public.

I decided to write as my graduation thesis a "Sesshu Research." I visited my senior adviser Tanaka Ichimatsu, who often gave me generous guidance.

Whenever I traveled abroad, I put the *Sansui Chokan* reproduction in my bag and carried it with me. After traveling around the world with me, it has now returned home. It remains by my side to this day.

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts provided me with one person in charge of storage (?)⁵ and several in charge of transport. Whatever work I wished to see, they would bring from storage and show me, one after another. There was an ink *sansuiga* on a pair of folding screens that was ascribed to the brush of Sesshu. The storage person asked me what year it was made and I told him that it was probably around the end of the fifteenth century. He was astonished and said something like, "So when Columbus discovered America, Japan already had such a magnificent painter!" Upon departure, I asked for a copy of the photograph of the folding screens. A couple of days later I arrived at my older sister's apartment in New York, and the photograph followed right after. I was impressed with the efficient service of this American museum. When I showed the photograph to a Catholic priest who often stopped by my sister's place, he raved about it, saying that he had never seen a painting that had touched upon Mother Nature in such a profound way. If I recall correctly, I later sent the photo as a gift from New York to my brother Tani Shinichi in Tokyo.

Sometimes, if I saw an excellent work of art from a different period in Italy or France, I would take out the Sesshu from my bag before the excitement subsided and look at it quietly on my own. Sesshu always looked magnificent. I cannot forget the joy I would feel then, a joy tinged with nostalgia.

It was around this time that I read in a newspaper that Shimazaki Toson also kept a reproduction of Sesshu's *Sansui Chokan* in his bag on the two trips he made abroad during his later years as the Chairman of the Pen Club. I learned later that when Toson died, according to his will, his surviving family buried this reproduction with his remains.

When I returned to Japan, I attempted to do a free style imitation of Sesshu's *Ekadanbizu, Huike Offering His Arm to Bodhidharma*, in oil on a size 80 canvas. It took me about three years to complete the work.

The Otsuka Kogeisha, a company that specializes in the reproduction of artworks, created an exquisite reproduction of Sesshu's *Kato Sansuizu*. The way they mounted the painting was not quite to my taste so I made a special request to buy

the reproduction in its bare state. There was an antique dealer who used to frequent our house when I was a young boy. He was a man who never fawned over his customers and therefore never made much money. He ended up being quite poor in his later years but he loved me like I was his son. It was this old man who made a simple but nice mount out of pieces of cotton for the *Kato Sansuizu* reproduction by the Otsuka Kogeisha.

I am sitting right by the hanging scrolls reproduction as I write this, which I have put up on my coarse, thatched wall.

I have a special fondness for Sesshu. And yet I know nothing of this painter. But then again, nobody knows much about Sesshu. For one thing, no one knows for sure when and where, and at what age this master artist died. We cannot give specific examples to explain what kind of paintings he was making before the age of fifty around the time he returned to Japan from China, much less the ones he made during his youth. There is a significant number of paintings in the world that are attributed to his brush. But I cannot say which ones are for sure made by him. Fortunately, however, there are several works that are proven to be painted by the hand of Sesshu. Thanks to these works, we do not have to doubt the fact that this great painter existed. Then again, some say he lived until the age of eighty-seven, while others say he was eighty-three. Either way, the number of surviving works are too few to understand in full the true value of an artist who lived a life of incessant production for eighty some years, tackling various subject matter in diverse painting styles.

In order to achieve an accurate understanding of Sesshu, one must devote himself to a very unglamorous, arduous yet often unrewarding and time-consuming research. I suppose I am already a dropout but there are a handful of art historians who continue to devote themselves to the task. In order for an accurate account to be made, not only of Sesshu but of Japanese art history on the whole, steady efforts of immeasurable scale need to be accumulated for many years to come. I have utmost respect for the art historians who have chosen to tread this difficult path.

Now, what is it about Sesshu that attracts us the most?

I, for one, am drawn into Sesshu's "luxuriant sense of sorrow." This, I believe, is the true nature of Sesshu.

Let us recall that famous anecdote of him. Sesshu loved to paint so much that he skipped out on studying Buddhist sutras at the temple. After his painting tools were taken away and he was strapped to a pillar for punishment, he rubbed his tears on the balk with his toes and drew a mouse that looked so real as if it were about to move. I do not know who thought of this story, but I find it extremely interesting that the person who first told the story, as well as the people who thought the story was something to be passed down, saw the true image of Sesshu in both the indefatigable creative spirit and the sadness that filled the heart of this little boy as he slept away in the very position he was strapped with the relief of being able to paint the mouse.

The story of Sesshu being asked to become the official painter for the Ashikaga shogunate but nominating the young Kano Masanobu instead because of his own status as a monk also seems to be a mere legend. Regardless of the truth, Sesshu did spend a large part of his life painting quietly in solitude in the temple retreats of Suou and Bungo provinces. I don't think we need to romanticize this story, but if we just try to visualize the look on his face as he quietly devoted himself to painting, away from Kyoto, in the heart of nature's bounty, we can for sure see the great soul of a man who could not help but observe the world in quiet solitude. And in this great soul, Sesshu continued to harbor a unique, luxuriant sense of sorrow.

I do not know what kind of ink, ink brush, and paint brush Sesshu used, and how he employed them in his work. But I do know that he used these tools to their fullest, that he daubed ink on paper as he wished until the painting surface became heavy, even slightly grimy with a dull blur.

Whenever I hear of a Sesshu painting, I am overcome by the urge to see it. And so I go see the work. There is nothing in particular I want to see; I go so that I can feel in my heart the enduring resonance of that faint, gray tone soaked with a distinctive sense of sorrow. If I can grasp at least an impression of that sensation, I come home feeling satisfied. And when I am basking in the afterglow of that impression, my heart eases. I feel a bit sentimental and yet I enjoy the moment. I also like the feeling of being wrapped in nostalgia every time I encounter a Sesshu, imagining how he daubed ink on his paper until his painting achieved that certain look. Sesshu welcomes us in a warm embrace. When we are embraced by him, we feel that the world is enveloped in a calm and soft air but is also anchored at pivotal points by thick, colossal pillars, where the wind blows and the air shines, and all beings, with their dignified presence in the world, move about making subtle noises. The leaves on the trees wave pleasantly while the water brims with surface tension, or ripples, or flows, or stands still, or becomes clear again. Men and horses either tread fast or walk slow, yet each in its own way muses in thoughtful silence, while the ships head out under full sail or quietly return to the docks . . . Sesshu's work provides us with a true-to-life reality and that of more tangible nature than in real life. His paintings also enable us to feel our own presence immersed in a pleasant reality, a reality that surely only Sesshu can make us feel. The reality of his paintings is exactly the reality we have around us, and yet it is a reality that is heart-warming and pleasant.

Another thing. The reality posed by Sesshu is certainly a "pleasant" reality, but beyond that, it is not altogether special. We are incredibly free in front of this reality; we can enter and exit it at will.

And all of this is made possible through Sesshu's signature style of grimy gray tones. Sometimes, however, Sesshu is held off at a respectful distance. For example, Shiga Naoya politely rejected Sesshu in his work *Za Uho*.⁶ *Za Uho* was a catalogue of Eastern antiquities that Shiga compiled as a record of the days he

spent in the Kansai area after the Great Taisho Earthquake⁷ when he lived his life buried in Eastern antiquities. Many important artworks were conscientiously photographed and introduced in this catalogue, which was certainly a great achievement. However, Sesshu is nowhere to be found in this catalogue. Shiga takes the trouble of mentioning in the preface that the works by Sesshu—which he likes—are not included because he was not able to have them photographed. I actually find it interesting and quite honest that Shiga went out of his way to justify, in this awfully short preface, his act of eliminating Sesshu. The catalogue *Za Uho* is a significant piece of work by a unique literary figure that documents observations of Eastern antiquities. However, the attitude toward appreciating Eastern antiquities that surfaces from it is highly individualized, almost unreserved. Which I think is fine, and this is precisely why I believe Sesshu was excluded from the book. Shiga writes, “Sesshu is an esteemed painter . . .” but goes no further. I think this is Shiga’s confession that he is overcome by a sense of awe when it comes to Sesshu. The truth is, I think, Shiga was in awe of Sesshu but decided to hold him off at a respectful distance by not including him in the book. I think one of the reasons for this was because the reality in Sesshu’s work was, as I said, “certainly a pleasant reality but beyond that, not altogether special.”

There is another reason. Sesshu was a painter in a million, an individual who was in essence a stern and intense sort. Shiga, being deeply immersed in art as he was, of course came to understand this nature of Sesshu and felt reluctant to exclude him from the book. But the fact of the matter was that including an artist as such would mean the complete defeat of Shiga’s ego as a literary figure.

I think it was all for the better that Sesshu was in the end not included, although with a perfunctory excuse.

I took up Shiga Naoya and his catalogue *Za Uho* here only because it seemed like an appropriate example, but this sort of perspective is not just limited to Shiga. Upon encountering Sesshu, many are in fact overcome by a sense of awe and respectfully dismiss or pass by him.

But I think this is where art begins.

A man enters Sesshu’s painting room and chats away.

Well, well, I see that you have studied quite a bit here as you usually do. I get it, the *doshaku*⁸ figures you have here are Go Dogen (Wu Daoxuan)⁹ of the Tang Dynasty and Ryo Kai (Liang Kai)¹⁰ of the Song Dynasty. You have certainly captured them well. And the *sansui* paintings. When it comes to portraying landscape, master, yours is second to none. Even in the land of the great Ming, one would never come across work as incredible as this. Ba En (Ma Yuan),¹¹ Ka Kei (Xia Gui)¹² . . . I know you particularly like the work of Ka Kei. Although your work may be in the style of Ka Kei, there is certainly a difference in nature. I mean, look at the sturdiness of the lines of these rocks and trees . . . and my gosh, now this is something quite

unique. What a magnificent ink black you have here. It almost looks like water is dripping from the painting. Ah yes, master, you went to the West Lake (Xi Hu) for pleasure when you traveled to Ming China. But not everyone who has visited the West Lake can capture so well the fine, graceful aura of the young monks by the West Lake. And now this in the style of Ko Genkei (Gao Kegong)¹³ amazes me; the shape of those clouds, the look of the mountains. Look how the puffy shapes rise with just one quick stroke of the brush. By the way, the water bird, the beast, some kind of living creature here is done in the style of Eki Genkitsu (Yi Yuanji)¹⁴ of Chosa (Changsha), and you have colored the flowers and the birds in this style too. Even the fastidious Sen Shunkyo (Qian Xuan)¹⁵ didn't always make great work like this. And finally with the dragon, the tiger, the gibbon, the crane, the common reed grass, the flying goose, and the egret, you are rivaling Monk Houi Mokkei (Muqi Fachang),¹⁶ who is now at the peak of his popularity. Every single work is absolutely brilliant. By the way, master, everyone praises and raves about Mokkei, or Houi, or the Monk, as if no other painter can outclass him, but I just recently heard that in the great land of Ming, he is not so popular. In fact, I learned that in some writings on art, his work is easily dismissed as being "crude." How annoying that there are so many unwise men who know nothing about this, whereas you master, you have such a discerning eye. I mean, no one would ever call these paintings crude. In other words, you have absorbed and incorporated only the good aspects of Monk Mokkei. Speaking of your discerning eye, you have Kyo Suigan (Gong Kai)¹⁷ here. His work may be somewhat bizarre, but he has remarkable class as a painter. After all, he produced old style *reisho*¹⁸ and is considered to be a disciple of Bei Futsu (Mi Fu)¹⁹ and Bei Yujin (Mi Youren),²⁰ the father-and-son founders of *bunjinga*.²¹ The mythical figure Shoki (Zhong-kui) you have here is in Kyo Suigan's style, is it not? My, my, I am completely awestruck.

Sesshu did not look displeased; every now and then he would show a bland smile and nod while his guest talked on. If at times he stopped to stare at the shapes of the clouds or the trees outside the window, it meant that he was thinking to himself that he will do the clouds like that next time, or that he needed to get more creative with the way he dotted the leaves. The guest had more to say.

Master, as I have read the writings of your dear friend and teacher Ryoshin,²² I feel that I am now well versed in the kind of painters and painting styles you look to for reference. Honestly, I feel that there is no other artist in Japan besides you who can so freely absorb the painting styles of the magnificent artists of the Great Ming. Recently, however, I heard a peculiar story and wanted to ask for your opinion. That is why I came to see you today. Priest Osen Keisan²³ seems to be younger than you but I hear that he is an outspoken person. According to him, nowadays people are raving about *karae*,²⁴ which are being bought and sold for ridiculously high prices. But he claims that half, or more than half of those Great Ming works are said to be forgeries. To this day, we have believed that these works are all rare treasures, and so I am completely baffled by this story. I didn't know what to think and that is why I came to see you.

Sesshu directed a soft look toward his guest, his smile unchanged. The guest started to speak again.

For one thing, master, you have been exposed to a good number of fine paintings in places like Kyoto since you were young. You have also studied and learned from such great art. You then went to the Great Ming, where you saw rare treasures. I am sure you can tell me if Priest Keisan's story is true or not . . .

Sesshu looked upon the guest who was urging him to say something. He thought for a while and said,

Well, I do not know much about how things are in Kyoto now. I do not know what paintings have arrived recently, and which works are being talked about. I wouldn't know how many of the paintings are real and how many are fake. I suppose there would be forgeries, of course.

The guest said in surprise,

So, master, are you saying that you knew from the beginning that there were fake paintings among those Great Ming works you studied from?

Well, I don't know what to say about that. First of all, I am only concerned with and learning from what I like most about my favorite paintings. Now if the work I liked unfortunately happened to be a forgery, it means that I was being deceived. But if my eyes were clear enough, I would still be able to learn from the truly good parts of the fake example. When I traveled to the Great Ming, I thought that I would be able to see more and more spectacular paintings and meet wonderful painters. To tell you the truth, when I got there I realized that the Tang and the Song Dynasties are times long past. I am sure that in the vast land of the Great Ming there are many brilliant painters that are yet to be known, but for a traveler on a sojourn for a mere one or two years like myself, what are the chances of meeting such artists? In that sense I was a little disappointed, but thankfully, I learned something instead. After all, for a painter, nature is his model. Nature, as well as human life. So according to Priest Osen Keisan, more than half of the paintings we see here are forgeries? Well, I guess he could be right. But in the Great Ming, too, you would probably have the same portion of fake and real paintings. I wouldn't know for a fact though. But so what if there are forgeries? It doesn't change the fact that there was a great number of magnificent painters during the Tang, Song, and Yuan Dynasties in the great land of Ming. I was so very fortunate to have been able to go to the Great Ming even if it were for a short period, for that is where I was able to see with my own eyes the environment in which the great works of art by the Tang, Song, and Yuan artists whom I revere most were created—the actual nature of the great continent, the natural wind and light, the lives and various manners of its people. In more grandiose terms, I think I was able to clearly grasp, in a way, the organic relationship that lies within the inseparable bond between the work, the artist, and the environment. I am truly grateful for being able to do that . . . Well, I guess I have deviated from your question about forgeries. I'm sorry about that.

The guest replied,

No, not at all, thank you very much for your precious words. You just spoke a great deal about the Great Ming. I understand that over there, you were honored with the top position at the famous temple of Shimei Tendozan (Tien Tung Shan). In Beijing, you received a commission from the Emperor to draw on the walls of the Imperial Palace, which I hear was extremely well received. Master, you truly are one honorable painter of Japan.

Contrary to the guest's expectations, Sesshu did not even smile. His eyes, which were riveted on the clouds and the leaves on the trees outside the window, absent-mindedly turned back to the guest, now in a dismissive way. He simply replied, "Well, the people of the Great Land know how to entertain guests with courtesy."

The other day, I visited the "Exhibition of Treasures" at the Kyoto Museum, where I saw Mokkei's set of three hanging scrolls—*Kannon (Guanyin)*, *Crane*, *Gibbon*, and Gan Ki (Yan Hui)'s²⁵ pair of hanging scrolls—*Liu Haichen (Gama)*, *Li Tieguai (Tekkai)*, among other masterpieces. Seeing these works for the first time in a long while, I was amazed anew by the imposing height and profound depth of Chinese painting. Moreover, I was utterly astonished by the grandeur of the history of painting in China, considering the fact that what I was seeing was only a mere fraction of this entire history, spanning the Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, and Yuan periods between the seventh and fourteenth centuries. Even the history of art in all of Western Europe from the fourteenth century to our times, from Giotto to Picasso, cannot be deemed outright superior to the history of art in China. Of course, the art of the East and the West are completely different, almost antipodal to each other. We could say that the art of the East has been committed to subjectivism that is backed by an almost ominously deep objectivity in the context of Buddhism and Daoism, whereas the art of the West has continued to promote a strict sense of objectivism that is powered by extreme individuality against the backdrop of the Greek ethos and Christianity. Either way, both histories were evenly matched in their grandeur of scale, profoundness in the exploration of human nature, and dynamism achieved through the pursuit of sophisticated expressions. The confusion and disorder the post-Meiji era *gadan* (art circle) in Japan experienced was largely due to the fact that artists grew weary of having to digest everything from Giotto to Picasso at once. The task was understandably a tiresome one. However, we must not forget that Sesshu digested the history of art in China that extends from the seventh century to the fourteenth century all on his own, and in the most admirable way.

Sesshu's work also appeared in the "Exhibition of Treasures" alongside Mokkei and Gan Ki. At first I somehow felt pity for Sesshu. I can say for sure that Sesshu is not their adversary. In Sesshu's work, I cannot find the lofty and profound, magnanimous culture that rests at the heart of Mokkei and Gan Ki's works. His

technique and the materials employed through his technique do not merge with the artist himself in a physically deep manner as in their works. With Sesshu, the relationship is far more shallow. Feeling rather disconsolate, I almost wanted to speak words of comfort to Sesshu. I stared intently at Sesshu's work for a while as I usually do and came home. But now, as I write this, *that* feeling returns to me. That feeling alone saves me. *That*, of course, is Sesshu's "luxuriant sense of sorrow."

Alas, no one can dispel nor obliterate the "luxuriant sense of sorrow" of this one man Sesshu. Sesshu is but one painter of a country that is far more culturally young and behind than the great China, but one cannot help but revere the inner voice of this true artist, delivered through his humble strength and strong humility. I believe the same kind of humble strength and strong humility were exercised by Poussin, the father of modern painting in France, against Greece and Rome; or Corot, the affectionate father of contemporary painting in France, against Italy; and finally, Manet against Spain. We must fully and clearly acknowledge in the most profound and broad sense that Sesshu was the one who paved the way for modern Japanese painting. And this modesty of Sesshu was charged with insatiable desire.

What was beyond Sesshu's gaze?

Sesshu was looking at the universe. He saw, felt, and lived life and nature. He was filled with skepticism. In him I see a rare soul of naiveté. The fact that he was a Zen monk means that he was an intellectual and a man of culture of the highest rank during his time. Yet even so, his soul was never fulfilled. He observed many works, mainly of the Song and Yuan Dynasties, that were imported at the time and saw how they embodied culture of great depth and stature. He delved deep into them but his soul remained unsatisfied. Even so he followed in the footsteps of the admirable Chinese painters throughout history, of the Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, and Yuan ages. It was his joy to be led by them in touching upon the truth of the universe, taking one step higher and deeper with each encounter. By following them, he felt that he was able to speak a little more of his inner truth. Sesshu wanted to be alone. He wanted to master the teachings of the Chinese magnates in the truest sense in solitude, even if it was in small steps. In particular, immersing himself in nature became an important theme. Next, or rather simultaneously, in order to tackle this issue, he had to achieve true spiritual freedom . . .

The people around Sesshu continued to praise his painterly techniques but he knew very well that the mere techniques of an artist were poor and powerless. The universe was too grand for him, and nature and life were always thoroughly mysterious. At over seventy years of age, Sesshu painted *Ekadanbizu*, *Huike Offering His Art to Bodhidharma* with youthful, single-minded passion. In it, Sesshu expressed his liking for the two figures; Daruma (Bodhidharma), who sits facing the wall in silence, and Eka (Huike), showing his severed arm to demonstrate his commitment to seek the truth. When thinking of these two individuals, Sesshu realized that it was worthless to pursue the perfection of trifling techniques.

He abandoned all conventions of painting and devoted himself to capturing the dramatic encounter of the two truth seekers in this noble legend. The painting turned out to be quite ungraceful. Nevertheless, he inscribed alongside his signature, "I draw this painting with great humility." As a painter one must first, and to the end, have what is most important to man. This is what Sesshu has taught me truthfully through his art. His paintings tell us that the single-minded passion, the naiveté, and the honesty in pursuing the truth must never be lost in a painting, or in life.

Frankly, I do not think Sesshu was good at painting. His natural gift and his sincere efforts occasionally gave birth to wonderful work. Then again, he also created a number of awfully lousy paintings. By no means would I be able to tell the authenticity of any artwork but I do believe that there is nothing more absurd than trying to determine the authenticity of the paintings ascribed to Sesshu depending on the degrees of skill. Whether it is good or bad, wonderful or terrible, a painting by Sesshu always has a certain profound mood to it. It is the mood I call a "luxuriant sense of sorrow"; that dull and heavy, gray and undistinguished feeling.

For example, with music, I can sometimes tell how good it is, but sometimes I cannot. However, listening to a piece by Beethoven, I can always detect a certain mood that the music has. Perhaps we could say that his music also has a "luxuriant sense of sorrow." I can sometimes understand the formal or aesthetic logic driving Beethoven's music but other times I cannot. I might or might not be interested. However, the particular mood that his work embraces impacts my soul, which I cannot help but revere. Even if I try to deny this, it is impossible for me, or anyone for that matter, to efface that impact from my soul. And this, I believe, is what is most valuable in human history. Beethoven was a musician in a million (or so I believe). Sesshu was a painter in a million. What they accomplished, however, was merely to deliver to the hearts of millions the "luxuriant sense of sorrow" they both harbored in their hearts. And for both of them, and for that reason alone, they needed their own grand artistic styles.

Admittedly, at times Sesshu can become somewhat of a burden to me, too. Sesshu's paintings are always based on a solid composition. The gradations of ink always recede deep into the picture, but also vigorously come forth toward the viewer. That gradation is unfailingly arranged on the picture surface with dynamic balance. Sesshu's lines almost always seem to be drawn with worn-out brushes. Each line in the picture possesses a sense of mass but the movement of the lines rarely gives the impression that they are flowing smoothly. They bend at sharp angles and progress throughout the painting with force. The bending and overlapping of those lines invariably create rich masses in different areas of the painting. Sesshu's dots are the most unique. Movements in all directions seem to gather and condense into each dot, and when these dots are scattered across the picture surface, a sense of depth and elastic rhythm surfaces around them. These gradations of ink, lines, and dots imbue the picture surface with an almost fated "Sesshu-

ness.” In Sesshu’s work, we never see the artist immersed in emotions. There is no sort of sensuous charm that enraptures the viewer, either. Sesshu’s paintings are entirely brusque; they are just “painterly.” This is why one cannot approach his work with an idle mind. In this regard, Sesshu is indeed an unapproachable giant. However, when we are unable to approach him, the fault is on our side. Sesshu is hardly impassive. In fact, his heart is filled with a yearning wish that is too often too human. But for us idle onlookers, sometimes this can only be a burden.

I’m afraid what I have rambled on here about has irreverently become a story of “Sesshu and I.”

Sesshu and I. Even if the name “Sesshu” were to be printed in the largest letters possible, and “I” in the smallest, almost invisible letters, the difference would be a trifle in comparison to the gulf between this giant and myself. I can even feel his gentle face staring into mine and saying, “Surely painting is a difficult thing, is it not? I guess you and I shall continue working on it, without rest.”

In order to truly internalize the variegated grandeur of modern art in the Western world as our own art, we must also have insatiable desire like that of Sesshu. We must also be as stern as Sesshu in our efforts to preserve the tradition of purity and vigor in painterly paintings, which Cézanne succeeded in reestablishing. That said, I’m afraid not everyone is blessed with a soul as grand as Sesshu’s. To the best of my ability, though, I truly hope to learn from this giant with utmost humility and honesty.

Translated by Haruko Kohno

The New Art

In the spring of 1930, I found myself in Rome when I made a bold prediction to my friend T.

“Soon Japan will have a war with other countries and lose.”

Furious, T declared that I was having a nervous breakdown, but sadly my prophecy came true. But despite the intrepidity of that prediction, it was still beyond my wildest imagination that the defeat would bring Japanese art to decline or destruction. On the contrary, I now recall how deep-seated and firm my trust already was in the Japanese as an artistic people. It was by association with the history of the Etruscans (the people who occupied central Italy in ancient times and enjoyed great prosperity before the rise of Rome) that I made such prediction for Japan. In Italy I had encountered many Etruscan artifacts, whose excellence had utterly astonished me.

Afterward, I embarked with T on an artistic pilgrimage around Italy. Learning that most of the Renaissance masters hailed from the regions near Etruscan ruins, and sensing that their works shared various qualities with Etruscan art, we decided that those artists were descendants of the Etruscans. Back in my boardinghouse in Florence after leaving T, I picked up John Ruskin's *Mornings in Florence* to find out that he, too, had a similar sentiment. The discovery made me feel vindicated in our assumption.

I am convinced that the Japanese people would never sink so low as to play up their identity as a “cultural nation” in order to compensate for their military defeat. In the Meiji era Okakura Tenshin strove to present not the belligerent but the artistic side of Japan to the world, but his effort was heavily tinged with a nationalistic zeal typical of this country at that time. What we need to do at present, I think, is to take a more humble viewpoint than Tenshin's, to become firmly aware of our artistic excellence as a cultural raw material common to all humankind, and to open up and promote it for the benefit of humanity as a whole. The priceless uniqueness of traditional Japanese art should be examined from a perspective even broader, deeper, and greater than that of Tenshin's *Book of Tea*. In other

words, a rightful place will be given naturally, of its own accord, to Japanese art's brilliant past within the cultural history of humankind when the Japanese manage to become truly and completely "cosmopolitan." The history of Japanese art needs to be rewritten. And future Japanese art needs to be built afresh on the foundation of such renewal of tradition and history.

While Oriental thought will continue to rise in all of humanity's esteem as a common cultural property, we should assess humbly as well as fairly, together with the people of the world, the true significance of Japanese art, which echoes the Oriental philosophy with superb artistic talent and skill. At the same time, Japanese art's shortcomings, too, must be brought into daylight and scrutinized.

After the war, I was frequently invited to various cultural gatherings, organized by recently demobilized young people who sought opinions from their seniors. On such occasions I invariably spoke of the Italian Renaissance, as well as French art and artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the artists from these periods were my guiding light, especially in this immediate aftermath of the war when I engaged in an intense soul-searching. What I sensed very, very vividly in those artists, we usually sum it up in the single word of humanism. As I reminisced over the works of these artists, with whom I was fortunate enough to familiarize myself, and read calmly and repeatedly about their times as well as their individual life histories, it became poignantly clear to me, if belatedly, what a significant and priceless human act the true artistic creation is, what great sacrifice it required of the individuals who performed it, and furthermore, how fearless these artists were in taking up such a challenge.

No doubt we, together with the people of the world, will properly elucidate the true value of traditional Japanese art as a reflection of deep, noble Oriental thought. At the same time, however, it seems equally certain to me that Japanese art's great failings will come under rigorous criticism, that is, its frequent tendency to degenerate into merely pretty and clever "geigoto"¹ whenever its intellectual backbone weakened. So will the frailty of our own, contemporary Japanese art, too.

On the one hand, I have good reason to believe that Rikyu's art of tea and Basho's *haiku* will in time receive a high position within the cultural history of mankind, a position much higher than most Japanese currently expect. On the other, we are being swamped by excessively stylized tea ceremonies or *haiku* with no poetic spirit, and those will surely invite the world's contempt. Flamboyant throughout the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods, did modern Japanese art ever demonstrate the virtues of its own tradition? Or did it reveal its shortcomings? Sadly, the latter seems to be the case to me. The thought deeply shames me. Our own art is but a superficial formalism. We took impressionism merely for a technique to color shadows in violet. What cheap imitations the arts of Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and others generated [in this country], those styles each obtained through a martyrdom, in exchange for literally the artist's body and soul! Or those

who in the prewar period dismissed Dadaism as a passing fancy, did they ever experience agony personally? Would it be too harsh to see the history of modern Japanese art as one of absence of intellectual foundation and mere importations of forms?

We are dexterous and agile. Have we not reached the moment to realize that these are precisely our shortcomings?

How robust, clumsy (?) they were, Paolo Uccello and Piero della Francesca, who immersed themselves in the study of perspective, Claude Monet, who stopped at nothing in his quest for rendering light with paint, and Marcel Duchamp, who laid bare the twentieth-century painting's anxiety with formidable candidness! Remember, it is in the presence of these artists that we truly feel the joy of looking at a picture and experiencing art, the pleasure of seeing ourselves taken to a higher level by it.

The last world war led to a massive immigration of many works and artists of the new art of the twentieth century to the United States. America actively and systematically studied and received them, while we went through a blank period brought on by the war. The new art, given various nicknames like radical painting and avant-garde, is on the rise in this country under the influence of both America and Europe. Yet I, for one, remain wary and strongly hope that the new Japanese art to come will not repeat the failure of its past since the Meiji era.

Remember, the greatest virtue of Europe's—now Europe's and America's—new art, largely represented by abstract painting and surrealism, has always consisted in its spirit of fearless quest for the essence of arts, a quest each time carried out in a different way. The proponents of the new art are so to speak harbingers of the modern-day renaissance of human culture. If one is unwilling to share their torment and join their brave march forward, it is easy to either dismiss, or unconditionally praise and servilely emulate. And sadly, most of the attitudes in this country toward the new art fall into one of these categories. I cannot imagine, however, that anyone who truly aspires to take part in the creation of culture and art in our own age could entirely ignore them.

Evident in these artists are humane affection, rich, unbound imagination, vigorous creativity, everlasting passion, and wisdom, common to many creators of great cultures in the past.

As I said at the beginning, I have no doubt as to the artistic talent and skills the Japanese people have traditionally demonstrated. We must not forget, however, that it is only when this talent and skill of ours are supported by a deep, broad thought and led by a noble ideal that they can truly take on multiple dimensions, making active contributions to human culture. Fortunately, since the war we have been given fairly ample occasions to come in contact at least with those masterpieces of Western art held in this country. And yet, my lingering concern is that the dazzling effects of these masterpieces' highly finished pictorial surfaces might

blind us to the underlying spirit and thought, drowning us with minutiae of “techniques of Western painting.” Those who can never understand art as anything other than style and form, would they not be in danger of repeating the mistake of generating yet another type of merely pretty “*geigoto*”? At this critical juncture, I sincerely hope that both viewers and makers of pictures in this country will pay close attention to what lies behind the techniques of the Western masterpieces on show, firmly recognizing and grasping the fact that it is only by virtue of the depth of their thought that the techniques are kept alive in multiple dimensions.

The high price we paid has taught us a precious lesson. Although sad and ashamed, I find a joy in the emergence, particularly among younger generations, of a genuine eagerness to humbly and systematically study and learn from not only Europe and America but also foreign countries in general. We must advance on this path further still. Descendants of a nation whose *sakoku*² policy cut the country off from the rest of the world [for over two centuries], we must be all the more resolute in accomplishing this task. We must reject shallow understanding and facile emulation of foreign countries and become authentic “cosmopolites” instead. We must see and study all that is fine, be it of Western or Japanese origin, as cultural property common to all humankind, and let a deep appreciation for it inspire us to take a resolutely active part, as “cosmopolitans,” in the work of creating a culture common to all of humanity. Our history of *sakoku* also significantly delayed our participation in “modernity.” Too often we trifle with modern thought, culture, civilization, art, etc., in an un-modern attitude. This is another, almost irredeemably great failing of ours. Wishing to live only as a receiver and emulator in the world of modern culture, agonized because often too innovative, is debasing ourselves to the status of the most un-modern slave nation. We must reflect deeply on this, too, in our effort to become true “cosmopolitans.”

After years of silence and self-reflection, I will say this now:

That the survival of Japanese art will become possible only when each of us truly becomes a “modern,” a “cosmopolite.”

As the two large exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York showed systematically and synthetically, the two major currents, “Cubism and Abstract Art” and “Dada–Surrealism,” are marks of the powerful creativity that the twentieth-century artists were able to demonstrate. Attempts to eradicate those marks, if still afoot, are futile. My only apprehension is that once again these traces might be treated as mere forms (in Japan). On the contrary, we must allow them to play their rightful role, achieving a unique development in this country, thereby making an active contribution to the evolution of the new art worldwide.

I dare declare:

The last thing the world wants from the creators of the new art in Japan is an adept and pretty “abstract painting,” or a formulaic Japanese version of “surrealism.” What the world in its goodwill and generosity expects from us is our genuine participation, this time as true cosmopolitans and moderns cleansed of our past

sins by our remorse, in the march of human kind's culture and arts toward tomorrow. Let us not waste our time worrying about form for form's sake.

Together with the new artists of the world, let us agonize, think, and dream; let us not fear letting our creativity burst, a creativity we have as cosmopolitans, as moderns.

Then, the only, true path of the new Japanese art will be wide open.

The world will greet us with joy.

Translated by Gaku Kondo

Conversations with Isamu Noguchi

Conversation with Isamu Noguchi

Showa 25 (June 8, 1950)

Isamu Noguchi became sick and hospitalized. I was very surprised because I was supposed to be his travel guide, so I first visited his younger step-brother Michio. Michio's mother said to me, "Please go to visit him at the hospital"—so I went to visit him in Ojikubo. When I arrived, Noguchi said, "I'm fine. I'm really sorry that I screwed up our schedule." He looked fairly healthy and he was reading a book. The book he was reading was called *Haiku*, written by Price. The book tells the historical background of haiku, and it's a very well-written book. Noguchi said, "This is a very fascinating book," and we started talking about many other things. "When I go to Kyoto, I would like to see Zen gardens. I think Zen art, Zen artists, tea ceremony, haiku garden, ikebana, etc.—they have a lot to contribute to the world as do all Japanese arts and culture."

Marcel Duchamp, who is a very famous artist who did the *Nude Descending a Staircase*, is a true Dadaist and the most influential avant-garde artist. Noguchi was highly influenced by Marcel Duchamp. Noguchi loves to tell me stories about Duchamp. "Marcel Duchamp told me things like this: don't do anything that you don't need to do—or if you try to do something that you can't do, you won't be able to do what you can do. Duchamp gives me really good advice—and his daily life in New York is very original, and his surroundings are super-minimal, simplified." Noguchi and I discussed that somebody like Duchamp grasps the idea of the amazing, ancient Zen monks from China and Japan, and the real tea masters. In Japan, people are forgetting about the idea of Zen and tea-ism—or have fossilized them both within an academic context. Noguchi and I discussed that even if something is very strong and impressive, it is the end if it becomes really academic and formalized.

Noguchi asked me, "I want to see paintings by Sesshu." So I promised that I would show him. Also he asked, "Do you have writing by Dr. Daisetz Suzuki?" And I replied, "I have Japanese writings by him—but not English, but I will find it



FIGURE 3. Isamu Noguchi, untitled drawing of Jomon figure, c. 1931. Ink on rice paper. The Noguchi Museum. Photograph by Kevin Noble.

for you.” Then Noguchi said, “I read *Zen and Japanese Culture* in the United States, and it was my favorite book, but it got lost since my friends took turns borrowing the book. I would like to read that book before I go to Kyoto.” I thought I didn’t want to exhaust him, so I said I would go home. Then he said, “I would like to see you and my family often, so please come back again—and please bring Dr. Suzuki’s book.” When I stepped out, he said, “Have you read *Ideology of the East*, by Tenshin Okakura?” I said, “Of course.” Then he said, *Book of Tea* is wonderful, but I prefer *Ideology of the East*.”

The leading avant-garde sculptor Isamu Noguchi said good-bye to me as he started to study haiku again.

Conversation with Noguchi **Showa 25 (June 9, 1950)**

“Giotto, Giotto—don’t you think this is like Giotto?” Noguchi asked me passionately when I visited him two days later, when I brought in Sesshu’s reproduction, *Winter Landscape* from Sesshu’s *Summer–Winter Landscape*. There was something powerful in this *Winter Landscape* scene. There is another landscape within the Summer-Winter landscape scene. He expressed there is something even stronger than an atomic bomb in the way the ink is used. I really like his expression that was so impactful. Noguchi asked me, “Please show me the original paintings by Sesshu”; he begged me again and again. As promised, I brought Dr. Daisetz Suzuki’s book *Zen and Japanese Culture*. He was very happy, like recognizing an old friend. At the same time, I brought him some of Rikyu’s poetry from tea writing called “Nan bou roku.” He said, “It’s very beautiful. I remember hearing this poetry that Rikyu liked.” “Thank you very much,” he thanked me many, many times. “Like I told you last time at home, one of the newest art movements in the United States, artists are using stains and splatters and enjoying the effect of raw pigment and paint itself. Those avant-garde painters’ work is clearly related to Zen art. Among them are Morris Graves, who loves Japanese art. He was planning to come to Japan, and he reached Hawaii—but had some difficulty and returned to the United States. Graves is learning from old Chinese copper-ware. I love copper-ware as well. American museums usually have high-quality Chinese ancient copper-ware, but I love to see them more in Japan.”

Noguchi was released from the hospital pretty quickly. On Sunday, we were invited by the American couple, Mr. and Mrs. Grilli. They are very passionate Japanophiles. The husband loves music and theater, while the wife loves the visual arts. Noguchi and I went to see them. In their house, they have an encyclopedia of Eastern art. *Shinbi Encyclopedia of Japanese Art* and *National Treasures Encyclopedia*. Noguchi was so fascinated to see those encyclopedias. We discussed various themes from contemporary Japanese art, architecture, fashion, culture, humanity. After a while, Mrs. Grilli asked, “What if there were an artist like Sesshu living

in contemporary Japan? What kind of work would he do?” Noguchi said that he would work like Picasso. Isamu Noguchi is such an artist, he sees Picasso in Sesshu—and Sesshu in Picasso.

One day in the hospital, it was very rainy. Because of that, the leaves of the trees outside were very beautiful. Noguchi said, “Today is a wonderful day. It’s very quiet and perfect for meditation; a very Japan kind of day.” So I asked, “If the window was not glass, but shoji—the light would be softer; would you like it any better?” And he replied, “Yes, yes.” Noguchi’s sculpture and design is the most avant-garde but at the same time, his works include this kind of quietness. I wonder if this quietness is what is attracting American audiences. I hope our trip to Kyoto together will influence the style and content of his art.

Both essays translated by Yoriko Yamamoto
and Mark Dean Johnson

Days with Isamu Noguchi

Originally published as “Isamu Noguchi tono hibi,” *Sansai* (August 1950)

It was a valuable experience for me to make a trip to the Kansai¹ region with Mr. Isamu Noguchi and spend time together before and after it. I find it too precious, even too distasteful, to hastily summarize our trip and friendship. Yet, in light of my forgetfulness, I would like to note a few things here as my reminders.

Long familiar with the writing of Okakura Tenshin, Mr. Noguchi holds him in high regard.

During his brief stay in Japan nineteen years ago, he worked at the studio of ceramicist Mr. Uno for a few months and worked in Nara with Dr. Warner.

Having avidly read *Zen and Japanese Culture*, he returned to this English tome by Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki while hospitalized prior to our trip to Kansai.

He also read a book by Bruno Taut before our departure and in a train westward. He finished reading it in the train.

Of course, he read all the English texts that his father, Yone Noguchi, published. As has been well known, many among them are on Japanese art.

By any measure, he is no amateur on Japanese art.

During our trip, a general-interest magazine asked Mr. Noguchi to contribute an article, and he ordered me to ghostwrite it. Despite his busy schedule, he took time to type talking points for me. I drafted a text under his name in Japanese and showed him my clumsy English translation of it. In it, I wrote, “I [Noguchi] earnestly hope that Japan should not repeat the foolishly extreme Westernization that the country undertook in the Meiji period [1868–1914].”

He changed this part as follows: “I earnestly hope that Japan should take another look at itself and rediscover itself.”

He then told me, “Because the situation now may be worse than the Meiji period.”

Indeed, we had fervently argued on this point at an inn in Nara. I argued, “Today, as always, some Japanese people think about Japan, taking another look at it and rediscovering it. So, Japan is alright.” To this, he countered, “If so, those people must now immediately speak up, with an ever louder voice. Otherwise,

something terrible will happen. It may be meddlesome of me, but just as Fenollosa and Okakura did, I want to speak up myself." My response was, "Please do."

He has a profound passion for old Japan. He firmly believes that taking another look at it and rediscovering it is *the* way to save Japan and make Japan contribute to the art and culture of the whole world.

. . .

He is far purer than I am.

I have become keenly aware of this fact while traveling with him, and visiting him and being visited by him.

It occurred to me that I should show him a reproduction of Sesshu's *Long Landscape Scroll* (Sansui chokan),² but I didn't show it to him then, since I thought it better for him to see it in a calmer environment.³

When he visited me at my humble home, I swept the room, spread a piece of felt on the floor, and laid open the reproduction of Sesshu's scroll. His excitement at seeing it was beyond description.

On the same day, I also showed him the picture postcard of a clay figure from Japan's stone age (published by the Tokyo National Museum), which I treasured and always kept near my desk. He was so touched by it, too, that he kept on drawing it on Japanese paper with ink and brush. Even though he was very exhausted by night, he begged me, "Show me the Sesshu again," and intently gazed at it. Feeling so worn out, he would mumble, "Let's go to bed, already." Yet, he would return to look at it, again, saying, "Just a few more seconds . . ." As though sighing, he uttered words of appreciation about the composition, about the brushwork, about the Japanese's master's distinct deployment of the *dian tai fa* technique,⁴ about the painter's humanity revealed in his work.

. . .

He always sees the back of a work. He cannot stop seeing it without seeing it through. He loves calligraphy. But if the calligrapher is not a fine person, he would not like his brush. That is why he loves the calligraphy of past Zen monks. He once admired some calligraphy written by Dr. Nishida Kitaro⁵ on the frame at the temple Myoshinji, which was the residence of Professor Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, who studies Zen philosophy.

He often talks about the great Dadaist Marcel Duchamp. He also loves to talk about Brancusi, his sculpture teacher, as well as Mondrian, Klee, and Miro.

I myself love to tell him about Rikyu, Basho, Ryokan, and Ogawa Usen. He is happy to hear about them. Recently, he started saying, "Dadaist Duchamp is just like Ryokan."

He told me that he would definitely find a reproduction of Sesshu's *Long Landscape Scroll*, a photograph of the stone-age clay figure, and Ogawa Usen's book, *How to Draw Haiga*,⁶ and buy them to bring home. Often remembering Buson's

haiga painting in ink that he saw in Kyoto, he would praise it.

During the trip, he would often discuss the true meaning of “leisure 閑,” “poverty 貧,” and “nothingness 無,” specifically as a critique of the materialist civilization that pervades today’s world. Having learned about Ryokan bit by bit from me and seen the reproduction of the lay monk’s calligraphy, he began to show a strong interest in “foolishness 愚.” Of course, as a rebellion against contemporary culture.

He is familiar with Laozi and Zhuanzi. He once proudly told me, “A friend of mine has just published the best English translation of Laozi.”

• • •

He has a magnificent Leica camera with a wide lens and a telephoto lens. With this camera, he avidly photographed important historic architecture, ranging from the Katsura Detached Palace to the temple Ryoanji, from the Taian, a teahouse believed to be designed by Rikyu at the temple Myokian in Yamazaki, to a garden designed by Katagiri Sekishu at the temple Jikoji in Yamato Koizumi. He aspires to capture the unity of a building and a garden—which is to say, the beauty of truly synthesized formalism.

He would hang this camera from his shoulder, carrying under his arm a calico *furoshiki* bundle containing paper and ink, brush and ink stone. In addition, at the temple Yakushiji in Nara, he spent half a day to learn the technique of *takuhon* rubbing.

Photography, drawing, *takuhon*. These three mediums allow him to record what he loves.

He also spends every available moment on practicing writing *hirakana* syllabary. Or, poring over a book on *haiku* by Freis.⁷

• • •

I have long been troubled by the similarities and dissimilarities between modern art, especially abstract art, and tea ceremony, *haiku*, and calligraphy. However, the moment I met with Mr. Noguchi, my concern evaporated. I am now seeing an open road before me, although I still have no concrete idea as to how to go forward on this road.

He often utters an original idea, out of the blue.

When the fires destroyed the Golden Hall of the temple Horyuji in Nara, I was devastated to see its horrific aftermath. Yet, he consoled me by saying, “That’s still beautiful,” and continuing, “In fact, until I saw its burnt ruinous state, I myself hadn’t perhaps known Horyuji was such a beautiful architecture.”

When I told him about Rikyu’s four ideals of tea ceremony—“harmony 和, respect 敬, purity 清, and simplicity 寂”—he immediately responded in agreement, “That’s a magnificent ideal.” When we talked about the burnt Horyuji, I explained to him the two meanings of *sabi* 寂 (= “simplicity”): One relates to *sabishii* (= “lonely”) and the other, *sabi* (= “metallic rust”), with the latter implying

the loving sentiment for a rusty, thus aged and bruised, state of things. Upon hearing this, he smiled in complete satisfaction, sharing his detailed observation on the relationship between humans who change nature and nature that changes artifice.

“You who praise the beauty of the burned Horyuji are more Japanese than I am in light of your love for *sabi*.” To this comment of mine, he responded with a sign of embarrassment and silence. He then retorted, “It is Arp who has the Japanese mind.”

Not just Arp. He talks with love and respect about such giants of modern art as Klee, Brancusi, Mondrian, and Duchamp. Listening to him, I begin to feel that the truly spiritual and subjective expression of art that once existed in the East and in Japan is today becoming things of the West, while the East and Japan are forgetting and losing it.

I feel that he is daily answering my questions concerning modern art and *Nihonga* (Japanese-style painting) in Japan today.

Ultimately, the issue boils down to the depth and height of spirituality and the strength of execution. But for our urgent reflection and awakening, there existed no other way to come to a solution. He makes me understand this too basic a fact again and again.

He is too busy now. Still, I hope that one day his schedule will ease up and he will write me a letter, perhaps from his studio in New York, about his deep and keen observations on what he saw in Japan—about Sesshu, about Rikyu, about Basho, about Ryokan, about Usen . . . I long to see the day when the artist I dearly love will candidly and seriously tell us how contemporary Japanese art should awake and make a new step.

Translated by Reiko Tomii

Rambling Words on Song-Yuan Flower-and-Bird Painting

People think all kinds of things. Which to pick from a myriad of flower-and-bird paintings of the Song and Yuan Dynasties—that, too, must be a matter of individual taste. Among those I have seen in person, I will choose the following two I saw in person and which left a particularly deep impression on me.

Attributed to Emperor Huizong, “Daffodil and Quail” (coll. Asano family)

Attributed to Muqi, “Hibiscus under Rain” (coll. Daitoku-ji temple)

Painted in color on paper, 27 cm high and 42 cm wide.¹ The paper is thick, its surface slightly fluffy, with almost no gloss. A gently curving riverbank done in the grading wash of bluish India ink. A plump quail, five blades of grass, some short, some long, of a daffodil, the mass of its flowers and buds. The quail’s eye is jet black, a little shell-derived white pigment on its feathers. The daffodil leaves are delineated with consistently thin lines of India ink, their color grading in places from green to ochre and from ochre to green. The core of the flower is painted with a vivid yellow, fine-ground gold foil applied to its base.

A mild painting.

Before seeing it in person, I had imagined the picture to be quite austere. Now that I know what it is like, my memory of it is always fond, one of softness and warmth.

I do not know if the work is really by the hand of a great ruler, Emperor Huizong. Also, the picture’s right-hand edge seems to me a little too tight; maybe it was wider originally. For that matter, the margins along the other three borders, too, could use a bit more space.

Twenty-two years ago, on October 26, Showa 3 (1928), I, in my school uniform, saw this work at Lord Asano’s residence in Hiroshima. The delight it gave to my eyes on that day is still vivid.

As for the Hibiscus attributed to Muqi, I saw it at Daitoku-ji, on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of Rikyu’s death. I cannot give any description this time, of its dimensions, paper support, etc., for I didn’t take any notes on that day.

But that's not the only reason. "Hibiscus under Rain," it is called. No doubt inspired by the haziness, this is indeed a fitting title. The artist's "Persimmons and Chestnuts" in the Ryuko-in temple, part of the same Daitoku-ji complex, might strike us as more crisp.

Closer inspection, however, reveals in this foggy picture of hibiscus a terrifyingly acute sensitivity and astonishingly skilled brushstrokes, almost to an overwhelming degree. Yet this picture, too, I always recall as blurred and fluffy. Its sharpness and virtuosity never take a prominent place in my memory, although I saw them with my own eyes and they struck my heart.

A curious picture.

I don't know exactly when, but I now recall myself ambling alone through a quiet National Museum of Kyoto. I wanted to see some porcelains on that day, so I slowed down to a particularly leisurely pace in the porcelain gallery.

There was a Song dynasty pot.

Like many other people, I had always had the vague feeling that the Song ceramics were the best, that there was nothing in the world that could possibly match it. The thought, however, had seldom hit me with such clarity as on that day.

Indeed, I muttered to myself: "This is what culture is."

The pot had a design on it. Of course, that was not what made the object beautiful. The greatness of Song ceramics, I think, resides in the fact that one can say the ones with a design are as beautiful as the ones without it, and the ones without a design are as beautiful as the ones with it.

If a pot could not *seem* beautiful without a design, then the design would only make it uglier. If conversely the beauty depends entirely on the absence of a design, I believe it is not a true beauty.

What about "nature"?

Nature is free. Some days a weed-grown garden surrounding our humble abode looks as though nature has endowed it with a design; some days it looks plain. Not only that. The design nature provides is always a flower that blooms against the solemn effect of a plain background. Also, teeming behind the plainness nature exhibits on the surface is an abundance of patterns, infinitely complex. Nature is thus beautiful.

Nature is not savage.

What is savage is a base culture.

The Song dynasty is one period in the history of China when culture attained its highest degree of maturity. Not just in the history of China, but in that of humankind of the entire world . . .

Someone gave me a collection of shells, an impressive gathering of many, of all shapes and colors, both large and small. It has become my most cherished treasure. When I take it out to admire it, my children join me gleefully. "They are so pretty, who made them?" they once asked. "That must be God," I answered. Ever since, they come back from time to time to urge me: "Show us that thing God made!"

The Song ceramics are like those shells. Or, like stones, I sometimes think.

Everywhere in Song, an artisan, or a group of artisans, were able to casually create ceramics and porcelain as beautiful as shells and stones—that's how high, deep, and broad its culture was.

That's what produced pictures like that.

Let us go back to the "Quail" and the "Hibiscus."

Even if painters kept a few quails in their house, and in addition had them perfectly stuffed and preserved, to immerse themselves in the study of the birds every day, how many of those painters could possibly rise to the level equal to this picture, above all in the precision of depiction?

Likewise with the Hibiscus. No two leaves, of which there are a dozen, show the same shades of ink. Their depictions are infinitely variegated, and yet they are perfectly unified. Perhaps with a tireless everyday exercise, could one obtain this variation and this unity?

Almost hopeless.

To our further exasperation, neither of the makers of these pictures appears to see the precision (in the Quail) and the freedom (in the Hibiscus) as a burden. The maker of the Quail easily achieves that precision with as much liberty as the painter of the Hibiscus. And the latter, does he not exult in his unfettered exploration of ink gradation and brushstrokes like seepage and scratch, all the while keeping exactly the same precision as the Quail's painter? These are precisely the absolute achievements none of their successors can attempt to realize.

Whenever I hear the word *sogen-ga* (painting of the Song and Yuan Dynasties), and especially *sogen kacho-ga* (Song-Yuan flower-and-bird painting), I think, almost by reflex, of Kishida Ryusei. He was perhaps one of the moderns who immersed themselves most deeply in that style. Toward the end of the Taisho period, or was it the early Showa, he showed a few highly influential still lifes at the Shunyo-kai and other group exhibitions. With their background uniformly painted in dark ochre, they were traces of Ryusei's tragic efforts to infuse the qualities he discovered in Song-Yuan flower-and-bird paintings into his works, qualities such as "noble elegance, calm depth, divine atmosphere," or the "sense of infinity." In so doing, he armed himself with a North European oil painting technique whose naturalism ran against his times.

Ryusei lost his battle. But he was not the first nor the last in his defeat. Rather, his doomed struggle is his honor even, outstanding as it is in its sheer honesty, courage, and doggedness.

Everybody admires the Song-Yuan flower-and-bird painting. And yet whenever one wishes to replicate it and proceeds to do so, the result as a rule is a disaster. Either it winds up in a senseless, rigid, fastidiously minute depiction, or the shallowest kind of pretty decorative picture, which does not even serve to decorate but is only a nuisance . . . and so on and so forth.

It is nothing to be trifled with.

In addition to the “noble elegance, calm depth, divine atmosphere,” and “sense of infinity,” the words of praise Ryusei lavished on Song-Yuan painting include “the sacred domain of gods and sages no mortal can hope to reach,” “the primal sense,” “the superior reality,” “austere,” “elegant,” and many others. These words, uttered by a man who started out as a post-impressionist Western-style painter and was on the way to carve out a unique position for himself, captured what he discerned with his own eyes in Song-Yuan paintings’ qualities. They have a pleasant ring to them, so full of truth. Indeed, when we approach a Song-Yuan painting, we must grasp deeply and firmly something akin to what he saw, rather than any technical minutiae or exactitude of description.

To help me write this short essay, Mr. Y, my editor, kindly put together a selection of flower-and-bird picture plates excerpted from the book *Masterpieces of Song-Yuan Paintings* and brought it to me. I am pleased to be reunited with this beautiful album for the first time in a while, having sent my own copy to an acquaintance when we moved out to the countryside to flee air raids during wartime.

In addition to the “Quail,” the “Hibiscus,” and the “Persimmons and Chestnuts,” there are yet more excellent works, including “Amaranthus Tricolor” (attributed to Qian Xuan, coll. Honpoji temple, Tokyo), “Diptych: Two Hanging Scrolls with Peony” (coll. Koto-in temple, Kyoto), “Diptych: Two Hanging Scrolls with Lotus and Fern” (coll. Chion-in temple, Kyoto), “Bamboo and Insects” (attributed to Zhao Chang, coll. Asano), “Peach Tree Branch and Pigeon” (attributed to Emperor Huizong, coll. Inoue), and “Peonies” (attributed to Qian Xuan, Chion-in temple).

Of these pictures, the simplest is of course the “Persimmons and Chestnuts.” When she saw the “Persimmons” picture, my daughter could not suppress a spontaneous, innocent laughter. Then she said to me, “What a funny picture! It’s like five bonzes² casually standing side by side.” She was absolutely right. Her remark had an instantly liberating effect on me, who, brow furrowed, was just about to tackle the picture in all seriousness. I felt as though dumbstruck to realize after all this time how embracingly generous Song-Yuan painting truly was. The venerable Ogawa Usen had once recommended this picture as an excellent *haiku* painting in his small gem of a book, *How to Paint a Haiku Painting*. To be honest, I had always been unable to completely agree with him on this. At that moment, however, I felt I finally got it. A “funny” picture whose five “bonzes” standing next to each other “casually” makes a child laugh spontaneous laughter—that’s the genuine Song-Yuan painting, and the good *haiku* painting as well.

Perhaps this is also why Ryusei lost. The “Quail” and the “Hibiscus” in my fond memory are always blurred and fluffy and simply warm. Now the “Persimmons” for my daughter is simply funny, just a picture that irresistibly makes her laugh.

Certainly Ryusei’s many words of praise are all true. But he missed one essential fact. The genuine honesty and plainness that make everyone cherish and fondly remember these pictures—any excellent Song-Yuan painting possesses them.

Whether it is larger works like Koto-in's peony diptych and Chion-in's lotus-and-hern³ diptych, or the Asano bamboo-and-insects picture, or still others, these paintings filled with diverse and numerous flowers, birds, insects, and fish, they all demonstrate an honest simplicity, as if a bold, straight line threaded together not just their composition, but each local depiction and the overall inflection as well. The affinity we have seen between the "Quail" and the "Hibiscus" also exists between the "Persimmons and Chestnuts" and the larger works that deal with more complex subject matters. With the "Persimmons and Chestnuts," we understand, more and more clearly as we dwell on it, that the painter's eye penetrates into the deepest bottom of nature's *design*.⁴ As for the "Peony" (Koto-in), it directly and boldly grasps the gorgeous flower's life and vigor, its meticulous and convincing depictions of details working as grace notes, appropriate to all of them. What the painter of "Persimmons and Chestnuts" brought to the fore, the artist of the "Peony" held it firmly behind his picture. What the painter of the "Peony" drew in with all of his skill, the author of the "Persimmons and Chestnuts" summed it up in one fell swoop, engraving and keeping it on his retina.

The late French poet Paul Valéry seems to me the quintessential man of intelligence and culture, not just in France but the twentieth-century Europe as a whole. I read a text of his several times, a profound and beautiful prose poem of sorts, in which the poet narrates how, turning a seashell he picked up on a beach in his hand, he expands a fine web of rumination in all directions, about nature, about men, about architecture.⁵ After a repeated and persistent effort to grasp the substance of the universe's truth hidden in that single seashell, finally, as though resigned, he throws off the shell. In his youth Valéry abruptly interrupted the composition of his exquisite poems and in total silence engrossed himself in the study of higher mathematics. He was a noble, genuine man of culture whose capacious soul could not but perceive in a single seashell the innermost meaning of the "architecture" that nature hid there.

I am certain that Paul Valéry would have truly understood a good Song-Yuan flower-and-bird painting. He was also a philosopher of formidable acumen who discerned, even in the rudimentary pottery in France, the true depth of the art of ceramics as an "art of fire." He also understood the highest achievement of Chinese culture when he read a novel by a young Chinese writer visiting Paris. "The same people who invented gunpowder," he wrote, "made no progress in chemistry, and manufactured no cannons for themselves; they wasted it in fireworks and vain amusements of the night."⁶ Far from belittling it, he recognized in this attitude the wisdom within Chinese culture. Reflecting in turn on himself as a Westerner, he leveled a far-reaching criticism against Western civilization and culture: "[We] have to the highest degree the instinct for abuse, [and] cannot imagine not having it."⁷

At the same time, he deplored the absence of a true mutual understanding and respect between the Orientals and the Occidentals, commerce and treaties being the sole links between them. He also lamented the atrocities of World War I,

mobilizing intellectuals from all over Europe into a pacifist association for which he volunteered to serve as the chairman, in his bid to save their continent from the catastrophe of modern warfare.

Song-Yuan flower-and-bird paintings might at first seem to have attained the highest degree of naturalism. Furthermore, in the best among them, those presumably from the Song dynasty, and those among the Yuan works which came the closest to the Song style, what Valéry calls “instinct for abuse” is never at work. The power of naturalism is something one almost never finds “abused” in Song painting. Inferior works by Maruyama Okyo and less-than-second-rate Western naturalist paintings often exhibit ugly traces of the harm done by an “abused naturalism.” Kishida Ryusei willingly penned a text entitled “Considerations on the Lack of Naturalism,” and often fell to a petty abuse of naturalism.

To practice powerful naturalism and yet avoid pettiness, one needs to have a great, substantial wisdom, so great that one “invents gunpowder but manufactures no cannons and wastes it in fireworks and vain amusements of the night.”

Leonardo da Vinci, whose “Mona Lisa” is a supreme achievement on a par with the Song-Yuan flower-and-bird painting, was *wise* enough to very often, almost routinely, leave many of his other tours de force unfinished. In this respect as in any other, his “unfinished” and perhaps ultimate masterpiece, “Adoration of the Magi” in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, is the cream of the crop in Western painting. It is indeed a monochrome, painted solely in a gradation of ochre, just like the Song-Yuan ink painting. And yet, it is just as perfect, if not more, as the meticulous “finish” of the “Mona Lisa.”

Leonardo da Vinci was perhaps the Occidental Paul Valéry admired most. The poet wrote his *Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci* with an extraordinary enthusiasm and prudence. Without having sufficiently explored the essence of Western culture, we might find this lengthy treatise utterly unconquerable, but I for one sense and cannot doubt the existence of a close and strong affinity between Leonardo-Valéry’s achievement and that of the Song-Yuan flower-and-bird painting.

As Paul Valéry toys with a seashell, his penetrating reflection uncovers the highest level of mathematics and a truly organic architecture in the composition and structure of the shell. I said previously that the Song porcelain is like a shell. The comparison also means that the Song porcelain is endowed with the highest degree of mathematical formation and architectural, essential structure, exactly on par with those Valéry’s keen observation discovers in a shell.

Today, the design and production of new ceramics follow the principles of rationalism, purposiveness, and functionalism, principles rigorously governing the design process of airplanes, automobiles, and other machines. And yet, the more one studies, designs, and produces clay, glaze, and shape in a scientific, rational manner, that is, in the most purposive and economical way, the closer the new ceramics become to the Song porcelain.

Among the products of the “contemporary world,” perhaps the most beautiful are airplanes and automobiles. The design and production of these objects crisply encapsulate contemporary intelligence, science, and technology. And indeed, well-made airplanes and automobiles are certainly beautiful to anyone’s eye. One day I was looking down on the city from the window of a tall building, when an automobile came into my view and stopped right under my window. Its shape had an astonishing resemblance to that of a certain species of beetle, down to the sheen on its metallic skin, reminiscent of insect wings. In other words, this shows that contemporary men invest with the production of automobiles the arcana of mathematics and architecture Valéry discovered in the formation and structure of the seashell. Furthermore, the degree of resemblance between the Song porcelain and a shell is much stronger than between this contemporary automobile and a beetle. The Song culture rose as high as a culture could, to a height truly beyond measure.

The Song-Yuan flower-and-bird painting is an exquisite flower that blossomed in such a culture.

Needless to say, for contemporary men to prize the Song porcelain and recognize the true value of the Song flower-and-bird painting does not imply blind worship of a past idol, let alone being overwhelmed by its value as an antique.

That prizing and recognition should aim to thoroughly appreciate the Song porcelain’s true nature as a cultural heritage for humankind, to treasure it as an archetype, and to hear in it a mute yet eloquent critique of contemporary culture.

Let us summon another Frenchman,

—after all, it is France that today shares the most with the Song culture—
the entomologist Henri Fabre.

I have always held his *Souvenirs entomologiques* close to my heart. Not only did I cherish it as a middle school student, but have since recommended it to my friends and given my children a copy for them to read. On each of these occasions I plunged happily back into the book, never tired of it.

Poetry, affection, amazement . . . When the heart is filled with these, I am surprised to see, a man can be so precise, thorough, yet capable of a description so brimming with life and emotion. While reading the actual book, however, I am not even aware of such surprise. It is simply fascinating, and beautiful. I just move from page to page, engrossed deeper and deeper by the fascination and the beauty.

Fabre’s observation of the life of insects, his descriptions . . . To me, they are the closest equivalents to that astonishing naturalism of the Song-Yuan painting.

Without even knowing, the scientist Fabre created a noble poetry, a beautiful literature.

The painters of flowers and birds in the Song and Yuan dynasties created an incomparable paragon for makers of scientific photography and film working in such fields as botany and zoology.

When connected to a calm heart, filled with endlessly supple affection nurtured by a highly developed culture, the human eye is capable of functioning as an organ of unimaginable subtlety.—And the hand, too . . . Also, trivialities before human eyes open themselves up, if the man is cultured enough to always wonder at them, to generously reveal even their innermost secrets. Here science becomes art, and art, science.

The contemporary world is suffering. The Japanese, bewildered and abject after military defeat, cannot think but of their own suffering, without a broader perspective, making themselves all the more petty and unhappy. Japan seems less and less inclined even to pause to conceive precisely what in our inheritance, in the products of the Orient, can be useful, or must be put to use, for this unhappy contemporary world, and for a world of tomorrow that should be happier.

Of course, everything I have been describing in my humble attempt so far is useful for such purpose. But what is it that sums it all up, the most essential in it all?

It is the “blank margin” [*yohaku*] in the Song-Yuan painting, of which flower-and-bird painting is a prime example.

“Blank margin” is the true life of the Song-Yuan painting.

Look at the Quail, look at the Hibiscus.

Most of the paper is left untouched, or covered only with the thinnest of ink wash, so much so that calling them “blank margin” feels rather meaningless here.

And it is precisely because so much is left “blank,” these pictures were able to attain their grandeur and height.

Blank margin is emptiness [*ku*], nothingness [*mu*], void [*kyo*].

What the modern world lost sight of, is it not the emptiness, nothingness, and void?

Rightly and courageously, Valéry put his finger on his own and his fellow Europeans’ “instinct for abuse.” He also wrote a beautiful poem about tossing a whole drop of “precious wine” into the ocean as a kind of “offering to the void.”⁸

Delving deep into mathematics, revering architecture, he was a genuine twentieth-century man of culture who was able to appreciate the true value of nothingness and void.

Europe, giving no heed to Valéry’s desperate admonition, plunged into the Second World War, is ravaged, and now threatened by the shadow of a third world war.

What is it if not a tragedy of the “instinct for abuse”?

Literature and arts of negativity, or void, diverse and unfamiliar of face, are arising one after another in the Western world. Criticizing it as a mere nihilism typical of those worn out by the commotion is superficial and does nothing to stop its inexorable advance.

And not a few visitors—their number would only increase—are coming to the Orient, to the Far East, seeking a panacea for the happiness of humankind, their understanding of the art of blank margin deepening at an ever-accelerating pace.

It is right that, urged by military defeat, we put the sharp surgical knife of criticism to our own past. That knife, however, is to cut and gouge the lesion away, not to injure and damage the precious flesh.

Would it be possible to conceive a happy world without the Orient? Nay.

Just as the painted areas and the blank margins in the “Quail” and the “Hibiscus” mutually liven up to form a complete work, the Orient and the Occident, too, should live to mutually enliven.

“Just as the Orient cannot depend solely on its unique values for its existence, we cannot content ourselves with understanding the Occident,” Paul Valéry told René Grousset shortly before his death (Grousset, *A New Humanism*).⁹

Yet how appalled Valéry would have been to learn that the defeated Japan is about to jettison, even in its culture and arts, what little is left of the “uniquely Oriental values.”

We must calm down and give the matter a great deal of thought.

The Song culture and arts are in some respect the highest even among the “uniquely Oriental values.” (The Yuan dynasty, victor and conqueror politically, learned obediently from Song’s example in culture and arts; in painting, flower-and-bird painting in particular, Yuan remained a lesser follower of Song.)

The “blank margin” in the Song-Yuang flower-and-bird painting has its broad and deep roots in the Chinese philosophy, which reached a climax in this period.

The “Quail,” the “Hibiscus,” the “Persimmons and Chestnuts,” the “Peony,” the “Lotus and Fern,” the “Bamboo and Insects,” the “Amaranthus Tricolor,” and many other Song-Yuang flower-and-bird paintings made a complete use of the astounding “naturalism” exemplified in these works in a manner that is truly artistic, strong, and beautiful, without debasing it into an “abuse.” Similarly, the notions of emptiness, nothingness, and void, which acquired an extraordinary level of depth in the Song period philosophy (especially in Zen), are nothing but a force that allows us to grasp the true meaning of “reality,” of “life,” “being,” and “existence” in the strongest, noblest, and surest manner possible.

That may be one of the pinnacles of the “uniquely Orient” wisdom.

Do not let yourself distracted too much by the depictions in the “Quail.”

Do not let yourself fascinated too much by the bravura of the brush in the “Hibiscus.”

Let us fix our gaze firmly upon that “blank margin,” that emptiness, nothingness, and void, which deploy the depictions and bravura so completely and magnificently as to teach us a profound lesson in a mute eloquence.

For that is the genuine way to appreciate the Song-Yuan flower-and-bird painting, and to put its lesson to contemporary use, for the world of tomorrow.

Translated by Gaku Kondo

Mondrian

An Essay on the New Occident and the Old Orient

“Western art is lifelike, or naturalist, or realist . . . and Oriental art is non-lifelike, or symbolic, or fantastic . . .” Notions like this seem to be somehow still widely accepted today, but that was not what world art in the first half of the twentieth century was, nor does it appear to reflect the state of art today.

Certainly the less than second-, third-rate artworks of the Occident often continue to be lifelike, or merely lifelike. The excellent art in the twentieth-century Occident, however, just like the excellent Oriental art in the past, is often non-lifelike, or symbolic or fantastic.

The idea that the art of the Occident is objective and the art of the Orient is subjective, too, is increasingly at variance with fact.

Most modern Japanese people live on *tatami* mats, inhabit a house with *shoji*,¹ eat *miso* soup and rice, and yet they always speak of *tatami*, *shoji*, *miso* soup, and rice with contempt.

It would even seem that belittling all things Japanese and extolling all things Western, through the way they clothe, feed, and house themselves, has become part of the role of the “culturati.”

The culturati coming to Japan from Europe and America, however, are impressed by the Japanese style of clothing, food, and housing, all the more so if they are authentic, their culture high and deep.

What Europe and America today seriously seek are the products of the Orient, the legacy that has been passed down from the distant past in our island nation in the Far East. To me the Japanese people today seem to covet less than second-, third-rate used junk from Europe and America, things these societies are only too eager to throw away. And Japan today is about to toss its own beautiful, noble things in the fire—the mural at the Horyu-ji temple, the Kinkaku-ji temple . . . one after another.

We must not burn them.

We will be in serious trouble if we throw them away.

We must treasure, cherish, understand, enjoy . . . more than ever those *tatami* mats on which we sleep and those *shoji* we open and close. We must build our new life, culture, and arts on them.

My editor has encouraged me to pick a few leading artists of the twentieth-century Occident and write about them one by one. But the last thing I would want is to present the latest fashion in the West and invite the reader to emulate it.

Van Gogh once wrote in a letter: “Japanese art, in decline in its own country, is taking new roots among French . . . artists.”² Indeed, I am often surprised to see so many of the new Western artists after Cézanne, van Gogh, and Gauguin engaged in the continuation and revival of the excellent art of the past in Japan or the Orient at large, contemporary French artists chief among them.

“If you mean by religious the man who strongly adheres to certain practices, who bows before certain dogmas, obviously I am not religious. Who is anymore in our time? Who is willing to abdicate his critical mind and his reason?”

“But, in my opinion, religion is something besides the reciting of a credo. It is the sentiment of everything that is unexplained and no doubt inexplicable in the world. It is the adoration of the unknown Force that maintains the universal laws and that preserves the types of beings. It is the suspicion of whatever in Nature lies beyond our senses, the suspicion of the whole immense domain of things that neither the eyes of our bodies nor even those of our spirits are capable of seeing. Then again, it is the impetus of our consciousness toward infinity, eternity, towards boundless knowledge and love; these are perhaps illusory expectations, but, already in this life, they make our thoughts flutter as if they had wings.

“In this sense, I am religious.”

Now Rodin was following the undulating and rapid flames of wood burning in the fireplace.

He continued:

“If religion did not exist, I would have felt the need to invent it.”

“True artists are, then, the most religious of mortals.” (Rodin, *Art*)³

Modern Western art—and contemporary art, too—is built on the devout asceticism [*gyo*] of these *religious* men.

It is logical that the new art in the Occident only too often resembles the old art in the Orient, down to its outward appearance and style—for each and every one of its makers is a true ascetic [*gyoja*] . . .

We, inheritors of the noble tradition of Oriental art, should see the new art and artists of the Occident as an exemplar for restoring our own tradition and learn from them.

To learn from the new Occident is not to deny the old Orient. It is to restore the outstanding features of the old Orient by infusing it with a new life that we identify such features in the new Occident and learn from them.

Most of you reading these lines now, holding this magazine in your hand, you are probably sitting on a *tatami*. Raising the eyes, you will see a *shoji*.

A *tatami* is a rectangle of six feet by three feet, whose two sides are frequently bordered with a strip of black cloth. Now, in your room, how are the lines of these borders disposed? Whether the floor be composed of four-and-a-half, six, or eight, or . . . *tatami*, a few straight lines crossing each other at a right angle surround where you are sitting. Raising the eyes, again you will see the *shoji*'s vertical and horizontal bars delineating many small rectangles. *Fusuma*,⁴ too, is a rectangle bordered by narrow wooden frames. So is the ceiling, and perhaps the chest as well . . .

Most of us Japanese spend our day-to-day existence sitting on and surrounded by many rectangles of various proportions.

You don't like a rectangle?

Some will say no, I suppose.

Many will no doubt say that they don't know, for they have never even thought about such a thing.

Too bad.

A rectangle is the best shape for a man to be surrounded by and live his everyday life in. Then there are the *size* and *proportion*, as well as the kind, variation, *rhythm*, and *harmony* . . . of each of these rectangles. In short, I always believe that the architecture of a Japanese house—even that of our postwar, dilapidated abode—is perhaps composed of the most sophisticated rectangle, or group of rectangles, in the world.

No need to go all the way to see the Katsura Imperial Villa or the famous tearooms. The battered *tatami* in our house, the *shoji* and *fusuma* riddled with holes punched by cats and children, will do nicely. Let us contemplate them, calmly, taking our time, attentively. Let us then imagine various alternative situations, in which the *tatamis* might be twice as large as they are now, or their *proportions* might be less equilibrated. . . . Of course, the current state is not necessarily the absolute best, but the numerous rectangles surrounding us indeed turn out to maintain an almost surprisingly stable balance, and contain much deep rationality.

It is chiefly thanks to Mondrian that I have become aware of, woken up to, and grateful for these things.

I will ask my editor to include a few illustrations for you to take a good look at. Except for the early ones, almost all Mondrian pictures are composed solely of crisscrossing straight lines as well as the rectangles (including squares) these crossings generate. From 1917, when he arrived at that style, until the day he died in 1944, during these twenty-odd years, he painted nothing but straight lines and rectangles.

Mondrian was a painter who thought about things deeply and intensely. He was Dutch. In this country of northern Europe, where the land is low and water

is everywhere, Rembrandt was born, lived, and created his art, the most profound in the Occident, which dug deep into the human soul. More recently, van Gogh came out of this same country, paving the way for twentieth-century art with his ebullient passion, always underpinned by an acute, deep, and eminently intelligent reflection. Born in 1872 in Amersfoort, Mondrian, too, after his study at the Academy for Fine Art in Amsterdam, pursued a reflection, on life and art, no less deep and intense than those of his two predecessors. For a while he painted landscape à la van Gogh, or melancholic figures in a mystical manner, before going to Paris in 1910, where he received the decisive influence of the then young cubist painter Picasso. Later Mondrian applauded the achievement of Picasso and his peers' cubist art. He singled out the fact that their painting jettisoned the mere copying of the outward shapes of things, while, chiefly based on Cézanne's lesson, it defined the space by arranging *volumes*.⁶ In so doing, recalled Mondrian gratefully,⁷ cubism set the foundation for form-making [*zokei*] through pure proportions and free *rhythm*.⁸ By the time Mondrian, then twenty-eight years old, arrived in Paris from Holland in 1911 (Meiji 43), pictorial art in France had abandoned indulgence in the copying of outward shapes of nature, thanks to the martyr-like efforts of pioneers such as Cézanne (who died in 1906, Meiji 39), Seurat, van Gogh, and Gauguin. Issues like arrangement of volumes (Cézanne), geometric composition (Seurat), fluid linearity (van Gogh), and arrangement of colors in *arabesque* (Gauguin) had been raised, each considered as a powerful means of expression for the *human spirit*.⁹ Each of these artists had left a superbly personal solution to these issues, which had provoked and guided further developments in the fauvism of Matisse and his peers (1905) as well as cubism of Picasso and his peers (1906–1908). These new developments were thus establishing a new conception of painting in a way that was even more contemporary. In this atmosphere Mondrian at last arrived at one conclusion, the most thorough of all. It was of course not merely a theory but was being explored, pushed forward . . . step by step, in parallel with a continual practice, in and through the actual art making, based on the painter's experience. Thus, realizing that the work of many painters throughout history had been in essence an attempt to *express harmony through equilibrium in the proportions of line, color, and surface*, Mondrian for his part decided, in order to achieve this goal *by the clearest and most powerful method*, to paint *only with straight lines and rectangles, three primary colors, with black and white*. From this moment forward he persisted in his unshakable belief, deepening and enhancing his painting. Anyone who, in our humble, six- (or four-and-a-half, or three) *tatami* living room, knows how to admire the composition formed by the planes of the *tatami* and the lines on their borders, anyone who can appreciate the relaxing calm induced by the horizontal rectangle or the narrow vertical strip of a frame on the torn *shoji*, we who are familiar with Oriental calligraphy, an art that, to speak like Mondrian, turns on the harmony obtained through an equilibrium in the proportion of line and black and white—we are qualified to understand his art best.

After Mondrian's art, of straight lines and rectangles, of three primary colors (red, blue, yellow) and black and white, was established, he naturally faced much opposition and lack of understanding, but he preserved his belief whole until the very end.

He says:

What is certain is that no escape is possible for the non-figurative artist; he must stay within his field and march towards the consequence of his art.

This consequence brings us, in a future perhaps remote, towards the end of art as a thing separated from our surrounding environment, which is the actual plastic reality [*zokei-teki genjitsu*]. But this *end* is at the same time a new *beginning*. Art will not only continue but will realize itself more and more. By the unification of architecture, sculpture and painting, a new plastic reality will be created. Painting and sculpture will not manifest themselves as separate objects, nor as "mural art" which destroys architecture itself, nor as "applied" art, but *being purely constructive* will aid the creation of a surrounding not merely utilitarian or rational but also pure and complete in its beauty.¹⁰

Elsewhere he made the following declaration on the future of his own thoroughly pure form-making [*zokei*]:

. . . all plastic [*zokei*] until the present could be developed, continued toward pure plastic [*junsui zokei*]. But once this (the pure plastic) has been created, one can go no further in *art*.

But will art be always necessary? Is not art only a poor artifice, so long as beauty in life itself is lacking? *Beauty realized in life* . . . that must be more or less possible in the future, in view of the march of human progress that is to be observed if one's vision is not too superficial. Then it will be quite natural for life itself to cast art into the abyss, toward the edge of which it is already advancing in our time. [. . .]

Once art is cast into the abyss, its true content will still exist. Art will be transformed, will be *realized*, first in our palpable environment, later in society . . . in our whole life, which will then become truly *human*.¹¹

Indeed, even as Mondrian continued his work in the pure plastic, building on his firm belief and sense of mission informed by a broad perspective, a series of dramatic changes occurred around him. Architecture in Europe, America, and the world changed completely. Crafts, too—nay, the entire gamut of everyday instruments and utensils, ranging too wide for the term "crafts" to encompass—have been transformed in their design beyond recognition. Architecture, furniture, everyday articles, and still other things were created and designed with the aim, to use his words, of being "not merely utilitarian or rational but also pure and complete in its beauty,"¹² instigating many people to dedicate themselves to making contemporary life beautiful.

Mondrian's pictures are simple. To the extent that nothing can possibly be simpler. Those who duly appreciate the "harmony through equilibrium in the proportions"

expressed in them, as well as the force of what he often calls “*dynamic*¹³ equilibrium,” are driven to make our society and environment more human, truly artistic. One day I said to Isamu Noguchi: “I wish Mondrian could have come to Japan, even just once.” “But he didn’t have to,” Noguchi replied. “He would have come to find exactly the same thing as his own work.” Then he pointed to the *shoji*.

On another day Noguchi told me: “A lot of new, good home architecture is beginning to emerge in America. But Americans still don’t know how to live in it. We need Japanese people to teach us . . .”

We have shown an Oriental, highly accomplished version of what Mondrian calls “a surrounding not merely utilitarian or rational but also pure and complete in its beauty” in Sen-no-Rikyu’s art of tea, whose influence can still be seen in every corner of our life. We only need to be aware of, reflect on, and acknowledge this legacy in order to qualify, as Noguchi says, to teach others.

In actuality, however, Japanese people today are forsaking this qualification as though it were a *plague*.¹⁴

Looking at Mondrian’s work, immersing ourselves in its simple, sober, harmonious, and pure beauty, is our first step to go back to our own selves.

How deep, high, and powerful the expression of his works is, with merely one or two of the three primary colors placed here and there, with almost nothing but black straight lines drawn on a white surface! Those who aspire to achieve a plasticity [*zokei-sei*] in calligraphy, too, must begin by a thorough appreciation of his work. That is my conviction.

Translated by Gaku Kondo

Arp

An Essay on the New Occident and the Old Orient

A few days ago I wrote to the Salon de Mai artist Tal Coat, whom I discussed in the previous issue:

I am writing to you because I took a great interest in your work when I saw it at the Salon de Mai in Japan. To me your pictures seem akin to the old Japanese ink painting, both in their technique and philosophy. I heard that you are a Taoist; so am I. *Laozi* is the book I hold in the highest regard. I also esteem *Zen* greatly and am familiar with the art of tea and the *haikai*. Among the contemporary European artists, I admire Mondrian, Klee, Miró, and Arp. When van Gogh and others began to sing Japanese art's praise, Japan began to learn about European art—however, there seems to have been something wrong with that learning. And Japanese art today is considerably weaker than one would imagine from its great tradition. I believe that the great tradition of Far Eastern art must be restored today on a global scale, but am saddened to tell you that contemporary Japanese art has little to contribute to that restoration.

Today's world is in a terrible state. In the present, our *Laoism* is among the most precious of various isms for the reconstruction of true *Humanity*.¹ In fact, Japanese people today have fallen so low that few of them can sufficiently recognize the true value and importance of your Taoist art. Yet at least I—please believe my words—believe I am capable of understanding it. I hope you will allow me to continue to write to you from time to time, and I would be delighted to hear from you, too. If you find an occasion to come to Japan . . . yes, you must come, at least once. Let us exchange reproductions of our works. Today I am sending you just one. Please send me reproductions of your recent works. Let us understand each other deeper and deeper in this way. Good-bye now, let us shake hands across the ocean, across the continents . . .

I will report again in these pages when I hear back.

Isamu Noguchi wrote to me, in a letter dated January 1, 1951: "It is difficult to find peace of mind when the world is heading toward a disaster . . . Let me know

what you think.” When I was in a village by Lake Biwa during and in the immediate aftermath of war, I would make *haiku* with young people there. I translated some of their poems, born out of the earth, along with Chinese literati’s reflections on their ideal, summed up in the phrase *seiko udoku*,² from which we took the name of our association “Seiko-kai,” as well as Laozi’s and Basho’s words, and sent them to Noguchi. He thanked me profusely and asked: “When can I repay you for many things you have given me?” I do not recall giving him anything. I merely followed his wish, conveying what little I know of Zen, Laozi, Rikyu, Basho, and Ryokan in my awkward English. (He is deeply grateful for magazines like “Sho-no-bi,”³ “Sho no hanashi,”⁴ and “Mokkan shuei,”⁵ which the editors are mailing him every month.)

The more I look at the current state of the world, the more deeply I appreciate contemporary art, the stronger my conviction grows that from now on, nay, right from this moment forward, Oriental culture, Far Eastern art, should play a far greater role than before. I once declared this in a letter to Noguchi. “True *orientalism*,”⁶ I wrote, “must play a greater role in the contemporary world.” However, I did write the following as well: “True Orientalism barely remains in Japan today. Rather, there are perhaps superior, true Orientalists in countries outside Japan.” What I am pointing to is of course not *academic* students and mere aficionados of the Orient. I mean people like Mondrian, like Klee, like Miró or Arp, who almost unconsciously touched the essence deep within the Oriental culture of the past. Even younger, Noguchi and Tal Coat are our comrades. That is my conviction.

This time I will say a few words about Arp.

Arp (1888–)⁸ used to call himself Hans Arp; he is now Jean Arp. That is, he had a German name before; he now has a French name. For he was born in Strasbourg in the Alsace-Lorraine, a territory over which France and Germany have long disputed. He began his study of painting in Weimar in 1907, often making trips to Paris. He spent 1911–1912 in Switzerland. In 1912, he joined the “Blue Rider,” a new artistic movement launched by older peers like Kandinsky and Klee. In 1916, he was among the founding members of Dadaism in Zurich. He joined the Cologne Dada in 1920 and the surrealist group in Paris in 1924. He currently lives in the Parisian suburb of Meudon. Last year an important solo exhibition was held in Paris. After shuttling between Germany, Switzerland, and France in his youth, at last he has settled into Paris.

“Art is a fruit growing out of man like the fruit out of a plant or the child out of the mother’s womb.”⁹

These famous words by Arp express the character of his art with an almost miraculous exactitude.

His work gives a strong sense of something that slid out into this world. It has nothing that suggests resistance. It exists there in its nonchalant roundness, like a stone by the roadside. And yet, his art has an edge, which consists in the organicity

it possesses to the fullest extent possible in a work produced by a human being. During his Blue Rider period, in which he was content with bringing up the rear of the older peers, and even in his Dada, surrealist, and other periods, in which he held a considerably more important position, on the face of it he was by no means a flamboyant figure; he appeared unremarkable, reserved, and taciturn. And yet, amidst all these vehement movements the quiet man and his art remained a sternly unwavering force. Of the extremely diverse artistic movements of the twentieth century, nothing was so intense and fierce as Dada. It affixed a mustache to Leonardo's "Mona Lisa," a long-revered icon of Western art, giving it a lecherous title;¹⁰ it turned a urinal upside down, calling it "Fountain"; it presented the visitors to its exhibition with an axe, encouraging them to strike down the works they did not like . . . It¹¹ radically negated everything within its reach, "art," "classics," "beauty," of course, but even all "values," all "significances." As it also negated itself, some of its members committed suicide. To read his words quoted above and look at his works, it might seem hardly likely that this man was part of the group of youths who set this formidable torrent of negations in motion. Looking deep into his art, however, one cannot but sense a certain purity, as though cleansed of all that is superfluous. The purity, one will also sense, has none of neurotic fastidiousness but is limpid in a nonchalantly, matter-of-fact way. More and more emphasis has been placed on the richness of Arp's talent as a sculptor. And yet, in the presence of his works one senses not one iota of the old conception implied in the term "sculpture." Should someone disparage them, claiming that they have nothing to do with sculpture, he would instantly reply with a smile, I suspect, that whether they are sculpture or not is the least of his concerns. However, no one can deny the fact that what he creates—nay, gives birth to—is a perfectly "beautiful mass"; and one will necessarily realize that in the end, sculpture in the true sense of the word is nothing but a "beautiful mass."

Art without attachments—that's Arp's art.

Those who have attachments fear being negated. Arp, however, begins with negation, so to speak. From a brave, extremely thorough negation for that matter . . . Naturally, it has nothing superfluous. At the same time, that is why his works, which were born after this terrible negation, as what *had to be born*, lack nothing that is necessary. This is neither logic nor theory; it's a necessary consequence, a hard fact.

Abundant "being" built on "nothing." That is what the past masterpieces of the Orient demonstrated; today, that is Arp's achievement.

Arp's is often nicknamed as "amoeba style." Amoeba! That is one fundamental form "life" takes. There lies the extremely robust life of his art, born as what had to be born at the end of negation. Along with Brancusi, the Romania-born, mystical abstract sculptor who studied under Rodin, Arp has proved to be the greatest and most profound influence on the new three-dimensional art. Many young, excellent sculptors have followed their paths. Contemporary design has emerged

in diverse machine products, from furniture to receptacles to vehicles, in which organic, frictionless curves encircle each plane. At their roots, we must not forget, is the strong impact of the new artists of three dimensions.

Just as Mondrian never had the need to come all the way to Japan to see the composition of *shoji*'s rectangles, so Arp perhaps does not need to come to see the stone garden at the Ryoan-ji, the "beautiful mass" of rocks in a garden, stepping stones in a path leading to a teahouse across its front yard, the natural-stone lantern . . . However, we, should we not appreciate his art deeply and honestly, and through it begin to think anew about the meaning of our Ryoan-ji, garden rocks, stepping stones . . . ?

Should the old culture of the Orient perish? Or, should it be preserved and cared for exactly as it is, for the sole purpose of saving it from ruin? Nay!

We must restore it, this time not as something limited to Japan, not as uniquely Far Eastern, but as a living culture of the world today; that's the scale we must operate on. The process is already in motion! Beginning with the time when van Gogh paved the way for a new European painting by copying *ukiyo-e*, it has been continued, deepened, and expanded by contemporary painters, sculptors, and architects.

When I complained to a foreigner that my many years of efforts to make the art of Mondrian and Arp accessible to Japanese people have born little fruit, my interlocutor, astonished, replied: "That's ridiculous. Their art should be the first to be understood in Japan, the birthplace of abstract art!"

A more detailed presentation must wait until I obtain materials on the latest development of Arp's art, which I am expecting to arrive soon. Arp loves silence. Time for me to stop talking as well. The readers, too, are asked to observe the "beautiful mass" he created and the life of "amoeba" in silence. The pure beauty of "volume," the *dynamic*¹² power and beauty of curves—I believe there is much to learn from him for the creation of the new calligraphy.

Translated by Gaku Kondo

Letters from France and America

An Essay on the New Occident and the Old Orient

I wrote a letter to P. Tal Coat, the painter whose style attracted my attention, the most Oriental among those exhibiting at the “Salon de Mai,” a contemporary French art show held in Tokyo and other cities. In my letter I wrote that I felt sympathy for his works, that just like him I am a “Daoist—Daoist and Laozist,” and proposed to him that we exchange views and reproductions to learn from each other through correspondence (“Sho-no-bi” magazine, April issue).¹

The following reply has arrived:

Château Noir, Aix-en-Provence,

Dear Mr. Hasegawa,

I was very pleased to receive your letter. Everything you said about the path I am walking with great struggle moved me infinitely. It is truly encouraging for me to learn that we are not alone in the narrow path we are following. I live in this countryside, in an environment surrounded by rocks and filled with light. And all my efforts are directed toward the infinity of light’s movements.—This movement is capable of enlarging and animating us.

(Although the reply goes on, I want to add a little footnote here. Aix-en-Provence, where he currently lives, was home to Paul Cézanne, father of contemporary painting, and the Château Noir, a few kilometers from that city into the mountains, is a rocky place with mystical scenery which often appears in Cézanne’s works. Tal Coat has already spent many years in this great painter’s territory. Here Cézanne used to engross himself in those landscapes of trees and rocks with a depth like Song-Yuan monochrome landscape paintings, until he collapsed during one of his outdoor painting sessions and died on the spot. In that same land, Tal Coat acquired a new, post-Cézanne conception of painting and pursues his solitary effort to capture the infinite changes that the craggy mountainous scenery displays as the sunlight shifts.)



FIGURE 4. Photograph of Saburo Hasegawa by Isamu Noguchi, Japan, c. 1950–1953. The Noguchi Museum Archive.

I am troubled by the fact that not all of the contemporary painting, despite its innovative appearance, has managed to break away from the yoke of photographic vision. This willingness to limit visual field to see only the surface, this willingness to hold onto forms and colors as if they were their possessions, is regrettable. And almost all the painters are turning their backs on the (painting's) true problem.

(Note: These words must confound those who try to persist in the false belief that Western art is naturalistic. He is forcefully, frankly declaring his firm belief that it is impossible to attain true painting without breaking away from the yoke of "photographic vision." Indeed, even the innovative masters of contemporary painting like Picasso and Matisse are still trapped in the remnants of this photographic vision. Although one often hears uncritical praises for this in the Japanese art world, no small number among the younger French artists clearly reject it, like Tal Coat. They regret the photographic vision's obsession with the surface of the things alone, and the erroneous idea that clinging to forms and colors, which are but ephemeral, might allow us to grasp the truth.)

(I will take the liberty of omitting a paragraph, for there Tal Coat expresses his sympathy for the reproductions of my works included in my letter.)

I am studying rocks a lot—their varying appearances changing minute by minute with light . . . and it is by rhythm that we can accord ourselves with this eternal birth and mutation by means of the movement of our brush [*hissei*] (this is my tentative translation for *geste*²; a more literal rendering would be "painting gesture"). In the world of painting, the movement of brush is our purest expression. Its origin is to be found in prehistoric painting. It is a movement that creates space.

(Note: Some may mistakenly think the author of this statement to be not a young contemporary French painter but an ancient literati master of *Nanga*.³ This, however, is definitely by a young contemporary French painter. At a time we—at least those of us in the art world—have almost completely forgotten the lessons from the ancient Oriental painters, such as "*Ch'i yün sheng tung*" and "*Ku fa young pi*" [the first two of the famous six principles for good painting established by the fifth-century Chinese artist Hsieh Ho, translated respectively as "Through a vitalizing spirit, a painting should possess the movement of life" and "By means of the brush, the structural basis should be established"],⁴ which taught us to accord ourselves with the eternal birth and mutation of the universe by means of the rhythm of our *geste*, what a pleasure, yet what a sorrow it is for us to hear these words from France! In his letter Tal Coat goes on to celebrate the creative and purest *geste* of the prehistoric painting and elaborates on how it differs from most of modern painting. I will, however, refrain from quoting the passage, which addresses the fundamental problems of contemporary painting in a too deep and detailed manner to quickly sum up in the limited space I have.)

The (true) rhythms are (to be understood as) movements. It is them that steadily nurture and foster (everything).

I would be delighted if you could write to me again so that we could further correspond on all these matters with you.

*Sincerely,
Tal Coat*

PS: You will excuse me for not including the reproductions of my recent works at this time. I will send them along as soon as I get my hands on them.

The American abstract sculptor Isamu Noguchi visited Japan again. No sooner than our first handshake in a while, he offered me a brown envelope and said, "This is for you."

I opened it to find nine photographs. These were the works reproduced here, by Franz Kline, whom progressive critics regard as the most promising of the younger painters. They are large-scale oil paintings, I was told, yet entirely done in black and white. Tal Coat's works on show at the Salon de Mai, too, were painted in diluted black ink on canvases thinly coated with yellow paint. Aware that I have been engrossed in a series of ink-on-rice-paper abstractions since last fall, Noguchi brought this felicitous gift to me by airplane, while Tal Coat wrote a letter to convey an honest enthusiasm for a like-minded colleague.

Noguchi gave me a free hand in deciding what to do with these photographs, although he did express his wish that they be reproduced in high quality in a calligraphy magazine.

In my reply to Tal Coat I sent him reproductions of Sesshu, Taiga, Buson, Gyokudo, Chikuden, and others. In my cover letter, I explained the Oriental ideal of "*shoga icchi*" ["coincidence of calligraphy and painting"], including a reproduction of Taiga's work "Iroha."

The Henri Matisse retrospective, currently at the Hyokei-kan wing of the Tokyo National Museum, has turned out to be an absolute mess, but how many of its spectators will visit the glorious exhibition of Koetsu, Sotatsu, Korin, and Kenzan in the main building? I am confident, however, that a viewing of the art of Koetsu and Kenzan might prompt the old Matisse, so studious and humble, to entirely redo his mural for the Vence Chapel, now nearly completed . . . Moreover, that mural of his is itself painted only in black and white, something unheard of in the history of Western mural painting.

Black-and-white, ink, *geste* . . . These are the latest, most important issues in the art of contemporary world. Put differently, contemporary painting has come so much closer to the innermost essence of pictorial arts.

I heard that Franz Kline is around forty—Noguchi himself does not know more than that. (I wrote to ask the Egan Gallery, which represents Kline, for more information, but have not heard back from them in time for the present essay's deadline.)

But all we need is his works.

Now, should I try to comment on these nine works?

I will not, cannot do that.

For commenting on the newest works of this kind would in fact be difficult without first giving a thorough account of the often winding paths followed by vigorous fine arts movements in Europe and America over the past half-century. Furthermore, how on earth could five or ten minutes, two or three pages, suffice to describe the trajectory of hundreds of thousands of serious artists bravely fighting the idle, decadent conservatism of this world? Be under no delusion: “*modern art*”⁵ is not synonymous with “frivolous levity” or “abstruse obfuscation.” And humbly do your homework on the diverse movements of painting from Cézanne to today in a suitable survey book (I have made a few modest contributions to this genre). But the fact remains that art can never be fully understood through commentaries.

A) *Clock Face*

This is an artwork not a riddle. It would be useless to try to know why this picture is a clock face. Here, though, is what I think.

“Time” flows. In one direction. It never comes back. Just so, every “movement” in this picture is rushing toward left with a great force, never to stop . . .

A clock face. Round and encased in a square frame. And there, this flowing and never-stopping, eternal movement of “time” is being marked and shown minute by minute . . .

B) *Nijinsky*

Nijinsky was one of the greatest dancers in the twentieth century. He was one of the most ingenious performers in Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes at its artistic height between c. 1908 or 1909 and c. 1914. Afterward he lost his mind and died in solitude in America a few years ago. The dance of the contemporary legend Nijinsky—O, who knows, it may have been just like this! This strange movement, this violent contradiction and opposition, this robust harmony between the hard and the soft . . . An air of tragedy . . . Force.

C) *High Street*

A high street in America, the land of machine civilization, strong, broad, long straight lines, drawn in asphalt, in concrete . . . automobiles, automobiles, automobiles . . . truck, truck . . . maybe they are the symbols of material prosperity. But do we not sense something inhuman, alienating, sad in them?

Crisscross of unhesitating, strong straight lines.

Its sadness . . . Its loneliness.

This is my favorite among the nine works.

So much for pseudo-commentaries, I promised not to do that, did I not? For the rest I will simply list the titles.

- D) *Leda*
- E) *Giselle*
- F) *Cardinal*
- G) *Chief*
- H) Title unknown
- I) *Hoboken* (cover illustration)⁶

But I don't think we should be fixed on these titles when looking at the works. I believe I would be perfectly able to love them, and I would never tire of them, even if they were all entitled just "Painting" or "Work." My guess is that the author, too, came up with the titles only when the works were done.

If we, heirs to the "coincidence of calligraphy and painting" tradition, have come to see the two disciplines as separate, that would be a regrettable decline. Last summer Noguchi saw an exhibition of calligraphy by the Edo-period Zen monks at the National Museum, singling out on his own Ryokan, Hakuin, and Takuan for special attention. Even after we left the show he never ceased to sing the praises of Ryokan and Hakuin. Needless to say, he could read not a word of what was written. Noguchi is not alone in this. Every single one of the new, leading European and American fine artists who have come to Japan has loved and respected calligraphy.

Calligraphy and painting should coincide. The two thousand years of tradition in the Far East have taught us so, and now honest new young artists all over the globe are devoting themselves to put this lesson into practice. Tal Coat's letter and Kline's works have been presented here as prominent examples of that. Tal Coat is a loner. He will continue his exploration alone. But now in France not a small number of young painters are coming closer to the world of calligraphy, in a way that is different from Tal Coat but with the same thoroughness (see my "Salon de Mai" in the February issue of "Sho-no-bi"). Kline is not alone in America. A group of younger artists, chief among them Pollock, who has already achieved a wide and considerable reputation, are instinctively adopting *kyoso*⁷ script in their abstract paintings, some apparently employing only black and white, like Kline. Yet Kline stands out with his foray into the world of calligraphy that is more courageous, more active and deeper than any other. Tal Coat is French in being harmonious, intellectual, and contemplative; American, Kline is bold, straightforward, simple, and practical. I hope we, too, remain true to ourselves, heirs to the great tradition of the Far East, standing on the common ground we share with these artists as contemporaries, while in the realm of the ethnic and cultural tradition creating a new art appropriate to the different sky and earth that raised us.

Lastly, I want to make an additional remark, though it is a superfluity. All of the new artists from France and America I have discussed may well be put in the

category of “abstract painting.” (Not exactly pure abstract, *non-figurative*⁸ painting perhaps, but largely abstract as a matter of fact.) However, what we need to think deeply about is that “abstract painting” or *abstract art*⁹ has not always existed in the West. Today, abstract painting is widespread both in America and France. Also widespread, however, is the vehement opposition to it. The history of abstract painting over the past few decades is that of a firm creative conviction enduring the firestorm of abuse, negation, and scorn. This, I think, is something one should not forget even for a moment. And, presumptuous as this may sound, here is my wholehearted wish—those who are about to commit themselves to the creation of new calligraphy will learn that artistic innovation is made possible only by the noble sacrifices of the men who devote their lives to their cause, fighting with their high and deep culture, broad perspective, and unshakable conviction. Cézanne, of course, but two giants of abstract painting, Kandinsky and Mondrian, too, are no longer with us. They were like martyrs, working tirelessly, humbly, honestly, studiously; to the end of their days they heroically sustained themselves with what little encouragement from their genuine supporters amidst so much misunderstanding, abuse, neglect, and negation.

I have presented two foreign young artists to you, creators in the art of calligraphy, with the hope of fostering a new, broad perspective and a deep, keen awareness of tradition in you. It is my sincere wish that you will appreciate their words and works as those of your comrades, as tokens of their commitment to doubt, reflection, contemplation, and work, in the continuation of their predecessors’ difficult struggles.

Biography of Mr. Franz Kline

His letter to Mr. Hasegawa:

I am delighted and honored that my works will be reproduced in a calligraphy magazine. Perhaps in 1931, the works by Korin, Sesshu, Hokusai and others I saw at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston left the strongest impression of my student days. Ever since, my strongest affection has been for Korin, Hokusai, as well as other, older painters of China and Japan, with the exception of Rembrandt, whom I had studied for a few years before that. I liked your works, those of the Sho-no-bi group and Ueda Sokyu’s in the “Sho-no-bi” magazine you sent me (the November issue of last year reproducing Noguchi’s and my works). I would like us to exchange works, what do you think? I am also looking forward to receiving more magazines. The dimensions of my works, whose reproductions Mr. Noguchi brought to you, are: *High Street, Hoboken, Chief, Cardinal* (each 6 × 5.5 ft); *Giselle* (4 × 5 ft); *Nijinsky* (4 × 3.5 ft); *Clock Face* (30 × 36 in.); *Leda* (24 × 30 in.).¹⁰

Born in 1910 in rural Pennsylvania in the northern United States, in the mountains where there are a lot of American Indians. Enrolled in Boston University in 1931. Studied in Britain in 1935. Returned to the US in 1938. Works in New York

ever since. First one-man show (December 1950, at the Egan Gallery in New York) after winning two [National Design] Academy awards for Pennsylvanian landscapes (painted after memory; I got Academy awards for anti-academic works). Give my regards to Mr. Noguchi. Also, there is an exhibition of Mr. De Kooning's work currently up in New York. It attracts a lot of attention and was covered in *Time* magazine. I showed your letter to Mr. De Kooning. Mr. D. says he will send you a letter and reproductions of his works. Please send me your works again. Letters too. I am looking forward.

Translated by Gaku Kondo

Making the Katsura Imperial Villa Abstract

When we are no longer children we are already dead.

—CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI¹

Austere, beautiful words.

In his youth, every day he made a naturalistic statue and destroyed it later with his own hands. Asked why, Brancusi replied:

I can't shake off the feeling that I am making a corpse.

An egg-shaped abstract sculpture entitled “Newborn” became one of the epoch-making works epitomizing his new sculpture.

Once the US customs adamantly refused to recognize his piece “Bird [in Space]” as a work of art. After a two-year dispute (1925–27), it was finally allowed to pass, with tax levied against its weight as a mass of bronze.

—The episode is paradoxically instructive, in that it points to the stark simplicity of his works, as well as his thorough exploration of the essential character of the materials.

At seventy-five, he is currently making “columns” rising infinitely to the sky. A critic concludes the account of his visit movingly with the following quote:

Stones are mute teachers, they silence the observer.

—Goethe

In the garden at the Katsura, many such mute teachers greet us, their character fully brought out in a beautiful arrangement as in a Brancusi sculpture.

Art is only a substitute as long as the beauty of life is deficient. It will disappear in proportion as life gains in equilibrium. Today art is still of the greatest importance—because it demonstrates plastically in a direct way, liberated of individual conceptions, the law of equilibrium . . .

—Mondrian, 1942.²

In Mondrian's (1872–1944) pictures, black straight lines intersect at right angle on a white plane, with white, black, blue, yellow rectangles or squares arranged in places—that is all there is.

However, they are rare examples of beautiful proportions, so noble, austere, profound—truly *human*—that it is difficult for anyone else to attain them easily.

“Mondrian, that's no painting,” you could say. But then, Lao-tzu's *Dao De Jing* would be no literature either. It is these things, so simple at first sight, that are the most enduring, for they are internally charged with concentrated forces.

—M. Seuphor, 1949³

Lao-tzu discussed void. Mondrian painted void.

These are the “nothingness” that comprises all beings and the essence of reality. Noble and beautiful proportions of rectangles and squares, and beautiful, internally charged voids: those are the Katsura's architecture.

They are also one early exemplification of “beauty realized in life,” the lifelong ideal of Mondrian, the “saint of abstract painting.”

Every morning I wash my face in the kitchen.

One morning I found a few wooden *kamaboko* boards in front of me.⁴ I grabbed them without hesitation. I borrowed an engraving chisel from my child. I carved two lines on one board, a circle on another, and two rectangles on yet another, slightly deforming them into dynamic and organic shapes that I like. I applied black poster paint on them, then went on pressing the results down on sheets of Kent paper.

After a while, I was oblivious to everything else.

On a white paper, a deformed circle, a bizarre rectangle, and various combinations of these appeared one after another.

I realized that my hand and mind were moving to the same rhythm. I continued.

They kept coming. In the end I had twenty, thirty sheets of strange, black-and-white prints.

“Yes, this is what I have wanted to create!”

Recently, like a daydream, a black plane with stark shapes on it had repeatedly appeared before my mind's eye. “Grab it! Grab it!” I had urged myself, but I had never known how and days had gone by in vain.

I'm not sure why, but this morning, when I saw the *kamaboko* boards, I immediately had the intuition that that was it.—From that moment until the work was over, what was it that possessed me?

I was relieved when it was over. What was in front of me, every morning—there it is, abstracted.

I made them one by one so that each may have its own unity. (I threw away the ones that didn't have it.) Once the process was over, however, I could see a constant threading through the whole.

I then spread and arranged them across two mats of *tatami*, as though on the panels of a *byōbu*.⁵ As I experimented with different arrangements, I found myself back in a state of complete obliviousness.

I did not think of any title yet.

A few days went by . . . Early summer last year, I had visited the Katsura for the first time in a while.

—Twice, with Isamu Noguchi.

He trotted around like a hunting dog with a camera. I stood or sat down in front of the rocks and the kiosk. And both of us, quiet most of the time, let our minds be branded, our bodies immersed, by the impression of a “ballet of *nothingness*” of utmost plasticity [*zokei-sei*], as it unfolded before our eyes under the sunlight falling from a rare clear sky during the rainy season . . .

A whole year has passed. It must be something that has been fermenting inside me ever since—gradually, almost unconsciously—that came out to take a “shape.”

(*abstract art*⁶ = abstract painting, abstract sculpture, new architecture and crafts = the forty years of their history saw many a transformation. What remains unchanged, however, is perhaps the fact that these creators speak of the things that strike their whole body and mind in everyday life, through the clearest and simplest = and the strongest = “plastic language” [*zokei gengo*].)

Katsura Imperial Villa: Early Summer

Having given this general title, I finally came to terms with my little experiments.

Soon, however, a burning sense of frustration seized me.

I want to create a much deeper silence.

I want to create much more beautiful proportions.

Like the Katsura—.

And like Brancusi, Mondrian . . .

Translated by Gaku Kondo

Calligraphy and New Painting

Encountering the Work of Alcopley

A: A friend of mine gave me a piece of advice. “Calligraphy will never rise again as a new form of art, even if you people helped out a little. Don’t even bother.”

B: Pointing to the works by the Alpha Club in the May issue of *Bokubi*, Isamu Noguchi uttered, “How boring. These are just improvisation.” Meanwhile, he pointed to the works by Kline featured in the same issue and said, “Now these are quite together.” At the same time, he also extolled the beauty of the Japanese kana scripts of the *Gen’ei-bon Kokinshu*.¹

“A” here refers to a close friend of mine who always speaks to me kindly and without reserve. He is the one who says what another would never bother to tell me. I am sure the same goes for the advice he just gave me. With regard to the words of Noguchi, or “B,” it is also normal in our friendship for him to be straightforward with both praise and criticism.

Ryokan,² during his time, disliked the work of professional calligraphers. Today, many are once again skeptical about calligraphy, or calligraphers, or the future of the art of calligraphy in the whole. In fact, many are beyond skeptical and are already disillusioned with the art. I must confess that after my trustworthy friend gave me his candid piece of advice, and also from the calligraphic works I have chanced upon thus far, I too often feel skeptical about calligraphy and its future.

Upon hearing “B,” or Noguchi’s words, I should feel most responsible as I am the one who selected the very works he was talking about. I have no words to say in excuse. Oftentimes I have tried to be brutally honest with my selections and critique, cautioning artists not to be self-righteous and self-absorbed, but perhaps I could have been even harsher. I also regret not taking all possible measures to effectively pursue the discipline of pure forms in calligraphy.

I am a lone and poor painter, bothered and tormented day and night by the feudalistic nature that tenaciously remains in the Japanese *gadan*,³ or rather, more broadly in Japanese culture and in the general lives of ordinary people. Oftentimes we come to the painful realization that from the moment of birth and onwards, we



FIGURE 5. Saburo Hasegawa's New Year's card to Isamu Noguchi, with a short description of the kamboko-ita process on verso, 1951. The Noguchi Museum Archive.

are endowed with excellent traditions but also saddled with daunting conventions. Knowing this, would it be too arrogant for me to urge those involved with calligraphy to reflect upon themselves because people—who are at most cultured laymen or mere members of the *gadan*—look upon them with skepticism and disillusionment? Now I shall profess that these arrogant words of mine, if allowed, would not only be addressed to the so-called old calligraphers but also to the calligraphers of my own time. Okakura Tenshin once encouraged the Japanese *gadan* of his time to revolutionize itself and Masaoka Shiki also severely criticized the “poem composers” of his time. In the way that these groundbreakers directed their deep passion, broad perspective, and effective action toward the true revival of significant Japanese painting and *tanka* poetry, I too hope that new calligraphers will appoint themselves to the task of reforming calligraphy.

Today, calligraphy, or the great tradition of the art of calligraphy, is steadily being revived—that is, by the hands of foreigners. In fact, I often feel that the same is happening with painting, and very regrettably so. Many times I feel that the outstanding tradition of Japanese art is, as Van Gogh once predicted, better utilized by the art circles in France. And every time I reflect on this, I feel “tormented.” One could say that Sotatsu is a much greater painter than Matisse. Then again I wonder, how many of our contemporary Japanese painters can come as close to Sotatsu’s art on a fundamental level as Matisse? I suppose there are artists in today’s Japanese *gadan* who are sought after by art dealers for emulating only the surface and peripheral elements of Sotatsu’s paintings. To my eyes, though, such emulations do not inherit even a fraction of the painterly spirit of the creative master Sotatsu.

So how should we rise again and where do we start? This issue involves not only contemporary calligraphers but also painters like myself.

Calligraphy and painting are separate art forms. And yet today, on so many occasions we encounter new contemporary Western paintings that have affinities with old calligraphic masterpieces. It is also worth noting that Western painters greatly respect and understand old calligraphic art. Needless to say, the new contemporary paintings of the West did not emerge overnight. In my own humble way, what I try to explain through my columns on contemporary art in this magazine is how difficult it has been to pave the way for painting and how many remarkably genuine artists have partaken in this endeavor. Just the other day, I was at Isamu Noguchi’s house, discussing Sesshu and Cézanne with him. It was Cézanne who opened my eyes in my youth to the greatness of Sesshu. In turn, I later learned from Sesshu the greatness of Cézanne. It may have been through abstract paintings by Mondrian that I learned about the beauty and sublimity of tea house architecture, or the art of tea ceremony itself, or of the man Sen no Rikyu. Or perhaps, the enlightenment was by way of new Western architecture or crafts. In any case, what is most important for us today is to understand truly great and truly beautiful art, and to achieve a correct and tangible understanding

of those truths. It does not matter what route we take. Western artists may awaken to and study the beauty of *Rikuchō* (six-dynasty) calligraphy or classical literature while daubing oil paint on their canvases. We might take the reverse route, but if so, why should we feel ashamed? The only thing we should be ashamed of is lacking the disposition to learn. Today's world is no longer yesterday's world. With the will to learn, an artist who is conscientious and hungry for knowledge can learn freely, taking anything in this world as a resource. It would be foolishly lazy for one to validate himself as an artist of his own time without making the effort to learn. The tradition of calligraphic art belongs to us Easterners. But today, calligraphy is an art for all. The examples we are seeing today confirm this fact. This may sound like a leap in topic, but I shall give Bashō as an example. I always think that if Bashō were still alive today, he might have taken a trip to Tibet or to Turkestan instead of his pilgrimage to northeastern Japan to pen his *Oku no Hosomichi* travelogue. From what I know of the man and his work, this would be the kind of disposition I imagine Bashō had.

I recently received works by Alcopley,⁴ who was introduced to me by Kline and de Kooning. Whereas Kline's is a powerful art of thoroughly pursued lines, Alcopley's is a graceful art of lines and dots, and while Kline created work as a professional painter, Alcopley made his paintings as an avocation during his life as a scientist. As such, there are some fundamental differences between Kline and Alcopley's works. Characteristic of a professional painter, Kline's works have been thought out with great care and thoroughly executed, where each line and each stroke powerfully expresses everything the artist has to say. His recent works in particular brim with a sense of tension and never fail to impact viewers. On the contrary, Alcopley's works are literally an elegant art of play. I felt that the Eastern tradition of calligraphic works by *bunjin* (literati) was alive in these works. These two ways—the way of the painter's profession and the way of the *bunjin's* avocation—cannot be compared equally. Neither is superior to the other. The tradition of the old *bunjin* masters, proud and self-conscious of their art, tells us so. I should also add that the letter from Kline and de Kooning recommending Alcopley was also filled with great respect for him. In his essay "On My Position,"⁵ Alcopley writes about himself in a clear-cut manner. His attitude essentially echoes why the *bunjins* of the past were inspired to take up calligraphy as leisure. I believe that Alcopley's art will heighten as he matures as a scientist, a man of culture, and also as an individual. And with this maturity, the lines and dots that entangle and frolic about in his works should gain deeper meaning and refined elegance.

Some of Alcopley's works have descriptive titles but I understand those were named at a later time. Alcopley's works are, of course, entirely abstract sketches or non-objective sketches, which all have very sophisticated and fine, solid formative compositions. I remember when I first saw photographs of Kline's works, I clearly acknowledged in the background of their formative compositions the histories of Cézanne and of abstract painting that emerged after Cézanne, which was the

source of influence and learning for Kline. In contrast, if we consider Alcopley's career and the impression we receive from his works, we can say that their formative compositions appear to spring from his inner self as a truly contemporary scientist. This is actually a very important observation for it proves in turn, though circumstantially, the fundamental validity of abstract paintings in the contemporary age of science. What I would like readers to recall now is how I mentioned at the beginning that Noguchi called the works by the Alpha Club merely improvisational and boring, but the kana scripts of the *Gen'ei-bon Kokinshu* beautiful. Just as Noguchi observed, old and outstanding kana scripts with their flowing lines and dots are always composed with amazingly strong frameworks. Today, however, people concentrate their learning on surface elements such as the shape of individual characters, the way the brush is handled, or how the letters are arranged in a piece. What should be most respected and what in fact most impresses and amazes Noguchi and other foreigners like him who have no knowledge of calligraphic attributes is this fundamental framework provided by the overall formative composition. And today, we are witnessing something similar to this streaming out beautifully from the avocation of this truthful man and scientist Alcopley. What exactly does this mean? In the way that both religions of the past (in the age of kana scripts) and present-day science have been pathways to the truth in their respective times (or to say, the least of them have been imbued with the aspiration toward a certain truth), the workings of the mind and the structures expressed in these works can directly connect with and reflect against each other beyond time and place. In the present age, then, how do we (contemporary people) make use of the beauty of kana scripts, which not only instantly enthrall us Japanese but also foreigners who cannot even comprehend them? I think we can draw a graceful object lesson from Alcopley's works that helps to answer this question. A specialist in kana scripts should not only mean a person who is knowledgeable about the kind of paper or brush that should be used, or the kind of shapes, lines, and arrangements that need to be considered when writing letters. If one can truly understand and appreciate the beauty of kana scripts, and by that call him a specialist, I believe that these works by Alcopley will for sure pique his interest.

Translated by Haruko Kohno

New Photography and Painting

Real Photo

Although Courbet's later works suggest the decline of both his mind and his body and give off whiffs of cheap romanticism, those he produced during his prime years brim with a pleasant sense of tension. The works of this period are also extraordinary and momentous in the way that the bare human eye operates in them in an accurate, unfailing manner, as closest to the lens of a camera. Having gone through Leonardo, then Velasquez, Western paintings of the modern era clearly reached the peak of photographic realism with Courbet. The works of Courbet's prime years are absolutely beautiful. Looking at his paintings, I can imagine how people up until his time passionately endeavored to turn the human eye into the camera lens. I also think that Courbet was the first and last painter to have neared complete success with that challenge.

Of course, there have been examples of extremely detailed paintings among those produced in Germany and mainly Northern Europe from the Middle Ages to the modern era. France also saw someone like Chardin. However, as might be expected of someone who confidently called himself "the realist Courbet," the photographic realism of this artist was of exceptional scope and impact. Particularly when he was in the best of health and spirits, Courbet's eyes and hands were able to accomplish photographic depiction like the workings of a human machine. Notably in Courbet, the zeal to paint was wholly directed to achieving that sort of depiction. He was a realist worthy of the name.

I do not have documents at hand that specify the exact years, but we must take notice of the fact that these works by Courbet were produced at the same time the art of photography was completed to a certain measure.

Taigado' once wrote about how interesting it was to see how the morning sunbeam entering through a small hole in the shutters projected onto the *shoji* screen an inverted image of the outside scenery. I am sure there have been more than a few across the world who have also found this fact interesting. But turning this interest into actually wanting to, and trying to fix the inverted picture as an image,

surely would have required passion of a great degree. This is the kind of passion I am thinking about when I speak of Courbet.

Photography, after having arrived at a certain measure of completion, was further perfected by the ingenious application of the lens and principle of the camera obscura. At the same time, photorealist paintings died out. The human machine Courbet was the last of the sort. I, for one, cannot think of any photographically sketched painting subsequent to Courbet that delivers passion to such a fulfilling degree. I have even come to think that no one can possibly paint a more beautiful photographically sketched painting as he did. We have, of course, seen the birth of many beautiful paintings after Courbet. However beautiful, though, they are all detached from the idea of sketching photographically. Then, ultimately, we came to see the birth of abstract paintings that abandoned altogether the aim to depict.

If we think retrospectively, we arrive at a very simple fact that when there were no cameras, a painting also fulfilled the role of a photograph. The zeal of modern Western painters in pursuing photographically accurate depiction, which culminated in Courbet, certainly diminished with the advent of the camera. It would be a mere delusion, I think, to anticipate the emergence of another “realist painter” like Courbet.

And this is why I have a special place in my heart for photography.

Oftentimes people are overcome by the strong desire to depict and document their subject material, and not infrequently there is a need to do so. Now that we have the camera, these objectives should be achieved with it, and not with a paintbrush. The passion of the man with the paintbrush—the “painter”—has moved onto something else.

The camera, which now takes over from painting the mission to depict and document, must rightly fulfill this task. The question is, then, what is considered “good” visual representation and documentation? Is it only the industrial-technical advancement that helps to accomplish this task? Of course not!

Today’s photographic machines are, in one way or another, better than yesterday’s. Naturally, new machines have the potential for making better photographs. This is a fact, a fact that gives us reason for hope in that future potential. Meanwhile, the changes and improvements in the performance of photographic machines will for sure continue to change the look of a “good photograph.” That said, good photographs can still be made with older, inferior cameras and sure enough we have seen the birth of such photographs. New, better quality machines can produce good as well as bad photographs. What is it then that determines the good or bad in a photograph?

How perfectly or not the photographic machine is operated also becomes a determining factor. The camera, of course, needs to be used correctly to a fair

degree but that alone does not guarantee a good outcome. The elements that determine a good photograph are indeed complicated.

No matter how you look at it, painting and photography are closely related to each other. It's clear, however, that a painting is not a photograph and vice versa. We need to keep this difference clear. Naturally, what a painter has to say about photography has its limits. It would be a mistake to impose the criteria that are only permitted in painting on photography, not to mention how uninteresting a photograph would be if it were bound by such criteria. I think we need to be absolutely clear about this.

Since the day cameras were first invented, there have been countless attempts to create photographs that imitate paintings. We cannot dismiss all of these attempts as worthless, but it's fair to say that most outcomes have been woefully bland. This is why photography needs to develop and change strictly as photography. Painting too should shake off the nostalgia for the days there were no cameras and progress on its own accord.

That said, albeit the difference between brush and camera, painting and photography are the same in that they are both visual art forms presented on flat surfaces. In this regard, I think painting should, after all, be allowed to have its share of a say about photography.

One of the most interesting publications I came across relatively recently was the photography issue of the French art magazine *Art d'aujourd'hui* (Art of Today). The featured works, cover, back cover, and the "layout" of the inside pages were respectively, and on the whole, thoroughly and convincingly presented. Now, were these photographs too painterly? Admittedly, they were. Even so, I think that the publication on the whole was unquestionably pertinent as a statement addressed to photography from the side of painting.

I felt that it was befitting and completely righteous of *Art d'aujourd'hui*, which promotes abstract art from the clearest artistic position among all French art magazines, to put together this feature issue.

The abstract art of today walks the path of the "form-creating" (*zokei*) arts—painting, sculpture and architecture—on the premise that this is the era of photography and moving images (television). That is to say, today's abstract art progresses while having entrusted the tasks to depict and document to contemporary machines. Abstract painters do not deny visual art on flat surfaces as methods to depict and document. And because they do not deny this, they entrust cameras and other machines to depict and document as they can better perform these tasks. Hence, we can say that it is the abstract painters who most look forward to seeing good photographs. What I saw in that magazine, I think, exemplified the kind of photographs that abstract artists strongly wish to see.

In short, I am talking about photographs that have a solid and contemporary "form-creating" quality.

“Sounds” express a variety of human emotions. Those “sounds” form music. “Shapes” also express a variety of human emotions. Those “shapes” form art. In this realm of art also lies photography. As I have repeatedly said, a photograph is not, and should not be, a painting. Both are considered art, but the conditions that make a good photograph and a good painting are different. They are different, but they can also be the same.

Let me return to Courbet. Courbet during his prime years depicted and documented his subject matter in the manner of a human camera. The works he produced were beautiful. I remain deeply attached to them because, as I mentioned above, I can strongly feel Courbet’s zeal to depict and document, and because this zeal has been given form in the most admirable way.

To elaborate, the most outstanding of Courbet’s works are accurate depictions and documentations on flat surfaces that are each based on a solidly constructed compositional framework. And what reinforces this framework is Courbet’s artistic spirit. In this sense, Courbet’s art does not differ greatly from the art of Cézanne and of artists after Cézanne. The difference would be that Cézanne and those that followed him handed over the tasks of realistic depiction and documentation to photography and moved on from there. Mondrian and other contemporary abstract paintings are also in the same vein as Cézanne as they too completely detached themselves from the idea of depicting and documenting subject matter. At the same time, in the way that they have a solid formative framework that is reinforced by their artistic spirit, they are in fact similar to Courbet. The works that were featured in the photography issue of *Art d’aujourd’hui* made great sense to me, as they seemed to reconfirm these thoughts of mine. The photographs that I saw were not in the least bit “emulations of painting,” but I could feel that while fulfilling the tasks of depicting and documenting, these works also had the kind of formative framework that we see in a good painting. With these photographs, I could sense the individual holding the camera forming the image.

I am not saying that photographers, new and old, should pursue photographic composition while being constrained to some “law of composition” derived inductively from past paintings. Photographers must always create form solely with the camera. What kind of shapes, how bright a white, a black, or a gray, what kind of material, what sort of line, how much of a volume or a plan should be arranged on the picture plane in order to capture and materialize the spirit of the person releasing the shutter? Questions like these must always be tackled seriously in order to achieve a truthful photographic form. A photographer who has this sort of sensibility of form should naturally accord with contemporaries working in other artistic genres. When encounters like these happen, we should be able to see true exchange and communication happening between painting and photography.

I am eagerly waiting for the emergence of this sort of genuinely formative photography. I get very excited imagining the moment when technology, with

its every-advancing industrial and chemical novelty, will realize this for us. I also think that it would be truly beneficial for our lives if these new, outstanding photographs took on the roles of depiction and documentation that excellent paintings of the past assumed in times before the camera was invented.

PAINTINGS ON PHOTOGRAPHIC PAPER

Without light, we would not be able to see things. We are essentially living within light.

Photography reached a certain level of success, of capturing images of objects in light by utilizing the principle of the camera obscura and lens. The process of fixating images gave birth to a completely new material, the photographic paper. That is how painters see it.

The invention of the photographic paper meant that a new method of drawing besides drawing with traditional pigments became possible. With this new paper, images could be drawn using light and be chemically fixated as with traditional pigments. As a matter of course, some artists decided to make paintings using this new material, whether that meant with or without lens or a camera obscura device.

This is how Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy arrived at photograms. In Japan, Ei-Q has been doing this for almost twenty years now, and other new artists are finally beginning to try their hands at the photogram technique. It is only natural that artists should want to incorporate this material as a medium of expression, given the fact that chemically fixating the image of objects or tones created by light rays in such ways is considered one of modern science's achievements, without which photography could not have progressively established itself as an art form.

For us living in a world of light and shade, the emotional aspects of our lives are largely dominated by varying degrees of brightness and darkness. Throughout history, painters have struggled to express emotions through the subtlety of light and shade, but it was not until the invention of photographic paper that this challenge was fully accomplished. Now with this material that makes such expression possible, people expect to see it develop as a new branch of painting. Operating today's camera can be quite complex and difficult. One way to explain this is that cameras and photography on the whole have not been fully developed yet. As cameras and photographic techniques improve industrially and chemically, ultimately, the operation should become extremely simple. Perhaps that is when we will be able to express freely, in every sense of the word, emotions as projections of light and shade. And when that is achieved, there will probably be no distinction between a painter and a photographer. A fortunate state where all painters are photographers and all photographers are painters might even be imaginable. In any case, even at this current state of development, drawing on photographic paper using light and shade is certainly an interesting and enjoyable process.

Following Cézanne, painters began to focus on the pursuit of pure forms and the painter's eye began to delve deep into the formative essence of art. Their interest in this direction in a sense brought a reinforcing effect to photography, which generally tends to lose its formative framework as their levels of depiction and documentation improve. This is just food for thought, but we could say that herein lies the *raison d'être* for the "painter's photograph," or paintings on photographic paper.

Frankly speaking, to the painter's eye, a photograph created by a photographer appears too often to have lost a great deal of its formative quality because he is caught up in the trifling technicalities of either the operation of the machine or the chemical fixation of the image, or both.

Of course, we must consider how the concept of technology differs between a painter and a photographer. While painters depend on an old technique with a history of several hundred or even several thousand years, photographers need to utilize industrial or chemical achievements that are renewed, literally with each passing day. That said, whether the image is fixed onto photographic paper or drawn on paper or canvas, photographs and paintings are highly similar in that they are both forms of visual art made to appeal to the eye. And so, for the time being, I think it's fair for painters to have their say in both the creation and the critique of photography.

In the preceding section, I repeatedly mentioned how painting handed over its tasks of depiction and documentation to photography. I may have given the impression that painting therefore had no choice but to direct itself to abstraction, but that is not what I meant, and painting's inclination toward abstraction certainly did not happen in such a passive way. If we look at modern science, in brief, the underlying ethos is that it must dig into the essence of things. Modern science observes phenomena, and from there proceeds to search for what lies therein. This sort of ethos, of course, is also present in the arts. The "abstraction" in painting happened because of this sort of ethos, or spirit in persisting with the question—what is a painting after all?—even at the very last moments before completion.

This is how after Cézanne, the focus of interest shifted greatly to pursuing the formative framework in painting. Naturally, this move to "abstraction" should also happen in photography, not to emulate painting, and albeit it being decidedly superior to painting in terms of its ability to depict and document. Thus in photography, too, no matter how solid a formative framework a work has, depicting in the manner of Courbet is in a sense outdated. Photographers should not overlook the achievements in painting from the days of Cézanne all the way to the present for the ever straightforward expression made possible in photography—the intensity of grasping the moment in a non-explanatory way and dynamic presentation—should become apparent as a need of the times.

As film (television) increasingly outperforms photography as an explanatory and descriptive media, photography, which by nature must cohesively express

something within one framed surface, must all the more pursue a direct and integrated expression. Photography is also expected to pursue “abstraction” more than what was expected of it before the advent of film. Here also, we should expect an intimate, and not imitative, exchange happening between photography and new abstract painting. This should explain why I look forward to seeing photographs that maintain a high “photographic” quality but are abstract in expression. (Refer to Steinert’s “Speeding Car.”)²

Two young painters, Koshimizu Tetsutaro and Yanome Ko, recently came to show me their works, the first of their attempt to use photographic paper. Made with neither camera nor lens, they were paintings so to speak, done directly on photographic paper. Of course they depend entirely on the use of light and shade, as images can only be expressed this way with this medium. Their strong interest in the material was quite apparent and I felt that they had a certain sense of newness, both as paintings and as “camera-less” or should I say, “lens-less,” photographs in the way that they were daringly devoted to the picture plane in creating the image. Although at this stage their works are still experimental, I think they manifest, to a certain extent, the potential development of this new kind of art on photographic paper.

Currently, I am working on a project with Kitadai Shozo, Yamaguchi Katsuhiko, and Hamada Hamao, with the help of photographer Otsuji Kiyoji.³ What we are trying to do is to compose subject matter through the eyes of a painter and to organize it through the eyes and techniques of a photographer. Despite our cross-disciplinary collaboration, we have not yet achieved satisfactory outcomes, but eventually, if both sides can work in complete harmony, I am sure that we will produce work that is quite complex and completely new in formative content. I hope to do so by all means. I want to pursue this work even further, as a new test case for collaborative work between painters and photographers. The current collaborative process is already beginning to reap new discoveries that respond respectively to the uniqueness of both the painters and our current photographic partner, Mr. Otsuji.

I have been observing Ei-Q’s continuous efforts spanning many years from the very beginning, and with utmost respect. The early works in particular were outstanding in terms of their depth and strength. The recent works with their representational forms appear to have a stronger sense of beauty and richness than before, but I also think that they have somewhat lost their sense of coherence. I hope that the new direction he is currently exploring will culminate into something strong and solid.

There are more than a few others not mentioned here who also started from the side of painting and are now engaged in experimental attempts in photography. I am sure that we will be seeing more of these artists, and I certainly look forward to that.

It is neither right nor desired to unjustly separate photography from painting; after all, both are visual art forms exercised on flat surfaces. We must also not forget the historical fact that painters had a significant role to play in the formation of photography. While establishing their respective positions, photography and painting should occasionally come together in proper and always renewed exchanges and collaborations. Such interaction, I believe, will for sure benefit both sides.

Translated by Haruko Kohno

The Fate of American Artists

Last spring, in March, a reporter from *Time* magazine responsible for its art column came to visit me at my personal exhibition (at the Contemporaries Gallery on Madison Avenue in New York) for an interview. At the end of the long chat, I confessed that in short, I am a man who has been agonizing between the Orient and the Occident for twenty years. One week later, I was embarrassed to see these words appear verbatim in the finished article and distributed all over America and the world. On reflection, though, this history of agony between the Orient and the Occident seemed to begin to stretch far longer than twenty years, now that I am forty-eight. One Sunday, then a pimply-faced boy, I grabbed my oil paint to go sketching in Nara Park. The next Sunday, I went out without carrying anything to sit in front of the principal Buddha image of the Yakushi-ji temple. I visited it so many times that the guard, a middle-aged man, started recognizing this peculiar middle school pupil. It was about the same time, I think, that my painting master Koide Narashige teased me, a precocious brat in a high school-issued cap with a white line. Upon seeing my oil painting copy of a Hiroshige woodcut, he suggested the somewhat grandiose *sobriquet* Ichiritsusai Saburo for me to assume. Around Showa 5 or 6, the late Saburi Makoto, who looked after me in Paris, remarked that I was walking around with “Japan” written all over my face, which caught me completely unawares.¹ After my return, I spent three years from Showa 7 to 9 copying Sesshu’s “Huike Offering His Arm to Bodhidharma” in oil paint and in whole spectrum of colors. Even today I look back on this episode as a bit over-the-top.

It was around the time when I sent my “Trajectory of a Butterfly” to the first Jiyu Bijutsu² exhibition in Showa 12 that I emulated the *matcha*³ making procedure, with my shaving brash as the *chasen*.⁴ This evolved (?) into the assiduous lesson-taking from a head tea master in Kyoto (the Kankyu-an Mushanokoji Sen-ke school) after I moved back to the Kansai region. Feeling that my tea lessons might be incomplete without a study of Zen Buddhism, I would go sitting in mediation at a temple called Hannya-rin in Hyogo. I got yelled at a lot by the monks.

I have been enamored of Cézanne and Henri Rousseau ever since I was a small boy. Also, even as I enthusiastically followed Mr. Koide's rigorous lessons on the foundations of oil painting, notwithstanding his constant opprobrium, Basho and Hiroshige were my heroes. While writing "A Study on Sesshu," my graduation thesis for the Art History Department at the University of Tokyo, I painted strange canvases à la Klee or Dufy and sent them to the Nikakai,⁵ only to be rejected. My ceaseless to-and-fro between the two mentalities during these years should be clear even from this cursory summary.

My trip this time was prompted by an invitation from an association of abstract artists in the US (the American Abstract Artists) to its Japanese counterpart (the Nihon Abstract Art Club) for a joint exhibition of Japanese-US abstract art, and I accompanied the works from our side. As it happened, although this may be a strange thing to say about oneself, I was constantly begged to explain Japanese culture and arts, so much so that some jokingly wondered why our government failed to appoint me as an artistic ambassador. Incidentally, although it is rumored that Japanese contemporary art often meets indifference overseas, both this Japan-US abstract art show and my own received far more response than expected and was welcomed by Japanese expatriates in the US as well. However, this is not so much because our works excelled. Our show coincided with a moment when the awareness was growing in the American Art world that Japan had been home to abstract art all along. Even before our works went on view, then, we were greeted with not only kindness and expectation but also reverence. Good thing the works did not overly disappoint! The enthusiasm of last year, 1954, was such that one American even predicted to me that the year was going to be one of total cultural invasion by Japan. The fervor for "Rashomon,"⁶ the previous year's sensation, was still very much raging. In the spring, almost concurrently with the Japan-US abstract exhibition, the so-called Azuma Kabuki troupe was putting on their production. In the early summer a house and a garden in Japanese style were built in the courtyard of the Museum of Modern Art. There was also an exhibition of calligraphy shortly thereafter. In the fall, "Ugetsu"⁷ premiered to very great acclaim, especially in the artist circles of Greenwich Village. A fierce debate erupted on its relative merits over "Rashomon," and at one time I was dragged into it as an arbiter.

Dr. Daisetsu Suzuki's lectures on Zen Buddhism had of course been magnificently continued since way before all this, exerting deep and great influence on a serious and ardent audience. The likes of John Cage (a new composer) and Ibrahim Lassaw (a new sculptor) did not miss a single session. My friend Okada Kenzo, now completely *abstract*,⁸ has established a firm foundation for himself, and some of the second-generation Japanese American artists have begun to emerge in New York. Toward the end of the year a solo exhibition of Isamu Noguchi's Japan works opened. Among the GIs,⁹ there seems to have been not a small number of young men whose mild nature saved them from any behavior that might have been offensive to Japanese people; it inspired no passionate welcome either, for that matter.

Unprompted they began, after their return home, to study and collect Japanese art to form a view on it, which they went around eagerly promulgating to their friends. Some of these young men introduced themselves to me, very hesitantly, at my exhibition and my public lectures, to confide in me their nostalgia for Japan, an indelible memory deep inside their heart. The expression on their face was full of goodwill, serious interest in, and respect for the beauty of the tradition, still very much present in every corner of Japanese culture, arts, and ordinary people's lives, as each of the young men was able to witness (if only to an extremely limited degree).

By the way, my impression after ten months or so in New York is that this is the cruelest city in the world. Personally I did not receive any excessively cruel treatment. Rather, I was blessed with much good fortunes and many warm welcomes. On the whole, however, New York is a very cruel city. Thoroughly cruel, one might even say. The dollar holds sway. Everything is subjugated to it. A horrifying view, you would think. On the other hand, this prompts every person in New York to wholeheartedly wish and struggle to cast off the yoke of the dollar, each in his or her own way.

I performed many tea ceremonies in New York. Or I was made to. To calm myself, to condition my body and soul, and to secure my footing before some important lecture or meeting, or when my work wasn't going so well, or when I wanted to give all I could without regret, I would sit down on the carpet in my apartment and quietly prepare a bowl of tea for myself and taste it slowly, alone. It felt very effective.

I had trouble turning down endless requests for performing the tea ceremony, talking about it, and teaching it. Okakura Tenshin's *Book of Tea* was quite well known, those who knew it held it in very high regard, and not a small number of people had developed a romantic notion of the art of tea through their reading. One evening I was invited to a dinner with Mr. Marcel Duchamp. Needless to say Duchamp was one of the most important advocators of the Dadaist movement and is known as one of the best artists in the twentieth century, along with Jacques Villon (painter) and Duchamp-Villon (sculptor).¹⁰ His few works figure among the most precious exhibits of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and other institutions around the world. The man himself is looked upon by painters and members of the art world as a sort of idol shrouded by serene mystery. Presumably over seventy years old, he is nevertheless full of youthful spirit, yet truly calm and gentle, and infinitely modest. After a pleasant dinner with Duchamp as the main guest, in a small gathering of people who had genuine respect for him, I opened my box and prepared a bowl of tea for each. The place was in the heart of New York. Before anyone knew, however, we were at one in deep quietude, as though on the edge of a lake in ancient times. Duchamp asked me a few sharp questions in a reserved, soft tone. I tried to answer them as kindly as I could. As I did so, however, a lighthearted mirth spontaneously welled up in each of us, which seemed to make the overall atmosphere even more intimate.

Just turn on a gas or electric stove, and in a few minutes the sleek streamlined kettle begins to whistle. Some of those instant teas or coffees are not bad at all. It is a perfectly easy business to make and quickly finish a serious dinner, let alone a bowl of tea, in an entirely rationalized kitchen, complete with a dishwasher and its built-in dryer. That, however, is business pure and simple. Research has long since told us how to swiftly, efficiently, rationally carry out the business of filling our stomach and furnishing nutriment to our body. Even further progress has been made. Here, however, the human body and stomach is almost an object, drinking and eating an operation to run a machine. Of course, that operation can be done while listening to the radio and watching TV. The trouble is that in its inexorable advance this whole environment has strayed so far, far away from that lake in ancient times. Duchamp seemed genuinely grateful that this Hasegawa character's tea restored what had been lost to him, instantly, effortlessly, right in the middle of the great New York City. I myself was glad to have made such a miracle (?) happen with his wonderful help.

The collections of *modern art museums*,¹¹ including MoMA in New York, which celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary this year, are becoming richer day by day, so much so that it almost seems as though most of the masterpieces of twentieth-century art were being gathered in America. Every time I was invited to a private collector's residence, I was surprised to see that each house looked like a small *modern art museum*. At the same time, I found it somewhat absurd. When in season, there is no shortage of personal exhibitions of good American as well as European artists organized by individual galleries. You can see as many pictures as you want. There is no end to it. I decided to concentrate on a small handful, things I truly like, which I would take all my time looking at, and to allow myself to skip the rest. In America as everywhere else, artworks can be picked up as objects of investment, sometimes speculation. But there are also many things generously donated or lent to museums, considerable both in quantity and quality. And the number of spectators flocking to see them, too, is by no means negligible, nay, substantial. Intently watching all this, I realized there was something urgent about it. Someone said that today's museums fulfill the function churches once performed. I am not sure if the problem is so simple, but at times I vaguely sense something serious in the gaze of the people enjoying pictures and sculptures to their heart's content, on Saturdays, Sundays, or holidays, quietly, taking care not to disturb other viewers. They must be seeking a moment of respite from their week, during which they are constantly abused by the dollar and the machine, and to which they have to return on the next day. This is particularly true in America, New York especially.

If I may make a strange confession, for a time I carried out an experiment and an observation, with myself as guinea pig, to determine how quickly, strongly, and deeply we might be enchanted by material wealth and comfort. It was evident, of course, that as a perfectly ordinary man I would not be able to resist the seduction for long, and I observed the process with great attention. Although

I hesitate to use my own weakness to judge others by, this experimentation taught me a considerable lesson. I had a clear feeling that it might be only natural if there are too many signals indicating that, swept up in the waves of *bunmei kaika*,¹² Japan since the Meiji era has been drifting further and further away from its true self every day. And yet, in New York, this epicenter of twentieth-century Western civilization, the longer I watched the life and the expressions on the faces of its inhabitants, the more irrepressible the desire grew in me to criticize the so-called materialist civilization, despite my own helpless status as a mere guinea pig in my thought experiment. Every time I was asked to give a talk or write a piece, it just came out of my mouth. To my surprise, my criticism met with an unexpectedly favorable reception. Some of my interlocutors, of course, gave strong opposition, which led to a heated debate, but in the end they became my closest and trusted friends. This brought home to me that it is precisely here that our true mission vis-à-vis the contemporary world lies, a mission for those of us who grew up in the Orient. Upon returning to our humble abode after exactly one year's absence, I was told by my wife that Mrs. So-and-so in our neighborhood had acquired an electric washing machine. I fell silent, torn between the impulse to let her have such an appliance and the suspicion that soon, not just washing machines but a wide range of devices and utilities would be flooding islands and continents of the Orient. This long-winding essay has been written despite my heartfelt wish to remain silent, at the request of my editor, who has none of my earnest hope to stay quiet. At issue here is far more than a washing machine. There is doubt in me about questions deep and broad that involve fine arts, life, art, and of course, even politics, a compelling feeling that there is nothing to do but to paint naked, in silence. That reminds me of the painters in New York, who are also painting with their whole heart, keeping their mouth shut. These pictures seem to me increasingly less *smart*,¹³ less dexterous, less theoretical, ignoring all the rules, rushing headlong, instinctively as it were, toward the essence of humanity, the only certainty they have. And their heads are not really turned toward Paris anymore. Most of them face this way, toward Japan and the Orient, with an expression desperate for help. Thus sometimes people overrated me. But I am fully aware that they were wrong in doing so. I confided my thirty years of wanderings and agonies to them. Some of them had these kind words to say to me: "You are not alone, Hasegawa; we, too, are feeling that agony right now." "It's only natural to feel it," they assured, "and each of us has to come up with a solution, however difficult it may be. Let's walk together, in the belief that this agony is a proof that we are all *new men*." These people included Harry Holtzman, who welcomed Mondrian, the titan of abstract painting, into America and cared for him, Suzy Perette,¹⁴ a fashion designer of the widely popular ready-to-wear women's clothes (her husband¹⁵ is a serious student of psychoanalysis, painter, photographer, and art critic), Herbert Matter, renowned for his commercial art works centered on photography, and his wife.¹⁶

Calder¹⁷ seems to be another member of this group, who produces mobiles (moving sculptures) in swift succession, nimbly moving his bear-like bulk around the most cluttered, factory-like studio, full of metal plates and wires. That said, a cheerful man of action typical of America, he is quick to put his thought to practice. Shaking my hand with his big hand, he vowed to visit Japan on his way back from India, where he is scheduled to travel in early 1955. Who knows, maybe he will show up tomorrow!

Translated by Gaku Kondo

Present-Day American Abstract Art

Twenty-five years ago, in 1929, I traveled across the United States and headed for Europe. At that time, I looked around a fair number of museums and exhibitions in various cities but there were very few, in fact hardly any works that were noteworthy enough to be considered new movements, which left me rather disappointed. In the fall of the same year, a week after I left New York for London, the Museum of Modern Art opened in New York. Last year, during my second visit to New York, a large-scale exhibition was held to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the museum. The past twenty-five years has been a memorable period of time, not only for this museum, but also for the entire American art world. Today, there are many contemporary art museums with significant collections of modern art across the United States, in New York, and other metropolises, and even in small and medium-sized cities. They all have large collections of twentieth-century art that have been gathered from France and other European countries and also collect and display works by modern American artists. In other words, during the past quarter century, more or less, contemporary art museums all over the United States have actively contributed to the promotion of modern art and the encouragement and education of new artists in America. During this time, art schools and institutions across the country have also rapidly and actively carried out art education based on new policies.

In the meantime, the Nazi censorship of the arts and the seizure of Paris and other cities by the German forces led a large number of artists to flee their countries for America, quite a few of whom ultimately settled there. Broadly speaking, this means that over a period of twenty to thirty years, New York, which has traditionally been referred to as a melting pot of races, has also gradually transformed into a melting pot of various new art. Aside from the old European masterpieces hailed as national treasures that rarely leave their countries, the number of significant works of the twentieth century that have been brought into America from Europe during this period is beyond imagination. Moreover, many of these works of art, whether they now belong to the collections of contemporary art museums or private collectors, are voluntarily put on loan to museums around the country, which



FIGURE 6. Saburo Hasegawa, *Relaxing (Serenity)*, c. 1951. Ink on paper; hanging scroll. The Noguchi Museum. This work was given as a gift from Hasegawa to Noguchi but was not identified until 2015, in the artist's studio, where it had hung for many years.

means that the number of outstanding works that are being permanently shown to the public is very large. Related lectures and explanatory talks are offered at all times, and the number and quality of museum publications are also impressive. In such ways, museums have for many years enlightened the public on modern art through the appreciation of real and important artworks. In short, compared to twenty-five years ago, we are worlds apart when it comes to the understanding of and interest in modern art.

Fortunately, the exhibition of Japanese and American abstract art held in New York was attended by many viewers. Particularly on opening day and on the last Saturday and Sunday, the exhibition was packed with visitors. I was asked many questions by these people but not once did I receive the hackneyed question, "So what is drawn here?" I think this viewer attitude is not exclusive to exhibitions that are entirely abstract art like this one, but can also be seen with regard to abstract art displayed in other modern art museums under usual circumstances. In other words, the public is already well acquainted with abstract works of art.

It is in this sort of environment that the new contemporary paintings of America are now being produced. If nothing else, for art connoisseurs and artists who are middle aged or younger, abstract art is an accepted norm of the times. Put another way, viewers seem to have already acquired a certain "familiarity" with abstract art without depending on any rigid theoretical understanding. I now recall an incident that happened in Tokyo just after the Second World War when I asked a young American man to name an artist he respected and he promptly answered without hesitation, "That would be Mondrian." Of course this was a young man who seemed to have been relatively well exposed to the new type of art education, but I was quite taken by how his answer was so crisp and decisive. Indeed, Mondrian's work can be found in museums everywhere, and the same goes for artists like Kandinsky and Klee. These works can also often be found in the homes of private collectors, some of whom seem to concentrate solely on works like these. There was another incident one time on my flight heading home, when an American passenger sitting next to me showed me an article in the weekly magazine *Time* that talked about how these artists have already begun to exceed the modern masters of the past such as Matisse, Picasso, and Braque in terms of market price. I guess in America, where tradition does not carry a lot of weight, when something is considered good, the reception is far more active than it is in Europe. Of course there are pitfalls to this too. In fact, my impression was that the new art of America certainly has worries of its own.

From what I have mentioned above, it should be easy to imagine that the influence of various movements involving the new art of twentieth-century Europe can be clearly acknowledged in today's art of America. At the same time, however, we must also notice that there is very little or absolutely no attempt by American artists to imitate European art on a superficial level. With so many real works readily available for viewing, I suppose the artists just cannot bring themselves to imitate

them in their own art. Moreover, the need to escape from European influence and to operate independently is now a strong consciousness shared among American artists, which shows in what they say and is being expressed in their works. This is something that is apparent in the path contemporary American art has taken in the recent past and is simply a matter of course as life itself in America is beginning to differ from life in Europe on a very fundamental level. I should also add that life in the United States of America also exposes both the freedom and the instability that comes from the general lack of the weight of tradition. I also strongly feel that the most earnest of Americans are hoping for some kind of spiritual support that can provide a balance to the material aspects of their contemporary lifestyle, but are in fact keenly aware that that cannot be achieved by looking into Europe's past and present, much less its own past. Quite often, people would approach me and confess this sort of worry. By all accounts, the current material standards of living in America are much higher than in any other place on this planet. And yet, this has not brought the least happiness to the most earnest of Americans. Those with lower living standards might find it hard to imagine that this is the mood that currently pervades America. However, I think this explains why, as I mentioned earlier, so many significant contemporary artworks were gathered for collections across the nation during the past twenty, thirty years and why this was met with such broad public support. I think that both in the minds of those who created contemporary art museums with great enthusiasm and the public who supported them there was a dire thirst for a spiritual sort of fulfillment, which they believed could be achieved by encountering and appreciating the living art of the times.

Now, if I can speak a little more specifically about abstract art in America, I think one of the most influential figures of the relatively recent past would be Mondrian. The fact that he moved to America during the Second World War and lived in New York for several years until his death in 1944, and that the works he produced during this time showed the last new development in his career left an impact—which was not so great in the beginning but gradually became irresistibly important—on many young American painters. As a matter of fact, AAA (American Abstract Artists), which sent works from their collection to our current exhibition,¹ was founded under Mondrian and Moholy-Nagy's guidance and training, and includes several artists who were closely connected with Mondrian during his final years. Mondrian's art and perspective on art were essentially based on a solid intention of endowing the path of industrial development in the contemporary machine age with the beauty of pure proportion and balance. Seen in this light, it makes sense that Mondrian's art should be most thoroughly understood in America, where industrial development is most advanced. Today, although Mondrian's art is being increasingly recognized both in America and in Europe, the way his influence surfaced in the art of American and European artists has always been different, even from the starting point. To put it simply, Mondrian's influence has continued to induce a more theoretical response in Europe and a more intuitive

response in America. The works by Mondrian himself during this final period in America also became much more flamboyant and bright in terms of color effect despite the modest number of colors used. And the influence from these works also surfaced in the works of younger American artists in an even more intuitive way. Despite being under the influence of Mondrian, who was thoroughly intellectual in terms of style, many of the works the American artists produced in response seem to be more lighthearted and intuitive in appearance. If we look at Albers² and Fleischmann,³ two German-born artists whose works have been brought on this occasion, they too are abstract artists who are highly intellectual and determined, but their current works also display a more flamboyant color effect than the ones they produced during their time in Europe. The works of other artists born in America are less rigid in terms of composition but instead show a great sense of intuitive freedom. Meanwhile, a strong feeling of opposition against the almost overly extravagant development of machine-age industry has naturally grown in the mind-set of all Americans. On the contrary, once outside its cities, America still has its vast spans of untouched nature. It is in these contexts that a very impulsive type of abstract painting collectively called Abstract Expressionism has emerged, which is entirely different from the art in Europe. AAA does not include the main artists who propelled this movement but there are more than a few members who show an inclination toward this trend.

Here I have outlined two streams of abstract painting—on the one hand, works in the lineage of Mondrian that are intellectual and determined, as well as geometric, based on straight lines and rectangular forms, and on the other hand, the abstract expressionist works that are impulsive and based on curves and dots. Today in America, artists that stand somewhere in between these completely polar ends combine elements and styles in varying ways and degrees to produce a variety of abstract paintings. Many of the works from AAA that are shown on this occasion are such works. Though highly diverse, abstract art accounts for a large percentage of contemporary American painting and sculpture on the whole; I think it is no exaggeration to say that today is the golden age for abstract art in America. It is, however, becoming increasingly evident that abstract art in America is changing drastically, on both conscious and unconscious levels, from the abstract art of Europe. Here are a few of those differences. First, the abstract art of America is more intuitive or impulsive rather than theoretical; second, in many cases, the technical execution is crude and direct; and third, the influence of Eastern art is gradually becoming stronger and deeper. I shall elaborate on this third point. Lassaw,⁴ one of the founding members of AAA, who has offered to show works again on this occasion, is garnering attention as one of the most prominent young sculptors of contemporary America (he is also an earnest and avid learner of Zen). His sculptures often show that his aim is not to express a rich sense of mass but rather to compose three-dimensional space that is embraced by or conveyed through linear forms. This idea is also apparent in recent paintings. We do

not find extreme examples in this exhibition, but suggesting undrawn space, as with the concept of spatial void in Eastern paintings, is a manner now often found in the works of new American artists. The trend is even more apparent when compared with the new paintings of Europe. Many of the critics pointed out that those who comparatively observed the exhibitions relating to a) new European paintings and b) new American paintings that have been held in New York and other cities since last year, have also found this point particularly noticeable. We could say that artists are becoming increasingly interested in the void, as opposed to the reality, in artistic expression. In the past few years, we have seen America's growing interest in Japan and the East in different aspects of various cultural and artistic practices. Although this interest has often been interpreted as mere curiosity about the exotic on the Japanese side, the state of things has changed, and the interest today is something far more serious and substantial than before. I think it was fortunate for American contemporary art to have been clearly shown the path toward abstract art from the modern art of Europe. Today, in America's modernized living environment, pursuing a nineteenth-century type of realism is of course out of context, and even the eclectic mix of abstract art and realist art in varying degrees seems, in one way or another, inappropriate for both the viewers and the artists. This is why the aims of the eminent pioneers such as Kandinsky and Mondrian were accepted by the young artists, not by way of difficult theoretical understanding, but more openly and directly. And on top of this acceptance, they were also able to find the deep joy of creating art of their own time. At the same time, however, these artists had to figure out for themselves how to strengthen and deepen their art in terms of content and expression. In doing so, their own tradition was too meager to turn to for guidance. When they looked elsewhere, they found the art of the East, which was even deeper in spirituality than the art of Europe, and which had a rich repertoire of abstract expressions that had far more spiritual weight than realist expressions.

It was against this sort of background that the exhibition of Japanese and American abstract art was held in New York last year, and was particularly well received by the audience. I also believe that in the hearts of the AAA artists who willingly offered to show their works in the Japanese and American abstract art exhibition held in Japan this year, there is a hidden enthusiasm of wanting to connect with Japan on an even deeper, fundamental artistic level.

Translated by Haruko Kohno

Nationalism and Universalism in Japanese Art

From the fall before last, Hasegawa Saburo was in America to deal with matters relating to the Japanese and American Modern Art Exhibition, give lectures, and present exhibitions of his own work. He returned to Japan this spring but left for America once again on September 17th. This time he plans to stay for one year during which time he will give lectures at the University of California, the California College of the Arts and Crafts, and the San Francisco Fine Arts School.

When he returned to Japan in the springtime, Mr. Hasegawa did not openly discuss his thoughts, but this time prior to his departure he spoke at our request. Our interview with him on the above topic will be featured in the next three issues. From the next issue onward, he will begin to speak in depth, which we hope readers will find interesting. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Hasegawa for taking time out of his busy schedule to join us.

In closing, I would like to add that we received an airmail dated September 23rd from him saying, "I have safely arrived and have started my lectures from the 20th."

—FUJIMOTO¹

Fujimoto: Seven or eight years ago when *Sozo Bijutsu*² was initiated, the group declared that it "aims for the independence of Japanese art built upon universalism." Today, I'd like to ask you about this concept of universalism and in contrast to that, the concept of nationalism. I saw the recent exhibition about Mexico but I have to say that every inch of it was Mexico. Which brings me to think that maybe something that has such a strong sense of nationalism conversely achieves a sense of universalism. Having lived abroad for many years and also spending a year in America last year, I think you, Mr. Hasegawa, would have a good understanding of this topic. First of all, let's begin with America's recent growing interest in Japan. We hear that there are Japanese gardens being made and Japanese elements are

also being incorporated in their architecture. What is it about Japan that America is so interested in? What elements of Japan do they like? Could you please share your thoughts on how America accepts and thinks of Japan? We wouldn't want readers to think that the answers to these questions automatically define universalism, but please do begin . . .

Hasegawa: When *Sozo Bijutsu* was first initiated, I was in Nagahama of Shiga prefecture to evacuate from the war. Members of *Sozo Bijutsu* in Kyoto had asked me to come to Kyoto and that was where I spoke on a similar topic. I spoke for a rather long time and we also exchanged thoughts but my impression was that they didn't understand me that well. Perhaps what I wanted to say didn't come out right. It's not just the people of *Sozo Bijutsu*. Many people at home seem to be looking into this topic from various angles, but when I try to answer their questions, people never quite understand me. I think I'm not doing a good enough job at expressing myself and I have a lot of trouble getting my thoughts through. But today, I shall try my best.

AMERICA'S INTEREST IN JAPAN

Last January, I happened to take some works from Japan to show at the Japanese and American Abstract Art Exhibition in New York. I was also there to present an exhibition of my own works, among other things. At that time, I was told by many American people that I was in America at the right time. They told me that America's interest in Japan was rapidly rising and that I had chosen the perfect moment to do what I was there to do. I'm not sure if it was the peak of interest but it was a timely moment for sure. Mrs. Rockefeller, who is knowledgeable about Japan and America, said something similar too. There was a growing number of people who had never visited but were interested in Japan, and people who became newly interested as the trend grew in the public mind over the past few years. I also met some people who frankly said that they actually never had any interest in Japan but as everyone else was raving about it, they might as well take this opportunity to talk to me. So you see, there are many degrees of interest.

Fujimoto: I see, so there are many different levels of acceptance among the American people.

Hasegawa: Yes, indeed so. Meanwhile, people in Japan are learning about this through newspapers, magazines, and other media. Each media covers this in its own way, which is fine, but of course the way people take it varies. One person may say, "This media says it's not such a big deal," and judge that the interest isn't all that great. People come to different conclusions depending on which media they touch upon.

On the other hand, there are others who think, "If the interest is so high, then maybe they know more about Japan than we do." They are surprised but also half in doubt. And this subtle discrepancy in understanding creates a very complicated

situation. I'm not sure how to put it, but I'll speak of the broad picture in America here. I must talk about Europe but let's leave it for now. If I remember correctly, Okakura Tenshin's *Book of Tea* was written around the time I was born, I think maybe 1906. It wasn't just Tenshin but there were other Japanese people who made efforts to introduce Japanese culture to the Western audience and helped to create the trend of accepting Japanese culture. I'm talking about people like Fenollosa, or Mr. Freer, the founder of the Freer Collection, and many other avid supporters of Japanese art, both famous and humble, during the Meiji period. There was a whole group of people who helped to push Japanese culture into America during this time period.

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts has a magnificent collection of Japanese art. There is also a wonderful collection in Washington. In Chicago too, there is the Chicago Institute of Fine Arts, which houses one of the best collections of Japanese prints, second to the one in Boston. The Director of the Chicago Institute once showed me their collection, saying, "We'd like to say we have the best collection in America, but ours would be the second best, after Boston. But this is quite a collection too, isn't it?" Indeed, it was a magnificent body of work.

This was in 1929. Over a period of several days, I was able to see works that were on the walls as well as those in storage. The number and quality of Chicago's collection was absolutely impressive.

And now today, as a post-World War II phenomenon, we are once again seeing America's growing interest in Japan. Some of this interest stems from the past, but there are some people who are completely unaware of the fact that Japanese art had already entered America at an earlier time. The enthusiasm we are seeing today, however, is no less than it was before. Today there are many supporters and aficionados of Japanese art. Speaking of Tenshin's *Book of Tea*, I think there has always been a continuous stream of readers, but it is also attracting new readers today.

TENSHIN'S BOOK OF TEA, AND OTHERS

Fujimoto: Do you think that Okakura Tenshin's ideology is at the core of this interest and continues on to this day?

Hasegawa: Yes, I think so. When people with this new, passionate interest in Japanese culture start hunting for resources and they come across the *Book of Tea*, they think, "This is just marvelous." But with regard to Tenshin's ideology, which you just mentioned, I feel that it's not being thoroughly understood. I've always felt this way but recently the feeling is a lot stronger. For example, besides it being a book of tea, Tenshin also writes extensively on architecture in relation to tea-rooms, but at the time that it was written, it was merely a kind of prediction. And it was a prediction that so brilliantly came true. I don't think any Japanese, nor European, nor American in the past has been able to predict the state of architecture in the contemporary world at such an early stage and so precisely as Tenshin.

It really is a wonderful piece of writing. But today, when people hear Okakura Tenshin's name or read his writings . . . I'm not exactly sure how Japanese people feel about taking up Tenshin in this day and age but from what I imagine . . . I think the reaction is different from what most people in Japan today expect to hear. The book is undoubtedly a masterpiece and has an eternal life, which also means that his words are eternally new. But when I spoke with some of the American people who had recently read the book, they said that Tenshin's writing style is very old and that they can roughly assume the time period it was written and published. Of course when they realize that this marvelous piece of writing was done at such a time, they gain a great sense of awe and respect for Tenshin. People actually came up to me to speak about their respect for him.

In association with Tenshin, I am now thinking of Suzuki Daisetsu, who has been another great influence on Westerners. I think many of the current generation, the ones who are highly educated, read the writings of Suzuki. I'm pretty sure readers of Suzuki outnumber those of Tenshin.

I should also add Blyth.³ I believe he is a Professor of English at Gakushuin University and is an English tutor to the Crown Prince.⁴ He has translated haiku poems and has written critical theories about haiku. And . . . who was the other one?

Fujimoto: Do you mean Warner?⁵

Hasegawa: No, I didn't hear about Warner. Probably because I didn't meet people associated with such circles. The other one I am thinking about is the one written as early as *The Book of Tea*. I'm not even sure which was earlier, but they are of the same generation. It was a very small book about haiku, but a very good one, written by an American or an English writer and it left a strong impact on devoted readers about Japan. This book familiarized haiku to American literary scholars and poets and the like, until Blyth's book was published. I think it played a rather important role.

As we're talking about literature now, I'll also mention Arthur Blume's⁶ translation of *The Tale of Genji*, the one that's been talked about. I'm not sure when it came out but I think it's being read by quite a lot of people today. And all those who have read it eulogize the book. The author Murasaki Shikibu is referred to as "Lady Murasaki" and many people speak of this "Lady Murasaki" with great respect. Well, that's all I can think of for now, but if something comes to mind, I shall talk about it later.

THE OLD FELLOWS AND THE NEW GENERATION

Fujimoto: Would you say that American collectors of Japanese art are exclusively collecting antiquities?

Hasegawa: As you know, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has an excellent collection of Japanese art that has been built up over many years, which is always displayed in a sober and beautiful way. It's also an art historically conscientious

collection. There's also the Freer Collection and Chicago's collection of prints, which have continued to add works from the Meiji period. These collections have also been housed in wonderful buildings. But what is interesting is that a fair number of these people who have recently become strongly attached to Japanese arts and culture are surprised when they learn that Japanese objects have been collected and shown in America from so long ago and in such wonderful buildings. So you see, there is a discrepancy in understanding on all sorts of levels. To put it simply, the people with this new interest in Japanese art see things from a different perspective. These people also belong to an entirely different generation. How should I put it? Those who have continued to appreciate and respect Japanese art from the previous generation have, in my view, a very professional and academic attitude in approaching today's art. Frankly speaking, I think these people have a very old-fashioned perspective not only toward Japanese art but also European art or literature.

Fujimoto: So you are saying the reception used to be an academic one.

Hasegawa: Yes, and I think today the term antipodal to "academic" would be "cultural."⁷

THE EXHIBITION OF JAPANESE ANTIQUITIES AND ITS IMPACT

Fujimoto: So you're saying that the attachment today is on a more basic level, closer to daily life?

Hasegawa: Yes, I think that's the difference. The Exhibition of Japanese Antiquities held in San Francisco to commemorate the conclusion of the Peace Treaty, and the Great Japanese Art Exhibition held in New York and Washington during the last two years both generated a lot of response. While these exhibitions made people who have continued to appreciate and study Japanese art from before extremely happy, they also generated great interest and understanding among a new, broad base of viewers.

The organizers of both exhibitions thanked me for creating these wonderful opportunities. However, I have to admit that some of the viewers who were seeing Japanese art from this newest perspective seemed to be a little disappointed.

Fujimoto: I'd like to know what they were disappointed about, but first, what do you think they were most interested in?

Hasegawa: I think the reaction varied greatly among individuals. But if I were to sum it up, I think people understood that what they were seeing was of very high quality, regardless of style. I don't want to carelessly bring this up and put everything in a nutshell but basically, everyone told me that they really understood how good it all was. They said all sorts of words of praise and my impression was that they were all very observant. For example in San Francisco, viewers seemed to enjoy Miyamoto Niten's⁸ *Koboku Meigekizu*⁹ but I think it wasn't only the *genpitsu*¹⁰ ink drawings that people reacted to.

Fujimoto: I see, so you are saying that viewers correctly understood the essence of what they were seeing.

Hasegawa: Other viewers talked about their fascination with colored works. So it's not like in the past where people used to show understanding of *only* ukiyo-e, or *only* ink drawings. With the exhibition of Japanese antiquities held in New York, for example, the work *Shuto Sansuizu*¹¹ by Sesshu was shown. Many people said that work was very good despite its modest size. Others said the portrait of Minamoto no Yoritomo was quite good. Of course, many liked the *Choju Giga*¹² of Kozanji Temple. I'm now reminded of this young painter, a very earnest, good man who came up to me and made the most interesting confession. He said that he went to New York over and over again to see the exhibition. When he saw the exhibition for the very first time, he didn't get it at all. He used the word "read." He said that he couldn't "read" the paintings that were being shown. Read them as paintings. But he went, not because everyone else spoke highly of the works, but because what he had learned and built up as a painter, both in terms of style and technique, and his attitude toward painting were, in his own words, "not compatible with these works." "Regardless," he said, "I felt that maybe the fault was on my end, that my way of thinking was too narrow, or that maybe I was wrong altogether. So I went, even if I couldn't read the works, hoping that the next time, I should have the paintings teach me how to read them. And so I went once, and then twice, and then gradually I was able to read the paintings bit by bit. When I started to read them, the paintings just got better and better and that made me really happy." The young man said to me very frankly, in all earnestness, "But now, I understand very well why I couldn't read the paintings at first. The exhibition was absolutely wonderful. If the exhibition hadn't come here, I would have still had this very narrow thinking and view of painting. And so I feel like I've learned a lot." Then he said, as a very direct opinion, "However, the way the works were shown and explained in this exhibition was not very viewer-friendly." But he quickly added, "That is, if I were allowed to wish so much."

Now, the conclusive observation I draw from this story is that high-quality Japanese antiquities were understood by viewers to a considerable extent, regardless of their styles. I think we can say that people's interest in these works was genuine. I hope people don't jump to the conclusion that the praise of ukiyo-e has simply shifted to the praise of ink drawings and that now only ink drawings are being appreciated. The works being genuinely magnificent, viewers really understood them.

EXHIBITING JAPANESE ART OUTSIDE OF JAPAN

Fujimoto: Was this young man who made his confession a modern artist?

Hasegawa: Yes, he was. Now, with regard to what this young man said about how the works are presented, it's something to think about but I think we can continue to act on our own judgment. As you know, today there are quite a number of modern

art societies in New York, and in other small and medium-sized cities, which all have programs to enlighten the public on modern art. So there is a certain class of people who understand and appreciate art. I'm not sure if the word "class" is acceptable, but exhibitions are certainly targeted toward such groups. Broadly speaking, I think there is already an established level of understanding and familiarity with modern art. We could say that there is also a large number of people who have concern, interest, and understanding of Japanese antiquities from the perspective of modern art. Well, if we are bringing antiquities from Japan that are national treasure class, if not top class, of course it's fine to present them in an old-school way, but I don't think Japan needs to feel that it has to. I think that as long as we focus on high-quality works, works that remain masterpieces throughout all ages, viewers will gradually begin to show appreciation even if they may not at first understand what they are looking at. Just like this young man I spoke about. I don't think we need to be so rigid about how we present works. For the record I will stress, however, that we should never base our choices on simple assumptions, like bringing classical artworks from Japan that are stylistically affiliated with modern art, or modern art-ish if you will, with the hope that viewers will be even more delighted. Speaking of modern art, many modern artworks from Europe are being brought to America and many works by contemporary American artists are also being bought on the market, a lot more than in Japan today. The understanding of modern art within America is neither superficial nor shallow, nor merely focused on style. So taking the trouble of looking for something that appears to be made in the style of, say, surrealism and taking it to America would be totally unnecessary. We need to select and show proper art in the proper way. That said, as I mentioned a while ago, the overwhelming majority of viewers are the people who are encountering Japanese art with a broader, cultural mind than with a professional and academic attitude. It's absolutely fine to select works and provide accurate and academic explanation from an art historical perspective, like who made them and how they are attributed in the modern age, but we need to bear in mind that exhibitions are not only shown to academics. I'm not saying that we should pander to the public. In fact, presenting works in an academic way would be a lot more so. We should have a much broader perspective and select works strictly as objects for visual appreciation and think about the larger picture, of how they should be arranged in an exhibition.

Fujimoto: I understand that nowadays, Western architecture is developing many effects known to Japanese architecture and gardens like the Katsura Rikyu, for example, expanding windows, pursuing simplicity, or placing stones in gardens. Are those influences—

Hasegawa: When I was living in America last year, several people told me that today's new architecture in America is, in these exact words, "hardly possible without the influence of Japanese architecture." In fact, the influence already seems pretty self-evident, so some people didn't bother to even talk about it. We need to recognize which aspects are derived from Japanese influences and why this is

happening, but it's a very broad and profound issue that is difficult to summarize. But the influence is most definitely there. People accept and talk about this as something very normal today.

Fujimoto: I'm sure it's difficult to summarize but could you take some time and elaborate?

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE AND ZEN

Hasegawa: Mr. Fujimoto, you are asking me to sit down and answer these questions today because America is currently showing great interest in Japanese culture and art and because there is interest on the Japanese side about this, am I right? I guess these questions can't be avoided. The topic of architecture, for example, touches upon a very fundamental issue, which I'll have to talk about.

Fujimoto: Ultimately, do you think modern architecture and old classical Japanese architecture correspond to each other in terms of rationality? After all, architecture cannot be separated from everyday life.

Hasegawa: I see, so that's what you want to ask me . . . it's a very difficult issue so let me try to put this simply. Actually there's a way to say this very simply but perhaps it'll be too simple, I'm not sure it'll work . . . Anyway, this is what I want to say. I first spoke about Okakura Tenshin's teism and from there, talked about literature. Some people might not believe the degree of interest there has been and say that my observations are from meeting special people. Well, they are special in the sense that they are mostly art-related people, or those broadly involved in culture. But of course I didn't meet, for example, Eisenhower and Dulles.¹³ Anyway, it was rare for any of these people not to ask me about Zen.

Fujimoto: I suppose this interest in Zen was based on Tenshin's *Book of Tea* or Suzuki Daisetsu's lectures on Zen.

Hasegawa: I just remembered that there is this book about *kyujutsu*, the Japanese art of archery, which was written by a German philosopher named Eugen¹⁴ something, and it was translated and published in Japan during the war. I understand the English version was translated from the original German text. I happened to meet with the Japanese and English translators while I was in America. This book, which is enjoyed by a great number of readers in America today, places great emphasis on the spiritual aspect of Japanese archery. Eugen was trained under a Japanese archery master who was a kind of spiritualist. And I think his being a philosopher led him to study the art in great depth.

AMERICANS AND THEIR WORRIES ABOUT SPIRITUAL LIFE

People in America asked me a lot of questions about Zen and archery but were also equally curious to know about the growing number of psychoanalysts in Japan

today. A typical question would be, "Is psychoanalysis thriving as a business in Japan as it is in America?" I may be slightly deviating from my initial topic, but I'll have to speak about this too.

Since my return from America, I have been noticing the frequent usage of the word "neurosis" in newspapers and magazines. Last year, the word was unheard of in America. But today in the most advanced materialistic society of America, people are most worried about the stability of their spiritual state. I am sure this would be considered a type of neurosis too. To put it simply, people immersed in this materialistic American life have different sorts of emotional worries and doubts. Objectively, and sometimes even subjectively, people realize that they are on the verge of an emotional breakdown. Overcome by the urge to do something about it, they go to church once a week and make themselves feel like they've achieved emotional balance. Or at least that's how it used to be. Of course church-going remains a practice to this day, but for some reason it doesn't work anymore. People have actually confessed this to me.

There are millions, tens of millions of Christian believers in America today and the number of people who go to church every week is not insignificant. The number of believers who depend on Christianity as the haven of the heart, or shall we say for the sake of formality "bread of the mind," is still quite large. But in terms of the quality of this practice, many have confessed to me that they actually haven't been fully saved. They have told me that their emotions are all tangled up and that they can't do anything about it. And that is why in America, psychoanalysis—or in their terms, psychiatry—is thriving as a business. Everyone is in a state of either hysteria or neurosis. You would go to see a psychiatrist if someone told you that you were, or if you had subjective symptoms. A psychiatrist doesn't use medication but treats patients through hypnotic suggestion or guidance, and the cost of treatment can be very high. But even after many visits and having had to pay a great fee, in the end, patients still cannot seem to achieve a peaceful inner state. The intellectual types then seem to turn to reading to solve their problems.

In addition, there are many religious sects, which are all led by popular preachers. These people are Christian clergymen, pastors, or priests . . . some could be professors. I have noticed that a few of these preachers are almost idolized through radio and television. Their lectures and conventions are extremely well attended.

There's also a book called *Power of Positive Thinking*, which has been a continual best seller. I could be wrong about the title but it's one of the many books and lecture texts written by popular preachers, and it's had a tremendous impact on its readers. So I think quite a number of people actually achieve a sense of security from books like these. But of course, others remain unsatisfied, especially those of the intellectual class. Writings on European existentialism and the like have been translated and published, and depending on the direction of the original German or French texts, people go on to explore other fields. Those who couldn't quite

achieve what they wanted ultimately turn to the writings of Suzuki and that is where they read about “Zen.”

There’s another interesting story. In America, there are the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow.” Broadly speaking, these refer to the “high” and “low” of cultural taste. You would use “high” to refer to a person with great taste and “low” to deem someone faddish. There’s even a new term “middlebrow” that has been invented recently. *Life* magazine, which enjoys a great number of readers, once featured a chart¹⁵ showing categorical examples of everyday tastes. For example, they would show highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow instances of games. I think chess¹⁶ was considered middlebrow. The highbrow example was *go*, or Japanese chess. There was even a picture of it printed in the center. So the American readers who saw *go* listed in *Life* as the highest taste of games started playing it. I’m not sure how many people actually play *go* . . . perhaps those involved in *go* would have statistics, but anyway, it’s right there in the chart. It doesn’t say how many Americans read and discuss Zen via Suzuki Daisetsu, or Basho, but I’m sure if the category were there, the number of readers would show. Today, it isn’t idle curiosity that leads people to Zen and Basho; they are deemed tastes of the highest class.

Let me share another episode. One time, someone asked me whether psychoanalytic businesses are thriving in Japan as they are in America. He then took back his question saying, “Oh, this must be a silly question to ask. You have Zen in Japan, so psychoanalysis must not be necessary.” The person next to him agreed wholeheartedly. What this episode tells us is that people are thinking to themselves, “We wouldn’t have been in such an emotionally disturbed state had we had something like Zen.” Leading intellectuals in America, or those regarded as leaders by the people around them, often seem to discuss Suzuki or Zen. And just as it is with the study of Japanese art, the way of connecting to such topics is not academic but cultural. I’m sure if we asked Suzuki, he would be able to tell us the process by which interest in Zen evolved, but I think in the past, it was the religious scholars and researchers with narrow, specialized fields of interest who first became interested in Zen and studied it from the perspective of religious studies or religious psychology. Today, however, the process is quite different. People encounter Zen from a much broader perspective. I don’t want to oversimplify, but that is also where we see the connection with the American interest in the aesthetic concept of *shibui* happening. That’s how it all began.

THE AMERICAN INTEREST IN THE SHIBUI

In the past, American people seem to have been fascinated with gaudy and ostentatious tastes. In Japanese we would call it, “*miichan haachan*.”¹⁷ I’m afraid I might offend some people, but many of the newest cars have very flashy colors and body styles (last year, the red ones were the most popular). Though popular, people riding around these flashy cars are often looked down on. Some people would say

the cars are like—and of course, I realize the term is racially prejudiced—“negro toys.” Today, there are many black people who are economically successful and can easily afford such cars. They are the ones who drive around cars with very gaudy colors and styles. People would say, “Well, those are the toys of the higher-ups.” But with any car company, the highest quality cars, their best ones, are very subdued in terms of shape and color. People consider the *shibui* ones to be the best. And if American cars won’t do, they turn to English cars.

Fujimoto: I can understand how people would also appreciate Sesshu’s paintings.

Hasegawa: If we were to take a look at men’s clothing, it’s all gray, close to black. People wear a lot of black too. In terms of fabric, silk is often used for in-between seasons or summer clothing and so is *tsumugi* (pongee) that is woven in the style of *fushiori* (fabric that makes use of slubs). Rich people with good taste all wear such clothing. Even if they aren’t rich, Americans with good taste often wear *fushiori* fabric and the like, and prefer a very dull kind of gray or brown, or anything dull-hued. I used to carry around my favorite unpatterned *tsumugi furoshiki* (wrapping cloth) and people would be envious of that. It’s funny because when people saw that I was wrapping things in my *furoshiki*, they would say that the fabric of my “bag”—of course, there is no such term as *furoshiki* in America—was the latest fashion trend. I would then tell them that it wasn’t the latest but a three-hundred-year-old fashion trend. And then they would say, “A-ha, so our latest craze over the *shibui* is a trend that started in Japan three hundred years ago!” That’s certainly one way to look at it.

When Yoshida Shigeru¹⁸ and Shigemitsu Mamoru,¹⁹ among others, were invited to America, they stayed at Mrs. Rockefeller’s guesthouse, a reception house that is separate from her home. It’s basically a state guesthouse. Reading about Mrs. Rockefeller’s state guesthouse in the papers, one would probably imagine a place with luxurious décor. In actuality though, it’s a refined space with very subdued aesthetics. For example, the chair upholstery is all black. The fabric is not *fushiori* but a similarly interesting, coarsely knit fabric. The curtains are also a very subdued brownish color, and almost entirely unpatterned. Beautiful sketches by Paul Klee and works by Brancusi adorn the walls. There are printworks by Munakata Shiko as well as my work on *byobu* screens. It’s not so much like the Tokyo Kaikan,²⁰ but more an opulent type of *sukiya zukuri*. Of course the guesthouse wasn’t made to welcome only Japanese guests. Guests from all over the world are invited to this place for tea and cocktail parties.

Fujimoto: I see, these examples of everyday life and environments are easy to understand.

ZEN, WABI, SABI

Hasegawa: Recently I had a talk with the architect Watanabe Riki for an interview in the magazine *Mizue*. He told me that Mies van der Rohe, one of the pioneering

European modern architects (he lives in Chicago now) said in a questionnaire for some magazine that his favorite piece of writing was by Roshi. Watanabe asked me what I thought of that, if it was true or not. Well of course I think it's true. That's what I told him. Obviously this means that Roshi's name is already well known among the intellectuals of the West. They don't say Roshi, but instead, Lao Tzu or Lao Tze in Chinese. His thinking is collectively called Daoism. Daoism or "the way." So there's Zen, Lao-Tzu, and Daoism. A lot of people have asked me questions about these topics. More than I had ever imagined. People are very enthusiastic about these topics.

I just remembered that when the Japanese commercial artist Kamekura Yusaku came to New York, he met with Paul Rand, who is considered a middle-ranking or even higher ranking designer in New York today. Rand is much sought after in today's commercial art world. At that time, Rand asked Kamekura about the aesthetic concepts of *shibui*, *wabi*, and *sabi*. But Rand could not fully understand no matter how much Kameyama and his guide Nanae Momiyama tried to explain these concepts to him. Ms. Momiyama said to me later, "However we explain this, they (Americans) don't get it." She and Kameyama tried very hard to explain but Rand still didn't understand. In the end they told him, "If you do not understand, you should go to the painter Hasegawa who is in New York and he will explain in detail," and asked me to meet with him. When I coincidentally met Rand on a different occasion, he said to me, "I've been told by Kamekura to speak with you. Could you please take some time to explain?" I succumbed to this request and went to his house and he also came to my apartment with his wife. Eventually we began to frequent each other's places and I told him that I would explain to him however many hours and days it took until he got a good grasp of the concepts. He said, "Please do," and asked me many questions very earnestly and listened humbly to what I said. When I returned to Japan this year, I met with you, Mr. Fujimoto. I had just translated the commentary of the "Exhibition of Tea Ceremony Treasures" into English, which I sent to Rand. He was very happy about it and sent me a letter in return. He seemed to be quite satisfied reading that. Kamekura was also very happy to learn that I had met with Rand. Being the popular man that he was, Rand was very busy, but he was happy to take time out of his schedule to come see me at my house. He said that his work up to that point was interesting, but that he was still very unsatisfied and was aspiring to do better work. He thought that if he could understand the concepts of *shibui*, *wabi*, and *sabi*, which he had read or heard about from time to time, he might be able to produce more interesting work. Rand said he was able to create very novel designs after only one or two talks we had. I think this is telling of how accepting American people are. His wife (who used to be a professional architect and is known to be a very wise woman) told me delightedly, "Paul has been creating very novel designs since hearing your stories." Rand is garnering attention as a leading figure in his field so I am sure that in no time, his influence will spread widely.

The work of Mies, who named Lao-Tzu as his favorite reading material, is understandably simple and *shibui*. Mies is also a highly influential figure. I couldn't stay in Chicago for long last year, and so next time, I hope that I will be able to speak in depth with this veteran architect in the way that I did with Rand. According to an architectural book I briefly read, Gropius, who came to Japan last year while I was away, evidently said, "I would like to learn more about Zen and work out a real solution between Zen and architecture."

The American abstract painter and Bauhaus teacher Josef Albers, who was close to Gropius from the Bauhaus days, also seems to be very interested in these topics. Among the American abstract painters, Albers, if I may say, belongs to the "older" generation who teaches the earlier geometric styles in abstract painting. Francois Crown,²¹ whom we have been hearing about since last year, produces paintings that are entirely white and black. I fear I might offend some people by saying this especially in Japan today, but he makes paintings that look like imitations by calligraphers. He is one of the so-called newer abstract painters. Ibram Lassaw, who showed a very interesting piece of sculpture in the Japanese and American Abstract Art Exhibition, is, at a little over forty, probably one of the few champions of new sculpture in America today. His work was taken to the Biennale. I know Lassaw attended every single lecture that was given by Suzuki at Columbia University. He has every book on Zen written in English, and Zen words written in English are posted on his studio walls.

Let me also talk about the Artists' Club of New York. This is a wonderful club whose members include people like Franz²² and Lassaw I just mentioned. Other members known in Japan would be the revolutionary composer John Cage, who is making new music at the forefront of today's music world, or Herbert Matter, who is doing interesting work in the fields of photography and commercial art. It's a social club where painters, writers, composers, and people at the forefront of different genres come together in a very friendly atmosphere. I was asked to host a lecture on Japanese antiquities using slides in front of this group and after that, I did a lecture on a narrower topic, Zen and art. I did these two lectures entirely on my own. Afterward, I was asked to sit in a symposium, which we're beginning to see more of in Japan. A symposium is a kind of round table discussion held for radio programs where you have several lecturers who speak individually and then answer questions. We did this symposium-style lecture once a week on the topic of "Zen and art." It was myself, Lassaw, and John Ferren,²³ who is an equally avid listener of Suzuki's lectures and who has read and studied Zen for a long time. Ferren's work was also shown in this year's International Art Exhibition.

The three of us were invited as symposium lecturers for a total of, I think, three times. There were requests from others, but I decided to concentrate on this series. *Art Digest* magazine, a rival magazine of *Art News*, also strongly requested that I write a critical essay under the title "The Influence of Zen on Contemporary American Art." That the editor expects an essay on such a topic reveals how

many contemporary American artists and art circles under the influence of Zen there are today. However, I ended up declining their request. I told them that I didn't want the American people to simplify this phenomenon and that I wanted to observe how things go for a while. I also hesitated to outwardly criticize artists that are influenced by Zen and end up nipping new talents in the bud. I didn't want to be too harsh, but I also didn't want to leave the impression that what the American folks are doing now sufficiently demonstrates correct influences of Zen. So I told the editor that I didn't want to be a brown-noser and we called it off, but they are still very interested. They've told me that if I change my mind, I can still write for them.

Fujimoto: Thank you. Perhaps we can now move on to your conclusion.

IMPRESSIONISM AND UKIYO-E PRINTS

Hasegawa: What I am most concerned about today is the interest on the Japanese side toward the rise of foreign interest in Japanese arts and culture. That is what I am most interested in. It would continue to be a matter of regret if we don't take a moment to stop and think about this.

If we look back on history, Van Gogh was influenced by Japanese ukiyo-e. This influence was a very strong and profound one. Van Gogh speaks openly about this influence in his letters. I have long been thinking about why Van Gogh was so heavily inclined toward Japanese ukiyo-e prints. I am sure there are various reasons but something very important hasn't been discussed to this day. It's something that hasn't been pointed out, neither from the Japanese nor the Western side.

In postwar Japan, there has always been a feudalistic^{c24} relationship with French paintings and other European paintings, even those that were created after the French Revolution. It continues to be this way.

As we know, Van Gogh wrote letters, and in them he said that Japanese ukiyo-e prints are truly the work of the common people, created by popular painters and loved by the general public. They have the energy, color, and lines that are suitable to this sort of nature. In this sense, I believe ukiyo-e had what it needed to guide Van Gogh. However, not all Japanese people are confident about this fact. Many say that Van Gogh's interest in ukiyo-e was merely out of exoticism. I think this perspective is extremely self-deprecating and self-loathing.

The road that Van Gogh paved led to the rise of modern art in Europe, and subsequently, in America. We often discuss what happened in architecture but not much has been said about modern art. Let us ask ourselves, who paved the way for modern art in the West? Radically speaking, I think we can say that it was the ukiyo-e painters. This came to my mind when I was in Japan, but nobody seemed to agree with me. I once spoke about this but no one cared to second my opinion. I said the same thing twice in America, and everyone agreed. My thinking is not based on empty theory. Let me explain.

At the Museum in Burisuto,²⁵ I compared Meiji-era *nihonga* and Western paintings of roughly the same time period, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Western paintings of this period most definitely belong to the lineage of ukiyo-e prints, both in terms of color and line. They are very close in painterly nature. Meanwhile, oil paintings of the Meiji era are imitations of nineteenth-century oil paintings.

This is where a slight slippage occurs. The West and Japan seem to pass by each other. I'm not sure if this has turned out to be good or bad. It depends on how you look at it, but personally I think that it's brought unfortunate outcomes. Others may not think so.

When we talk about architecture, or of America's current interest in Japan, we really have to start from here. Otherwise we won't be able to understand it. When Van Gogh visited Southern France, he wrote delightedly in a letter, "This place is like Japan." That's how strongly Van Gogh admired Japan. And yet all the while, Japan was sending out artists to study in France. I'm not saying that Japan should have stayed the way it was. I've never felt that way and I never will. I'm not here today to say that. But somehow, whenever I talk about this, people take it the wrong way.

This discrepancy in understanding, or slippage, that began then continues on to this day. It hasn't been resolved at all.

The new architecture of today was born from a sequence of theories from cubism to abstract painting—Le Corbusier was just about midway between the two. Thus, in order to discuss what happened in the arts, or at least in painting in Japan, we really have to go back to Van Gogh.

WHAT THE JAPANESE MUST FIRST KEEP IN MIND

At the same time, we must also think about the rise of foreign interest in Japan from our side. Ukiyo-e and its influences have always been discussed in tandem with the idea of exoticism. What lies behind this perception is groundless self-deprecation. We must rid ourselves of this way of thinking. Otherwise we will have to continue imitating what the West imitated from us. I'll also add that I'm rather tired of having to take care of the latest mode.²⁶

When Van Gogh became wholly devoted to ukiyo-e, ukiyo-e in Japan was already showing signs of decline. Today, interest in tearoom architecture, Japanese tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and calligraphy is flourishing in the West. Though circumstances differ, this current phenomenon of rising interest in Japan echoes the case of Van Gogh. In the course of development of Western prints, we saw that Van Gogh turned to ukiyo-e as a model of truly democratic art, worthy to be made under the postrevolutionary tricolor flag. One of the reasons why he learned from ukiyo-e was because he found something essentially meaningful in the art.

In pursuing something essential like this, the arts and culture of the West today must learn from a very broad range of genres in Japanese culture. Generally speaking, there is tea ceremony, tea house architecture, flower arrangement, and calligraphy, as well as noh plays, kabuki, and Japanese music that relates to both. There is also traditional Japanese Zen, which the Japanese people have continued to mix into their daily lives, as well as Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, which have all had decisive influences on Zen.

Among them, Zen in Buddhism and Daoism in Eastern thought have attracted great interest as the most powerful influences on arts and culture. The interest is very deep, as in the case of Van Gogh, in their essence. I hate to offend those who have strictly followed the teachings of Buddhism and those who have endeavored to preserve traditional Japanese art to this day, but I must say that both Buddhism and traditional art have largely deteriorated compared to the times their principles were impressively alive. The situation is just like when Van Gogh encountered ukiyo-e. Simply put, everything seems too often to be drifting to the superficial pursuit of forms.

Nevertheless, foreigners who are trying to learn from Japan are driven by a continual inner need that makes them able to see the intrinsic values of our thinking and our art. I have seen many cases where foreigners readily accept this deterioration and superficial formalization as a means to an end, a way to get to the essence of what needs to be learned. Some of us Japanese say that our art has already become outdated, but Western people are in fact tearfully grateful for what we can offer them.

Now with this rising interest in Japan, some people are ecstatic to think that what Japan had to offer to the world had universal value. Meanwhile, others are very uncomfortable and troubled by the Westerners' pursuit of exoticism and the craze over what they consider trivial.

Needless to say, the situation we currently have is rather muddled. I'm not saying that I completely understand the situation and I can't say that I'm not guilty myself, but I have to say that intellectuals, cultural figures, and artists from the Meiji era onward seem to instinctively dislike what they have inherited as tradition simply because in their times, the tradition appears to have deteriorated and formalized for the worse. The research and acknowledgment of the essential value of our tradition and how magnificent it used to be is lamentably lacking.

New Western art movements, from Van Gogh and onward, have an intrinsic sense of vitality and embrace many qualities that fulfill the needs of the times. It is understandable how Japanese people today would find such movements attractive. That said, people must realize that many of the new Western art movements, the ones we are fascinated by, have in fact acquired a great deal from what we have inherited as tradition.

When I talk about tea ceremony, people arbitrarily decide that I am referring to the worst kinds of local tea instructors and tell me that tea ceremony itself isn't

worth discussing. The same thing happens when I talk about calligraphy. Zen too. People say Zen now is superficial. True, the Zen we see today may be self-styled. But this is based on the assumption that Zen priests of the past were better than the priests of today.

However, there are many Zen issues that can only be learned by meeting in person some of today's priests. I hate to sound rude but we have to meet them in order to learn from them. If we meet them in person, we will be able to learn core ideas, at least more than the people who attempt to learn from the outside.

In the West, Van Gogh turned to ukiyo-e out of necessity. Meanwhile, during its quest for modernization, Japan had to turn to the realism of Western paintings prior to Van Gogh. So it was inevitable for that slippage to occur, for the West and Japan to pass each other without crossing. To think that this was something unfortunate is to see things from a Western-centric point of view.

The viewpoint is understandable. To a certain extent, it's a logical argument so there's no way to dispute it. We just have to let it go.

THE FOUNDATION OF INTERNATIONALISM

When we discuss internationalism and universalism, we must be clear about the focal point. Should we view things with the West as the center? From whose perspective should we be thinking? Needless to say, we must place the world and the whole of humanity in the center when we talk about internationalism or universalism. While Einstein's vision of a unified world state is an ideal, in reality, we have to talk about individual nations in order to get to that ideal. That is why we have to think of internationalism and universalism as two separate ideas.

When we talk about culture, art, and of course politics, ultimately, tradition, in the truest sense of the word, cannot be established overnight. In that sense, internationalism is different from colonialism. What we mean by internationalism is the equal and friendly relationship among independent nations.

COLONIALISM AND FEUDALISM

Blindly imitating French paintings is an example of the colonial mind-set. Whether the material be oil paint or Japanese pigment, forcing ourselves to follow the way the French do their paintings would only be exemplifying artistic colonialism. What then do we mean by internationalism? When a country tries to be international, and on top of that remain an independent nation, it can become fanatically right-winged and patriotic. The idea is to depend only on the domestic present, and it's a pathetic way of thinking.

When discussing internationalism or universalism, people bring up the issue of nationalism. Often though, they are actually talking about colonialism. Cultural figures and intellectuals have a great tendency to do this. And when people

discuss nationalism, or universalism that is based on the idea of nations as a collective unit, they end up giving in to the past and ignore the idea of genuine creativity.

On the whole, Japanese people today are extremely feudalistic. The Japanese are all submissive to something. Submissive to foreign countries, if not to its own past. Once people realize that this is not good, they then become self-centered. And in postwar Japan, people have taken self-centeredness as a form of freedom.

What happens next is that people begin to realize that it is meaningless to confuse self-centeredness with freedom, and suggest that the situation be normalized. When this happens, we develop either an internationally colonial mind-set or a nationally dependent mind-set. How should we foster our creativity as modern Japanese individuals? Unfortunately, nothing awakens our consciousness to be truly creative today.

And so here we are suddenly thrilled to hear that foreign countries are now beginning to acknowledge Japanese things, particularly things of the past. This instantly reveals the feudalistic nature that remains in the Japanese mentality. Why are we so pleased and interested in this phenomenon? From what I have analyzed up to this point, we can say that the growing foreign interest in our art and culture has gratified both the colonial consciousness and the past-dependency that inheres in us Japanese. But now, have we fallen so low? I don't think we can go lower than this. I really hope that we rid ourselves of this shameful mentality and become truly creative. We shouldn't be talking about what others are doing. We have to do something about our own creativity.

THE DENIAL OF THE PAST

But in reality, it's not so easy. Japan has to be internationally minded in politics despite its psychological dependency, while also dealing with economic and historical problems.

In Italy, a unique movement called futurism once emerged as a new artistic trend. It happened almost in parallel with Dadaism. In Italy, France, and in the whole of Europe, futurism and Dadaism happened almost simultaneously.

I believe that in order to foster our creativity and develop our ability to emulate influences, we should for once break out of this backward looking mentality. As extreme as this may sound, perhaps we should deny the past altogether. After all, futurism and Dadaism denied the past in very radical ways. And in so doing, they left meaningful footsteps in the history of modern art. Although styles of futurism and Dadaism have been imported, I don't think Japanese modern art has ever been able to fundamentally break away from its dependency on the past.

As we have seen in past examples from Europe, pursuing true creativity means in a sense to reproduce the classic. And of course, only what was considered highly creative in the past can survive the times and become great classic art. Since the

Meiji era, a feudalistic attitude has remained in the minds of Japanese people, which we have chosen not to acknowledge to this day.

I thought for a moment that I should sympathize with new, young Japanese artists who choose to completely deny the art of their past. If the denial is to achieve true creativity in the modern age, that would be acceptable. But if denying one's own past is for the purpose of becoming a cultural colony of an outside country, there is something terribly wrong with that. It's as bad as depending on one's past. This means that either the present becomes a burden or the past becomes the burden . . . either way, it's a burden. So what is happening now appears to be a very active situation from the outside. I think that's how people see the artistic activities of Japan today.

You can include me in this, but I'm not actually pleased.

Now this issue of universalism. There's no real solution to it. All I can say is that artists of our time can only become truly creative by placing the world and humanity at the center.

If I were a very eager nationalist, I would simply pursue the past ideal of *Hakko Ichiu*²⁷ and gather everything that exemplifies this nationalistic slogan. But that wouldn't be right either. I am strongly influenced by this way of thinking.

The more I look into *Sesshu*, *Basho*, *Rikyu*, and *Zeami*, whom I respect and have researched on my own, I see that their cultural and artistic outputs are genuinely Japanese. They have learned a great deal from the past; *Basho* from *Zen* and *Lao-Tzu*, particularly *Chuang Tzu*, and *Sesshu* from *China* as he was a *Zen* priest himself and traveled there. That journey to *China* left a great impact on *Sesshu*.

Their art is, after all, the art of the Far East. These are artists of an island country at the far-most edge of the East. The art of *China*, *India*, in other words, the Asian continent itself, is at the basis of their creativity.

There is not a single work made by these artists that does not have its roots in the Asian continent. The same goes for the works in the Exhibition of Japanese Antiquities. The Japanese are a truly artistic race. All of these artists have ultimately arrived at art that could only have been made in the island of Japan. I'm not belittling what we have created to this day. Hence, if we were to take this uniqueness and compare it to something else, we would need to think in terms of the East versus the West.

When we view the East and the West in the modern and contemporary times, the term "underdeveloped" often comes up. This is a very interesting word. Easterners, despite having old cultures and civilizations, readily accept being called underdeveloped. It's a strange situation indeed.

THE NATURE OF INTEREST IN EASTERN CULTURE

America, whose prominence within world politics has always been defined by its material power, now seems unable to manage its material abundance. If you have

too much to handle, surely you stop to reflect on yourself, otherwise you will go mad. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why America today has become interested in Japan and the East.

America today is overconfident of its material power and political/military strength. There are shallow-minded Americans in all genres. But I am also well aware that not everyone is shallow. Material civilization in America has peaked, advancing the mode of life to an almost absurd degree. Americans themselves are becoming aware of this. Everything we can think of has now been mechanized—electric washing machines to give just one example—and sure enough, life has become awfully convenient. There's nothing bad about it. Evidently, American people are pursuing even more convenience, and it's all working out.

At the same time, however, American people have stopped thinking why they should pursue a lifestyle that is so dependent on machines and tools. Before they knew it, the practice of thinking had been abandoned altogether. From time to time, they pondered the significance of a mechanized civilization. But when progress accelerated, they got caught up and forgot to reflect on how things were at the beginning. They told themselves that they needed to stop and think, but hesitated to do so from the fear that their hands would be eaten up by the machines. So they just continued. That's just the way humans are.

Being in New York and in other places in America, I often compare what I have been doing and seeing from my childhood days with the state of things in America and notice how inefficient things have always been on my end. On the contrary, everything in America is done so efficiently. That's fine, of course. However, Americans are increasingly forgetting to reflect on the meanings of their actions. This situation will worsen for sure.

I think we Easterners could have done things the way America did. If they did it, we could have done it too. But we chose not to. Probably because we lacked the confidence. And we're constantly troubled by the regret of not doing so.

So this is my conclusion. After World War II, India, the Chinese Communists, and other Eastern nations gained political independence. Despite England's massive material power and military power, and regardless of all the political vicissitudes, India ultimately became independent.

Since the times steam engines and dynamite were invented, the East has continued to be economically, politically, and diplomatically reticent, almost silent. Easterners themselves never really questioned this. Occasionally they did strike back, almost in a state of hysteria, but such attempts ultimately failed. Then suddenly, people like Gandhi, Nehru, and Mao Zedong, and others in Japan became influential voices in the world.

Understandably, people were surprised. However, considering the geographical size and population distribution of the Eastern world, it seems unjust that they were not given the right to speak in the first place. So I think this current rise of

interest in the arts and culture of the East signals what is to come in the more pragmatic aspects of life such as politics, economics, and diplomacy.

OUR CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF JAPAN

In that event, I think there needs to be a correct and proper understanding of Japan. This means acknowledging how much Japan has received from, for example, India or China, and how much we have incorporated that influences our essence and our art. Just as Einstein propounded the ideal of a world state, so it would be ideal to have something we could call world art. Art is always created by truly creative individuals who make their way across untrodden grounds. However, in a way, the more one exhibits his unprecedented creative power, the more he speaks of the history and tradition of his people and region. Art cannot escape its context. And yet, conversely, being confined to that context brings out its best qualities.

Which brings me to think about the United Nations, which happened to be right by the building I lived in for a couple of months last year. I'm not sure the United Nations is as grand an organization as it presents itself to be. Depending on how you look at it, it might be a completely meaningless organization. Nonetheless, it could be fulfilling a certain task little by little.

If you take the subway from the United Nations, in a few minutes you will arrive at the artists' village of New York. There you will find many artists from different countries doing all sorts of things. They all get along surprisingly well, which I like better. But I'm beginning to understand that things are never easy for anyone. Artists have a hard time making great, universal art, and the United Nations also has difficulty fostering effective political dialogue.

But in the end, as shallow as this may sound, the important thing is for people to get to know one other. The important thing is to learn from each other, and for each to give in return. Now, I say this as self-criticism, and not to blame my fellow people, but I feel that we have voluntarily cultivated a colonial mind-set since the Meiji era. I think people like Okakura Tenshin and Suzuki Daisetsu were, if anything, exceptional.

So speaking of the issue of US bases in Japan, I think that both sides have their faults. The recent expansion of the airfield into Sunagawa²⁸ is one of many problems lingering between us and America. I'm not saying that the American side is doing the right thing, but when something like that happens, I think both sides are to be blamed. It's really unfortunate when people react hysterically like that.

CULTURAL INVASION

Incidentally, while I was in America last year, so many people told me that New York is currently in the midst of a Japanese cultural invasion. Perhaps some were just being diplomatic. Others must have really meant it. They said that Japan is

culturally conquering America, and that America is steadily succumbing to the invasion. Indeed we have seen a number of Japanese movies being released in America during the past few years——*Rashomon*, *Ugetsu Monogatari*, and *Jigokumon*.²⁹ Also, a Japanese house³⁰ was built in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Azuma Tokuho³¹ and his troupe toured America as the Azuma Kabuki.

Upon covering these events, the *New York Times* stated emphatically that invasion of this sort was welcome and that they hoped to see invasion of a grander scale in the future.

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