

**Modern Japanese Arts and Crafts around Kyoto:
From Asai Chū to Yagi Kazuo, with Special Reference
to Their Contact with the West (1900-1954)**

INAGA Shigemi 稲賀 繁美

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Rutherford Alcock (1809-1897), the first British Consul in Japan, stated in his *The Capital of the Taicoon* (1863) that nothing exists in the archipelago which may be classified in the category of Fine Arts, and this fact implies “inferiority” of Japanese art. Fifteen years later, in his *Art and Art Industries in Japan* (1878), Alcock drastically changed his opinion. Borrowing the idea from William Morris’s medievalism, Alcock recognized in the lack of distinction between craftsmen and artists a distinctive feature and merit of Japanese artistic life. In this book, the British former diplomat clearly states his views, the antithesis to the French classical idea formulated by Charles Blanc’s (1813-1882) *Grammaire des arts de dessins* (1867), where the French influential art critique and eclectic theoretician insisted upon the supremacy of the beaux-arts to the applied and decorative arts and crafts.¹

Whereas the academic education of Fine Arts put primary emphasis on such criteria as linear perspective, chiaroscuro, modeling, and human anatomy in pictorial art and principles of symmetry in decorative arts, these principles were nearly absent or intentionally overlooked in Japanese art and design. Such deviations from the Western norm were highly appreciated by European amateurs of the epoch which

* This paper was first presented in English at the School of Asian Studies in the University of London on May 16, 2006 at the invitation of Timon Screech, reader in the history of art at SOAS. My thanks go to Dr. Timon Screech, as well as to Mr. John McCann and Professor Patricia Fister, who kindly checked my English. The paper is included in the present proceedings as it was judged that a contribution by the organizer of the international symposium was indispensable to the volume. In the original program, I refrained from presenting this paper because of the time constraints of the schedule and made the decision to give priority to the guest speakers invited from abroad.

1 稲賀繁美 「工藝の脱構築のために」『工藝』創刊号, 1995, pp.13-18.

saw the vogue for Japonisme.² The *Service Rousseau* by Félix Bracquemond (1883-1914) (Figure 1) testifies to the Western interest in what Ernest Chesneau (1830-1890) called “*dysimmetrie*” through which the Japanese motif of a pheasant is whimsically thrown into a dish in an irregular position.³ Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), among others, made use of a page of *Hokusai manga* representing sumo wrestlers to portray a caricature of the Tahitian governor Gustave Gallet (Figures 2 and 3). Gauguin was convinced that the Japanese imagery, free from the yoke of perspective, chiaroscuro, modeling, and anatomy, was extremely fitting for satirical purposes.⁴

Ironically, after the Meiji Restoration the Japanese government found it indispensable to accommodate the Japanese product to Western artistic criteria and tried hard to implement the Western academic art education which contemporary Western artists had begun to repudiate. The mutual cross-purpose which occurred between the Western demand for export and Japanese supply in the domestic market characterizes the modernity of Japanese art from its beginning at the middle of the nineteenth century, when the country put an end to its isolationist politics and resumed diplomatic contact with the West.⁵

In this paper, let us focus our attention on the transformation of the arts and crafts in the first half of twentieth-century Kyoto. Being the capital of Japan for more than one thousand years since 794, Kyoto provides us with special examples which will permit us to analyze the problems the traditional arts and crafts had to face in confrontation with Western modernism.⁶ How was painting differentiated from and/or connected with arts and crafts? What was the social status of arts and crafts in the changing society? And how were the craftsmen striving to transform themselves into modern artists in the social hierarchy in accordance with, or in reaction to the Western value judgment? Such are the questions this paper tries to raise and analyze.

1. Asai Chū and Art Nouveau

Let us begin with Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) (Figure 4). The Nabi painter is known

2 Shigemi Inaga, “Impressionnisme et Japonisme : histoire d’un malentendu créateur,” *Nouvelles de l’estampe*, juillet, 1998, pp. 7-22.

3 Ernest Chesneau, “Le Japon à Paris,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Sept. 1878, pp. 385-97.

4 稲賀繁美 「戯画の効能」『ジャポニズム研究』第21号, 2001, pp. 38-43.

5 佐藤道信 『<日本美術>誕生』講談社メチエ, 1996.

6 However the image of the ancient capital was reinforced in the late nineteenth century. See 高木博志 『近代天皇制と古都』岩波書店, 2006, part II.

to have collaborated for the studio of Art Nouveau which S. Bing (1838-1905) promoted since the Exposition universelle in Paris in 1900.⁷ *Promenade des nourrices* (1899) synthetically summarizes the lesson of *Japonisme* (Figure 5). The human figures are rendered without chiaroscuro or modeling, and by the application of opaque pigments, anatomy is sacrificed for the benefit of free drawing, especially in the depiction of the black dog in the foreground. The composition does not respect linear perspective, but the relation between near and far is articulated in terms of low and high, faithfully following the Oriental vertical format. In sum, the four decorative detachable panels which constitute the scene no longer belong to the Western tradition of canvas painting, but reveal their affinity with Oriental folding screens. The work partakes of interior decoration and refuses to be categorized as a “painting.” In short, half a century of Japanese influences resulted in the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.⁸

Asai Chū 浅井忠 (1856-1907), one of the first representative oil painters in Meiji Japan and regarded as a realist in the school of the Italian painter Antonio Fontanesi (1818-1882), was sent to the Parisian World Fair and had the opportunity to visit Bing’s studio. My assumption is that Asai could have seen Bonnard’s folding screen. Soon after his return from Europe, Asai executed a similar subject of a Parisian lady with a dog (Figure 6). The vertical format of *kakemono* looks like a transposition of the third panel from the left of Bonnard’s piece with a dog in the foreground/below, and the range of carriages on the background/top in Bonnard’s composition is replaced by a pedestrian and a bicycle in Asai’s version. Closely observing the Parisian art scene where decorative art was flourishing, Asai seems to have been convinced of the imbecility of awkwardly imitating the old fashioned Western academic oil painting (he named his diary during his stay in Grez-sur-Loing *Guretsu nikki* 愚劣日記, “*guretsu*” meaning imbecility). As a Japanese, he realized that it would be much wiser to practice the Japanese decorative aesthetics as practiced by Bonnard and catch up with the latest Parisian mode by which people can “happily earn money.” As for dexterity in ink drawing and compositional skill, Asai must have recognized his superiority to French decorators.⁹

7 Gabriel P. Weisberg et.al, *Les Origines de l’Art nouveau, La Maison Bing*, Van Gogh Museum, 2004.

8 *Les Nabis*, catalogue de l’exposition, Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1993, fig.14 (p. 41).

9 稲賀繁美『絵画の東方』名古屋大学出版会, 1999, pp.190-92.

It was therefore not by whimsy that Asai settled in Kyoto after his return from Paris. Named professor at the newly founded Kyoto High School of Arts and Crafts 京都高等工藝学校, Asai spent his final years teaching design for the purpose of renovating the Kyoto tradition of decorative art. Yet whether he was really successful in Kyoto is another matter. Let us examine one of his oil paintings, *Hunting on Horseback* (Figure 7), which was used for the production of a tapestry by Kawashima Jinbei II 川島甚平 (1853-1910) presented to the British Japanese Exhibition in London in 1910 and later hung on the wall of the Akasaka Detached Palace (Figure 8). Asai was requested by the Nishijin silk textile weaving manufacturer to provide a model for a manual reproduction. The task forced Asai to sacrifice the free brush handling in which he excelled.¹⁰

The tapestry by Kawashima was highly appreciated for its technical merit. And yet, Asai's original oil painting lacks spontaneity and vivacity and even hints at lassitude. Its monotonous rigidity reminds us of the painstaking process of composing an academic salon painting which had been experienced in 1898 by Kuroda Seiki 黒田清輝 (1866-1924) with his *The Talk on Ancient Romance* (Figure 9), based on the *Tale of Heike* 平家物語.¹¹ A disciple of Raphael Collin and representative of the generation of the *plein-air* aesthetics in Japan, Kuroda, in rivalry with Asai, tried to implement the academic composition soon after his nomination as professor of oil painting at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts 東京美術学校. Neither Asai nor Kuroda were successful in transplanting the Western tradition of grand composition to



Fig. 8 Kawashima Jinbei II, *Embroidered Tapestry "Warriors on a Hunt,"* 1909. Kawashima Textile Museum, Kyoto.

10 『浅井忠の図案展』（前川公秀・原田平作他）佐倉市美術館，愛媛県美術館，2002.

11 『白馬会』展覧会カタログ，ブリヂストン美術館，京都国立近代美術館，1996.

Japanese soil. Their failure may be partly ascribed to their affinity with spontaneous execution, but the decline of the grand composition in the contemporary West must also be taken into account.

2. Asai Chū and Kamisaka Sekka

Although Asai was rather unwilling to execute oil paintings to be used as models for textile products, he enthusiastically encouraged young students and craftsmen to revise their decorative design approaches. Asai held the opinion that the essence of Japanese art resided in the applied arts and that its inferiority to “fine art” was an incorrect point of view. Although Asai was interested in the Art Nouveau style, he was not a simple imitator of the latest things Western. Asai’s design models are imbued with a subtle sense of humor. His favorite use of ink drippings and ample lines may be based on his observation that in the West, what is the most conspicuous is not the meticulous skill in detailed *décorations* of which Japanese craftsmen boasted, but rather the caricature-like spontaneity and free improvisations of the *Otsu-e* 大津絵 style of popular imagery (Figure 10).¹²

Indeed, the dripping technique of the Rinpa 琳派 school was highly appreciated by Louis Gonse, author of *L'Art japonais* (1883). Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三 (1863-1913), one of the most famous and influential ideologues in modern Japanese art, also recognized in the Rinpa style a kind of impressionist aesthetic which preceded the Western homolog by two centuries.¹³ As Tamamushi Satoko 玉蟲敏子 shows, the Kōrin school of decorative art was to be rehabilitated from the beginning of the twentieth century and seminal publications were issued in commemoration of the bicentennial of Kōrin’s death celebrated in 1915.¹⁴ After the untimely death of Asai, it was Kamisaka Sekka 神坂雪華 (1866-1942) who took the initiative for the modern restoration of the Rinpa style in modern Kyoto. Tawaraya Sōtatsu’s 俵屋宗達 *Puppy* (Figure 11) of the seventeenth century, for example, was reinterpreted in Sekka’s model book around 1910 (Figure 12).¹⁵

The antagonism between Asai Chū and Kamisaka Sekka must not be overlooked. While Asai was a proponent of the Art Nouveau style, Sekka, in contrast spoke

12 芳賀徹『絵画の領分－近代日本比較文化史研究』朝日新聞社，1984，p. 329.

13 岡倉天心『日本美術史』木下長宏編，平凡社ライブラリー，2001，p. 264.

14 玉蟲敏子『行きつづける光琳』吉川弘文館，2004，第3章.

15 『神坂雪華展』佐藤敬二他，京都国立近代美術館，2004.

ill of the “macaroni-art-nouveau-style” shortly after his “inspection” (and not ‘study’) trip to Europe, and dissuaded his compatriots from blindly imitating the Western “bad taste.” While Asai was also criticizing the Kyoto craftsmen for lack of intelligence (“they excel only in manual skill but lack in brain work”) Kamisaka riposted to this opinion by saying that “it would be enough for Kyoto craft designers to go to Europe for ‘inspection’ after having sufficiently undergone brain training in Japan.” Though an excellent educator and full of innovative inspirations, Asai was after all, an outsider in Kyoto, and his somewhat humorous designs with funny motifs were not necessarily convincing to Kyoto people. Moreover, Asai held a position as professor in the department of decorative design, and he was not fully aware of the professional skills of craftsmen or their technical draftsmanship.

A comparison of writing boxes may reveal the differences of these two men. It is true that Asai was proposing a modern renovation of the Kōrin school. The swelling lid of the lacquerware case of Hon’ami Kōetsu’s *Writing Box with Design of a Woodcutter* (Figure 13) of the seventeenth century certainly served as inspiration for Asai Chū, as one may see in the *Stationary Paper Box with Design of Chickens and Plum* (1906) executed by Sugibayashi Kokō 杉林古香 (Figure 14). And yet the technique of the nacre inlay remains in an experimental state, and the application of a two-dimensional model on the three-dimensional box reveals some awkwardness in its treatment. The premature death of Sugibayashi (1881-1913) shortly after Asai’s own death in 1907 seems to have prevented them from furthering their collaboration. In contrast, the *Tobacco Box with Lotus Leaves* and *Calligraphy Box with Reeds* by Kamisaka Sekka (Figure 15-a,b) show the technical perfection of inlay as well as the



Fig.14 Asai Chū and Sugibayashi Kokō, *Stationary Paper Box with Design of Chickens and Plum*, 1906. Lacquerware. The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.

clever layout of the motifs on the curved surface of the box.¹⁶

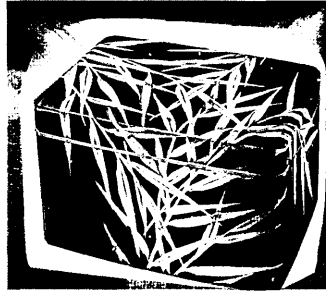
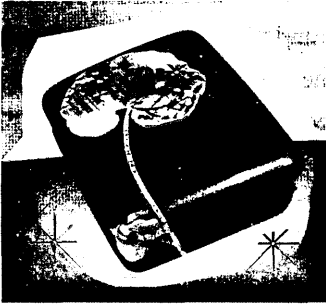


Fig.15-a Kamisaka Sekka, *Tobacco Box with Lotus Leaves* (Design by Sekka, lacquer by Kamisaka Yukichi), 1910-20. Gold, lead, and *maki-e* lacquer with mother-of-pearl on wood. Private collection.

Fig.15-b Kamisaka Sekka, *Calligraphy Box with Reeds* (Design by Sekka), 1910-20. Gold, lead, and *maki-e* lacquer with mother-of-pearl on wood. Clark Collection, on long-term loan to the Ruth & Sherman Lee Institute for Japanese Art.

The character of the two different institutions must also be taken into consideration. The Kyoto High School of Arts and Crafts, where Asai had taught since its foundation in 1902, aimed at nurturing leading artists and master designers for the textile industry and was composed of three departments: design, dyeing, and weaving. Kamisaka Sekka seems to have taught at the Kyoto Municipal School for Fine Arts and Crafts 京都市立美術工藝学校 around 1894. Though it is composed of three sections—painting, sculpture, and design—it mainly aimed at training artisans and craftsmen in apprenticeship. In 1909 the painting section became independent and was re-established as the Kyoto Municipal Professional School for Painting 京都市立絵画専門学校 (the reshaping may suggest changes in social demand). Among the first graduate students from the reformed professional school are distinguished painters such as Tsuchida Bakusen 土田麦僊 (1887-1936), Murakami Kagaku 村上華岳 (1888-1939), Nonagase Banka 野長瀬晩花 (1889-1964), Ono Chikkyō 小野竹喬 (1889-1979) and Sakakibara Shihō 榊原紫峰 (1887-1971), who formed a circle in 1918 called Kokuga Sōsaku Kyōkai 国画創作協会, or the Association for the Creation

16 佐藤敬二「近代琳派としてのデザイナー，神坂雪華」『学術コンソーシアム通信』特別編，共同プロジェクト中間報告集，2005，pp.1-30.

of New National Painting—a leading group of Modernism in Kyoto Japanese style painting.¹⁷

Let us summarize the administrative reforms and social environment. The official salon was inaugurated under the auspices of the Ministry of Education in 1907 (so-called “Bunten,” 文展 which was to be reformed into the Imperial Salon, “Teiten” 帝展 in 1919). Yet the section of arts and crafts was excluded from the salon. It is not until 1927 that a fourth section was created for the arts and crafts in the eighth Imperial Salon, “Teiten.” This means that during the twenty years between 1907 and 1927, arts and crafts were formally excluded from the official salon. However, it does not follow that craftsmen were satisfied with this unfavorable status quo. Indeed, the circumstances testify to the fact that during the decade of 1910-20, Kyoto craftsmen began to consciously perceive themselves as modernist artists. In Tokyo, the Shirakaba school began the publication of the monthly magazine *Shirakaba* (白樺 *The White Birch*) from 1911 which exalted self emancipation and liberation of artistic expression as means of self-realization. It was thanks to the *Shirakaba* magazine that young Japanese of this epoch took notice of Post-impressionism, a term coined by the British art critique Roger Fry in 1910. The establishment of the Kokuga Sōsaku Kyōkai mentioned above must be counted among the direct impacts of the *Shirakaba* magazine, and its first exhibition of paintings held in Kyoto in 1918 triggered parallel movements in other fields. The association of *urushi* lacquer craftsmen—Katsumi-mura 香津美村—organized its first exhibition in the following year (1919). In ceramics, the association Akatsuchi (赤土 or Red Earth, which was later changed to Sekidosha 赤土社) followed suit in 1920.

If we mechanically apply the Western distinction between Fine Arts and applied arts, we tend to exclude arts and crafts from the discourse on modernism. However Kyoto modernism has its roots in arts and crafts. Categorically eliminating arts and crafts a priori from the perspective may lead to misunderstanding. Let us consider the case of Kamisaka Sekka's *Inkstone Box with the Motif of Oharame* 大原女 (Figure 16) datable to the 1920s, which apparently follows the tradition of the *Writing Box with Design of Woodcutter* by Hon'ami Kōetsu 本阿弥光悦 of the seventeenth century, mentioned above. The same motif of the local peddler ladies of Kyoto appears in Tsuchida Bakusen's *Oharame* of 1927 (Figure 17). Tsuchida is one of the first painters to

17 『京都の工芸 [1910-1940] — 伝統と変革のはざまに』 1998 年, 京都国立近代美術館.

choose this as a subject for paintings. His choice has been interpreted as proof of the innovative attitude of the association Kokuga Sōsaku Kyōkai to which Tsuchida belonged. However Kamisaka's piece suggests another interpretation. Tsuchida may have borrowed the motif from lacquerware so as to introduce a new subject matter into genre painting.



Fig.17 Tsuchida Bakusen, *Oharame Maidens*, 1927. Color on silk, framed. The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.

Uchiyama Takeo 内山武夫, former director of the Kyoto National Museum of Modern Art, has pointed out that Tsuchida's triangular composition relies on Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Figure 18), which Tsuchida had seen during his stay in Paris in 1922-23. It must also be remembered that the Kokuga Sōsaku Kyōkai resolutely refused to exhibit their works in the official salon, imitating the spirit of independence of the French Impressionists of which Manet was considered the elder brother and a pioneering master. The implicit reference to Manet's refused masterpiece testifies to Tsuchida's will to share the same suffering with the father of Modernism. At the same time, by borrowing the Western composition, Tsuchida was trying to uproot the Japanese style of painting from the category of decorative and applied arts so that it could be entitled to the status of Fine Arts as a work of painting.¹⁸

3. Social Function and Ideology of Arts and Crafts in the Colonial Context

One of the criteria for distinguishing a work of Fine Art from that of the arts and crafts is whether the work is endowed with "lofty ideas" (Ernest F. Fenollosa) capable of educating the viewer's intellect or limited to offering simple aesthetic

18 『土田麦僊展』京都国立近代美術館, 千葉県立美術館, 1997.

pleasure. The opposition of manual labor and work of the intellect, which Asai discussed, also stems from this distinction. So long as the work of art is capable of transmitting ideas through allegorical motif or the subject matter it treats, painting occupies a higher position than arts and crafts and accordingly is recognized as belonging to the category of Fine Arts. At the same time, however, paintings may be more easily engaged in politics and exposed to ideology than arts and crafts. Historical and religious paintings can hardly be neutral due to the subject matter which they represent. By their nature, paintings are often subject to current political conditions and called upon to accomplish their social function by meeting the social expectations of a given period.

In the case of Tsuchida Bakusen's *Korean Maidens* (1933) depicting Korean ladies in *Chima* and *Chogori* (Figure 19), which was initially intended for the royal collection of the Li family under Japan's annexation of the Korean Peninsula, Nishihara Daisuke 西原大輔 speculates that the work borrows its composition from Édouard Manet's (1832-1883) *Olympia* (Figure 20). It was in this context that the Korean costume obtains a civil right, so to speak, in the realm of Fine Arts in accordance with the tradition of Western Orientalist genre painting.¹⁹ One of the early examples of Korean local costume represented by a Japanese would be *Autumn* (1920) which Kojima Torajirō 児島虎次郎 (1881-1929) showed in the Parisian Salon des artistes français in 1920 (Figure 21).²⁰ Regardless of the personal intentions of the painters, these works may be categorized as Japanese colonial paintings. As feminist criticism has already clarified, these works duplicate the political domination on the level of pictorial representation.²¹ By depicting women under Japanese rule and subjugating them under the male gaze, they contribute (indirectly and unconsciously) to celebrating the legitimacy of overseas territorial occupation by the ruling imperial power, in which Japan hoped to occupy a place.

Similar effect was pursued in the tapestry *View of Rêhé* 熱河 (Figure 22) executed by Yamaga Seika 山鹿清華 (1885-1981) in 1937. A famous Nishijin 西陣 weaver and disciple of Kamisaka Sekka, Yamaga Seika had obtained a Grand Prix in the Parisian

19 西原大輔「近代日本絵画のアジア観」『日本研究』第二十六集 国際日本文化研究センター, 2004, pp. 185-220.

20 『児島虎次郎』展覧会カタログ, そごう美術館, ひろしま美術館他, 1999.

21 稲賀繁美「《他者》としての美術、美術の《他者》としての日本」, 『美術史と他者』(島本浣・加須屋誠編) 晃洋書房, 2000.



Fig. 22 Yamaga Seika, *View of Rêhé*, 1937. Tapestry. Art Museum, Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music.

Exposition universelle des arts décoratifs in 1925 and also awarded in the newly inaugurated fourth section for arts and crafts in the eighth Imperial Salon held in 1927. In his final years, he was elected member of the Academy of Fine Arts 日本芸術院 and awarded the Order of Cultural Merit 文化功労者. Though apparently benign and harmless for today's viewers, the motif of the tapestry was highly charged with political connotations of the epoch in which it was produced. Indeed the piece celebrated the puppet monarchy of Manchuguo 満洲国. The tapestry represents in the background a view of Chengde 承德—the location of the summer villa of the emperors of the Qing 清 dynasty and famous for its Lamaist temples. The official tour to Chengde was a must for famous Japanese painters, as is exemplified by Yasui Sōtarō's 安井曾太郎 (1885-1981) *Lamaist Temple in Chengde* (1938) executed in token of his cultural mission (Figure 23). The famous archaeologist and architecture historian Sekino Tadashi 関野貞 (1867-1935) did a survey (Figure 24) of the site and pleaded for the protection and restoration of this exceptional historical heritage shortly before his death; his proposal was not accepted due to lack of urgency under the strict budgetary constraints of the military economy. Instead, the site became object of a reportage film *Mysterious Region, Nekka* 秘境熱河 produced by the Manshū Movie Company 満洲映画社 in 1936.

It would not be superfluous to mention Yasui's painting of *A Lady in China Dress* (1934) together with his colleague Umehara Ryūzaburō's 梅原龍三郎 (1888-1986) *View of the Forbidden City in Peking* 紫禁城 (1940) (Figure 25), the latter executed



Fig. 23 Yasui Sōtarō, *Lamaist Temple in Chengde*, 1938. Oil on canvas. Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art.

from a room on the top floor of the Peking Hotel 北京飯店 in Beijing under Japan's military occupation. They have been regarded as the culminating masterpieces of Japanese oil paintings and are frequently and uncritically reproduced in Japanese (infamous) history texts published under the sanction of the Ministry of Education.²² It is a bitter irony that these “masterpieces” either implicitly depict or explicitly suggest Japan's invasion of China, although they carefully avoided direct representation of war. Both Yasui and Umehara were born in Kyoto, and were among the best disciples of Asai Chū in his final years in Kyoto. If it were not for the establishment of the Shōgoin Oil Painting Research Institute 聖護院洋画研究所, a small private classroom which Asai founded, both of these men probably would have ended up as merchants or craftsmen.

Depictions of women wearing the costume of the subjugated territory and pictorial renderings of the cultural heritage of the occupied land—such were constituent elements of the political unconscious of the artists who contributed to the glory and illustration of the hegemony of the Great Japanese Empire. For better or worse, the wartime paintings of these two artists represent the culminating point of the institutional maturity of oil painting as a social practice imported from the West and transplanted in Japanese society. However, Yamaga's tapestry no less ostensibly concurs with these two oil painters in its overt glorification of the Great Asian Prosperity Zone 大東亜共栄圏. The contrast between Yasui and Umehara, who were

22 『写真の系譜Ⅳ 絵画の成熟』（田中淳他編）東京国立近代美術館，1994. See Inaga Shigemi, “Use and Abuse of Images in Japanese History Textbook Controversy of 2000-2001,” in the proceedings of the Banff international symposium on *Historical Consciousness, Historiography, and Modern Japanese Values*, IRCJS, 2006.

both awarded the Order of Cultural Merit 文化勲章 in their final years, and Yamaga, whose distinction remained at a one rung lesser level of “cultural merit,” suggests that the Westernized social hierarchy of Fine Arts was established by then, with arts and crafts allocated to an inferior position.

4. Arts and Crafts Facing Modernism

Yamaga Seika's *Chengde* tapestry (Figure 22) depicts in its foreground a huge camel with its child. (One may ironically ask: which represents Japan and which Manchuria?) At first glance the camel motif looks like a harmless exotic element inspiring a nostalgic yearning and romantic aspiration to “the West” 西域 of Inland Eurasia. However, the above analysis should suffice to convince readers that the animal indispensable for transportation in the desert was full of political connotations, suggesting among others the vital life line of the Empire 帝国の生命線 which extended into Inner Mongolia and facing Outer Mongolia under the Soviet Union's influence.

To support this reading, one might invoke Fujishima Takeji's 藤島武二 (1867-1943) *Sunrise in the Mogolian Desert* (1937)—the sunrise connotes of course the glory of the Great Japan Empire; or a far more outspoken *Minamoto no Yoshitsune (Genghis Khan)* 源義経 (Figure 26) (1938), a huge folding screen of six panels (243 x 720 cm) by Kawabata Ryūshi 川端龍子 (1885-1966).²³ The fantastic identification of the Japanese tragic hero (1159-1189) with the founder of the world nomadic empire (1162-1227) was a legend stemming from the book on the *Deeds and Facts of the Kamakura Era* (*Kamakura-jikki* 鎌倉実記, 1717) and Koyabe Zen'ichirō's 小谷部全一郎 pseudo-

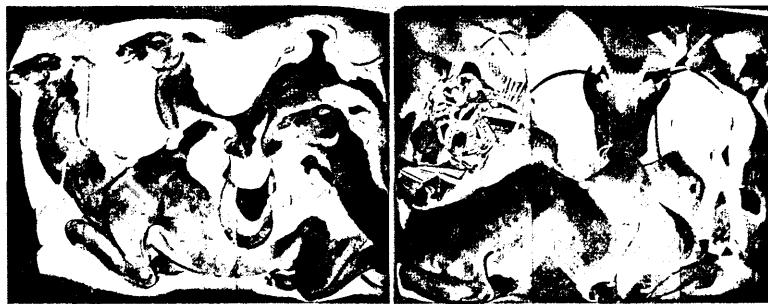


Fig. 26 Kawabata Ryūshi, *Minamoto no Yoshitsune or Genghis Khan*, 1938. Ryūshi Memorial Museum.

23 『川端龍子』展 滋賀県立近代美術館, 2006.

scientific book in Japanese, *Genghis Khan is Minamoto no Yoshitsune* 成吉思汗ハ源義経也 (1924) is known to have fuelled popular nationalistic imagination. Evidently Kawabata's choice of the Japanese samurai on camelback was intended to justify the fanatic expansionist dream of Japan's rule over the whole of Asia. Ryūshi is also known to be involved in the 'international' cultural mission of receiving and training young foreign students of painting from Manchuguo.

Given the circumstances, it would be difficult to deny the clear political background of military nationalism which was behind such Kyoto ceramic works with pretension of "sculpture" as "*Traveling over the Desert* (Figure 27-a) (1937) by Numata Ichiga 沼田一雅 (1873-1954) or Funatsu Hideharu 船津栄治 (1911-1984)(Figure 27-d). The animal motifs were convenient vehicles to transmit wartime ideology under the "emergent situation." Funatsu also executed an ornament of a *Cow with a Hump* (Figure 27-c), which undoubtedly alludes to the contemporary yearning for southern countries, as suggested by Yamaguchi Hōshun's 山口蓬春 painting of *Evening in a Southern Isle* (1940). In this context, Funatsu's *Fowl* (1934)(Figure 27-b) was by no means political-free but it did not fail to transmit to the contemporary public the

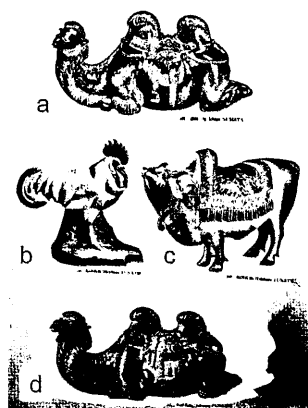


Fig. 27-a Numata Ichiga, *Traveling over the Desert*, 1937. Ornament. The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto

Fig. 27-b Funatsu Hideharu, *Fowl*, 1934. Ornament. Fukui Pottery Museum.

Fig. 27-c Funatsu Hideharu, *Cow with a Hump*, 1942. Ornament. Private collection.

Fig. 27-d Funatsu Hideharu, *Traveling over the Desert*, 1937. Ornament, Fukui Pottery Museum.

clear message that it allegorically symbolized the imperial family. An oil painting representing a fowl and donated to the French government by Kawamura Kiyoo 川村清雄 (1852-1934) in 1937, at the occasion of the Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques dans la Vie Moderne (Figure 28), testifies to this fact.²⁴

The relevance of such political reading becomes more evident when one compares products at the National Laboratory of Ceramic Ware 国立陶磁器試験場 made during the war period with those of the preceding period. Yagi Issō's 八木一艸 (1894-1973) *Celadon Incense Burner* (Figure 29-a) is equipped with a knob in the form of guardian lion-dog and *Incense Burner in Shape of Deer* (Figure 29-b)(both early Shōwa, ca. 1920s-30s) is modeled after the sacred, auspicious animal. Both of these pieces rely upon traditional motifs and were conceived as utensils. In *Covered Brazier, Brooding Crane* (1933)(Figure 30-b), the famous Kyōyaki 京焼 master, Kiyomizu Rokubei V 清水六兵衛 (1875-1951) searches for a harmony between the oval form for the practical purpose of warming hands and the realistic shape of a brooding crane rendered in a color contrast of black and white. His *Ornament, Peacocks, Sansai Type* (Figure 30-a) (1929), despite their purely ornamental character, nonetheless are significant in terms of technical achievement as they are experimental works reproducing the three-color glaze pottery of the Tang dynasty 陶三彩. It may be said that the 'ceramic sculptures' 陶彫 which Numata conceived could easily have served for ideological aims since they were deprived of practical usage.

The *Covered Brazier with Design of Autumn Grasses* (1940)(Figure 30-c), also by Kiyomizu Rokubei V, shows visible affinities with pottery by its vase-like shape. It seems that potter's dependence on the wheel (轆轤 *rokuro*) is often regarded as an exclusive criterion to distinguish pottery (relegated to a lesser position because of its practical concern) from works of Fine Arts (as defined by the Kantian notion of "disinterested-ness"). The presence of the wheel may have been interpreted as a sign of potter's subjugation to his/her own tools, which would disqualify him/her from being an autonomous artist. It appears as if the wheel were the major obstacle preventing him/her from emancipation and subordinating him/her to the rank of craftsmen. The *modus operandi par excellence*, the wheel is removed as a useless tool of fabrication,

24 Cf. *Cinquanteenaire de l'Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques dans la vie moderne à Paris en 1937*, Institut français d'architecture/Paris-Musées, 1987. Despite this retrospective overview in France, no detailed account on the Japanese participation in this exposition has been provided by recent critical studies in Japan.

once the work is accomplished as an *opus operatum*. As we shall see, this ambiguous position of the wheel as *parelgon*, suspended between the inside and the outside of a craft ware, marks the crucial cleavage between the realms of ‘arts and crafts’ and ‘Fine Arts’.

5. Cleavage between ‘Art and Crafts’ and the ‘Fine Arts’

Indeed, we may clearly observe the transitory phase from ‘arts and crafts’ to ‘Fine Arts’ when we think about the passage from Yagi Isso to his son, Yagi Kazuo 八木一夫 (1918-1979) in the transformation of ceramics.²⁵ Yagi Kazuo’s early ceramic sculptures in the footsteps of Numata Ichiga, such as *Cat* (1938) (Figure 31-a) or *Hare* (1935) (Figure 31-b) already show a remarkable *Kunstwollen* to plasticity. Yagi Kazuo’s deformation and accentuation as a late teenager make his pieces not easily reducible to stereotypical decorative ornaments and separates him from neighboring craftsmen (Figure 31-c,d,e). At the same time Yagi’s autonomous shaping makes it difficult to reduce them to simple conveyers of ideological messages, as were the cases of *Traveling over the Desert* or *Cow with a Hump* (Figure 27-a,d).

Needless to say, plastic autonomy does not necessarily guarantee the redemptive effect of acquitting the artist of suspicion of involvement in the political ideology of, say, the Japanese Empire’s military invasion in the continent or to the Southern sea. Though apparently *wert-frei*, the products of arts and crafts (such as ornaments of a camel or an Indian cow) could not always escape from the charge of wartime cooperation. To the contrary, it would also be a mistake to deny the artistic value of the *Chengde Tapestry* by Yamaga Seika because of its uncritical implication and voluntary involvement in wartime propaganda (In fact, Yamaga’s unconditional admiration for Chinese civilization remains intact in the postwar period).

In the inevitable mutual dependence between ideas and forms, let us investigate the possibilities reserved for arts and crafts in differentiation from the regime of pictorial representation and/or abstraction.

The pictorial motif depicted on the surface of the object does not fail to transmit messages which may be verbally articulated. Even Yagi Kazuo’s creation is not free from this condition. The *Pot with Sunflower Design* (Figure 32) done immediately

25 『八木一夫』 展覧会カタログ (松原龍一他編) 京都国立近代美術館ほか, 2004.

after the war (1947) ostensibly reveals inspiration from Vincent Van Gogh's sunflowers, endowed with a mysterious eye at the center. The will to creation manifests itself through Yagi's reference to the plant which symbolizes the Dutch painter (1853-1890), dubbed "man of fire" ("fire" implies a particular affinity with the ceramic work made in the kiln). And yet the strong lines engraved on the surface of the vase reveal a menacing will as though to break the vase itself by the incisive power of the drawing. Instead of searching for an anticipated harmony between pottery and painting, Yagi was already forecasting the possibility of a frontal collision of plasticity and painting in his work.

In this challenge to the conventional rules of ceramic ware, we may certainly read Yagi's feeling of rivalry toward Tomimoto Kenkichi 富本憲吉 (1886-1963), a representative classical ceramist-artist in Kyoto. While amateurish and nonchalant in his treatment of the wheel, Tomimoto was extremely strict when it comes to the painting of motifs on the ceramic ware, and Yagi remarked that Tomimoto's brush handling exhibited a kind of "physiological ecstasy." According to Yagi's subjective interpretation, Tomimoto did not see the ceramic surface as anything more than a replacement for white canvas. As a genuine potter ("chawanya" 茶碗屋 or bowl fabricator, as he used to say with some irony and pejorative self derision), Yagi could not bear to see Tomimoto behaving like a painter on ceramic ware.²⁶ For Yagi, the ceramic surface should not be reduced to a simple support (*toile du fond*) of drawing and painting, but the ceramic ware had to manifest its own ontological dimension at the risk of destroying itself in the conflict with incisive drawing. Yagi's challenge clearly implies the momentum of self-negation typical of modernist thinking.

Modernism in formal language aims at the purification of self-expression for the sake of autonomous aesthetic experience and tries to realize this aim by way of abstraction of what could be regarded as secondary functions. It rejects the idea of three-dimensional plastic work serving as a support for pictorial representation. Firstly, ceramic ware should no longer be regarded as the ground for painting (be it a figurative expressionistic painting by Van Gogh or abstract pictograms or signs of a Joan Miró or a Paul Klee). Secondly, it was no longer acceptable for ceramic ware to serve as material to model an external form (be it a camel, a cow, a dog, or a rabbit). Thirdly, modernism liquidates all dependence on practical functionality. The ceramic

26 八木一夫「富本さんのこと」(1974)『オブジェ焼き』講談社文芸文庫, 1999, pp. 61-70.

should not serve as a vase to contain liquid, or any kind of utensil for utilitarian purposes, be it for tea ceremony or for other aesthetics rituals). By definition, the self-imposed purpose of modernism consists in the self-realization of abstract concepts through the inherent nature of the mobilized material.

Bearing this theoretical framework in mind, we see that Yagi's *Spring Sea* (1947) (Figure 33) contains in it all the dilemmas and contradictions of ceramic ware struggling to become an autonomous work of Fine Art. Here, a flower bowl is rendered in the guise of a globefish, and in another version of the same series, Yagi depicts traditional motifs of flowers and butterflies on the swelling abdomen of the puffer. The conflict between the abstract round form made by the potter's wheel and the temptation to model the form into a realistic but caricature-like swellfish, or the confrontation between figurative plasticity and pictorial representations—such incompatible interests are forced to converge in this piece which defies classification.

People active in the domain of arts and crafts had actually been searching for modernism since the early 1920s. However, their formal imitation of the latest Western modern designs revealed their fundamental deviation from the spirit of modernism. In fact, it was theoretically self-contradictory to put a seemingly functional outlook of modernist attire on pieces of arts and crafts which were, by definition, deprived of autonomous function. Indeed, what would be the merit of fabricating machine-like shaped metal tubes as a flower vase, were it not for ostentatiously demonstrating the fabricator's wish to catch up with the latest industrial design? So long as arts and crafts have to contribute to practical purposes which remain alien to the inner logic of formal autonomy, any serious pursuit of modernism should logically result in the inevitable deviation from the very category of arts and crafts. In sum, “art and crafts” were incompatible with the autonomous propensity of modernism from the outset. Under these conditions, how could Yagi Kazuo become an “avant-garde ceramist” in the heart of the capital of “arts and crafts” ?

6. The Yoke of Modernism

How to liberate the wheel from the yoke of practical usage? This was one of the main concerns of Yagi Kazuo. *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* (1954, Figure 34) seems to have provided the ceramist with the answer. As a born ceramic ware craftsman, Yagi clings to the potter's wheel as if it were the key to his identity. Yet he had to deprive



Fig. 34 Yagi Kazuo, *The Walk of Mt. Samsa*, 1954. Private collection.

the wheel of its practical functionality so as to let the wheel run recklessly out of its ‘normal’ course. The wheel is now destined to work as a generator of autonomous plastic thinking. In order to realize this liberation of the wheel from practical purposes, Yagi cut the raw ceramic cylinder into round slices of circular bands in such a way that they are no longer capable of containing liquid. Then, contrary to the usual horizontal position of the wheel, Yagi arranges the circle vertically so that it can freely roll around like an imaginary caterpillar. To this monocycle the ceramist added, like parasites, multiple open holes which, again, no longer play any practical role. Though the holes derive from the open mouth of a vase which permits the display of flowers, or the chimney of an incense burner which funnels smoke away, the holes implanted on Yagi’s wheel-like piece of work refuse any rational explanation of their *raison-d’être* in utilitarian terms. Such was the absurd metamorphosis which Yagi whimsically named after Franz Kafka’s short story.

Yagi’s leap to “uselessness” (rather than Kantian “disinterestedness”) implies his rejection of the conventional usage of the wheel. Yagi remarks that in “sophisticated craftsmanship” (as he put it with his typical irony), “the wheel tends to search for a perfect harmony between the human hand and the clay material in such a way that their cooperation realizes a quasi-necessity as if the clay were treated as a water current which runs without any sense of resistance.”²⁷ While fully understanding the affinity between the material and the employed technique, Yagi refused to accept the typically artisan working ethic of reducing oneself in such a predestined perfection.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

Damages intentionally inflicted upon such a euphoric relationship with the material permit the creator to contemplate his/her own working condition. And this moment of contemplation seems to lead the author to the unprecedented venture into a new creation.

Yagi's choice does not consist of adhering to Western-style sculpture by giving up the specificity of the ceramic work. Instead, he insists upon the vacuum which the ceramic work contains in its heart. But at the same time, he deprives from this emptiness the fitness to its purposes (*Zweckmässigkeit*). In other words, Yagi's modernism consists in looking constantly into the creative fissure between the Western concept of sculpture and the Eastern practice of ceramic wares. It is in the forms which are deprived of functional rationality for practical use that Yagi inspires a new life. He searches for the latent possibilities in the emptiness of the vase which is already deprived of its usefulness.

In the following years, Yagi pursued one after another the problems which ceramic art faced in its struggle to cast off its old skin of "artisan work" so as to metamorphose itself into "modern sculpture." Each of his series of creations seems to bear the traces of birth trauma, as if each piece is recapitulating in its ontogenesis the whole process of phylogenies which modern art has witnessed in its encounter with the realm of arts and crafts. While refusing, on the one hand, to return to the euphoric state of unconsciousness in which the artisan work was slumbering, Yagi does not stop resisting, on the other hand, to create a kind of work which tries to establish plasticity via the will of the artist without taking into account the specificities of the utilized material.

A photo taken in 1954 shows Yagi carrying his *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* at the foot of the Gojōzaka slope 五条坂 in front of the Kiyomizu temple 清水寺 (Figure 35). A retreat via the mountain path would metaphorically signal an escape into the conventional world of arts and crafts; and descent to the downtown would announce the beginning of an unprecedented adventure. Are the arts and crafts predestined to yield to the temptation of materiality, or are they able to usurp the territory of Fine Art by transgressing the conventional boundary which has excluded them for long? Looking back the crossroads which Yagi passed half a century ago, I would like to conclude my retrospective overview and critical observation of the modernity of the Kyoto

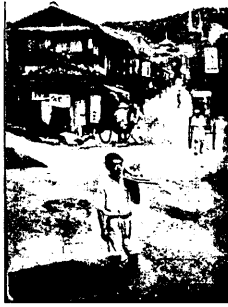


Fig.35 Photo of Yagi Kazuo carrying *The Walk of Mr. Samsa*. Mainichi Newspaper evening edition, September 5, 1954.

arts and crafts in the first half of the twentieth century.²⁸

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²⁸ For my detailed analysis of Yagi Kazuo, refer to the following papers. 稲賀繁美「古傷に宿る光－やきものと彫刻との亀裂に八木一夫を読む」『あいだ』109号, 2005, pp. 35-41. Inaga Shigemi, “Yagi Kazuo entre la tradition japonaise et l’avant-garde occidentale, ou la fissure entre la poterie et le sculpture,” communication faite dans la Troisième Colloque d’Études japonaises de l’Université Marc Bloch de Strasbourg : *La Rencontre du Japon et de l’Europe: Images d’une découverte*, le 8 déc. 2005 (texte inédit). An expanded version will be published as “Les Traces d’une blessure créatrice: Yagi Kazuo entre la tradition japonaise et l’avant-garde occidentale,” *Japan Review* 19 (2007).

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- (3) 葛飾北斎『北斎漫画』9編より《相撲》1814年〔稲賀 2001b〕
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