Modernized Differently: Avant-Garde Calligraphy and Art in Postwar Japan

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In January 1944, Shōjo kurabu (少女倶楽部) or Girls’ Club (fig 1), the most popular magazine for teenage girls in wartime Japan, published its New Year’s issue showing on its cover a girl in a sailor-school uniform. This girl had just finished making a kakizome (書き初め), the year’s first calligraphy, which expressed a resolution for the new year. A large writing brush in hand, she looks like an adolescent girl in her early teens. Despite the innocent expression on her face, she has clearly written the words Bei Ei gekimetsu (米英撃滅) or Annihilate America and Britain. The cover of the girls’ magazine shows us that during the war period, calligraphy functioned not just as a way of learning and practicing characters but, more seriously, as a means to transmit ideology to schoolchildren.

Did the situation change after the war? In January 1946, the 12-year-old crown prince Akihito (明仁), the current emperor, did his kakizome practice by writing heiwa kokka kensetsu (平和国家建設) or Construct a Nation of Peace, which was a popular slogan of the early postwar period (fig 2). Still using a key theme of wartime propaganda, construction, it turned into a rallying cry for the creation of a nation resting on democratic, antimilitaristic principles. Following Akihito’s practice, schoolchildren throughout the country wrote this slogan at the beginning of this year. Although the content of the message was ideologically opposite to what had come before, the way calligraphy functioned remained unchanged.

It did not take long for the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, hereafter GHQ/SCAP, to notice the ideological role calligraphy played in the Japanese education system. They suspended the teaching of Japanese history, geography, and

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1 It was painted by the popular illustrator Tada Hokuu 多田北烏. On the political role of the magazine during the war period, see Hasegawa Ushio 長谷川潮, Shōjo tachi eno puropaganda: Shōjo kurabu to Ajia taiheiyō sensō 少女たちへのプロパガンダ：『少女倶楽部』とアジア太平洋戦争 Propaganda for Girls: Girls’ Club and Asia-Pacific War (Tokyo: Nashi no ki sha 梨の木舎, 2012).
ethics in December 1945, and eliminated calligraphy from the elementary school curriculum in April 1947. The teaching of writing was limited to pen and pencil as part of the study of the national language. Only four years later were elementary schools permitted to teach calligraphy in the 4th to the 6th grades, at the discretion of the school.\(^3\) It was during this difficult period that Ueda Sōkyū (上田桑鳩), Morita Shiryū (森田子龍), Inoue Yūichi (井上有一), and others started to work actively on avant-garde calligraphy.

In this presentation, I will first discuss the social and political context of calligraphy in occupied Japan, which has often been neglected by the scholarship on postwar Japanese art. I will then examine how calligraphers conceived of the notion of tradition, comparing Ueda’s understanding with that of modernists such as Okamoto Tarō (岡本太郎) and Tange Kenzō (丹下健三). I will also argue that calligraphers’ interests were not limited to contemporary abstract painting, with which they have been often associated, but were so diverse as to include design, sculpture, and especially architecture. Lastly, I will examine their interdisciplinary interests in the intellectual context of the early postwar period in Japan.

Calligraphy was not the only form of traditional culture that was the target of criticism after the war. Kuwabara Takeo (桑原武夫), a scholar of French literature, harshly criticized contemporary haiku as a “second-class art (第二藝術),” arguing that contemporary haiku poets were evaluated not for their works but rather in terms of their social influence, such as the number of disciples a poet had and the circulation of their haiku magazines.\(^4\) Kuwabara also argued that the language of haiku, so old-fashioned that readers required explanations and commentaries, was not suited to express contemporary life. The resulting controversy


involved not only haiku poets but also practitioners of other forms of traditional culture including calligraphers.⁵

When calligraphy education was eliminated from the grade-school curriculum, leading calligraphers Onoe Saishū (尾上柴舟) and Bundō Shunkai (豊道春海), both members of the Japan Art Academy (日本芸術院), formed Shodō kyōiku shinkō kyōgikai (書道教育振興協議會), or the Association for the Promotion of Calligraphy Education, and made successful approaches to the Ministry of Education, the Diet, and GHQ/SCAP. We should be reminded that the activities of avant-garde calligraphers were not unrelated to these political activities. In the first issue of Sho no bi (書の美), Beauty of Calligraphy, Ueda wrote:

We should make use of calligraphy as an art movement, without which we should not talk about the revival of culture. […] Such a movement should be directed by the government, […] but the Ministry of Education overlooks calligraphy.⁶

これ書を芸術運動に活用しなくて文化進行を語ることは出来ないであろう。 […] かかる運動は、当然国家がやらなければならないこと […] である。しかし、文部省は、書を軽視している。

Ueda’s criticism is obviously addressed to the Ministry of Education’s elimination of calligraphy in grade-school curricula, a concern that Ueda surely shared with leading figures in the calligraphy world.

But avant-garde calligraphers such as Ueda soon parted ways with these conservative calligraphers. In 1948, Ueda participated for the first time in Nihon Bijutsu Tenrankai (日本美術展覧会) or the Japan Arts Exhibition, the largest annual art exhibition in Japan, which had begun as a government-sponsored art exhibition in 1907. Known by its abbreviation Nitten (日展), this exhibition began to accept calligraphic works for the first time in its more-

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than-forty-year history. In 1949, Ueda was selected to be one of the judges for the calligraphy section, but in 1951, his exhibition of *Ai* (愛) or Love (fig 3), the work that can read (品) *shina* or *hin*, meaning goods or elegance, became controversial because it cannot be read as *ai*. Later, Ueda recalled how he argued with Bundō about this work at that time. Bundō said to Ueda, “Your works are always illegible and therefore controversial, so write something classical and legible (君の作品は常に読めないので、問題になるから、古典的な読めるものにせよ).” Ueda replied, “I transform characters as a new form due to my creativity but I have never submitted any works that are not legible. Because this is an art exhibition, there is no problem for creative works that are not easy to read (創造性によって、新形式や読みにくく字を変形こそすれ、読めない作品は、一点も出した覚えはなく、創造的に書いたことは、藝術の展覧会に出品する以上読みにくいことは何の差支えもないのではありませんか).” Bundō refuted him: “Anyway, we cannot have that. Such works destroy tradition (とにかく困る、ああいったものは傳統を破壊するものである).”

Four years later, Ueda left the Japan Arts Exhibition.

What should be noticed here is that the difference between Ueda and Bundō lies not so much in the legibility of characters in calligraphy but rather in differing notions of tradition. In his review of the first Japan Arts Exhibition to include calligraphic works, Ueda explained what he thought about tradition. He wrote:

> We modern men should not stick to the forms of classics created by the ancients but base ourselves on their spirits and attitudes that created those forms to express our own feeling of life with the modern sensibility. [...] Classics express their own feeling.

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7 Mukai Akiko 向井晃子 argues that in this work Ueda denied the relation between the image and the legibility of the letter, which means that you cannot even decide how 品 should be read, *shina* or *hin*. See Mukai, “‘Sho no modanizumu’ no hōga: Ueda Sōkyū ni miru zen’eis sho’no modanizumu’の萌芽: 上田桑鳩に見る前衛書 The Rise of Modernism in Sho: A Case of Ueda Sōkyū in 20th-Century Avant-Garde Calligraphy in Japan,” *Kokusai bunka gaku* 国際文化學 Intercultural Studies Review, no. 27 (March 2014): 126. I would like to thank Mukai for reminding me of this point in her article.

of life. Therefore, we should also express our feeling of life. It will fit the spirit of tradition and is new.\(^9\)

吾々近代人は、古人が作り出した古典の型を守るのでなく、古典の型を作り出した古人の精神や態度に立脚して、近代感をもって、自己の生活感情を表現すればよいのである。 […] 古典は自己の生活感情を表現したのだ。だから、吾々も生活感情を表現すれば、傳統の精神に合致し、そして新しいのである。

Bundō argued that tradition should be preserved without change, whereas Ueda thought that we should not persist in duplicating the forms of traditional works but rather express something new in the spirit of the tradition. Ueda did not reject the tradition of calligraphy but rather tried to find a way to adapt it to the current situation.

Ueda’s attitude toward tradition could be compared with the discussions on the subject developed by two modernists, the painter Okamoto Tarō and the architect Tange Kenzō. These men began to appreciate tradition in the early 50s, when tradition was the target of harsh criticism among modernists. They were not reactionary; rather, they were advanced in the sense that they tried to move modernism forward by reinterpreting the notion of tradition.

Okamoto was known as a popular avant-garde painter after the war. But in 1952, he published an article on ancient Japanese pottery of the prehistoric period called Jōmon (縄文). According to Okamoto, Jōmon pottery has protruding, flamboyant, and even magical decoration, in which he found the vigorous movement of life. In his argument on the pottery, he discussed tradition as follows:

Tradition is never just the past. It belongs to the present. It is never unshakable or unchangeable. Rather, it always changes and is never the same even for a moment. Unless we grasp it dynamically, we cannot make use of it and develop it actively.\(^{10}\)

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\(^9\) Ueda, “Nitten dai 5 ka (sho) wo mite kanjita koto domo 日展第五科（書）を観て感じたことども Things I Felt When I Saw the Section 5 (Calligraphy) at Nitten,” Sho no bi, no. 9 (December 1948): 21.
For Okamoto, tradition is not what is handed down to us but what we stare back at from the present.

Tange’s idea of tradition is similar to Okamoto’s. Tange was one of the central figures in the tradition debate that occurred among architects in the mid-50s. This debate concerned whether and how tradition should be used in modern architecture. In his article published in 1956, he wrote:

> When we live with the realities of Japan and embark on creation with an advanced attitude with which to overcome them, we awaken to Japan’s tradition. […] Tradition is what exists inside and outside. When we say “overcoming tradition,” it should mean overcoming what is outside and also what is inside. It is to overcome the self.¹¹

Like Okamoto, Tange insisted that tradition should be used for new creation instead of the preservation of the past, and he regarded tradition subjectively, as being inside the self.

Tange also drew attention to Jōmon pottery and incorporated its elements into some of his buildings, such as Kurashiki City Hall (倉敷市庁舎), which Tange regarded as the

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¹⁰ Okamoto Tarō 岡本太郎, “Jōmon doki ron 縄文土器論 On Jōmon Pottery,” Mizue みづゑ Watercolor, no. 558 (February 1952): 4

expression of Jōmon tradition by concrete. For Tange, tradition is not what we preserve but the means for new creation in the present.

Compared with Okamoto and Tange, who were drawn to the dynamism of the Jōmon, Ueda’s imagination of the ancients’ “feeling of life” seems to be subtle. But these figures are linked in that they do not hesitate to reorganize tradition in today’s context. Ueda was in a more difficult situation than Okamoto and Tange, both of whom started as modernists in their careers. Ueda had studied Chinese and Japanese classical calligraphy and emphasized the importance of rinsho (臨書) or the practice of copying masterpieces, on which he even published a book. We cannot overemphasize Ueda’s endeavor to reinterpret tradition, which started a couple of years earlier than Okamoto’s and Tange’s efforts.

Another thing we should notice is that Ueda and his disciples were very active in looking at what was happening in other genres. There were a lot of discussions about the relationship between their avant-garde calligraphy and contemporary abstract paintings by Franz Kline, Alcopley, Pierre Soulages, and others. But it should be noted that the calligraphers’ interests were so diverse that Sho no bi and Bokubi (墨美), or Beauty of Ink, include many articles on sculpture, design, and especially architecture.

Readers of the August 1950 issue of Sho no bi must have been surprised when they opened it. On the first page there appears a photograph of a modern house (fig 4). It was Richard Neutra’s Kaufmann Desert House in Palm Springs, California. Built in 1946, this winter retreat was one of the most important mid-century Modernist houses in the United States. The text on the bottom of the page reads:

Please make a study of the calligraphic work that should be hung on the wall in the central front of this building.

14 Franz Kline’s Hoboken (1950) appeared on the cover of Bokubi 墨美 Beauty of Ink, no. 1 (June 1951); Pierre Soulages’s unidentified painting appeared on the cover of Bokubi, no. 26 (August 1955) and featured in Bokubi, no. 26 (August 1953): 18-26; Alcopley’s paintings were reprinted in Bokubi, no. 16 (September 1952): 11-25.
A contribution by every associate and every member will be appreciated (the deadline is September 20).\textsuperscript{15}

この建物の中央正面の壁に掲げるものとして書作品を試作して下さい。

全同人、全会員から募集します。（9月20日締切）

Ueda’s review of the contributed works was published three months later. In his comment on Morita Shiryū’s work (fig 5), which reads en (遠) or distance and sei (静) or tranquility over the horizontal line,\textsuperscript{16} Ueda wrote, “It would be common sense to try to make the work according to a horizontal line for such a building with smart horizontal lines, solid vertical lines, and the spaces made between them.”\textsuperscript{17} Ueda’s comment clearly shows that he considers it possible to make calligraphic works according to their environment where they are to be hung.

This photo was most likely reprinted from an article in the architecture magazine \textit{Kokusai Kenchiku} (國際建築) or International Architecture, published a month earlier (fig 6).\textsuperscript{18} Three years later, in \textit{Bokubi}, Hamaguci Ryūichi (濱口隆一), an architecture critic and historian, wrote an article introducing architecture magazines in Japan and abroad.\textsuperscript{19} But Ueda’s interest had come much earlier. Ueda became interested in contemporary architecture before he knew Franz Kline, Isamu Noguchi (野口勇), and other contemporary artists.

So, why were calligraphers interested in other genres of art? We should consider the popularity of the discussion about \textit{sōgō geijutsu} (総合藝術) in the late 40s and 50s. \textit{Sōgō geijutsu} or the work of total art is a notion advocated by critic Hanada Kiyoteru (花田清輝).

\textsuperscript{15}“Richádo Noitora sekkei, Kororado sabaku no ie リチャード・ノイトラ設計 コロラド砂漠の家 House in the Colorado Desert, designed by Richard Neutra,” \textit{Sho no bi}, no. 28 (August 1950): 1.
\textsuperscript{17}Ueda Sōkyū, “Kororado sabaku no ie no tame no sōsaku コロラド砂漠の家のための創作 Review of the Creation for the House in the Colorado Desert,” \textit{Sho no bi}, no. 31 (November 1950): 34.
based on Richard Wagner’s idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk. With sōgō geijutsu, Hanada pursued the possibility of transmedia works and of collaboration among different artistic modes including literature, fine art, music, theater, the movies, and others, so as to construct new types of art that can address society in a critical way.

What is interesting here is that Uno Sesson (宇野雪村), calligrapher and Ueda’s foremost disciple, mentions sōgō geijutsu in his article in November 1948:

Calligraphy is simply established for the pure appreciation of line art but […] it is also established as the work of total art [sōgō geijutsu] with literature, as the movie is established as the integration of theater, music, painting and others, and dance is established as the synthesis of music and forms. […] Calligraphy should be explored as commercial art and advertising art in the areas of movie subtitles, signboards, placards, and elsewhere […].

What the scholarship on Japanese calligraphy has neglected is those kinds of interdisciplinary interests that calligraphers surely showed in their magazines Sho no bi and Bokubi. It is true that they felt a strong affinity for American and European abstract paintings, but we should also pay attention to their overt interests in other genres of art, including sculpture (fig 7), design (fig 8), and architecture.

Some scholars have regarded Japanese avant-garde calligraphers as being “modernist,” by recognizing the independence of calligraphy and their interest in the medium in their painterly activities. But as we have discussed, their interest looked to collaboration

20 On Hanada’s sōgō geijutsu, see Ken Yoshida, “The Undulating Contours of sōgō geijutsu (Total Work of Art), or Hanada Kiyoteru’s Thoughts on Transmedia in Postwar Japan,” Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 13, no. 1 (2012): 36–54.


22 Amano Kazuo 天野一夫, “Sho no modanizumu, Gensetsu to sakuhin: Zaishi Sho no bi no ichi to igi 書のモダニズム・言説と作品：雑誌「書の美」の位置と意義 Modernism in sho, Arguments and Works: The
and intermedia, which was quite opposite to the reduction and the medium-specificity advocated by Clement Greenberg.\textsuperscript{23}

It is true that avant-garde calligraphers modernized Japanese calligraphy in some way, but we should think about a different type of modernism from the American version when we discuss the issue of calligraphy in Japan. The modernism conceived by Japanese calligraphers included the process of negotiating different genres and media. Probably it affected not only calligraphers but also other sorts of practitioners—including artists, designers, and architects. This makes the history of postwar Japanese art slightly difficult to grasp but at the same time tells us about the possibility of different frameworks in which to understand postwar art history.

Place and Significance of Journal Sho no bi,” in Fukkoku ban Sho no bi, Bessatsu kaisetsu 復刻版 書の美 別冊解説 Facsimile Edition of Sho no bi, Separate-volume Guide (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai 國書刊行會, 2013), 41–81; Mukai, “‘Sho no modanizumu’ no hôga.” In an e-mail message to the author, Mukai insists that she is working on a different type of “modernism” than the American one. Mukai, e-mail message to the author, July 8, 2014.

\textsuperscript{23} This is rather a reductive view of Greenberg’s diverse discussions on modernism, which I discussed in “Color Field Painting in the Cultural Context of America” (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2014).