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**“Writing a Picture”:
Adolph Gottlieb’s *Rolling* and Yoshihara Jiro’s *Red Circle on Black***

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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B.A., Virginia Commonwealth University, 1995

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May 2001

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge several people without whom this thesis would have been very difficult. I would like to thank my mother and father, Cheryl, Kim, and Nathan for their unwavering love and support, no matter where in the world I may have been. I would like to thank my friends abroad, Siobhan, Alice, Eleanor, and Ollie, for their insights and understanding. At home, I thank Kalpana, Billie, Leanne, Jen, Renee, and many other friends for their encouragement. Professionally, I would like to acknowledge Laura Lu and Lawrence Pryor for providing translations. I thank Larry Yoshihara for his personal interest, hospitality and contribution to my project. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Freddie Jacobs and Dr. Rosemary Smith for their guidance and that little extra “push.” As they say in Japan, “*Domo arigato gozaimasu.*”

Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 History of Calligraphy	5
Chapter 2 Abstract Expressionism and Adolph Gottlieb	24
Chapter 3 Gutai and Yoshihara Jiro	44
Chapter 4 Conclusion: A Word and Image Comparison	64
Bibliography	76
Appendix A	82
Appendix B	84
Appendix C	86
Vita	88

Abstract

“WRITING A PICTURE”: ADOLPH GOTTLIEB’S *ROLLING*
AND YOSHIHARA JIRO’S *RED CIRCLE ON BLACK*

Ginger Suzanne Russell, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2001

Major Director: Dr. Fredrika Jacobs, Associate Professor, Department of Art History

Calligraphy and calligraphic elements in abstract art demonstrate the differences between Japanese and American approaches to abstraction. An examination of the use of calligraphy in Japanese art can reveal how its historic tradition in Japan lends depth and meaning to an image, which is not effectively possible for American artists using the same forms. These differences descend from a Japanese writing system that developed as abstracted images in themselves. Though the Western tradition of Abstract Expressionism art sought to make the experience of painting purely visual without the aid of narrative, explanation, or text, both American and Japanese artists used

calligraphic forms. In a word and image analysis, this thesis demonstrates how these calligraphic forms can reveal layers of meaning within their appropriate cultural context. Reconciling calligraphy with abstract art presents the conflict of East meeting West in a new form.

Introduction

In “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” Clement Greenberg advocated a “pure art,” a “sensuous” art, guided by feelings and unhindered by literary or linguistic content.¹ Along these lines, artists such as Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock explored color-field abstraction, action painting, gesture painting and more. During the 1960’s, Abstract Expressionism was affected by the impress of Zen philosophy and consequently the introduction of Japanese calligraphy. Artists such as Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, and Adolph Gottlieb flourished with appropriated calligraphic elements that lent an air of Zen mysticism to their images while remaining faithful to the Abstract Expressionist principle that significance resides in the process. Critics used the term “calligraphic” to invoke that same Zen mysticism and recall the practices of Zen Buddhist calligraphers. Surprisingly, few realized the paradox created by the melding of calligraphy with Greenberg’s supposition of a “pure art.”

Furthermore, Abstract Expressionism proliferated in Japan in the post-World War II atmosphere. Reestablishing a national identity in the international art world went hand-in-hand with Japan’s efforts to rebuild. Contemporary art in Japan sought to fuse native traditions, such as calligraphy, with popular modern art. Artists such as Morita

¹ Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1, ed. John O’Brian, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 23-38.

Shiryu, Yoshihara Jiro and the Gutai group experimented with this fusion.² Their publications, *Bokubi* and *Gutai*, included contributions from Western artists and were distributed worldwide, facilitating Japanese and American influences on each other.³ Like the Americans, Japanese artists saw the inherent modernism of Zen calligraphy and incorporated it into their art. As signs, calligraphic characters and gestural elements in American and Japanese Abstract Expressionist art invoke the linguistic and literary functions that Greenberg refutes, more so in Japanese art, in which calligraphy and calligraphic forms are clearly viewed as signs. If Abstract Expressionism chose non-linguistic qualities as its content and subject, the act of writing calligraphy and all that it signified, in Abstract Expressionist works, contradicted that choice, creating a conceptual paradox. This thesis will examine that paradox.

Outline

The first part of this thesis reviews the history of calligraphy in Japan. It also examines the influence of Zen Buddhism on the development of calligraphy. It concludes with a synopsis of modern calligraphy's role in the current Japanese art scene.

The second part considers the influence of Japanese calligraphy and Zen Buddhism on interpretations of American Abstract Expressionist painters, specifically

² Japanese names in this text are written in traditional Japanese fashion, family name first.

³ In his article, "*Yoshihara Jiro toh Sho*" (Yoshihara Jiro and Calligraphy), Osaki Shinichiro footnotes that Tapié had contributed to Yoshihara's publication, *Gutai* and recalls a story about issues of *Gutai* being found in Pollock's studio after his death. He also mentions that Morita's publication *Bokubi* had been discussed in written communication between Kline and Alcopley. Osaki Shinichiro, "*Yoshihara Jiro toh Sho*" (Yoshihara Jiro and Calligraphy), *Yoshihara Jiro-ten, (Jiro Yoshihara)*, catalogue of exhibition, ed. Osaki Shinichiro, (Ashiya: Ashiya City Museum of Art & History, 1992), note 7.

Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974). It examines critics who purport to recognize “calligraphic” influences when discussing the work of Abstract Expressionist painters such as Gottlieb. This examination includes the Greenbergian discourse on the nature of Abstract Expressionism. According to Greenberg, Abstract Expressionism avoids literal translation; therefore, any “calligraphic” content should have been appropriated by Abstract Expressionist artists without the implications of literature.

To continue this Greenbergian discourse, an investigation is made of the Japanese painter, Yoshihara Jiro (1905-1972). This comprises an examination of the influence of Japanese calligraphy and Zen Buddhism on Yoshihara, as well as his reception by critics. A comparison of Gottlieb and Yoshihara follows. Their similarities include their stylistic development and their relationship to the principles of modern art in the West. Their differences can be illustrated by a “word and image” analysis of Yoshihara’s painting, *Red Circle on Black*, 1965, and Gottlieb’s *Rolling*, 1961. This analysis reveals intrinsic and irremovable cultural signs in the calligraphic forms of Yoshihara’s painting. In a post-modern display, these signs could not be appropriated trans-culturally or connote the same meaning in a different context. These signs contradict Greenberg’s discourse and represent a significant difference between Yoshihara and Gottlieb and hence Japanese and American artists.

This thesis delves into this conflict and discusses its repercussions, such as the revelation of the predominance of Western critical thought. Critics could relegate the Western appropriation of Japanese signs to formal “calligraphic” elements and still, though paradoxically, remain within the parameters of Greenberg’s theoretical principles.

However, when Western critics, such as Alexandra Munroe and Arthur C. Danto examine Japanese modern art, this predominance still prevails, restricting interpretations to suit Western discourses. Can we assume that Japanese artists and, more importantly, viewers are also formalizing and de-signifying their own signs? How can we be sure that Japanese artists are not merely appropriating the style of Abstract Expressionism, without its theory? In attempting to answer these questions, I will build on my earlier study “Calligraphy as Image in Japanese Abstract Art.”⁴

While a resolution to this contradiction is not foreseeable, I hope to prove that we can no longer rely on constrictive Western theories for our analyses of modern art, particularly of other cultures. Both Japanese and American artists rely on appropriation of forms, styles and signs to such an extent that the history and cultural connotations of these forms, styles and signs cannot be ignored in any interpretation. Critics and artists can allow for a more post-modern understanding of art, specifically where trans-cultural appropriation is concerned.

⁴ Ginger Russell, “Calligraphy as Image in Japanese Abstract Art,” *ATHANOR* 17 (1999): 69-75.

Chapter 1 History of Calligraphy

Development of the Native Japanese Syllabary

Prior to the Heian period, 794 to 1185 AD, Japan did not have a written text for literary or poetic use; they depended purely on the oral tradition in their native language. Chinese language had been introduced in the 5th and 6th centuries and it was used by the aristocratic elite for governmental and religious documents. Early examples of calligraphy found in Japan came from the 6th century in the form of Buddhist sutras, or sacred writing, copied and re-copied to be disseminated throughout the country. The ideographic and pictographic Chinese system had itself developed for centuries as abstractions of images and forms in nature, representing concepts and words but not phonemes. There are over 40,000 Chinese characters today and only 500 retain elements of their original figurative form. (See Appendix A for more examples.)

Due to the differences in the spoken language of each country, Japanese writers began to develop an indigenous text in their artistic endeavors. In the 8th century, the *Manyoshu*, the oldest anthology of poems in Japan, was written with *kanji* used only to denote a sound. The use of *kanji* for sounds came to be known as *Manyogana*, or the *Manyoshu kana*. By the 9th century, the *Manyogana* had developed into *hiragana*,

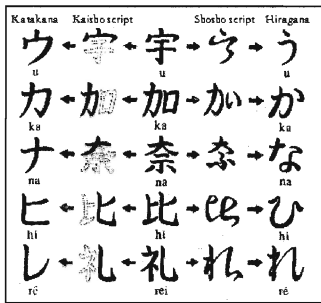


Figure 1. Diagram from Aoki, Illustrated Japanese Characters (Tokyo, Japan; Japan Travel Bureau, 1999), 19. See also Appendix A.

written forms simplified from the grass script forms of *kanji*, and *katakana*, derived from the *kanji kaisho* standard script (figure 1).

This abbreviation of characters led to a mixture of *kanji* and *kana* in text, using Chinese characters to condense concepts and *kana* to accommodate the grammatical structure of the Japanese spoken language. Japanese text combined the *on-yomi*, a phonetic *kana* system that correlated

sounds with characters, and *kun-yomi*, which was the ideographic system that correlated concepts with characters. The *Genji Monogatari*, or Tale of Genji, written in the late 10th century, was Japan's first and most famous novel, and one of the first examples of this combination of text. *On-yomi* included numerous variations of characters that stood for the same sound but in the 9th and 10th century, it declined to an average of four, in effect, simplifying and standardizing Japanese text.⁵ The Japanese text advanced through its use by the centralized Japanese government, conducted in the native tongue, and in diplomacy with other countries. Bunpei Tamiya noted that “there are no other examples of a simplification of *kanji* and the formation of a sound-based syllabary as seen in the Japanese *kana* systems.”⁶

⁵ Andrew Pekarik, “Japanese Calligraphy and Self-Expression,” *Apollo* 121 no. 276 (Feb 1985): 85.

⁶ Bunpei Tamiya, “The Characteristics of Japanese Calligraphy,” *Sho-Contemporary Calligraphy: The Mainichi Jubilee Exhibition in Stockholm*, trans. Martha McClintock and Tom Gally (Tokyo, Japan: Mainichi Shimbun, 1993), 4.

The indigenous Japanese system was perfected during the Heian period by the courtiers for the purpose of literature and poetry. Between 850 and 950 A.D., the *kana* had developed into what was called *onnade*, or women's hand. Because women were not expected to learn the difficult and elitist Chinese written language, they relied on *onnade*. This cursive script became the adopted form of writing for any informal correspondences, particularly between men and women, and for contemporary Japanese poetry. With this new writing system, poetic and literary styles developed along with a new aesthetic in calligraphy during the Heian period.

In correspondence between men and women of the Japanese court, or more specifically, love letters, the visual appearance of the writing came to be understood as an indication of the writer's personality. Since men and women at court were segregated, they inferred all manner of personality traits from the handwriting alone. Content and form merged for the purpose of revealing personal character. In Tale of Genji, Prince Genji concludes the beauty of a woman that he has never seen, based on the beauty of her calligraphy. "His heart leaped [*sic*] (most blasphemously) at the thought of a beauty of feature that would doubtless have outstripped the beauty of her handwriting."⁷ The Heian Court, in which Tale of Genji is set, was the epitome of courtly elegance and the height of Japan's native calligraphy.

As a literary form, calligraphy was always more dependent on its visual effect than on maintaining any standardized presentation. The text was not the only formal

⁷ Edward Seidensticker, trans., The Tale of Genji, 1978, p. 200 quoted in Pekarik, "Japanese Calligraphy," 86.

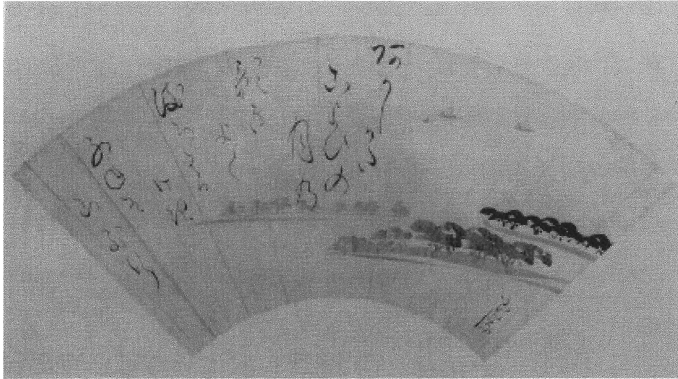


Figure 2. Ike Gyokuran (1728-1784), *Akashi Bay*, ink on mica-covered paper, 17.3 x 44.8 cm, as reproduced in Addiss, *How To Look At Japanese Art* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), figure 35.

element considered. Artists often employed rich backgrounds and graphics, emphasizing the writing as a visual element in an arranged composition and a more creative use of media such as decorative paper and colored ink. Calligraphy incorporated a variety of decorations, such as seals and painting, or could be used in decorative arts such as ceramics, textiles and fans (figure 2). There was also a careful adherence to the tools of calligraphy, called “the four treasures:” *fude* (the brush), *sumi* (ink), *kami* (paper), and *suzuri* (the inkstone).⁸ More than just a convenient form for their language, though, their writing system took on the personality of their native poetry and literature, striving to underscore the meaning of the writing with the forms of the characters. According to Andrew Pekarik, the indigenous phonetic syllabary seemed to facilitate better personal expression than Chinese script.⁹

⁸ Cecil H. Uyehara, “The Rite of Japanese Calligraphy and the Modern Age,” *Oriental Art*, New Series 33 no. 2 (Summer 1987): 175.

⁹ Pekarik, 85.

By the end of the Heian period, there were two established traditions in Japanese calligraphy: Chinese writing, considered prestigious and educated, and the native *kana*, used for native and informal leisurely writing. While official and religious documents sought regulated Chinese text, the calligraphy of those documents retained a visual aesthetic. Calligraphy was the only method of writing in use and its association with painting through tradition and media was unavoidably invoked in every document.

Zen Buddhist Calligraphy

In the 12th century, power shifted to the military class and courtly styles declined. The Kamakura era (1185-1333) saw the beginning of a military culture. The emergence of a shogunate government supported a feudal society dependent on samurai and warlords. This military predominance would last until the reinstatement of the imperial family in 1868. During this time, Buddhism flourished, especially Zen Buddhism. It was a religion particularly suited to the lifestyle of a warrior. For example, its tenet of perfecting form is the foundation of martial arts. The philosophy that everyday activities, such as making tea, held beauty and enlightenment could be appealing to a soldier who might not live to see any great reward. And the idea of removing the emotional self from painful, earthly bonds could aid a soldier when facing any battle. Zen Buddhism teaches that any activity, whether making tea or writing calligraphy, when undertaken and practiced for the purpose of perfecting form can become a “total discipline for developing mind and character,” a “way” as translated from Japanese.¹⁰ Pekarik described, “The

¹⁰ Ibid, 87.

ultimate way, the model for all the others, is the Buddhist one, through which the believer learns both to suppress and understand the self.” This “way” becomes a means of perfecting not only the form of the activity but personal character and thought. Hence an activity is appreciated for its beauty, its place in the moment and time, its relationship to its environment and the practitioner, and its possibilities for providing enlightenment. A person following the “way” comes to understand the activity as a metaphor for himself.

The “way” of calligraphy, or *shodo*, exemplifies this idea. The writer understands that not only does the content reveal his character, but so too does the way in which it was written, its formal characteristics. Every part of the act must be invested with feeling. The final product will have a trace of the writer. Calligraphy was meant to be a record of a calligrapher’s Zen Buddhist awareness of himself.

According to Cecil H. Uyehara, because calligraphy had a history as a religious tool, it gained a connotation of mysticism and divinity in Japan. The 6th century Buddhist sutras and the popularity of Zen Buddhist calligraphy in the Kamakura and the following Muromachi (1392-1568) periods reinforced this religious connotation. Though subjects ranged from personal *waka* (5-line poems) to excerpts from sutras, names, or simple characters, the spirit behind the content represented Zen philosophy. Indubitably intertwined with religion, calligraphy in Japan today is still regarded “as a source of spiritual training and discipline.”¹¹ This connection with religion could be one of the factors for the evolution of calligraphy into *shodo*, although Uyehara felt it is better translated as “the rite of calligraphy.”

¹¹ Uyehara, 174, 175.

Modern Calligraphy

Though Japan started to modernize, or rather Westernize, during the Meiji Restoration (1868), calligraphy was stagnated by standardization. The government adopted an austere style of calligraphy to be taught in schools and used for all official documents. This adoption was meant to distinguish the new government from the previous shogunate. The government hoped that this style would instill a new nationalism as well as facilitate literacy. Even though a trend in renewing Chinese classics revitalized calligraphy, it was losing legitimacy as an art form as Japan faced modernization/Westernization. The Meiji Restoration encouraged an onslaught of Western texts and models that influenced all aspects of Japanese society, especially the educational system. Calligraphy lost its place in the Westernized curriculum, having no Western counterpart. Furthermore, associations with the imperial family and the ousted shogunate as well as a devotion to studying and copying ancient texts and masters were a detriment to modernizing calligraphy.

In fact, its inclusion as an art in an 1882 Tokyo exposition was challenged by a contemporary Western-style painter, Kosaka Shotaro, in a series of articles entitled, “Is Calligraphy Art?” printed in an academic journal in 1883.¹² This sparked a long debate, and demonstrated calligraphy’s decline. Westernization and other tools of modernization such as the pencil, pen, cheaper paper, even the typewriter, as well as the general quickening atmosphere of the modern world eliminated calligraphy as a practical art, and

¹² Ibid, 177. The journal was the *Toyo Gakugei Zasshi*, no. 8-10, 1883.

elevated it to a specialized fine art. Calligraphy journals, exhibitions, and professional calligraphers in the 1920's were evidence of this specialization. The independence and cohesion of professional calligraphers before World War II prepared them for the jump to avant-garde calligraphy after the war.

Japan's defeat in World War II was a catalyst for expansive new thinking. Traditional values and ideas were questioned and the total upheaval of their society gave license to experiment. After 1945, calligraphy enjoyed a postwar revival that revolutionized styles. It retained its Japanese cultural heritage while incorporating the international trend of modernism and abstraction. Major exhibitions and competitions began to accept calligraphy and soon expanded their categories to include "avant-garde calligraphy." The proliferation of calligraphy as an exhibition art changed it from *yomusho*, "an art-for-individual-reading," to *mirusho*, "an art-for-viewing."¹³ *Mirusho* and the avant-garde tendency for abstraction focused the calligraphy on form rather than literature. Single *kanji* (Chinese characters) became popular as well as the extremely cursive *kana*, *onnade*. Avant-garde calligraphers suggested "'dissembling and assembling' of the classics into new forms and shapes (*zokei*)." There was not even a necessary faithfulness to script.

Uyehara reworked the debate about calligraphy, questioning "Is avant-garde work calligraphy?"¹⁴ He explained how calligraphy had grown to include so many aberrations that classification is uneasy. However, he acknowledged that avant-garde calligraphy

¹³ Ibid, 180, 181.

¹⁴ Ibid, 182.

was essential in gaining international recognition for Japan's art. Because of the Western interest in Zen philosophy in the 1950's and 60's, calligraphy found a new audience. A few exhibitions were held throughout the U.S. including one at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1954.

Modern Japan still has a strong tradition of calligraphy. Traditional calligraphy is a compulsory part of the curriculum of schools, starting in elementary school and continuing until high school. Emphasis is placed on the execution of characters, translating intention to the medium and reverence as a traditional art form.¹⁵ Annual exhibitions of Chinese style, Japanese style, avant-garde and literary styles attest to the prevalence of this form in art. Local and national exhibitions draw large audiences. At any exhibition, viewers can be seen contemplating a particular piece, fingers moving over mental *kami* to ascertain the form of the *kanji* or *kana*.¹⁶ Like any traditional art, calligraphy is interpreted and collected, causing its extensive presence in everyday life as a popular art.

Critical Interpretation of Calligraphy

Pekarik explained, "One of the distinguishing features of Japanese culture is that skills, which in other cultures are peripheral, have become the focus of such intense development and concentration that they constitute a life's work and the measure of an

¹⁵ I would like to thank Mr. Hasumi at Motobuto Junior High School for allowing me to observe his class in calligraphy and translating his lessons to me.

¹⁶ I would like to acknowledge Alice Parsons and Siobhan Young for their explanations and insights when accompanying me to exhibitions.

individual's humanity."¹⁷ A calligrapher dedicated his life to the practice. Zen monks, in particular, made no distinction between their calligraphy and simple handwriting. Eventually calligraphy became a hereditary profession. It was viewed less as a personal talent or hobby and more as a right of inheritance, which included trade secrets and training. Modern calligraphers however are breaking the hereditary mold.

Pekarik claimed that throughout Japan's history, "truly artistic writing ... was considered to be the expression of a writer's complete personality."¹⁸ Calligraphy's



Figure 3. Left, Ikkyu Sojun, ink on paper, 130.8 x 35.6 cm. Right, Obaku Ingen, ink on paper, 106 x 28.9 cm. As reproduced in Addiss, How To Look, figure 39 and 40.

aesthetic was not a formal product, but rather "an art involving the creativity, imagination, and spirit of the individual." The form of the calligraphy reiterated the idea that was written and the individuality of the writer and, often, the same text written in different styles could convey different moods and different ideas. Stephen Addiss provided an example that illustrates differences in the personalities of the writers and reception of their work (figure 3). The two writings compose practically the same text: on the left, "First Patriarch Bodaidaruma Great Teacher," by Ikkyu Sojun (1394-1481) and on the right "First Patriarch Daruma Great Teacher," by Obaku Ingen

¹⁷ Pekarik, "Japanese Calligraphy," 84.

¹⁸ Ibid, 85.

(1592-1673). According to Addiss, the difference in style suggests that the first is proud and exclamatory, celebrating the religious leader, while the second seems more like an invocation of the teacher or a chant.¹⁹ In addition, variations in spacing, symmetry, size, thickness of line, heaviness of ink, materials, seals, as well as choice of script style all determine the communicated meaning. Both Chinese and Japanese artists have viewed the tradition of calligraphy as expressionistic and personal. The expressive individuality of the writer is highly prized, as evidenced by connoisseurship and collectors. The process of investing one's self in the production of the work meant the direct transference of one's personality, thought, and spirit to the art. It was felt that the painting would have a direct communicative relationship with the viewer by expressing the artist's individuality and beliefs. In this sense, calligraphy developed with poetry as a personal expression and as a unique Zen exercise.

Yusho Ojio was a calligraphy master in 17th century Japan. His book, *Hitsudo Hiden Sho* (The Secrets of Calligraphy) is considered to be a classic and was written to answer a student's questions regarding seventy-seven different issues. Ueda Makoto, in his book *Literary and Art Theories in Japan*, interpreted the treatise and revealed Yusho's rather modern thinking.²⁰ It is an excellent example of early methods for critical interpretation in calligraphy. Yusho not only provided rules for beginning and advanced students but also explained how a calligrapher's work will be viewed and interpreted. He

¹⁹ Stephen Addiss, *How to Look at Japanese Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 82-83.

²⁰ Ueda Makoto, "Yūshō on the Art of Calligraphy," *Literary and Art Theories in Japan* (Cleveland, OH: The Press of Western Reserve University, 1967), 173-185.

introduced criteria for “good” and “bad” calligraphy and advocated pursuing moral refinement in *shodo*.

Ueda summarized Yusho’s definition of calligraphy as a “complex art, synthesizing the functions of representative and expressive art, time and space art, pictorial and verbal art.”²¹ “Representative art” refers to Yusho’s idea that contemporary characters were derivations of Chinese ideograms, which in turn were forms derived from nature, a series of imitations. According to Yusho, if poorly done, this imitation became too far removed from its original intent. Hence, the beginning student had to learn the fundamentals of: the ideogram, including the meaning, the form, and stroke order; of calligraphy, such as line, space, balance, rhythm, and momentum; and of the materials, ink, brush, paper, and inkstone. Without these fundamentals, “an imitation of another artist’s work, no matter how skillfully it may be done, turns out to be devoid of life and spirit.”²² The advanced student, however, had to transcend the fundamentals, without losing sight of them. Yusho advocated personifying the characters, bringing about a “pictorial” and “expressive art” by idealizing the *kanji* into perfect human figurations. This reinforced the idea of the “life and spirit” of a character. The advanced student was endowing this “life” and, yet, avoiding a regression back to the original forms in nature.

Yusho’s illustration of calligraphy as a “time art” implicitly involved the viewer. Speed, rhythm, and momentum become expressive attributes of a work of calligraphy and visually apparent. Each of these attributes reveal not only the artist’s personality and

²¹ Ibid, 174.

²² Ibid, 176.

feeling at the time of creation, but also impress upon the viewer the length of time involved. Yusho acknowledged that the “experienced onlooker would be able to follow calligraphic lines with all their different speeds, thus reproducing in his mind the rhythm with which they were originally drawn.”²³ The consideration of a work’s time can reveal “righteousness, loveliness, force, abundance, virtuosity, sincerity” among other qualities.

Ueda readily applied the term “abstract” to Yusho’s description of the evolution of Chinese ideograms. He also allowed that pictographs have not only been abstracted into contemporary characters, but insisted that these characters too are abstracted further for the purpose of writing “good” calligraphy in modern times.

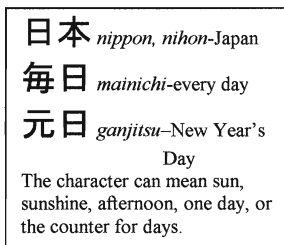
Tommer Peterson, a graphic designer, studied with a Japanese calligrapher for the purpose of applying the principles of Zen calligraphy to his work. He stated that the format of calligraphy emphasizes visual aesthetic to the point where words do not have to have a linear order or any order at all and can even be “left out in the execution of a text.”²⁴ He explained that the Japanese written language contains qualities that are startlingly different from Roman text; there are no spaces separating words, no capital letters, and no adherence to horizontal script. Instead of horizontal guide-lines to be written on, left to right, a single Japanese character is written within an assumed square, hence sentences can be written either vertically or horizontally, left or right. Furthermore, the use of punctuation is not as steadfast as it is in the West. These qualities illustrate the mutability of the written language in Japan. According to Peterson,

²³ Ibid, 181.

²⁴ Tommer Peterson, “Words. Meaning. West. East.” *Print: America’s Graphic Design Magazine* 46 no. 3 (May/June 1992): 89.

this aided him as a design tool. It allowed him to free his thinking from the visual restrictions of Western (Roman) text.

The written form takes precedence over a character's phonetic equivalent in the determination of meaning, and sometimes pronunciation. *Kanji* can be polysemic, i.e. one character can have several meanings and pronunciations. For example, the character 日 can be pronounced *ni*, *nichi*, *hi*, and *jitsu* depending on the context. (See figure 4.) This polysemy has led to innovative and content-rich calligraphy throughout its history. Furthermore, *kanji* has a large number of homonyms and these are used freely by calligraphers.²⁵



A good example is *kaku*, meaning to draw or to write.

While it sounds the same, it is written as two different characters, 画 (to draw) and 書 (to write). This is a character's graphology and necessary when learning to read and write Japanese. In this case, *kaku* could be used to say, "writing a picture."²⁶ (For more examples of graphology, see Appendix B.)

Zen calligraphy employs even more basic forms in some of its exercises. This practice is called *hitsuzendo*. *Hitsuzendo* is the drawing of circles (*enso*) or lines/staffs (*mujibo*). "After a period of meditation, a single circle is painted, as the painter attempts

²⁵ These homonyms are one reason that China's spoken languages are so tonal, to differentiate similar sounding words.

²⁶ Kay Morrissey Thompson, *The Art and Technique of Sumi-e: Japanese Ink-Painting as Taught by Ukai Uchiyama* (Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1994), 10.

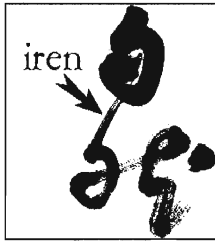


Figure 5. Tommer Peterson, 自然 *Shizen* (Nature), ink on paper, *shosho* style, 1990, as reproduced in Peterson, *Print*, 46 no. 3: fig. 3.

to focus the entirety of his or her being, holding nothing back, into the rendering of the simple figure.”²⁷ These forms were celebrated for their simplicity and honesty.

Another visual aspect of calligraphy is known as *iren*.

This is the quick movement of the hand and arm between brushstrokes and is usually suggested by unintentional serifs on the strokes. These serifs indicate the proper direction of the hand and arm and, for this reason, stroke order and direction are

inherent in the written language (figure 5). Depending on the style, *iren* will show confidence in the character’s construction (the stroke order) and illustrate the natural rhythm of writing. It is an excellent reminder of how Japanese text is not a visual mimesis, but rather an ordered process. Another reminder is the varying thickness of a single stroke; this indicates starting and ending points. There are also stipulations about abrupt versus trailing stops to a stroke. These are not ironclad rules to be followed, but rather serve to remind the viewer of the shared process of writing. A number of terms describe the process. For example, *hyogen teishi* means, “limiting the expression.”²⁸ It is used to indicate when a calligrapher has purposefully pre-empted the brushstroke or form, leaving it incomplete. When it is gradually abbreviated, it is called *tsuku hanashi*. When the stroke is abruptly ended, foregoing the tail, it is termed *hane kiri*. This is just an example of the historiography of calligraphy, demonstrating its extensive study and

²⁷ Peterson, “Words. Meaning,” 89.

²⁸ Christine Flint Sato, *Japanese Calligraphy: The Art of Line and Space* (Osaka, Japan: Mitsuru Sakui, Kaifusha Co, Ltd., 1999), 74.

significance. Other more interpretive terms concerning calligraphy include *kokoro no yoyu*, or space “for the heart,” and *asobi no yoyu*, meaning “space to play.”²⁹

Semiotic studies are prevalent and popular in Japan. A good example is the exhibition held at the Hakodate Museum of Art in Hokkaido, Japan, entitled Spiritual Fragment: Drawing Letters in Art. The exhibition catalog included the essay, “*Supirichuahlu furagumento—nihon teki seishin to shite no moji*” (Spiritual Fragment—Writings of Japanese Spirit), by Hozumi Toshiaki.³⁰ This was a careful semiotic study of recent calligraphy and its place in modern art. It cited linguistic theorists, such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, and Edmund Husserl. The author emphasized the impact of the visual form of writing and questioned why Westerners underestimate the written form’s influence on thinking. To illustrate this point, he recalled Rene Magritte’s “*Les trahison des images*” (Betrayal of Images), 1929, and examined the close relationship of Japanese ink-painting and calligraphy. He implied that its spartan style and empty spaces allow a measure of suggestibility for the content. In this way, the visual presentation of any written text can provide a deeper understanding of it.

A demonstration of Hozumi’s supposition can be seen in the accepted current uses of *kanji* and the two distinctive syllabaries, *hiragana* and *katakana*. These syllabaries are the descendents of *omnade* and the later, more austere style advocated by the Meiji government. Both have the same number of characters that stand for the same sounds and differ only in visual form. However, they tend to be used for different purposes.

²⁹ Ibid, 78.

³⁰ Hozumi Toshiaki, “*Supirichuahlu furagumento—nihon teki seishin to shite no moji*” (Spiritual Fragment—Writings of Japanese Spirit), Spiritual Fragment: Drawing Letters in Art, ed. Hozumi Toshiaki, (Hokkaido, Japan: Hakodate Museum of Art, 1996), 7-12, trans. Laura Lu.

Hiragana is the primary form for Japanese, used in all types of documents. It is the first alphabet that children learn. *Katakana* is used mostly for words adopted from foreign languages and transliterations, such as パン (*pan*), ズボン (*zubon*), and マクドナルド (*Makudonarudo*) or McDonald's. This creates a visual segregation of words in a text; native Japanese is written in *hiragana*, descended from the native *kana*, while foreign words written in *katakana* are interspersed within the same text. *Kanji* are used intermittently as the subject becomes more serious and academic. A high occurrence of *kanji* is meant for an educated audience, since *kanji* are taught, beginning in primary school and reaching the thousands only by college. *Kanji* is used not only to clarify written text, but also for proper names and in places where the West has usually supplanted text with ergonomic signs, such as elevator open/close buttons, entrances/exits, north/south/east/west directional signs, weather forecasts, and laundry instructions. Hence, looking at any written text, its visual presentation can provide clues about its content, writer, and intended audience. Japanese commercial graphic designers have taken full advantage of this variety of text. It is not unusual to see vastly different uses of their alphabets (and Western alphabets) in their commercial media (figure 6).

In Yusho's and Hozumi's examinations of calligraphy, though, the visual form was secondary to the written content. It was not until the manifestation of avant-garde calligraphy that words became secondary to the visual form. According to Elizabeth tenGrotenhuis, "some of the more avant-garde contemporary Japanese calligraphers create compositions that they call calligraphic, but which are pure, abstract forms not

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lady
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グローバルにモードを取材した
TYO発の超ファッション誌

2001 2 23 is coming soon

gli
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2001年2月23日(金)
21世紀の幕開けと共に
大人の女のモード誌
創刊!

Kodansha

Figure 6. Advertisement for a Japanese magazine entitled *gli*. *VoCE* 4 no. 3 (March 2001): 197.

based on any word, concept, or literary symbol.”³¹ These calligraphers draw from their training but not on the literary tradition. TenGrotenhuis suggested that, “from our Western and particularly American perspective, we might call them the abstract expressionists [*sic*] of the Japanese calligraphy world.”

Modern Japanese artists can utilize fully the abstract tendency inherent in calligraphy and in their textual license and freedom. Calligraphy as an individualized and expressive medium was perfectly suited for the movement towards abstract art in post-World War II Japan. Its concentration on formal qualities and the importance of process from Zen Buddhism naturally extended to abstract art.

³¹ Elizabeth tenGrotenhuis, “Contemporary Japanese Calligraphy-Background and Ground,” Multiple Meanings: The Written Word in Japan-Past, Present, and Future, a selection of papers on Japanese language and culture and their translation presented at the Library of Congress, ed. J. Thomas Rimer, (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1986), 31.

Chapter 2

Abstract Expressionism and Adolph Gottlieb

In the 1930's, American art was experiencing a convergence of styles in New York City. Like Japan's calligraphers, artists were searching for identity. Realism dominated the American scene after World War I, but European modernism and non-representational styles were emerging. Artists such as Theodore Roszak and Lee Krasner formed the group American Abstract Artists, and critics such as George L. K. Morris supported them. In addition, Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) gave these artists the jobs and opportunities to shape high art and impact American culture. These events led to the growth of Abstract Expressionism.

New York artists were able to absorb relevant and concurrent styles, notably Surrealism, Cubism, and eastern European expressionism, from artists such as Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, and Vasily Kandinsky, who were living or exhibiting in New York. American artists were also influenced by the theories of Carl Jung, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Zen Buddhism. In the genesis of Abstract Expressionism, Clement Greenberg emerged as the movement's most ardent critic and supporter, writing definitive essays such as "Avant-garde and Kitsch" and "Towards a Newer Laocoon." His theories were followed religiously by a number of later critics, including William Rubin and Michael Fried. His contentions were defied by just as many.

The debate over the definition of Abstract Expressionism is critical to this thesis. Therefore, a thorough examination of Greenbergian discourse is provided before proceeding to a brief discussion of Japanese and Zen calligraphic influence on American artists and an exploration of Adolph Gottlieb's relationship to Abstract Expressionist theory and Eastern influence.

The Greenbergian Debate

In 1940, Clement Greenberg published "Towards a Newer Laocoon." The article outlined the development of the avant-garde movement from Romanticism in Europe, through Cubism and Surrealism, leading to the purity of Abstract Expressionism. This purity was sought in the elimination of literary subject matter because literature and language intrinsically included the sociological politics of the era. Rather than read art as a commentary on society, Greenberg praised art that sought a purely sensuous experience without a linguistic intermediary. This art came from the avant-garde, who "saw the necessity of an escape from ideas, which were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society."³² Greenberg suggested that avant-garde artists were searching for a "pure form," an "abstract" art, which could only be understood through its intended sense, i.e. sight, and could not be communicated in "non-visual identities." Form was emphasized to the point of autonomy and any communicative meaning as a sign was expunged from it by virtue of its depiction, size, and relationship to other forms. Every art—poetry, music, painting, and sculpture—was to stand as an autonomous discipline,

³² Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," 28.

independent of academic references, and purely sensuous. “It was the signal for a revolt against the dominance of literature, which was subject matter at its most oppressive.”³³

Essentially, Greenberg advocated a de-politicizing and de-socializing of art, such that art could not be used as propaganda for ideology, politics, or social struggles. To arrive at this “pure” art, the artist reduced everything to its original state and abstained from societal connotations.

In “Abstract and Representational,” Greenberg maintained that good art is not based on what it means, but how it makes a viewer feel, autonomously and holistically.³⁴

It was in this essay that Greenberg explained the Abstract Expressionist exercise of flattening the picture plane and abolishing illusive depth as a kind of re-ordering of the language of painting. Interestingly, Greenberg summoned his Western lineage of Abstract Expressionism and contrasted it with an evaluation of Western versus Chinese and Japanese art. He did this to defend his Western evolution of abstract art and though Greenberg had an awareness of Chinese history and art, his invocation of it was out of place in the essay.³⁵

This is not his only mention of Asian painting. In his review of The Principles of Chinese Painting, Greenberg respectfully described the field of Chinese art and the close relationship of painting and literature in China, as it was demonstrated by calligraphy.³⁶

³³ Ibid, 28.

³⁴ Greenberg, “Abstract and Representational,” The Collected Essays, vol. 3, 186-193.

³⁵ Greenberg reviewed The Principles of Chinese Painting by George Rowley in 1950 and the first major exhibition of modern Japanese calligraphy was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1954. Chinese and Japanese art was a fashionable topic at the time.

³⁶ Greenberg, “The Art of China: Review of The Principles of Chinese Painting by George Rowley,” The Collected Essays, vol. 3, 42-44.

He also mourned the evolution of Chinese art into highly decorative forms. There was no indication, though, of his thoughts concerning the amalgamation of literature and painting as the single art form, calligraphy, nor an admission that purely decorative arts are, in fact, subject-less. In “‘American-Type’ Painting,” Greenberg considered Gottlieb and Franz Kline, among other artists. An interesting segue about the “influence” of Chinese and Japanese calligraphy is given during his discussion of Kline:

... Kline’s unmistakable allusions to Chinese and Japanese calligraphy encouraged the cant, already started by Tobey’s example, about a general Oriental influence on American abstract painting. Yet none of the leading abstract expressionists except Kline has shown more than a cursory interest in Oriental art, and it is easy to demonstrate that the roots of their art lie almost entirely within Western tradition. The fact that Far Eastern calligraphy is stripped and abstract—because it involves writing—does not suffice to make the resemblances to it in abstract expressionism more than a case of convergence. It is as though this country’s possession of a Pacific coast offered a handy received idea with which to account for the otherwise inexplicable fact that it is now producing a body of art that some people regard as original.³⁷

According to Greenberg, Kline was the only artist in 1955 who was appropriating the forms of calligraphy. The implication was not that calligraphy was irrelevant to Abstract Expressionism, only that it had no influence on most American artists. With this tenet established in his criticism, Japanese Abstract Expressionists emerging at the time must have presented a challenge to Greenbergian followers.

Equal to the followers were dissenters. Stephen Polcari, in “Abstract Expressionism: ‘New and Improved,’” suggested that Greenberg’s Western foundation for Abstract Expressionism was an attempt to institute a prestigious pedigree for American art, thus catapulting it to a standing of sophisticated high art, justified by its

³⁷ Greenberg, “‘American-Type’ Painting,” *The Collected Essays*, vol. 3, 227.

formal concerns and internationalism. Yet, he “minimized the intellectual complexities behind the deceptively simple surfaces and forms.”³⁸ Discarding Greenberg’s opinions, Polcari continued by illustrating how Abstract Expressionism underwent reconsideration in the 1970’s and was since viewed as laden with subject matter and interpreted beyond formal analyses. He reviewed the variety of recent methodologies from iconography to Marxism. No one method was adequate, he claimed, because “an art as rich as Abstract Expressionism, which at times aspires to the layered complexity and content of Joyce,” could not be comprehended fully by all of them.³⁹ He called for a “new synthesis” that would incorporate all aspects of Abstract Expressionism and convey a more accurate interpretation.

In “Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism,” Lawrence Alloway offered another dissenting view. Alloway argued that one reason for the abandonment of traditional sign systems by American artists was to break away from European dominance. Furthermore, the return to “primitive,” particularly Native American, symbols validated Abstract Expressionism as both “newer than Europe and older.”⁴⁰ Hence, American artists were painting something fresh and yet more mature, more sophisticated and yet honest.

When Gottlieb used primitivistic pictographs, Alloway and the artist agreed with Greenberg that he had deviated from subject-less modern art. Alloway quoted Gottlieb’s own defense for deviating: “the mechanics of picture making has been carried far

³⁸ Stephen Polcari, “Abstract Expressionism: ‘New and Improved,’” *Art Journal* 47 no. 3 (Fall 1988): 174.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 177-178.

⁴⁰ Lawrence Alloway, “Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism,” *Artforum* 12 no. 3 (November 1973): 37.

enough.”⁴¹ However, modernism and its flatness edged back into Gottlieb’s work by 1959, according to observers. Alloway claimed, “The sententious aspect of Abstract Expressionism was gradually lost sight of,” and noted that critics’ analyses of Gottlieb migrated to the pictorial surface. For Alloway, the adherence to formalism by Greenberg and his followers was responsible for usurping signification and subject matter and, in turn, affecting future American artists and critics alike. In Gottlieb’s case, the move from pictographs to a more obtuse style seemed to reduce the discussion of symbolism in his paintings and affirmed the Greenbergian canon of subject-less content. Alloway concluded his argument for sign systems by asserting that, contrary to popular tendencies, Abstract Expressionists “incorporated complex layers of cultural allusion into their art.”⁴²

Another article that disputed Greenberg’s doctrines is “Against a Newer Laocoon,” by Robert C. Hobbs and Barbara Cavaliere. Continuing in Alloway’s vein, Hobbs and Cavaliere also attributed significant symbolism to Abstract Expressionist painters like Gottlieb. The authors concurred that Abstract Expressionists were using “symbols of a supra-personal nature,” relying on the unconscious to recall primal forms.⁴³ These primal forms in conjunction with automatism seemed to recall ancient rituals and mythology about magic, giving credence to psychoanalytical translations. In the case of Gottlieb’s works, the authors mentioned the painter’s derivation of signs from ancient mythology and Greek theater, creating “an emblem that contains the essence of the

⁴¹ Ibid, 38.

⁴² Ibid, 42.

⁴³ Barbara Cavaliere and Robert C. Hobbs, “Against a Newer Laocoon,” *Arts Magazine* 51 no. 8 (April 1977): 111.

abstract idea.”⁴⁴ In a careful investigation of *The Rape of Persephone*, 1943, the authors reduced the painting’s depiction down to the essence and emotion of the myth. In Gottlieb’s own explanation, he insisted that the painting could not be articulated but had to be seen in order to be understood. Further, he elaborated on his paintings not as abstractions but as depictions of reality at its most basic essence and emotion.

These two authors and Alloway were a few of the significant critics who disagreed with Greenberg’s formal fondness. Cavaliere and Hobbs called it “extreme irony that the primary as well as the most articulate apologist for the new painting, Clement Greenberg, has ignored the artists’ proclaimed involvement in subject matter and refused to handle these paintings in any other terms than formalist ones.”⁴⁵ The authors recalled Motherwell’s classification of abstract art: subject matter as a translation of the world through the artist’s feelings. It was not a representative equivalent of the real world, but rather abstract perceptions belonging to the artist, which were given a visible form. Barnett Newman’s introduction to “The Ideographic Picture,” the catalog for the exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1947, confirmed this idea. Calling it “an abstract thought-complex,” Newman asserts that the idea was always real, merely given a painterly means of understanding.⁴⁶ Abstract art was not the reduction of reality to formal shapes, colors, and lines, but rather the depiction of real abstract concepts, and these concepts served as the subject matter, in a symbolic, allegorical, or psychoanalytical sense. Cavaliere and Hobbs did not defy Greenberg’s supposition of a

⁴⁴ Ibid, 113.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 114.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 116-117.

purely sensuous art, only reiterated that it did not necessitate avoidance of a subject matter or allusions to signs and other cultural symbols, which facilitate the projection of abstract ideas.

In the same *Art Journal* issue as Polcari's article, Ann Gibson examined the supposed beliefs of Greenbergian discourse in "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language."⁴⁷ After an introduction about the theories of linguistics and the importance of language to coherence and thought, Gibson presented three reasons for the "evasion of language" prevalent in Abstract Expressionism: Greenberg's discussion on the purity of art; the connotation of totalitarianism and propaganda associated with social realism; and the artists' rejection of French Surrealism's literary foundations. These reasons elicited "anti-intentionalism" on the part of the artist. Gibson gave four additional influences, namely, Jungian theory, New Criticism, Russian Formalism, and Existentialism. Each of these theories hypothesized varying conditions for perception of the world and viewer perception of art, acknowledging the primacy of the viewer and the sensory experience. The difficulty of ascertaining the effect on the viewer generated anti-intentionalism—the avoidance of articulation, explanation, and any language in general about the art from the artists. Ironically, according to Gibson, this avoidance of language allowed a multiplicity of meaning and content and did not necessarily reduce Abstract Expressionism to its formal elements. While the author recommended intriguing reasons for anti-intentionalism, she did not reconcile the evasion of language with her beginning

⁴⁷ Ann Gibson, "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language," *Art Journal* 47 no. 3 (Fall 1988): 208-214.

statement of language as necessary to the formation of thought. If Abstract Expressionism was meant to be understood without articulation, how was thought on the work formulated? Returning to Greenberg, we must concede that it was not meant to be logically examined, only emotionally felt.

Other Influences

World War II can be said to have had a dramatic effect on the transformation of American artistic style. While artistic development in New York had evolved from European precedents, one should also consider the fact that most of the prominent Abstract Expressionists were of European descent and heritage and hence more strongly affected by events in that region. In addition, the influx of refugees and the re-settlement of Europe's literati took place mainly in New York. Because the Pacific styles, especially Japanese, had no immediate relevance to the New York scene, memories of the Japanese internment in America and the atomic bomb rarely entered the dialogue of American stylistic development at that time.

Eventually, in 1954, the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized the first exhibition of modern (Japanese) calligraphy shown in the U.S. Other than those mentioned here, there are few examinations of that exhibit's influence on New York artists. Except for Greenberg's earlier denial of Japanese influence, most critics did not address the status that Zen Buddhism and philosophy were attaining in the U.S. at that time. Still a number of artists exhibited some connection with Zen Buddhism and calligraphy. For example, Franz Kline was in regular correspondence with the publisher

of the Japanese calligraphy journal *Bokubi* and contributed to its pages. Mark Tobey studied Chinese and Japanese calligraphy in the U.S. and abroad. Ad Reinhardt lectured at Studio 35, in 1952, on the comparison of Western and Eastern art.⁴⁸ Artists such as Motherwell and Pollock were reading *The Wisdom of the East* and *Zen and the Art of Archery*. John Cage, an enthusiast of Zen, was teaching at Black Mountain College in the forties and early fifties, influencing a new generation of artists at about the same time that P.T. Suzuki was lecturing and publishing in the U.S. on Zen philosophy.⁴⁹ Zen was reaching a wide audience and become a fashionable concept.

Adolph Gottlieb

Adolph Gottlieb came to prominence in the 1940's with a series of paintings categorized as *Pictographs*. These paintings employed a variety of symbols, signs, and images with "primitive" and archaic stylistic appropriation that seemed to evoke a personal, psychological language. The symbols were compartmentalized on a plane divided by a grid. The compositions took on the formal problems of Abstract Expressionism such as the flatness of the picture plane and displaying abstract concepts, but the titles prompted a return to mythological and classical themes as subject matter, such as *Eyes of Oedipus*, 1941 (figure 7), and *Rape of Persephone*, 1943. Despite the

⁴⁸ Studio 35 was an alias for "Subjects of the Artist" school, a series of seminars and lectures for advanced artists, organized by Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and supported by other artists in New York. It lasted from the fall of 1948 until April 1950. Cavaliere and Hobbs, "Against a Newer Laocoon," 110.

⁴⁹ Barbara Rose, "Japanese Calligraphy and American Abstract Expressionism," *Words in Motion*, catalogue for an exhibition organized by the Library of Congress and the *Yomiuri Shimbun* (Tokyo, Japan: Yomiuri Shimbun, 1984), 38-43.

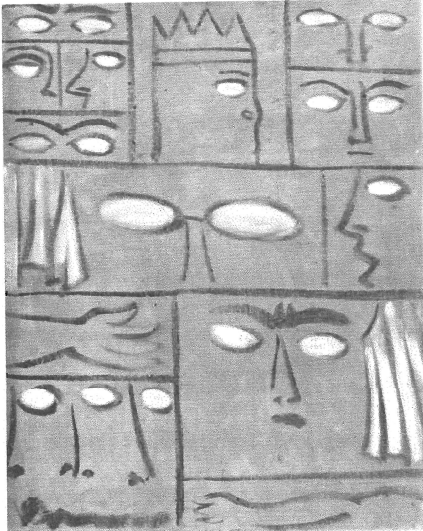


Figure 7. Adolph Gottlieb, *Eyes of Oedipus*, 1941, oil on canvas, 32 x 25 in., as reproduced in Doty, *Adolph Gottlieb* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968), 27.

titles, Gottlieb maintained anti-intentionalism, allowing the viewer the freedom of interpretation. In 1951, he abandoned the pictographs in favor of even simpler forms as exemplified by his *Imaginary Landscapes*.

Early *Pictographs* confounded most critics, including Greenberg. In a review of an exhibition in 1947, Greenberg wrote, “Gottlieb is perhaps the leading exponent of a new indigenous school of symbolism,” acknowledging his use of hieroglyphs as

signs.⁵⁰ But he was also skeptical; he questioned “the importance this school attributes to the symbolical or ‘metaphorical’ content of its art; there is something half-baked and revivalist, in a familiar American way, about it.” It is a contrast to his theory of sensuous and “pure” art. Though the hieroglyphs are created from the artist’s subconscious and not conventional forms, they do not allow the paintings’ autonomy and seem to suggest a means of communication, that is, a subject matter.

⁵⁰ Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of Hedda Sterne and Adolph Gottlieb,” *The Collected Essays*, vol. 2, 188.

As recently as 1994, Sanford Hirsch contended that Gottlieb's pictographs were the genesis of a new type of sign that served as a foundation for Abstract Expressionism.⁵¹ Breaking from Western precedent, Gottlieb's signs and, thereafter, Abstract Expressionism did not require culturally and academically established associations for understanding. The viewer could rely strictly on his visual apprehension, thereby emphasizing the primacy of the viewer, which was important to Gottlieb. Furthermore, Hirsch professed that this concept was still so atypical that recent critics continued to apply iconographic readings. In the same text, Charlotta Kotik, mentioned the concurrence of Gottlieb's *Pictographs* with the popularity of semiotics, as theorized by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce.⁵² By relying on the viewer's perception of the signifier and endowment of symbolic meaning, semiotics assured the primacy of the viewer. In his review, Greenberg neglected the symbolism of *Pictographs*, praising Gottlieb only for his role in stimulating new ideas in painting. His formal analysis commended his use of color, but hints that Gottlieb's forms were repetitive and not innovatory. Greenberg intimated that this recycling assured Gottlieb a measure of safety in the success of his paintings and challenged him to stretch his talent. In 1953, Greenberg wrote the foreword of a catalog for a Gottlieb exhibition and gave accolades for rising to the challenge in *Imaginary Landscapes* (figure 8).⁵³ Many critics found it

⁵¹ Sanford Hirsch, "Adolph Gottlieb and Art in New York in the 1930s," *The Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb*, organized by Sanford Hirsch (New York, NY: Hudson Hills Press, 1994), 11-29.

⁵² Charlotta Kotik, "The Legacy of Sign: Reflections on Adolph Gottlieb's Pictographs," *The Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb*, 59-67.

⁵³ Greenberg, "Foreword to a [*sic*] Exhibition of Adolph Gottlieb," *The Collected Essays*, vol. 3, 180-181.

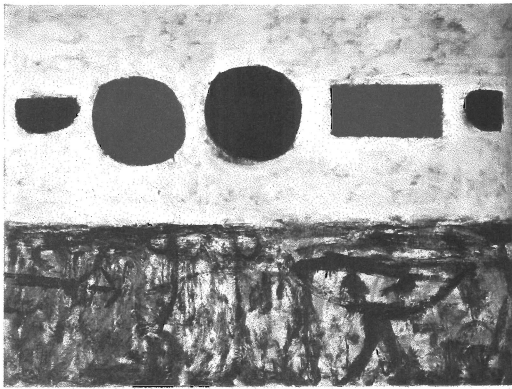


Figure 8. Adolph Gottlieb, *Frozen Sounds, Number 1*, 1951, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in., as reproduced in Doty, Adolph Gottlieb, 66.

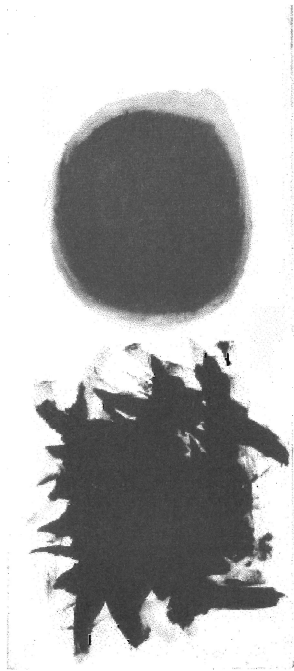


Figure 9. Adolph Gottlieb, *Burst*, 1957, oil on canvas, 96 x 40 in., as reproduced in Doty, Adolph Gottlieb, 18.

difficult to reconcile Gottlieb's *Pictographs* with the *Landscapes* and later *Bursts* series (figure 9). They tended to dismiss one style or the other in favor of their discussion.

The *Landscapes* coalesced into his similar *Bursts* in the late fifties and early sixties.⁵⁴ Medium and method took a more significant role. Gottlieb worked with tempera, inks and paints, in a variety of applications, including squeegees, spatulas, and spinning (but not in the sense of Action painting.) The difference between the *Landscapes* and *Bursts* was "one of spirit rather than of form," and to support his claim, Martin Friedman footnoted Greenberg as the proponent of this implication.⁵⁵ Friedman described the spirit of *Bursts* as "grandly conceived statements of dualism" within a simplified *Landscape* format in which "color disks oscillate in space over exploding ground masses" represented by broad, kinetic swaths of dark color. From Friedman's formal analysis, we can infer that the forms on the picture plane have no external reference. Their relationship to each other and everything contained within the picture plane is solely responsible for expressing the artist's feeling and "all literary and associational qualifications become extraneous."⁵⁶ Specifically, the *Bursts* series represents intrinsic opposites, or rather polarities, and "challenges the finality or stasis of dualism."

⁵⁴ Overlapping the *Pictographs* and *Imaginary Landscapes*, Gottlieb also produced a number of isolated paintings, utilizing grids and "totemic" subjects. The *Imaginary Landscapes* series seemed to represent land and sky, each reinforced with metaphoric forms. In a catalogue for a Gottlieb exhibition in 1963, Martin Friedman asserts that the *Landscapes* were a reaction to the "over-refinement of the pictographs." Martin Friedman, *Adolph Gottlieb*, a catalogue for the exhibition organized by the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN: Colwell Press Inc., 1963), 10.

⁵⁵ Friedman, *Adolph Gottlieb*, 11, note 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid* 11, 12.

At a later retrospective, Alloway focused on Gottlieb's *Bursts*. True to his earlier conclusion, Alloway also talked less of symbolism and more formalistically in his investigation. There was however an interesting interpretation of a pair of paintings entitled *Blast*. Although Alloway viewed *Blast* as evocative of the atomic bomb, he insisted on the multiplicity of interpretation, particularly as representative of "dyadic" and dualistic thought processes. Alloway recognized that "Gottlieb's painting, like that of other Abstract Expressionists, was never containable by theories of concreteness and purification. On the contrary, the concrete was replaced by process so that painterliness became an open source of authentication."⁵⁷

Diane Waldman, in "Gottlieb: Signs and Suns," traced the evolution of Gottlieb's symbols from his early to late paintings. She maintained a formalist approach to *Landscapes* and *Bursts* while reiterating Friedman's assertion of the dualism represented strictly by the formal elements of the paintings' "autonomous shapes on a ground." Her formal analysis was seemingly set aside for an explanation of Gottlieb's "residual traces of a symbolism in the form of the calligraphic strokes (or related shapes) that occupy the lower part of the canvas. The bottom form changes from a thicket of strokes, massive and impenetrable, to a loosely brushed form, to an open space enclosing calligraphy."⁵⁸ What this symbolism could be is not volunteered and a "calligraphic" interpretation is unintelligible since neither words nor language are stipulated. Nonetheless, one intriguing detail was Waldman's notation of Gottlieb's rendition of time, which

⁵⁷ Alloway, "Adolph Gottlieb and Abstract Painting," *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective*, organized by Sanford Hirsch and Mary Davis MacNaughton in association with the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation (New York, NY: The Arts Publisher, Inc., 1981), 61.

⁵⁸ Diane Waldman, "Gottlieb: Signs and Suns," *Art News* 56 no.10 (Feb 1968): 67.

“becomes readable in a literal sense with regard to the physical devotion Gottlieb lavished on certain areas of the canvas.” One might consider this a more appropriate similarity to the processes of Zen calligraphy.

Other Zen comparisons can be gleaned from Robert Doty’s contribution to an exhibition catalog in 1968. He alleged that Gottlieb had “an intuitive awareness of the significant gesture, the perceptive touch,” and a command of the medium, both Zen precepts.⁵⁹ Doty focused more on the *Landscapes* and *Bursts* than previous critics and relied heavily on formal analysis and Greenberg’s commentary. Doty also utilized the term “calligraphic” when describing *Bursts*. Because he worked from a Greenbergian context, he characterized Gottlieb’s evolution in terms of how “the *Pictographs* were discarded,” leading to an achievement in *Bursts*. *Rolling*, 1961, was described as a refinement “to the barest essentials:” a “format of circular shapes in flat, primary colors above the agitated mass of interwoven black lines. Hence both shapes and lines are suspended over a common ground, implying infinite space,” and “the universal experience of earth and sky, the tension between space and mass.”⁶⁰ The titles supposedly reinforce this “tension.”

Another reference to Japanese and Zen calligraphy was given by Andrew Kagan in “Paul Klee’s Influence on American Painting.” Kagan submitted that Klee influenced Gottlieb and that the signs employed in the *Bursts*, especially the calligraphic forms, were derived from Klee’s appropriation of Japanese calligraphy and ink painting. According

⁵⁹ Robert Doty, “Part II,” *Adolph Gottlieb*, an exhibition catalogue for the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968), 19.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

to Kagan, the *Pictographs* were a struggle in signification, teetering on the edge of literacy and anti-intentionalism. The *Landscapes* led to the triumph of the *Bursts*, “Gottlieb’s final, most ingenious, and most successful synthesis of Klee’s ideas.”⁶¹ This approach of direct lineage through Klee attaches a meaning of “anthropomorphic Japanese calligraphy” to the interpretation.

More obvious references to Japanese and Zen calligraphy can be found in Manfred Schneckenburger’s essay for the Munich 1972 Olympic exhibition. The author explored the coincidental and purposeful convergence of modern art and Japanese calligraphy, focusing on the “affinity of spirit.” Schneckenburger discussed the Eastern conception of bipolarities, or yin and yang, and cited an example of “Zen Buddhist brush drawings of the moon or of a circle with unconnected calligraphic characters strewn alongside,” as a depiction of such.⁶² The similitude of Adolph Gottlieb’s *Bursts* to these brush drawings makes them a suitable example of such bipolarity; “The circle, as a symbol of the cosmos, hovers in the upper half of the picture, while below there is the black blot: chaos. In the dialogue of the elemental, the great opposites become a unity: heaven and earth, form and ‘non-form.’”⁶³ Rather than suggest words, the calligraphic forms evoke meditation and “tranquil calligraphic lyricism.” Schneckenburger provided the best term to describe this wordless calligraphy, “psychograph,” which is a sign that

⁶¹ Andrew Kagan, “Paul Klee’s Influence on American Painting, Part II,” *Arts Magazine* 50 no. 1 (Sept. 1975): 86.

⁶² Manfred Schneckenburger, “Zen Buddhism, Ink Painting, and Modern Art,” *World Cultures and Modern Art, Exhibition of 19th and 20th Century European Art and Music with Asia, Africa, Oceania, Afro- and Indo-America*, a catalogue for the exhibition on the occasion of the Games of the 20th Olympiad, München, 1972, trans. P.J.D. (Munich, Germany: Bruckman Publishers, 1972), 221.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 224.

conjures meaning, emotion, and psychological reaction, the original feeling from whence the words were created.

Barbara Rose ventured that the use of Japanese calligraphy mirrored the dualism prevalent in Gottlieb's work. Rose postulated that since calligraphy avoids shapes and closed contours, it is a non-representative line (to the Western eye) that can be drawn. Incorporating drawn calligraphic lines in Abstract Expressionist painting illustrates the "antithesis-synthesis resolution of dialectical conflicts," because it is the union of drawing that is not representation and writing that is not language, with painting.⁶⁴ It is dualism not only of shapes but processes. Rose even went so far as to propose that the inclusion of a Japanese cultural form demonstrates another dualistic unity, East and West.

In a 1976 Japanese publication, Giulio C. Argan mentioned Gottlieb's evocation of "great undefined spaces, of the diffused luminosity, and of the atmospheric transparencies of the great Japanese artists."⁶⁵ In the same text, Gordon Washburn offered "a dissenting view."⁶⁶ Like Greenberg, he asserted that Abstract Expressionism was a natural evolution of strictly Western styles and any similarity was coincidental. The popularity of Zen philosophy and calligraphy arose only as a result of primary Western interest in the subject. In fact, Washburn excerpted several sources that insisted that Japanese art had been more influenced by Western styles. Hans Hartung claimed, "What is surprising is that the Japanese seem so seldom to consider the extent to which

⁶⁴ Rose, "Japanese Calligraphy," *Words in Motion*, 41.

⁶⁵ Giulio C. Argan, "Japan's Contribution to Contemporary Art," *Dialogue in Art, Japan and the West*, ed. Chisaburoh F. Yamada, (Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha International Ltd., 1976), 194.

⁶⁶ Gordon Washburn, "Japanese Influences on Contemporary Art: A Dissenting View," *Dialogue in Art*, 196-209.

their own art has been influenced from abroad. It is my view that evidence could easily be found to reveal the quite striking effect which abstract art, both lyrical and gestural, has exerted via America on young Japanese painters.⁶⁷ Washburn exhorted that it was the West's indifferent and incomplete understanding of Japanese spirituality that was the ultimate cause and proof that Americans had not been so affected.

If Greenberg and Washburn's contention that Japanese calligraphy and Abstract Expressionism were only coincidental concurrences is true, then Greenberg's Western lineage of Abstract Expressionism dominates any study of symbolism, specifically Gottlieb's. And since Washburn avowed that Americans were unable to comprehend the philosophy of Japanese calligraphy properly, the same could be said of Japan's understanding of strictly Western art forms, such as Abstract Expressionism, in spite Hartung's proclamations. Therefore any study of Japanese Abstract Expressionism need not rely on Greenbergian or Western discourse and should depend more on its own inherent lineage.

Insofar as Gottlieb is concerned, there is a wealth of symbolic interpretation regarding *Pictographs*, but *Bursts* seem to force a return to Greenberg's perspective, even with the profession of subject matter. Critics were usually unwilling to tackle the symbolism of Gottlieb's post-*Pictographs* work. The obviousness of Gottlieb's sign systems is evident in the numerous and lengthy discussions of his *Pictograph* series and, given this foundation and his defense of subject matter, it is puzzling why analyses of the later *Landscapes* and *Burst* series tended towards formalism. One can only surmise that

⁶⁷ Ibid, 208.

the proximity of Gottlieb's early work to Surrealism in chronology and psychoanalysis influenced their reception. Interpretations of his later works could have been influenced by the tendency at the time to avoid personal history, the predominance of formal style and criticism, and his inexplicable abandonment of pictographs. But why does "primitive" and Native American symbolism figure so easily and prominently in expositions of *Pictographs*, while the few interpretations that suppose any Japanese influence on Gottlieb's *Bursts* find equally discordant arguments?

Chapter 3 Gutai and Yoshihara Jiro

After the development of Abstract Expressionism in the U.S., other countries accepted New York as the leader in the contemporary art world. The Abstract Expressionist style broke from European strangleholds yet emerged still steeped in the Western fine art tradition. Abstract Expressionism was respected around the world and in Japan.

Several Western artists respected Japanese art as well. Ever since *ukiyo-e* had impressed 19th century artists in France and the rest of Europe, Japan had maintained an aura of “other” and exotic Orientalism, begetting *Japonisme*. In the wake of World War II, modern artists revived their interest in Eastern philosophy and Japanese art. Artists in Japan were aware of this renewed interest and worked to foster it for the dual purposes of modernizing and establishing a national identity in the post-war environment. Just as the Japanese had taken Chinese writing and adapted it for their own purposes in the 6th century, so too would they adapt Western art in the 20th century. In this way, the Gutai Art Movement became the first modern indigenous style to be critically recognized in the international art community.

In general, modern Japanese art has not been subjected to as much critical dissection as has Abstract Expressionism. English criticism is relatively scarce and its analytical depth is superficial. However, the Gutai group enjoyed international

popularity from the 1950's until the 1970's under the leadership of Yoshihara Jiro. In the 1930's, Yoshihara was considered to be one of the first proponents of abstract and non-figurative art in Japan and his work was redolent of Miro and Kandinsky. Later, he formed the *Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai* (Gutai Art Association), whose work has been characterized as “the abstract expression of the appropriate cultural-historical milieu of ... war devastated [*sic*] civilization, discovering a ... complicated language of art.”⁶⁸ Yoshihara presided over the group until his death in 1972. Neglected in its early years, scholarship about the Gutai began only to develop in the 1970's.

Gutai

Yoshihara, together with over twenty other artists, started the Gutai group in 1954, near the city of Osaka in the Kansai region of Japan. In October 1956, Yoshihara wrote the Gutai Manifesto, which outlined the goals of the group. Like Greenberg, Yoshihara dismissed representative conventional art because it consisted of “deceiving spooks of fakes,” or rather the materials were used to deceive the spectator into accepting a meaning.⁶⁹ He declared, “Gutai Art does not transfigure materials” and did not subjugate it to the spirit. Instead the artist and his materials were equals, working together in order to create an eternal, plastic rendition of emotion and spirituality. He offered primitive art and architectural ruins as examples of the significance of materials. These materials outlasted the artist, the original intended audience, and any applied

⁶⁸ Jelena Stojanović, “Gutai or Abstractions as a Project of the Symbolic Joining Modernism,” *Gutai*, (Beograd: Jugohemija, 1986), 57.

⁶⁹ Gutai Manifesto, (October 1956), original translation supplied to this author by Lawrence Yoshihara, Yoshihara Jiro's son.

contemporaneous meaning. In the Manifesto, Yoshihara also paid respect to Pollock and Mathieu for their similar achievements in “discovering the nature of the materials.”⁷⁰ Ultimately, Yoshihara stated that the goal of the Gutai group was to unite the human spirit with the perpetuity of materials in order to create art that was more than an “archaeological existence.” The *kanji* compound for the term *Gutai* 具体 reflected the group’s manifesto and goal of making the spirit “concrete.” *gu* 具 meaning “tool” and *tai* 体 meaning “body.” Together they translate as “embodiment” or “concreteness.”

Yoshihara avoided politicizing Gutai in a nation racked with uncertainty in the post-war years and still reeling from the imperialist fever that ignited it. Like Abstract Expressionism, Gutai rejected ideologies. But rather than direct them with a distinctive new style, Yoshihara encouraged artists to do anything that had never been done before; it seemed an all-inclusive movement. As Inui Yoshiaki described the objectives of the Gutai group, “their aim consisted more in centrifugal self-development than in centripetal compaction.”⁷¹ Inui’s essay provided an interpretation from the Japanese perspective. He contended that Gutai was a completely native development and furthermore not influenced by American art. He remarked that Japanese critics, who saw it more as a Dada derivation, essentially ignored Gutai in its early years. While the roots of Gutai can be found in Japan’s Dada movement, it can also be argued that the group was reacting to the Surrealist-based Social Realism prevalent in Tokyo during the 1940’s.⁷² In addition,

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Inui Yoshiaki, “15 Years of Gutai Art,” *Mizue* (1967): 79-84, reprinted in *Gutai*, a catalogue for the exhibition at Galleria Milano, Mailand, Italy, n.d., p. 451.

⁷² There has always been an historic separation and rivalry between the Kanto (Tokyo) region and the Kansai region. The Kansai region has always been considered more conservative and traditional with its

increased exposure to foreign art movements was facilitated by international publications circulating in Japan with more frequency and freedom than before the war.

Alexandra Munroe, in a typical Greenbergian frame, avowed that the Gutai group, like other artistic movements around the world, sought to free itself from post-war ideologies by denying symbolism and concentrating on plastic qualities.⁷³ Munroe read Gutai's overt de-politicizing not only as a rejection of ideology and academicism but also as a reassertion of an exclusive attention to materials and medium. This, however, does not adequately portray the Gutai Manifesto and the artists. In fact, Munroe contradicted herself when she described the consistent theme of birth throughout the group's work as a metaphor for their post-war artistic freedom and "liberation from decades of oppressive totalitarian bureaucracy." Munroe also asserted that Gutai artists were "intentionally disinterested in the formalist arguments of modern Euro-American abstract art," claiming that "Yoshihara's involvement with the innovation of Japanese traditional arts, specifically Zen calligraphy, ... informed his philosophical understanding of art as the direct reflection of the liberated self in the temporal here and now."⁷⁴

The Gutai's first exhibit, "Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun," 1955, held in Ashiya, a suburb of Osaka, was unprecedented in Japan (figure 10). This twenty-four hour exhibit featured works that

historic capital of Kyoto and Nara, while the Kanto area has the atmosphere of Edo period modernization and decadence with its new capital, Tokyo. The regions are also known to speak different dialects.

⁷³ Alexandra Munroe, "*To Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun: The Gutai Group*," *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 84.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

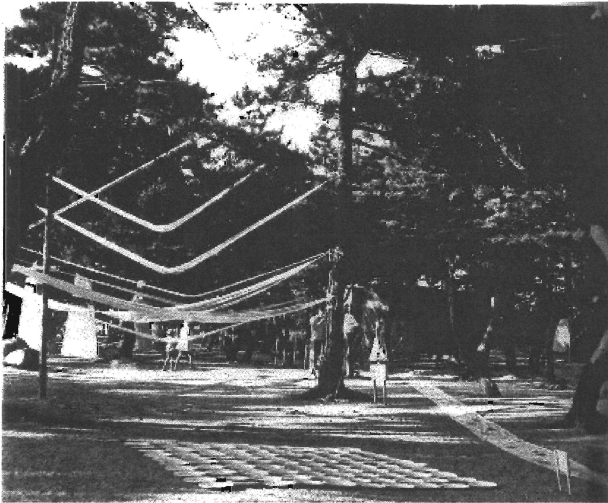


Figure 10. Photograph of Gutai Art Association's "Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun," 1955, Ashiya, Japan, as reproduced in Munroe, *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), figure 6.9.

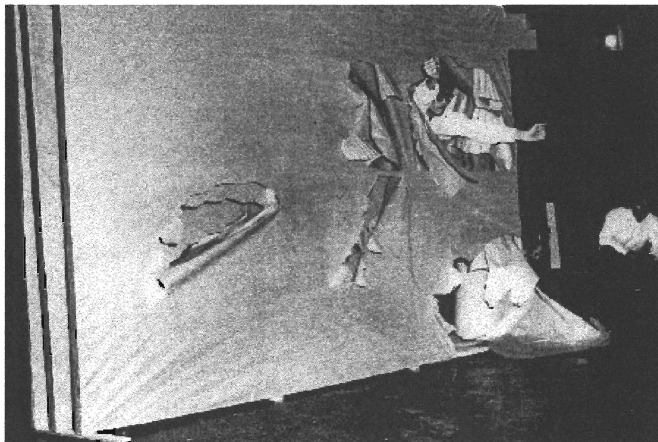


Figure 11. Photograph of Murakami Saburo's *At One Moment Opening Six Holes* (Isshun ni shite rokko no ana o akeru) at the "1st Gutai Art Exhibition," October 1955, Tokyo, Japan, as reproduced in Munroe, *Scream*, plate 21.

involved the outdoor environment in significant ways; paintings, sculptures and other works hung from the trees, sat on the open ground, and utilized the sunlight. That same year, the group held another exhibition in Tokyo. This show was documented with photographs that were used later in exhibits throughout the world. They showed some of Gutai's more famous works by artists such as Murakami Saburo, Shirago Kazuo, and Tanaka Atsuko. In *At One Moment Opening Six Holes (Isshun ni shite rokko no ana o akeru)*, 1955 (figure 11), Murakami burst through paper screens built six feet high and twelve feet wide. The screens represented the traditional Japanese *shoji* (doors) covered with *fusuma* (paper). The act of piercing through the paper with his whole body alluded to the idea of breaking through Japanese tradition and hence experiencing a rebirth. In the same show, Shirago performed *Challenging Mud (Doru ni idomu)*, in which he wrestled a mass of mud violently, alluding to man's struggle with nature. Tanaka created the memorable *Electric Dress, (Denki-fuku)*, 1956, which was made of flashing colored light bulbs, evocative of urban nightlife and a "statement on the ridiculous confines of feminine fashion."⁷⁵

Monroe returned to her Greenbergian slant when she stated, "by titling the majority of their paintings 'work' (*sakuhin*), the Gutai artists emphasized the objecthood of painting and denied any literary, figurative or symbolic meaning." In other words, it would not represent nature but be a "work" of nature in itself.

Barbara Bertozzi credited the Gutai group with "inventing an innovatory 'extra-pictorial' way of tackling art which had no correspondences whatsoever with what was

⁷⁵ Ibid, 91.

going on in the West.”⁷⁶ Though Japan was fully aware of Western trends in art and theory, the Gutai sought to transform and adapt it for themselves by infusing it with traditional and native originality. Yoshihara did not limit himself to painting at the “Mid-Summer Sun” exhibition; he also offered some more conceptual pieces, such as a “house” that deceived visitors into entering an illusionistic space. Bertozzi proclaimed that this show presented “two new salient factors of the group’s activity: the involvement of the spectator and an appeal to nature; the second being, at least for us, the most innovatory and jolting.”⁷⁷ Echoing traditionalists like Okakura Kakuzo and Tanizaki Junichiro, Bertozzi offered historical confirmation of Japan’s traditional respect for nature.⁷⁸ She did not discuss at length the role of the viewer despite this idea’s striking similarity to the goals and theory of Abstract Expressionism.

Its seeming relationship to Abstract Expressionism and Art Informel was owed largely to Michel Tapié. After encountering the *Gutai* journal in France and seeing a resemblance to his own theories of Art Informel, Tapié visited Japan in September of 1957.⁷⁹ Thereafter he worked to publicize Gutai by organizing exhibits in the U.S. and Europe. The first show abroad was at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, 1958. Other shows included “International Metamorphosis,” Paris, 1959, and the “Gutai Torino

⁷⁶ Barbara Bertozzi, “Gutai,” trans. Christopher Martin, *Flash Art* (International Edition) 24, no. 158 (May/June 1991): 94-95.

⁷⁷ Bertozzi, “Gutai,” 97.

⁷⁸ Okakura wrote The Book of Tea and Tanizaki wrote In Praise of Shadows, two influential books about Japanese aestheticism. The Book of Tea (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964); In Praise of Shadows (Stony Creek, CT: Leete’s Island Books, 1977).

⁷⁹ “Tapié coined the term *Art Informel* (Art Without Form) in 1950 to describe the work of Wols, but extended it to artists Jean Dubuffet, Hans Hartung, Henri Michaux, Georges Mathieu, Jean Fautrier, Alberto Burri, Antoni Tapies and the COBRA artists in an effort to identify a new, pan-European art movement.” Munroe, Scream, p. 100 note 48.

Show,” Turin, 1959. In Japan, the Gutai group sponsored exhibits for artists such as Sam Francis and Lucio Fontana.

Tapié propelled Gutai into the international arena in the late 50’s and early 60’s, but descriptions and classification of the Gutai movement conflicted. Critical interpretations tended to categorize Gutai as a corollary of Informel (because of Tapié’s association), Abstract Expressionism (as was advertised by the Martha Jackson Gallery), or Happenings. Arthur C. Danto presented the prevailing opinion of Gutai at the time of its reception in New York as “imitative” of Abstract Expressionism and not nearly “Japanese” enough, according to American stereotypes of Japan.⁸⁰ Even though the Gutai group defined their work as *koi*, meaning action, Allan Kaprow included some Gutai artists as forerunners of “Happenings” in his book Assemblages, Environments & Happenings.⁸¹ Bertozzi was even bold enough to pronounce Gutai artists as the innovators of performance art.⁸² Ultimately, Gutai’s immediate popularity was a result of its affinity with American or European trends and its identity was lost in this affinity. The group’s popularity abroad failed to serve them in Japan or establish the movement at that time as an indigenous style.

One Japanese critic, Yamasaki Tsuruko, was an early supporter of Gutai. She offered the following explanation for the failure of other Japanese critics to recognize its significance: “Critics frequently remarked that Gutai’s works had ‘no content’ ... art critics seem to have the habit of discussing the content of art works, and thus declare that

⁸⁰ Arthur C. Danto, “Japanese Avantgarde Art,” *The Nation* 260 no. 1 (January 2, 1995): 26-29.

⁸¹ Allan Kaprow, Assemblages, Environments & Happenings (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1966).

⁸² Bertozzi, “Gutai,” 98.

content is lacking when they cannot find anything to say. In other words, they do not concern themselves with the content of emptiness.”⁸³

Although Gutai performances had been reported in the *New York Times* and photographic displays of these activities were exhibited at the Gutai’s 1958 Martha Jackson Gallery show, Gutai’s “performance art” and “Happenings” did not travel abroad.⁸⁴ Different critics have explored a number of reasons for this but the overwhelming suggestion was that Tapié preferred marketable works and hence used mostly paintings and sculptures in exhibits that he helped organize. Logistically, these works were easier to transport. However, James Roberts attributed this to a loyalty to traditional Japanese calligraphy.⁸⁵

When discussing the relationship between the two journals, *Gutai* and *Bokubi*, Roberts weighed calligraphy as a definite and heavy influence on the Gutai movement. Morita Shiryu published *Bokubi* as an avant-grade calligraphy journal and Yoshihara often contributed articles.⁸⁶ *Bokubi* served roughly as a model for Yoshihara’s journal, *Gutai*. *Gutai*, which was published principally as a newsletter for the group, invited essays from broad disciplines and foreign critics. The first issue made a proposal in English to the West, inviting cross-cultural stimulation and exchange, thereby confirming the Gutai group as a leading avant-garde movement in Japan. The journal lasted ten

⁸³ Yamasaki Tsuruko, “*Tokyo no Gutai-jin*” (Gutai Artists in Tokyo), *Gutai* 4 (July 1956): 32, reprinted in Munroe, *Scream*, 373.

⁸⁴ *New York Times*, 8 September 1957, cited by Munroe, *Scream*, 91.

⁸⁵ James Roberts, “Painting as Performance,” *Art in America* 80 no. 5 (May 1992): 113-118+.

⁸⁶ Some examples of articles include “The Space of Abstract Paintings,” *Bokubi* 21 (February 1953); “Calligraphy That Does Not Look Like Calligraphy,” vol. 2 (July 1951); and “Calligraphy and Abstract Paintings,” vol. 26 (August 1953).

years with twelve issues and featured essays by the artists of Gutai, with English summaries listed in the back. It occasionally ran articles about Pollock, whom Yoshihara admired, and invited contributions from the fields of calligraphy, *ikebana* (flower arranging) and other crafts, children's art, music, and theater. In conjunction with Tapié's efforts, the publication served to increase Gutai's international exposure and led to numerous exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe. Between 1958 and 1971, Yoshihara and Gutai artists participated in thirty international shows.

Citing artists published in the *Gutai* journal, who call their work "calligraphy without the support of the ideogram," Roberts illustrated Gutai painting as the union of Western oil technique with "extreme practices of the more esoteric Japanese and Chinese calligraphers, who have been known to apply ink by spitting or by using someone's hair as a brush."⁸⁷ Danto's article agrees with Roberts' contention that the Gutai movement seemed to present a synthesis of East and West and evolved more from native traditions than the imitation of Western styles.

Yoshihara Jiro

Yoshihara has explained his reasons for starting the Gutai Art Association. Having a strong attraction to abstraction and artists such as Miro and DeChirico, he had battled attacks on his work from the academic artists of the totalitarian and militaristic society of pre-war Japan. He called the years between 1935 and 1945 "the darkest period

⁸⁷ Roberts, "Painting as Performance," 115-116.

of my life.”⁸⁸ Writer Tono Yoshiaki provided insight into the mindset of artists before the war by illustrating their lives as “menaced by the coming clouds of the militarism and the war. The ‘abstraction’ was the internal refuge for desparate [*sic*] painters at that time ... The freedom, obtained, [*sic*] or rather given after the war, released his severe internal control.”⁸⁹ After the war, the democratic system encouraged artists and provided opportunities to see international art. In 1949 the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a daily newspaper, sponsored the first annual “Yomiuri Indépendant Exhibition,” aimed at artists who had been excluded from the conservative academic venues. This opportunity enabled younger artists to display more radical styles. The inclusion of works by Pollock, Rothko, Mark Tobey, and Ad Reinhardt in the third annual “Yomiuri Indépendant Exhibition” helped re-invigorate the avant-garde movement in Japan.

In 1951 Yoshihara had been a founding member of the *Gendai Bijutsu Kondankai* (Contemporary Art Discussion group), which focused on *sekai-sei*, or “world relevance,” that is, achieving an integration of modernism, internationalism, and tradition in Japanese culture. Yoshihara was eventually dissatisfied with “orthodox modernism” and was “convinced that formal abstract painting had no future.” Gutai’s credo, “create what has never existed before,” reflected Yoshihara’s assessment of the situation.⁹⁰

Yoshihara’s early work is reminiscent of that by post-impressionists such as Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin (figure 12) but quickly changes to a fascination with

⁸⁸ “Yoshihara Jiro,” *The Contemporary Artist in Japan*, ed. David Kung, (Honolulu, HI: East-West Center Press, 1966), 137.

⁸⁹ Tono Yoshiaki, “Forty Years of Jiro Yoshihara,” *Jiro Yoshihara Exhibition*, a brochure for the exhibition held at the Tokyo Gallery, 1967.

⁹⁰ Monroe, *Scream*, 87.

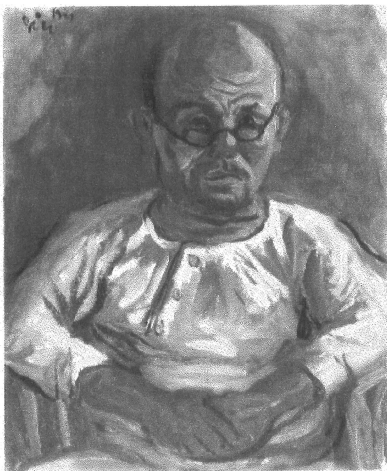


Figure 12. Yoshihara Jiro, *Portrait of an Old Man*, 1927, oil on canvas, 65.2 x 53.8 cm, as reproduced in *Jiro Yoshihara 1905-1972* (Osaka, Japan: Osaka City Museum of Modern Art, 1998), figure 5.

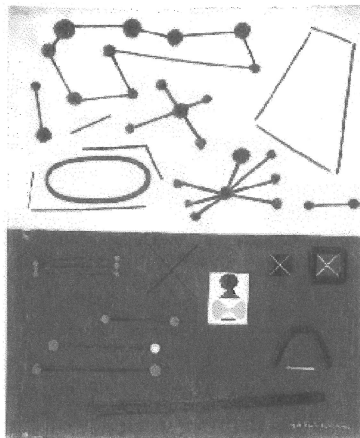


Figure 13. Yoshihara Jiro, *Work*, 1937, oil on canvas, 45.0 x 37.8 cm, as reproduced in *Jiro Yoshihara 1905-1972*, figure 52.



Figure 14. Yoshihara Jiro, *Work*, 1960, oil on canvas, 116.7 x 91.7 cm, as reproduced in *Jiro Yoshihara 1905-1972*, figure 97.

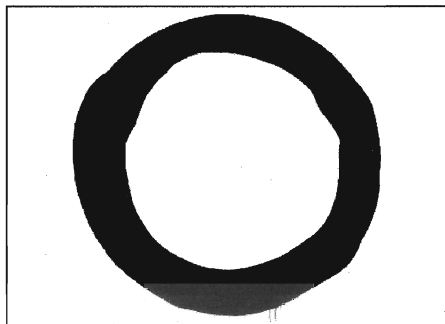


Figure 15. Yoshihara Jiro, *Work*, 1965, oil and acrylic on canvas, 181.8 x 227.5 cm, as reproduced in *Jiro Yoshihara 1905-1972*, figure 117.

geometrical abstraction, similar at times to Adolph Gottlieb's *Pictographs* (figure 13). In the late 1940's, his work took a Surrealist turn before committing completely to non-figurative representation by 1950. Geometrical abstraction dominated his style until the commencement of Gutai when *koi* and *matiere* became an increasingly visual aspect of his work. Latent calligraphic inclinations emerged as early as 1953 and recurred throughout his series of non-figurative paintings titled *Work* (figure 14). *Koi*, materials, and chance were always significant tenets in Gutai art, but Yoshihara "remained more formal and spiritual."⁹¹ And he was tenaciously involved with the avant-garde calligraphy movement. In the 1950's, attention in Japan was focused on the similarity between avant-garde calligraphy and abstract paintings. Many ideas concerning the relationship played out in the pages of *Bokubi*, with a number of articles contributed by Yoshihara. In one particular essay, "The Space of Abstract Painting," Yoshihara discussed the elimination of depth from the picture plane by means of calligraphic lines, as exemplified by Willem de Kooning.⁹² Besides his numerous essays for *Bokubi* and his participation in roundtable conferences such as "Calligraphy and Abstract Paintings," he admired Zen calligraphers such as Nantembo Toju (1839-1926), whose works he often exhorted Gutai artists to study.

⁹¹ Ibid, 94.

⁹² One might compare the Abstract Expressionists' quest to eliminate depth to the Buddhist edict that "Oriental art ... wants above all to destroy the geometric structure of space" in painting in order to eliminate the viewer's metaphysical distance to the subject and hence enlightenment. Shuzo Kuki, "The Expression of the Infinite in Japanese Art," an essay delivered at Pontigny during the *Décade* of 8-18 August 1928, published in *Influence and Counter-Influence in the Early History of Existential Phenomenology*, ed. and trans. Stephen Light, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 53.

Yoshihara's early work of the 1930's and 1940's utilized "circles and triangles." During the 1960's, he returned to circles as a maturation of his style and content. Although the first completely isolated circle painting was in 1962, *koi* still governed the content at that time. Its repetition through the years was an exercise not in perfection of similitude but in variety. Yoshihara explored the formal ranges of the circle, such as size, line width, and symmetry and experiments with the medium, incorporating drips, texture and color (figure 15). While Greenberg accused Gottlieb of repeating "safe" subjects, Yoshihara freely admitted it. "It saves me from having to think what to draw on every canvas."⁹³ By 1967, Yoshihara introduced the straight line into his repertoire. By 1971, he utilized more calligraphic marks. These circles and lines were profoundly evocative of the *hitsuzendo*, *enso* and *mujibo*, discussed above (figure 16). The later paintings of calligraphic marks "call to mind the *kanji* radicals *hen* (the left side of a Chinese ideograph) or *tsukiri* the right side of the ideograph."⁹⁴ (See Appendix C.)

According to Osaki Shinichiro, one of the leading critics for the Gutai group, Yoshihara's relationship with calligraphy extended beyond

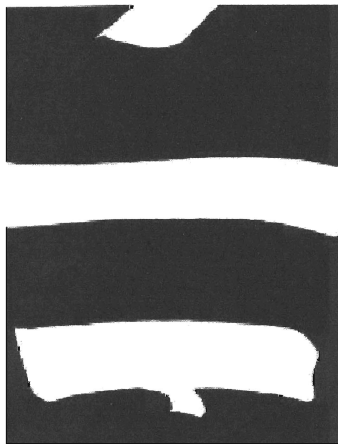


Figure 16. Yoshihara Jiro, *Work*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 117 x 91 cm, reproduced in *Jiro Yoshihara 1905-1972*, figure 127.

⁹³ Yoshihara Jiro, "Koten no tame no bunsho" (Statement for Solo Exhibition), *Yoshihara Jiro-ten* (Jiro Yoshihara), catalogue for a 20-year retrospective (Ashiya, Japan: Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, 1992).

⁹⁴ Osaki Shinichiro, "Yoshihara Jiro toh Sho" (Yoshihara Jiro and Calligraphy), *Yoshihara Jiro-ten*, 179-184. trans. Lawrence Pryor.

the shape of his forms. Like a number of calligraphers and Western artists, Yoshihara understood the restrictions of *kanji* and urged an exploration of calligraphy's limitations. The practice of exceeding these limitations could be applied to the interests of the Gutai group. Osaki also discussed *Aufheben*, which he defined as "solving problems by unifying contradictory concepts at higher levels" in regards to unifying the spiritual and the materials, an integral Zen idea.⁹⁵

The circle was a kind of apotheosis for Yoshihara. The succinct subject matter was easily associated with Zen calligraphy and the *enso*. Westerners perceived the *Circle* series as a formalist exercise and concurred with the connotation of calligraphy since a Japanese artist had done them. As was the case with Gottlieb, it seemed that the trends of other artists defined the content of his painting. Yoshihara offered his own clarification:

No matter how spacious the canvas is a single circle can fill it, and that, too, is a good thing. This, also, emancipates me from the torture of what to create on each canvas. After that is the question of what kind of circle shall I draw or how shall I bring it into being. I must confess now that I am tormented with the fact that there have been times that I have been unable to draw a single circle satisfactorily. The fact that I have been unable to draw a single line makes me study the fundamental principles of art. Then, there remains a possibility of infinity in the form of endless trail. It means a dialogue with myself that I face the circle I have drawn. I determine then whether my turmoil or compromise with my circle has come to an end or not. Often the dissatisfaction of what I have done never leaves me.⁹⁶

Yoshihara's explanation seems lonely and resigned, but his words evince his commitment to create something new, revealing, and eternal. At the end of his essay, he returned to the theme of loneliness, "I can never escape from the consciousness of loneliness.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Yoshihara Jiro, personal statement, trans. Lawrence Yoshihara. *Jiro Yoshihara Exhibition* brochure.

I can not [*sic*] explain what significance those circles I have persistently drawn here.

Sooner or later somewhere else I might also come to discover work that I will attach



Figure 17. Nantembo Toju, *Enso* (Circle), n.d., ink on paper, no size given, as reproduced in Munroe, *Scream*, figure 6.4. Inscription reads, “Eat this and drink a cup of tea,” at age 82.

myself to. No matter how it will be, I will finish my career always pursuing facing up to myself.”⁹⁷ A lifetime’s work was dedicated to finding himself within it. If we accept the circle as *enso*, we might find that readings of the circles change with their forms. These interpretations would mirror established critical approaches to calligraphy. But how does the changed meaning reflect the artist? As portrayed by Tono, “the circles ... symbolize his solitary and fecund will to exist.”⁹⁸

The *enso* is a form used predominantly by

Zen monks as an exercise in meditation (figure 17); “as the ultimate form in Zen painting, the *ensō* represents void and substance, emptiness and completion, and the union of painting, calligraphy, and meditation.”⁹⁹ Like Gottlieb’s *Bursts*, it is a symbol of dualism, synthesis and antithesis. Initially, Yoshihara did not claim a Zen influence. Many Japanese critics, as well as the artist’s son, also denied its effects.¹⁰⁰ But Yoshihara himself recalled a conversation with a Zen monk. In response to the monk’s question

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Tono, “Forty Years of Jiro Yoshihara.”

⁹⁹ Munroe, *Scream*, 94.

¹⁰⁰ In my first conversations with the artist’s son, Larry Yoshihara insisted that calligraphy was not intended at all, but in my final conversation, he seemed to change his mind. At an exhibit of his father’s work, he assented to a visible calligraphic influence in the later paintings.

regarding the circle as subject matter, Yoshihara replied that it was the best thing he could do at the moment. The monk told him that this was the “essence of Zen.”¹⁰¹ Interestingly, Tono stated that this explanation appealed more to “American tourists” since Zen was a “reimportation to Japan through American Beatniks.”¹⁰²

As detailed by Martica Sawin, the recognition of calligraphy was a result of the “wide-spread imitation of Western art” in Japan.¹⁰³ By exploiting their own sources and tradition, Japan’s artists would achieve “a rich multiplicity of concept” in their art, as opposed to artists such as Kline who denied connotations of calligraphy in his paintings. This proclivity of Japan’s to infer a calligraphic influence on Western artists was, in part, to serve their own needs. It created an intriguing interplay of appropriation. American artists seemed to exhibit similarities in their work with Japanese calligraphy. Regardless of the denial of some American artists, Japan proclaimed the influence and embarked on an extensive analysis of the connection between calligraphy and abstract painting. From these discussions, a new generation of Japanese artists explored and expanded their style and discourse based on a simulacrum. Yoshihara’s work was ultimately received as imitative of that original, albeit fictional, simulacrum. This interplay of appropriation was historically typical of Japan’s adaptive techniques, wherein the transmissions of forms across cultures occasionally “include a violation of the original forms and principles that could result in the appearance of new products that are no longer re-

¹⁰¹ “Yoshihara Jiro,” *The Contemporary Artist in Japan*, 138.

¹⁰² Tono, “Forty Years of Jiro Yoshihara.”

¹⁰³ Martica Sawin, “An American Artist in Japan,” *Arts Digest* 29 (August 1955): 12, 13.

exportable to the place of their origins,” as in the case of Japanese writing.¹⁰⁴ “That transformation is at once a result of an internalization of the creative process on the part of the recipient and a deviation from the original form or, to put it another way, a ‘creative misunderstanding,’” possibly intentional in the atmosphere of an occupied post-war Japan.

Osaki alleged that the influence of calligraphy was overpowering Yoshihara’s direction in art and led him from an emphasis on action and medium to one on space and form. Combined with his attention to dualism, this change induces a richer interpretation of his *Circle* series. Rather than transmit spirit through the process onto the material, Yoshihara used his paintings to represent a new dualism—allowing his spirit to transmit the form and the form to transmit that spirit such that his paintings became the mirror he was searching for. While always a significant factor in Gutai’s methods, this particular dualistic idea found its final and independent rendition in Yoshihara’s *Circles*. The tangible is a representation of the intangible and could only have been created by that idea. Yoshihara had found his *Aufheben*. One might even conclude that this intangible spirit was also un-say-able; hence the exclusion of actual ideograms and Yoshihara’s perceived limitations of them. The understanding of this intangible, un-say-able spirit was dependent upon the participation of the spectator, “incumbent upon them to make the great leap, to enter into depthless metaphysical abysses and to be overwhelmed there.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Shimizu Yoshiaki, “Transmission and Transformation: Chinese Calligraphy and Japanese Calligraphy,” *Multiple Meanings*, 5-6.

¹⁰⁵ Shuzo Kuki, “The Expression of the Infinite,” 53.

The viewer, in essence, validates the work's meaning, comparable to the Zen riddle, "If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?"

Post-Imperialism in Japan

The innovation of the Gutai cannot be understood properly apart from a solid understanding of Japanese culture. Confucian philosophy drives Japan to avoid dramatic change and maintain *status quo*. Furthermore, because of Confucianism and Japan's geographic isolation, the group ethic in Japan is legendary. Breaking away from the conventions of stringent homogeneity is rare in Japan, often encountering resistance. But the outcome and effects of World War II provided a powerful catalyst for cultural rupture. Matsui Midori gave an intriguing examination of Japan's adjustment after the war. In a post-colonial perspective, Matsui described Japan's internalized image as "other," as a rebellion against technological and modern imperialism. "The fiction [of otherness] is internalized by the Japanese themselves and exploited, as a strategy in the sale of Japanese 'culture' to the West."¹⁰⁶ According to Matsui, Gutai and other modern movements were part of that sale. Nonetheless, Gutai's "hybridity" of Western and Japanese style resulted in a phenomenon known as "splitting," in which "the subject preserves its difference from the imperatives of the dominant cultures and through that resistance eventually transforms the way that native and foreign traditions are understood."

¹⁰⁶ Matsui Midori, "Beyond Signs: Hybridity in Japanese Art," *The Age of Anxiety*, a catalogue for the exhibition, ed. Louise Dompierre, (Toronto, Ontario: The Power Plant, 1995), 64, 65.

Matsui also explained Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard's exposition of Japan's technological initiative. While the West is driven by the "rational subject" in its evolution and technology, Japan is "fundamentally formalist," that is, "instead of attachment to essence, origin, and absolute godhead, Japanese culture possesses loyalty to form," to the exclusion of any investigation of reasons why.¹⁰⁷ The lack of wonder concerning rationality or individual existence suits exactly their group ethic. In such a group-oriented society, wherein independent rationality and change is discouraged, a departure from established form is rare indeed. But with the catalyst of post-war liberation, the Gutai credo and the works that subscribed to it challenged and promoted Japanese art in true Zen dualistic fashion. Just as Murakami broke the paper screens, so too did Gutai free Japanese art.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 63.

Chapter 4 Conclusion: A Word and Image Comparison

Although an analytical comparison of the works of Adolph Gottlieb and Yoshihara Jiro has not yet been written, such a study proves intriguing. Their paintings exhibit a number of striking similarities in formal compositions, “calligraphic” and pictographic connotations, dualistic themes, and concurrent stylistic development but display one major difference—their native culture. Two particular paintings by these artists: Gottlieb’s *Rolling*, 1961 (figure 18), and Yoshihara’s *Red Circle on Black*, 1965 (figure 19), make an apt comparison not necessarily because of their stylistic similarities but because of consistent descriptions of them by critics as “calligraphic.” Although not confused with calligraphy, the term “calligraphic” was often employed by writers to invoke the suggestion of Orientalism and Zen mysticism when describing Gottlieb’s paintings. For Yoshihara and Japanese artists however, this term is more a direct connection to *shodo*. The implications of this term reveal the crux of this thesis. How does “calligraphic” change our interpretations?

Gottlieb painted *Rolling* at the height of his *Burst* series. Its symbolism is stark and the “calligraphic” strokes at the bottom reveal no direct linguistic reference. They function formally, overlapping and fighting the flatness of the pictorial plane. The discs in blue and red hover, while an asterisk shape of pink rests on the left just above the

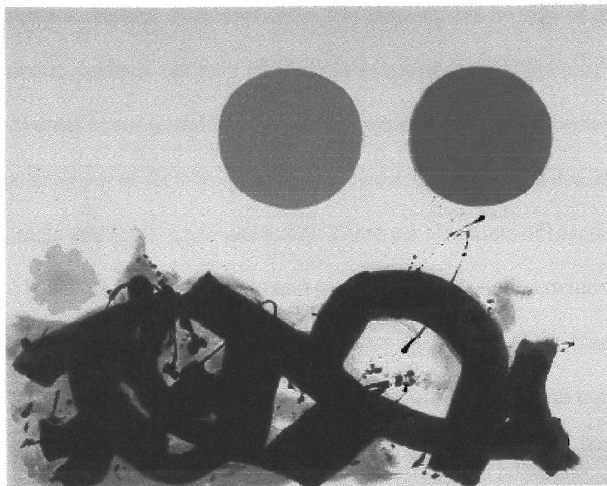


Figure 18. Adolph Gottlieb, *Rolling*, 1961, oil on canvas. 90 x 72 in., Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia.

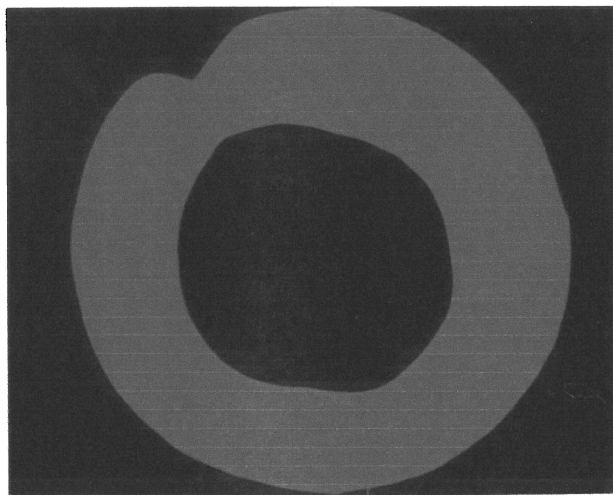


Figure 19. Yoshihara Jiro, *Red Circle on Black*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 71¾ x 89¾ in., as reproduced in Munroe, *Scream*, plate 18.

“land” mass of black strokes. Formalistically, this painting can be viewed as typical of Gottlieb’s symbolic dualism, not only of upper versus lower spaces but also blue versus red, geometric versus chaotic, and flat versus overlapping. According to Sandler, it is an example of “polarity not of dichotomy.”¹⁰⁸ These polarities represent dualities such as sky and earth, male and female, yin and yang. There are also hints of blended pink throughout the “land” mass and splatters and gradations of black that demonstrate both opacity and translucence. The blended pink connects the asterisk to the black mass.

What symbolism lies in this composition? Circles or discs recall a plenitude of

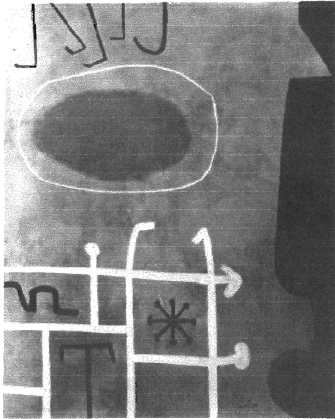


Figure 20. Adolph Gottlieb, *Sentinel*, 1951, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in., as reproduced in Doty, *Adolph Gottlieb*, 56.

meanings from Gottlieb’s earlier pictographs such as *Evil Eye*, 1946, or as Alloway suggested, “a way of preserving manual touch as a positive value.”¹⁰⁹ The repetition of circles provided a constant form that was consistently honest and fresh. The asterisk can be seen in paintings such as *Sentinel*, 1951 (figure 20), and *W*, 1954.

Alternatively, it can be viewed as an inconsistent disc representing a chaotic breakup as it approaches the “ground.” It bears repeating that neither a language nor word is indicated by the

¹⁰⁸ Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1976), 200.

¹⁰⁹ Alloway, “Gottlieb and Abstract Painting,” *Retrospective*, 60.

“calligraphic” depiction of the ground. It does resemble Japanese, particularly Zen, calligraphy but this is not supported by any of Gottlieb’s statements. Rather it is emotional writing, automatism, as honest as the circles but also inconsistent.

The subject matter that *Rolling* could suggest is one of destruction and rebirth, powered by the dyads of order (the discs) and chaos. Rebirth can be inferred from the most prominent black stroke, centered beneath the two discs. In a circular motion as large as the discs, a thick black line encompasses a rising white space, splattered and stained with creeping translucent black, creating depth. Splatters from the red disc and black line seem to suggest magnetism. The title implies slow movement up and down and calls to mind the fact that two things roll: spheres and hills. The “abstract symbolism” of *Rolling* constitutes a complex subject, but the effect of the painting is a reduction to the primal feeling of comfort as induced by karma: what goes around, comes around.

All of Gottlieb’s critics insisted that regardless of subject matter, the effect the artist sought was the reduction to basic emotions and abstract ideas dependent on the viewer’s perception. While *Pictographs* held the implication of cultural conditioning, *Bursts* forced the viewer to become introspective. Even so, Gottlieb defied Greenberg’s prescription that sensuous art was subject-less. He did however maintain the inarticulate sentence of Abstract Expressionism. The subject of dualism, particularly of chaos and rebirth, has already been established as a prevalent Zen Buddhist theme. In this case, the term “calligraphic” lends itself to the resonance of Zen Buddhism and is seemingly appropriate for the subject. However, inhibited by Western writing and sign systems and

Greenberg's insistence on the Western ancestry of Abstract Expressionism, the only possible "reading" for Gottlieb's "calligraphic" strokes is the title.

Though *Rolling* is not as "pure" as Greenberg might have preferred, the effect is sensuous. Its inspiration or intention is most likely related to the title. In a word/image comparison, they become synonymous, each conjuring the other as representations. W.J.T. Mitchell's theory stated that word and image are linked in a fluctuating relationship of "word vs. image" and "word as image."¹¹⁰ There is a relationship either as opposites since the word is not the image and/or as synonyms since they are associated. Hence, Mitchell's word and image conundrum is created. Words and images are at once antonyms and synonyms, each conjuring the other as an opposite or equivalent. From this perspective, the painting suddenly represents the title sensuously. All the formal elements emphasize the title. And it becomes increasingly evident that dualism is more of a narrative subject than an interpreted sensation.

This leads to two possible interpretations: 1) accepting the term "calligraphic" and hence the interpretation of dualism with associations of Zen Buddhism or, 2) accepting a word/image association with the title and foregoing a dualistic theme in favor of sensuous reception. Neither really agrees with Greenbergian discourse but Gottlieb never had in his use of narrative titles and obvious pictographic signs. In both interpretations though, the "calligraphic" marks themselves are never more than gestural forms and the painting remains a representation.

¹¹⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Word and Image," *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 53. Mitchell is highly critical of Greenberg's contention of "pure" art. See Mitchell, "*Ut Pictura Theoria*: Abstract Painting and Language," *Picture Theory* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 213-239.

Gottlieb's stylistic maturation to *Bursts* echoed the trend of Abstract Expressionists to reduce signs to their parts or forms. Without the interaction of the whole, what is the signification of the parts? The signification is lost, achieving the reduction to basic emotion dependent on viewer reception. The parts direct a return to the picture plane, the nature of the materials, the action of the artist, and the basic viewer experience—sensation. Moreover the parts are cleansed of ideology, purified. These forms signify an appreciation of the sensuous experience and hence the basis for perception and thought without the imbrument of political agendas and (European) cultural elitism. It is the reduction to its parts that eliminates the linguistic references. In this respect, forms are like letters; adjoined, they spell words and convey concepts, but individually a letter does not contain meaning.

Mukai Shutaro reiterated that writing systems become the basis for logic and perception for the native culture; "From the point of view of cultural semiology, 'culture equals language.'"¹¹¹ Consequently, Westerners are able to isolate and dissolve a symbol into "nothingness" or non-signification because their language and writing systems (and hence logic and culture) can be isolated and dissolved into autonomous parts. Just as words are formed from letters, so logic is formed from sensory perceptions. And, as sentences are constructed from words, so ideology is constructed from logic. All, however, are capable of being reduced to meaningless parts, relinquishing the intent of the whole. Abstract Expressionism was an exercise in this reduction, creating

¹¹¹ Mukai Shutaro, "Characters that Represent, Reflect, and Translate Culture—in the Context of the Revolution in Modern Art," *The Empire of Signs. Semiotic Essays on Japanese Culture*, ed. Ikegami Yoshihiko, (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1991), 65.

independent forms. Even in reconstructions, each form retains its autonomy, resulting in a pansemic work.

Japanese, Chinese, and other writing systems derived from China's model are fundamentally different. Words are not necessarily constructed from meaningless parts, but rather meaningful ideograms and pictographs. Furthermore, ideograms are not fashioned from a traditional placement of lines but from an abstracted figurative representation. A representation could technically be reduced to parts but each part still retains the meaning and prescribed process of the whole and is non-autonomous. "A language based on such a writing system can never be dissolved into a constellation of nothingness like western [sic] languages, for the 'seeds' of the constellation are inherent in the very signs and lines used in writing."¹¹² To illustrate, Mukai quoted the "poem," 雨 = Ame ("The Rain") by Niikuni Seiichi (figure 21). The construction of the ideogram for rain originated as a drawing of rain (figure 22). The dots that pervade the page in the poem resemble rain both visually and scripturally.

Japanese writing prevents a reductionist sense of logic in calligraphy and art and determines a new mode of thinking. Hozumi Toshiaki asserted that linguists such as Saussure "underestimate the visual influence of written characters on thinking."¹¹³ The parts cannot be reduced to merely their formal elements without still symbolizing their real world referents. It takes on the role of word/image, thus preventing the loss of signification. Instead the parts remain signs of the ideograms contributing to the creation

¹¹² Ibid, 66. "Constellation" refers to *kanji*.

¹¹³ Hozumi Toshiaki, "(Spiritual Fragment)," *Spiritual Fragment*, 8.

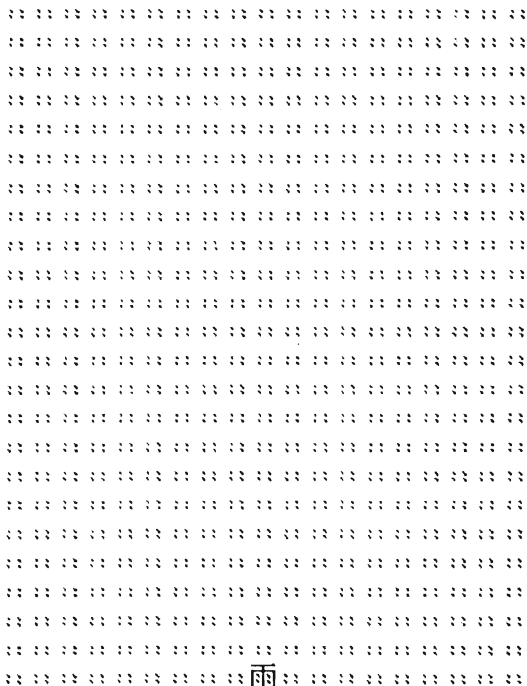


Figure 21. 雨 = Ame ("The Rain") by Niikuni Seiichi, 1966, as reproduced in Ikegami, Yoshihiko, The Empire of Signs, Semiotic Essays on Japanese Culture (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1991), 59.



Figure 22. Origination of *kanji* for rain, diagram from Aoki, Illustrated Japanese Characters, 150.

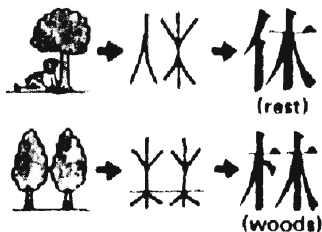


Figure 23. Compound ideographs, diagram from Aoki, Illustrated Japanese Characters, 17.

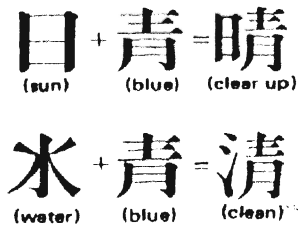


Figure 24. Compound ideo-phonograms, diagram from Aoki, Illustrated Japanese Characters, 17.

of new ideograms and words, as illustrated by figures 23 and 24. The introduction of an abstract style to calligraphy did not reduce the words to simple empty forms but acted more like another combination of ideograms conjoined to create an elevated and more complex ideogram. Such is the methodology of traditional Japanese calligraphy when considering stylistic differences and the case of *Red Circle on Black*. A rare formal and iconographic analysis from a Western critic was given by Arthur C. Danto:

Red Circle on Black is strikingly beautiful. The huge, slightly compressed circle must have been painted in a single authoritative, calligraphic gesture with an immense brush. Iconographically, I surmise that it is the traditional O-shape that figures as the emblem of enlightenment, as in the famous ox-herding pictures Dr. Suzuki commented upon. What Yoshihara took from Pollock was the drip, which reminds the viewer that this is paint, with a life of its own. It is having its own life that seems to me to characterize this extraordinary image.¹¹⁴

Danto characterized all of Gutai similarly.

Generally, *Red Circle* garners mostly historical interpretations as an interstice of Japanese tradition and post-war modernism. James Roberts and Alexandra Munroe offered historical context, while maintaining a Zen connection. Munroe insisted on the direct influence of Zen, describing Yoshihara's *Circles* as *enso*, "the ultimate form in Zen painting." While critics seemed willing to ascribe a Zen and calligraphic influence, I have found none that use the methodology of calligraphy to interpret the subject as moderated by the abstract style so similar to Abstract Expressionism. Interpretations of *Rolling* have demonstrated the effect of Zen philosophy on analyses of Abstract Expressionist work and style. However Yoshihara's painting can illustrate how the style

¹¹⁴ Arthur C. Danto, "Japanese Avant-garde Art," *The Nation* 260 no. 1 (January 1995): 29.

of Abstract Expressionism has been appropriated to enhance the Zen subject and its calligraphic interpretation.

The understanding of avant-garde calligraphy involved more than an appreciation of form. Aestheticists conceived of the abstraction of forms as a Zen exercise. Hisamatsu Shinichi explained that “instead of form producing form, form is produced by what is without form.”¹¹⁵ *Red Circle* as the *enso* is startlingly different from traditional renditions such as Nantembo’s. Bearing in mind not only the cause for the movement towards abstract gestural calligraphy in Japan but also Yoshihara’s interest in Pollock, Abstract Expressionism, and American art in general, this difference could be attributed to an appropriation of the American style rather than its influence. As we have seen in the adaptation of Chinese writing, appropriation is an historical occurrence in Japan used most often to fill the gaps needed to bridge cultures.¹¹⁶ A reduction to a meaningless, ineffable form is illogical due to the model of Japanese writing and calligraphy. Instead this model is used in conjunction with the appropriation of Abstract Expressionist objectives to produce a form for what is without form.

Through the conditioning of Japanese writing, the viewer still associates a referent to the sign. No matter how formally it is depicted, the signified is never absent. But how is its interpretation changed in its presentation? Yoshihara presented an abstraction of not only the form but also the concept that the form signified in calligraphy. By

¹¹⁵ Munroe, *Scream*, 131. Originally published in *Zen and the Fine Arts*, by Hisamatsu Shinichi, trans. Gishin Tokiwa, (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1982), 69.

¹¹⁶ It can be argued that this occurs not so much as a necessity but as an imperialist reaction to “suspicious” encroaching foreign influences. Eventually it results in the hybridity explicated by Matsui Midori, “Beyond Signs,” *Age of Anxiety*, 63-69.

removing the context of the *enso* and isolating the image to be the sole occupant of the canvas, Yoshihara extrapolated the meaning of *enso* to the extreme. It no longer has a literal translation. In effect, he has abstracted an already abstruse concept, mirroring the evolution of Japanese characters and language. The Japanese viewer who has an orientation to calligraphy, Zen Buddhism and *enso* will better understand the subtleties and layers of meaning within the painting as opposed to a viewer who can only appreciate its formal qualities. The knowledgeable viewer will integrate the abstract style into a new conception of the image. The new concept, the subject and content of the painting, is ineffable but not meaningless. The former signified referent, the paradoxical and dualistic “void and substance, emptiness and completion” is imperative to its new understanding as a Zen concept. It must be emphasized that this content is not demonstrated as a relationship amongst the formal parts but as a metaphysical transformation of the sign dependant on its calligraphic history.

The circle fills the entire canvas, large and imposing, yet the stroke of the circle is unsteady and imperfect. It completes its rotation but there are a few discrepancies in the contours, betraying Danto’s appraisal as singular and “authoritative.” At the upper left of the circle it thins slightly, hinting at the start and end of the stroke but never delivering a definitive answer. The color is richly opaque and the thickness of the paint is evident in the drip at the bottom of the circle. Imagine the union of “void and substance, emptiness and completion” as compressed, unsteady, imperfect, and a little messy. This returns to

the idea of transcendence, specifically finding a “place of nothingness” wherein the consciousness is established with the meeting of opposites.¹¹⁷

Imagine also Yoshihara’s painting as an example of a “thing-in-itself” as defined by Tani Arata: “in general, ‘thing-in-itself’ signifies ‘substance of its own,’ ‘body of one’s own,’ ‘immediacy without figure of speech’ and ‘the transcendental’ which results from it.”¹¹⁸ As Tani elucidated, when an object is meant to stand for itself, its origin is lost and the separation between “signifier” and “signified” is eliminated. Similar in theory to Mitchell’s word/image conundrum, Tani’s signifier/signified are no longer independent entities. The painting is not an image of a sign but the “thing-in-itself.” It is its own meaning, transcending not only Japanese language but also form and signification. And Yoshihara’s abstraction of an abstraction is just that, becoming the meaning comprehensible only by beholding the painting. Whereas Gottlieb and most American painters extracted linguistic reference and meaning in order to gain the sensuous ineffable experience, Yoshihara incorporated the references in order to create a sign conceivable only through the sensuous experience.

¹¹⁷ Munroe, *Scream*, 131.

¹¹⁸ Tani Arata, “Concerning the ‘Institution’ in Art II,” *Scream*, 386. Originally published in *Bijutsu techo* no. 362 (January 1973): 308-325; reprinted in *Kaiten suru hyosho: Gendai bijutsu-datsu posuto modan no shikaku* (Representation Revolved: Contemporary Art As Seen from the Post-Post modern [sic] Perspective) (Tokyo: Gendaikikakushitsu Publishers, 1992), 298-315.

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Appendix A

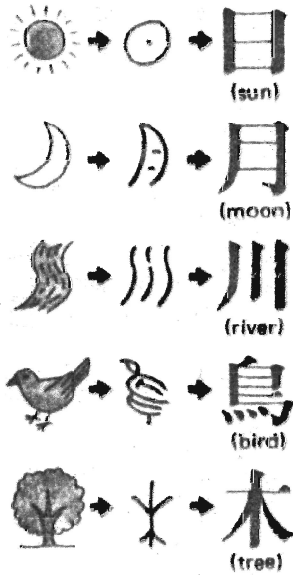


Figure A-1. A diagram of pictographic *kanji* characters that are based on figurative drawings, as published in Aoki, *Illustrated Japanese Characters*, 16. The context of the *kanji* determines its exact meaning and pronunciation.



Figure A-2. Soothsayers developed a system of pictographs in the 14th century B.C. to record divination. They were written on tortoise shell and animal bones, also used for divination. These pictographs evolved into the Gilt, Seal, Square and Print characters described above, from Aoki, *Illustrated Japanese Characters*, 15.

The Hiragana and Katakana									
あ a	い i	う u	え e	お o	ア a	イ i	ウ u	エ e	オ o
か ka	き ki	く ku	け ke	こ ko	カ ka	キ ki	ク ku	ケ ke	コ ko
さ sa	し shi	す su	せ se	そ so	サ sa	シ shi	ス su	セ se	ソ so
た ta	ち chi	つ tsu	て te	と to	タ ta	チ chi	ツ tsu	テ te	ト to
な na	に ni	ぬ nu	ね ne	の no	ナ na	ニ ni	ヌ nu	ネ ne	ノ no
は ha	ひ hi	ふ fu	へ he	ほ ho	ハ ha	ヒ hi	フ fu	ヘ he	ホ ho
ま ma	み mi	む mu	め me	も mo	マ ma	ミ mi	ム mu	メ me	モ mo
や ya		ゆ yu		よ yo	ヤ ya		ユ yu		ヨ yo
ら ra	り ri	る ru	れ re	ろ ro	ラ ra	リ ri	ル ru	レ re	ロ ro
わ wa				を o	ワ wa				ヲ o
ん n					ン n				

Figure A-3. The *hiragana* and *katakana* syllabary. In addition to *kanji*, *hiragana* and *katakana*, Roman letters, or *romaji*, are gaining widespread use in the transliteration of Japanese. *Romaji* is easily recognized and read by Japanese people, since it is taught in the school systems in conjunction with the move to make English an official language of Japan. Aoki, Japanese Illustrated Characters, 21.

Sosho forms of kanji

Kanji: 安 ann 以 i 宇 u 衣 e 於 o (i te)
 Hiragana: あ a い i う u え e お o

Kaisho forms of kanji

Kanji: 安 ann 伊 ii 宇 u 江 e 於 o (i te)
 Katakana: ア a イ i ウ u エ e オ o

Figure A-4. The abstraction of *kanji* characters and styles into *hiragana* and *katakana*.

Appendix B

(D) Graphology

The form of a character to be used can be an indication of the respect another person intends to show. The character 殿 *dono* for example normally used to indicate "Mr." on letters has varying forms:

To a person superior *meue* to you

To a person of similar position *taitō*

To a person inferior *meshita* to you

Figure B-1. The graphology of the character *dono* is demonstrated in Earnshaw, *Sho—Japanese Calligraphy*, 130. Note how the strokes differentiate the meaning.

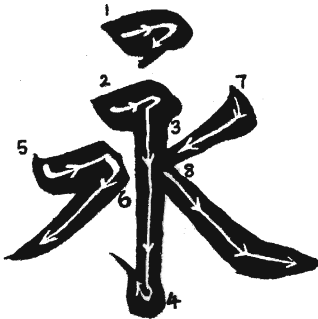


Figure B-2. Every *kanji* has a precise stroke order, which is taught in conjunction with its meaning from elementary school to college. Moreover the stroke order is essential for finding the character in a *kanji* dictionary. Figure from Earnshaw, *Sho—Japanese Calligraphy*, 130.

For each kanji used in the Japanese language there are two or more possible pronunciations. These are divided into *on* readings and *kun* readings.

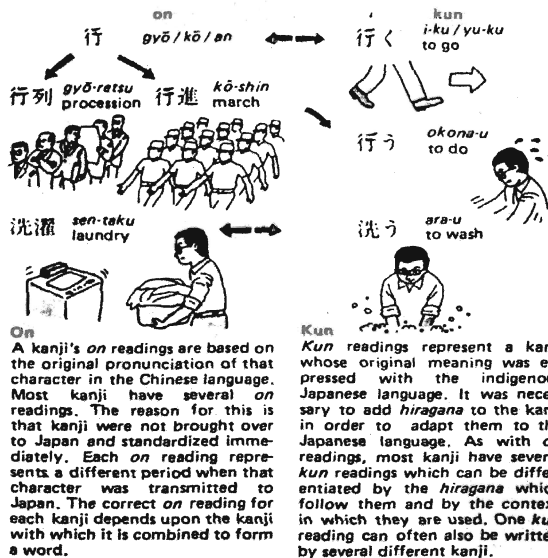


Figure B-3. *On* and *kun* readings, as reproduced from Aoki, *Illustrated Japanese Characters*, 26.

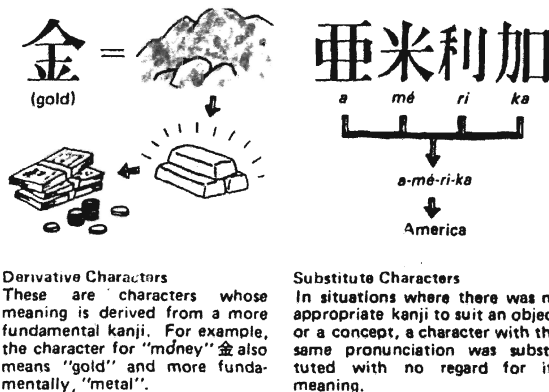
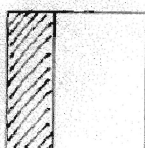
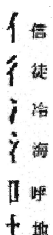
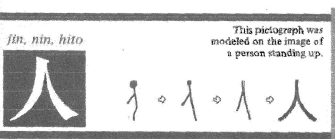



Figure B-4. Derivative *kanji* have a variety of meanings and pronunciations, while substitute *kanji* are used purely for their phonetic value. Substitute characters are used more often in China. Excerpt from Aoki, *Illustrated Japanese Characters*, 17.

Appendix C


Below are some diagrams of *kanji* radicals with examples of characters, as published in Earnshaw, *Sho—Japanese Calligraphy* and Aoki, *Illustrated Japanese Characters*.

<p>hen 偏</p> 	<p>nimben 人</p> <p>gyōnimben 徒</p> <p>nisui 冷</p> <p>sanzui 海</p> <p>kuchihen 呼</p> <p>tsuchihen 地</p>		<p style="text-align: center; font-size: small;">This pictograph was modeled on the image of a person standing up.</p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: x-small;">jin, nin, hito</p>  <p style="font-size: x-small;">Meaning person, people, others, respectable people, personality, the unit used for counting people. When abbreviated for use with compounds it looks like this and is called the "nimben" element.</p>
--	--	---	--




(kon, kin, ima)
now

→




(kyō)
today



(bukkyō)
Buddhism

→





→ 今年
(ko-toshi)
this year

今夜
(kon-ya)
tonight

今月
(kon-getsu)
this month


今朝
(kō-sa)
this morning






(futsu-go)
The French language

←

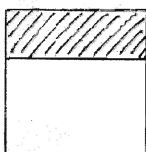


(butsu, futsu, hotoké)
Buddhism



When Buddhism was introduced to China, the phonographic compound of 佛陀 was created to express the idea of "Buddha". 佛 is the original form for 仏. This character is also used to represent France.

kanmuri 冠



ukanmuri 安

wakanmuri 冗

kusakanmuri 草

takekanmuri 笛

hatsugashira 葦

hachigashira 八公

電

This character is drawn from a combination of lightning and a rain drop. It means "lightning", "electricity" and "very fast".

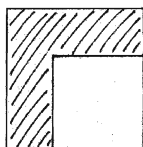
(den)
electricity

露

Based on the image of a series of grains, this character is used to describe the phenomenon of humidity becoming like grains; dew. It also means "wet", "to expose", "bare", "to become thin" and "to be few in number".

(ro, tsuyu)
dew

tare 垂

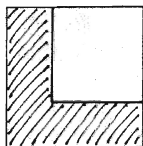


gandare 原

madare 店

shikabane 展

niyo 績

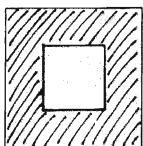


shinnyō 近

sōnyō 起

innyō 延

kamae 構

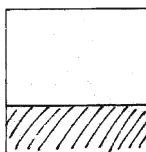


mongamae 門

kigamae 气

kunigamae 口

ashi 脚

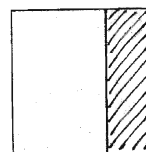


hirabi 書

sara 盆

koromo 衣袋

tsukuri 才



rittō 利

fushizukuri 印

tomasu 料

akubi 欲

ōzato 部

ōgai 頁

本

(hon, moto)
source, book

The line through the lower part of the tree indicates its roots. The roots are the tree's source of nourishment. This led to the association of this character with "source", "origin", and "main part". When used as a prefix it means "correct" and "true". Since books were seen as the source of knowledge it came to mean "book".

日本

(nippon "ni-hon")
Japan

本店

(hon-ten)
head office

本名

(hon-myō)
real name

本屋

(hon-ya)
bookstore

Vita

Ginger Suzanne Russell was born on February 17, 1973, in Newport News, Virginia. She is the daughter of Howard and Sok Sun Russell and is an American citizen. From 1980 to 1987, she lived in Seoul, Korea. She graduated from North Stafford High School, Stafford, Virginia, in 1991. She attended Virginia Commonwealth University on a Provost Scholarship and received her Bachelor of Arts in Art History, Museum Studies with a minor in Chemistry in 1995. From 1996 to 1998, she continued graduate study in Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University. While completing her undergraduate and graduate studies, she worked at museums such as the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the Richmond History Center/Valentine Museum and the Smithsonian Institution's Conservation Analytical Laboratory. In 1998, she moved to Urawa, Japan and taught in public schools for two years. She returned to the U.S. in 2000 after an extended round-the-world trip through Asia and Europe. She has been previously published in *ATHANOR* XVII, 1999.