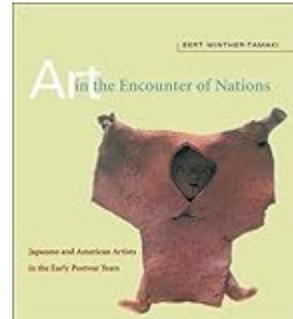




Bert Winther-Tamaki. *Art in the Encounter of Nations: Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001. xi + 207 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2400-6.



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The Art of Nationalism

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In Washington, D.C. last June, at the annual conference of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, a panel on modern art exhibitions and the Cold War attracted a standing-room-only audience. The speakers included not only historians, but also officials from the State Department and the National Museum of Art. As this session demonstrated, a growing number of scholars in the field known traditionally as “diplomatic history” are exploring the role of culture in international relations, blurring the borders that previously defined the field and opening it to interdisciplinary perspectives.[1] Art historian Bert Winther-Tamaki engages in a similar effort but from a different direction: he skillfully demonstrates how international relations have influenced the world of modern art. His book, *Art in the Encounter of Nations*, deserves the attention of scholars in both fields.

Focusing on seven Japanese and American artists, Winther-Tamaki explores how discourses of national identity impinged on modern art in the two decades following World War II. Grounded in the theoretical approaches of Benedict Anderson, Homi K. Bhabha, and

Edward W. Said, the book’s central theme is “artistic nationalism,” a term that Winther-Tamaki coins to describe the criticism and opposition faced by artists whose work seemed to meld the ostensibly discrete East and West. The central proposition of artistic nationalism, as defined early in the first chapter, is the belief that an artist’s national identity fundamentally conditions his or her artistic identity. In subsequent chapters, Winther-Tamaki presents case studies that demonstrate the influence of this ideology. As Japanese, Japanese-American, and European-American artists attempted to integrate Japanese aesthetic traditions and modern abstract art, other artists and critics frequently took to the barricades to defend and reinforce the borders that supposedly separated East from West. Modern art, rather than serving as an international language, thus became a field of nationalist expression.

Also in the first chapter, Winther-Tamaki briefly discusses U.S.-Japan relations to identify roots of the belief in an East-West dichotomy. He notes that postwar scholar D. T. Suzuki, an important authority on Zen Buddhism and Japanese culture for the modern artists ana-

lyzed in later chapters, popularized the notion of a “spiritual East” and a “materialistic West.” Earlier important sources included the Meiji-era art scholars Okakura Kakuzo and Ernest Fenollosa, both of whom extolled Japanese art traditions. Okakura, in particular, was an early and prominent proponent of artistic nationalism who eloquently defended the lines that were thought to separate the East and West. Unfortunately, Winther-Tamaki devotes only a handful of pages to this historical background. He refers to Okakura’s *The Book of Tea*, which is still in print, but overlooks the more polemical works *The Ideals of the East* and *The Awakening of Japan*, in which Okakura develops the spiritual-materialistic dichotomy. Popular Meiji-era writers Lafcadio Hearn and Edwin Arnold, who do not appear in Winther-Tamaki’s account, also built successful careers by defining essential differences between traditional Japan and the modern West. Like many historians of U.S.-Japan relations, Winther-Tamaki concentrates his focus on the post-World War II era. Many of the issues that drive his study, however, had very deep roots and fueled wide discussion beginning in the late nineteenth century.[2]

In his second and third chapters, the author presents case studies of Okada Kenzo, Hasegawa Saburo, Mark Tobey, Franz Kline, Morita Shiryu, and Yagi Kazuo. (A generous number of illustrations support Winther-Tamaki’s analysis, though, in a few cases, the use of color plates rather than black-and-white would be helpful.) In Japan, Morita and Yagi worked to infuse modern abstraction into the traditional worlds of Japanese calligraphy and pottery respectively. As both artists struggled to blaze paths from tradition to modernity within their artistic communities, they found that American painters and sculptors already were infusing Japanese aesthetic traditions into modern abstraction. To Morita and Yagi, this recognition fell like a physical blow that threatened to deprive each of his artistic and national birthright. Winther-Tamaki carefully weaves biography and theory to reveal how Morita and Yagi attempted to resolve their crises of national identity via their works.

As they did so, artists and critics in the United States were defining the relationship between national identity and Abstract Expressionism. At first, readers might wonder how Abstract Expressionism could possibly express national characteristics. Is it not, as one art critic wrote, a universal language like Esperanto (p. 20)? As Winther-Tamaki shows in a fascinating passage, however, many artists and critics claimed that “national flavors” characterized Abstract Expressionist works: French works were “suave,” while American works were “vigorous” (pp. 20-

21). To many, the individualism and masculinity of Jackson Pollack personified American Abstract Expressionism.

Japanese abstract artists who attempted to bridge the perceived chasm between the traditional East and the modern West sometimes found that their success abroad triggered criticism in Japan. Okada, a Japanese expatriate in New York who eventually became a U.S. citizen, emphasized the influence of Japanese traditions in his abstract works. Drawing from the vocabulary of Japanese aesthetics, he used the term “yugenism” to characterize the tranquillity and gentleness of his style. Indeed, one American reviewer described Okada’s paintings as “faded silk” (p. 27), which proved a useful contrast to the more “American” style of intense and saturated colors in the work of Mark Rothko, Okada’s friend. Although Okada was successful in the United States, some Japanese critics denounced his Abstract Expressionist work as “*karayuki-san* art” catering to the postwar American taste for “Japonica” (p. 28). “*Karayuki-san*” was the prewar term for Japanese prostitutes forced to work overseas, while “Japonica” echoed the nineteenth-century Orientalist fantasies of Arnold.

While Hasegawa’s approach to modern art differed greatly from Okada’s, their experiences as expatriates were remarkably similar. Abandoning oil painting as “artistic colonialism” (p. 35), Hasegawa attempted to identify East Asian calligraphy as a premodern form of abstraction. For his efforts, he gained the admiration of such Americans as Alan Watts, who saw him as a hybrid of Paris bohemian and Zen Buddhist. But to other Japanese artists, Hasegawa was less a cultural ambassador than an eccentric aspiring to be the Beat Generation’s Japanese guru. They detested his practice of wearing kimono in American public appearances and attacked him as an “outlandish spectacle” of “unidentifiable nationality” (p. 43).

As Winther-Tamaki shows, Americans who were influenced by East Asian art also ran the risk of being typecast according to the axioms of artistic nationalism. Tobey, who studied Japanese calligraphy and Suzuki’s writings on Zen, described his works as “Sumi Paintings” (using the Japanese word for ink, *sumi*). To American critics, Tobey’s “Oriental models” resulted in the defect of understatement. Despite Tobey’s protest that he “could never be any but the Occidental that I am,” scholars viewed his work as too reticent, even effeminate, in contrast with the virility of Pollock (pp. 52-55).

Kline, the most successful of the Abstract Expression-

ists whom Winther-Tamaki analyzes, succeeded at least in part because of his ability to recognize and conform to the demands of artistic nationalism. Like Tobey, Kline had enthusiastically studied calligraphy but later came to deny resolutely its role in his work. While his paintings clearly echoed the influence of his earlier enthusiasm, his rhetorical rejection of calligraphy won him, in the words of artist and critic Elaine de Kooning, an “all-American” place in the canon of Abstract Expressionism (p. 61).

Winther-Tamaki reserves his last and longest chapter for Isamu Noguchi, the Japanese-American sculptor and designer. In Noguchi’s case, one might expect finally to see a complete blurring of the borders of national identity: the son of a Japanese poet, Noguchi Yonejiro, and an American editor, Leonie Gilmour, he saw himself as “the fusion of two worlds, the East and the West” (p. 112). And yet, as Winther-Tamaki deftly demonstrates, Noguchi, his works, and their public reception usually leaned toward one national identity or the other. Two events serve to illustrate this point. In 1952, Noguchi presented a proposal for a memorial cenotaph at Hiroshima’s Peace Park. Although it incorporated ancient Japanese archetypal symbols, it was rejected because the memorial committee had decided that the designer should be Japanese. An American citizen, Noguchi would be an inappropriate choice to commemorate those killed by an American bomb. In 1956-58, however, he received funding from the Japanese government to install a “Japanese Garden” at UNESCO headquarters in Paris (for which he imported large stones from Japan). In this instance, Japanese officials found him adequate to the task of conveying Japanese identity. Because Winther-Tamaki presents an extended biographical and artistic portrait of Noguchi, we come to know this artist more fully than those in the other case studies. Here we see in telling detail the interplay of individual, national, and artistic identity. Instead of fusing his two national identities, Noguchi and his works oscillated between the two in response to the artistic nationalism of his different audiences.

Written for a scholarly, not a general, readership, *Art in the Encounter of Nations* contributes to a wide range of academic fields, including American and Japanese studies. It is likely to support subsequent research, as diplomatic historians, for example, integrate cultural studies into the broader historical context of the Cold War. Indeed, like the artists who tried to bridge national boundaries with their works, Winther-Tamaki’s book should further the cause of interdisciplinary inquiry and collaboration.

Notes

[1]. “America on Exhibit: U.S. Diplomacy and Overseas Exhibitions during the Cold War,” panel at Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Conference, American University, Washington, D.C., 15 June 2001. A brief but diverse list of new approaches to U.S. foreign relations includes Warren I. Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture: A Study in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, *Transmission Impossible: American Journalism as Cultural Diplomacy in Postwar Germany, 1945-1955* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999); Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Emily S. Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[2]. Okakura Kakuzo, *The Ideals of the East, with Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1903); idem, *The Awakening of Japan* (New York: Century Co., 1904); Lafcadio Hearn *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1894); idem, *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1904); Edwin Arnold, *Japonica* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1891); Joseph M. Henning, *Outposts of Civilization: Race, Religion, and the Formative Years of American-Japanese Relations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 90-113.

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