

“Calligraphy” as the Embodiment of Modernism

Takayuki Kurimoto (Art Critic)

In spite of his orthodox origins as a student of ancient, *rinsho*¹ calligraphy, immediately after World War II, Nankoku Hidai (1912-1999) became the very man who discovered the potential of “calligraphy without words”. Defying traditional notions of the *Bunboshiho* (Four Treasures of the Study)², Nankoku continued his radical explorations of abstract line-art during the Japanese post war. Nevertheless, despite being recognized as a leading figure of “avant-garde calligraphy”, the artist dedicated his life to building an entirely independent body of work, without establishing any teacher-student type relationship in any particular group.

When discussing the tremendous impact of Nankoku’s work, one must consider how that the modernist art trends of the pre and mid war periods bear more relevance than the calligraphic works of his contemporaries. In other words, Nankoku's calligraphy should be examined in the same art-historical context as the pioneers of Japanese abstract painting: Saburo Hasegawa (1906-1957) and Jiro Yoshihara (1905-1972).

By travelling to Europe and America, and subscribing to Western magazines, Hasegawa and Yoshihara gained early exposure to the trends of Modernist painting, and by the late 1930s, became well-versed in the art of abstraction. These artists were ardent admirers of a form of abstraction represented by Mondrian, and their masterpieces from this period were underpinned by a universal sense of mathematical sensibility.

Meanwhile, in 1946, Nankoku presented *SHIN-SEN-SAKUHIN-DAI-ICHI DEN-NO-VARIATION (SPIRIT LINE 1 LIGHTNING- VARIATION)*, a work of "avant-garde calligraphy" that shared multiple aesthetic similarities with abstract painting. To present his work, Nankoku chose an exhibition sponsored by an art organization as an opportunity, rather than a conventional calligraphy exhibition. Although its arrival came after the establishment of modernism in painting, from a broader perspective, the emergence of "calligraphy without words" within an artistic context may have created an opportunity that brought calligraphy from East Asia to the global realm. This may not appear apparent if a limited focus was placed solely on the various calligraphic organizations who were influenced by pre-war trends, however, Nankoku played a

¹ The traditional calligraphic practice of copying masterpieces.

² A phrase that refers to the four indispensable items in calligraphy: the brush, ink, paper and ink stone.

crucial role in the establishment of Modernism in the chaos of post-war Japan.

With this, I would like to address how Nankoku's calligraphy took on the expression theory of Western Modernism as represented by "abstraction".

If we took an open-minded look at the changes in Nankoku's aesthetics from late 1940s, we may notice threads of Western Modernist abstraction in Japanese art through Yoshihara's geometric painting of the mid-war years, and Hasegawa's *Locus of a Butterfly* (1937). However, these visual elements of ellipses and grids reminiscent of Mondrian's aesthetics are not found in Nankoku's work. Rather, through the ways in which his expression utilizes the contrasts between the curves and straight lines, one might say the artist's work bears more affinity with the organic forms of Kandinsky and Miro.

Having said this, the artist Nankoku Hidai never forgot to remind his contemporaries of the creative nourishment provided by the framework of calligraphy as an essential part of Eastern culture.

*"Calligraphy began as an artform for writing, whereby the artist's emotion and spirit was expressed as the characters formed in accordance to ordered strokes. Even when I'm writing experimentally, the preexisting figurative image like a single character in my mind influences the way I write. Therefore, even in these cases, I will always make sketches that I can write in accordance with."*³

- Nankoku Hidai

Nankoku's "avant-garde calligraphy" does not subscribe to the improvisational ethos of automatism or action painting. Rather, whilst being works of non-writing, the artist's works of lines are a result of elaborate mental training than that of subconscious immersion. To Nankoku, the time spent for production is a delicate and intellectual process that continuously pulsates to and fro between perfection and imperfection. Furthermore, the artist also believed that the power of calligraphy lied in how vividly it could make its viewer experience the continuity of time as a single line that stretches across space.

In his endeavor to bridge intellect with physicality, Nankoku Hidai was able to sense the further developments of Modernism in Japanese painting in the 1930s and boldly transcend

³ Nankoku Hidai. "Shohyogen No Honshitsu (The Essence of Calligraphic Expression)" Essay. In *Gendaisho 2 Hyogen to Seisaku (Contemporary Calligraphy 2: Expression and Production)*, 82. Tokyo: Yuzankaku, 1983.

through the world of postwar art.