

ART HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER

KENZO OKADA: CULTURAL FUSION

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado  
Spring, 1997

## Introduction

I still remember clearly what Kenzo Okada, the famed Japanese-American painter, said to me more than thirty years ago in New York: "In order to understand and appreciate one's mother country, one has to step out of its soil for a period of time. Hiroko-san, I suppose that partly for this reason, you left Japan and came to America. So did I."

The story of Kenzo Okada (1902-1982) may seem just like one of the countless "American success" stories achieved by immigrants from abroad, but Okada is different. He achieved his fame in one of the most competitive fields for anyone, native or otherwise, to succeed in; he made it in the field of visual art. Okada self-exiled to New York from Japan with his wife, Kimi, in 1950.<sup>1</sup> He was then already 48 years old. As an artist in Japan, Okada was not successful, in fact, he was an obscure figure who could not reach the height of prominence many of his artist friends had attained. However, after only three years in New York, Okada's new work caught the attention of Betty Parsons, a prominent figure in Abstract Expressionism and the owner of a well-known gallery in New York. Okada held his first one-man show in America at the Betty Parsons Gallery in the Fall of 1953 (Figs. 1 & 2).<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the *New York Times*, on October 11, 1953, hailed Okada's paintings as the abstracts of an orthodox impressionist who bears two of traditional art's most valid credentials--magic of color and richness of paint handling. Kenzo Okada was to become an heir to such luminaries as Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, who were also "discovered" by Parsons and had shown their works regularly at her gallery.

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<sup>1</sup> The Kenzo Okadas became Naturalized U. S. citizens in 1960.

<sup>2</sup> He exhibited sixteen paintings. One of them, Number 3, was immediately purchased by the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Tokyo Shimbun, 1958, p. 8).

The news about Okada's first one-man show traveled quickly to his native country. From then on Okada was no longer obscure "at home." Thus, Okada's story is rather paradoxical; he had to be recognized abroad first before achieving fame and prestige in his own motherland, the ultimate goal he and his wife had striven so hard to attain. In less than ten years after his move to New York, Okada had established himself as an internationally acclaimed abstract painter, especially after winning one of the highest awards at the 1958 Venice Biennale. Since his first one-man show in 1953, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, as well as the Tokyo National Museum of Art and the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome to name just a few, have acquired his paintings for their permanent collections.

Art critics, too, have been keen observers of Okada's achievements, although their opinions about his work vary; for example, Anna and Giorgio Bacci, the art critics for the *Christian Science Monitor*, marvel; "In a way, Okada is kin to the Botticelli of 'La Primavera' or 'The Birth of Venus.' There is the same exquisite sense of the natural, of grace, of instinct for ethereal images that inhabit a world between fantasy and reality."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Bert Winter, art historian, holds a very different view; "Okada succeeded by glossing his style with a Japanese veneer which appealed to the elite American collectors who supported him."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, everyone seems to agree that his paintings are breath-takingly beautiful, and that his emotive quality parallels the work of Rothko. No wonder, then, that during his lifetime, his patrons were not limited to the museums. They were, indeed, some of the wealthiest art connoisseurs in the United States such as the Rockfellers,

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<sup>3</sup> Bacci, 1980, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Winter, 1994, p. 63.

the Mellons, the Carnegies, the Phillips, and the Albrights. I know for a fact, that at least one patron remodeled his living room to enhance his treasured painting by Okada! What, then, are the secrets of Okada's success?

### Tokyo in Paris

Okada's life has four distinct phases: (1) a privileged youth filled with European luxuries; (2) a student in Paris; (3) an artist in Tokyo, and (4) a New York artist. At age nineteen, after a traditional education at a private boys' school, he entered an art academy in Tokyo because he disliked the academic studies.<sup>5</sup> After only one and half years at the academy, however, he dropped out. About this time his father died.

In 1924, at age 21, he went to Paris to experience "real" European art like many young Japanese art students of his generation. When Okada arrived in Paris, he did not have a clear vision for his stay in the city. During his three and half years in Paris, he established a reputation as an idle fellow; he studied little and spent much of his daytime "sleeping either in the parks or on the terraces of cafes with a newspaper over his face."<sup>6</sup> In the 1960s, Okada reminisced about his Paris days, "I was able to stay in Paris because of the generosity of my brother. My brother sent me money each month, but I spent it in two days, and I was very hungry until the next check arrived. I was not ready to cope with the situation in Paris. I did not know the language and I was sad and lonely."<sup>7</sup> Toward the end of his sojourn in the city, he completed only one painting which he submitted to the Salon d'Automne before he returned to Tokyo.

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<sup>5</sup> Rago, 1961, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Kagesato, 1989, p. 22, translated by S. Anderson.

<sup>7</sup> Rago, 1961, p. 29.



## Paris in Tokyo

In 1927, as a Paris "trained" artist, he settled into being a professional painter. Although he might have been idle in Paris, he had evidently observed and absorbed some essence of the art of the French school, for the work completed during the 1930s and 1940s reflects French influences. His paintings are steeped with undigested borrowings from the various styles and techniques of the French Impressionists, especially Cezanne whom Okada called jokingly "my father." In addition, his subjects are all European, a common feature among the Japanese artists at that time. His attitude towards the choice of subject reflects one aspect of the Japanese psychology of that era, that "Western culture is superior to that of Japan," a notion the Japanese were brain-washed to believe after the 1860s when the government spearheaded the cultural revolution in order to transform its nation from a feudal society to Westernized modern Japan.

A Flower Girl of 1938 (Fig. 3) is a prime example of Okada's works of the 1930s and 40s which were often criticized as "feminine."<sup>8</sup> For this particular work, he painted a slender, pale girl sitting on a stool holding a basket and a bouquet of flowers. He not only outlined the figure in black in the style of van Gogh's work, but also let the strokes of silvery paint hug the girl's cheeks and forehead as Matisse did with his vibrant colors. The girl is undoubtedly European, perhaps French, as if he had painted her from his memories of Paris. The brush strokes are short, firm and expressive resembling those of Cezanne without an equivalent confidence.<sup>9</sup> However, A Flower Girl manifests certain illusionistic qualities which are absent from the works of the French

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<sup>8</sup> Kawakita, 1982, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> In the 1950s, Okada candidly reflected on his own work of the 1930s and the 40s; "In those days, my paintings were superficial. I was concerned with the painting techniques and formal beauty only." (Kawakita, 1982, p. 9, translated by Hiroko Aoyama.)

Impressionists. For example, the girl is seemingly leaning against the wall, yet her back is slightly detached from the wall surface. A tilted stool, too, appears to hover above the floor, thus the girl levitates. Moreover, there is an air of ambiguity and mysterious depth expressed by his eloquent colors; a curious mixture of Oriental mystery and European expressiveness. In his works of the 1950s and beyond, I detect a similar mysterious depth and ambiguity as conveyed by A Flower Girl. I am, therefore, convinced that Okada brought with him this unique talent when he came to America to further pursue his creativity. This particular quality deepened during his self-imposed exile in New York, as will be explained below.

#### **Orientalization of Abstract Expressionism**

Shortly before his departure from Japan for the United States in 1950, Okada told a reporter: "I intend to find a point of contact between the great movement in modern art now centered in America and the parent body of Oriental art."<sup>10</sup> As soon as he arrived in America, however, he became fully aware of the enormity of making his ambition into reality: "I don't expect myself to fully understand what the core of the Western culture is in a short time, but I would like to immerse myself in it as if I were an innocent child. It may take at least four or five years to grasp a hint of its essence--until then, I won't show my work to the public. I may not even succeed, but I assure you that I will challenge myself with the soul and fighting spirit of a man of the Orient."<sup>11</sup>

Okada's decision to self-exile to New York was motivated simply by his desire to seek a new artistic direction. He believed that only the United States,

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<sup>10</sup> Ogawa, 1989, p. 17, translated by S. Anderson.

<sup>11</sup> Kawakita, 1982, p. 8, translated by Hiroko Aoyama.

especially New York, would provide him an opportunity and environment where he could freely express himself independent of the constraints enforced by Japanese society. "He felt he had reached a dead end in the style of his painting. After laboring to find a way out of the impasse, he decided to dive into the maelstrom of Abstract Expressionism emerging in postwar America and the possibilities it seemed to hold for the future."<sup>12</sup>

When he saw the works of Abstract Expressionists such as Pollock, Klein, Rothko, and Newman for the first time, he had difficulty in understanding their energetic concept of abstraction. The Okadas even had the good fortune to live in an apartment right across from where Hans Hofmann was residing--in fact they could observe Hofmann painting from their window. Although he was living in Greenwich Village, then the center of Abstract Expressionism, his lack of knowledge of the English language prevented him from personally interacting with the essence of the latest artistic movement and its philosophy. Consequently, "He felt the ultimate despair: 'Nothing comes; I can't do anything.' Okada's way of overcoming his anguish was to turn deep inside himself."<sup>13</sup>

His process of soul-searching for two years became the most important turning point of his life. By following his intuition and his natural foresight, he broke completely from the European genre with which he had been obsessed for nearly thirty years. Instead, he focused exclusively on Japanese symbols and the style of classical Japanese decorative art familiar to him but so exotic and mysterious to the eyes of an American audience. His intuition must have told him that "Japanizing" Abstract Expressionism, amalgamizing the two mainstreams of the traditional and the modern, was the only passage to

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<sup>12</sup> Ogawa, 1989, p. 17, translated by S. Anderson.

<sup>13</sup> Furihara, 1989, p. 137, translated by S. Anderson.

achieving success, and he categorized his unique painting style as "Yugenism."<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, when Okada first arrived in New York in 1950, he must have immediately perceived a strong Oriental influence on New York artists such as Pollock, Klein and Motherwell. In 1969, Okada sharply criticized some Western artists who were seemingly imitating the Eastern art:

"Persons who are not fully satisfied with the rational tradition of the West are now turning toward the Oriental way of thinking in an effort to assuage their dissatisfaction. For instance, many people at first regarded Cezanne's approach as 'too logical' and so turned to artists whose work looked more Oriental. In a sense, this means that the Western way of thought reached an impasse; the general tendency is to try to search for an answer in Oriental philosophy. But this is like trying to mix oil and water. No success...In the case of modern art, it (mixing East and West) is more like *kyogen*, a comedy performed as an interlude between curtains of more serious Noh plays...What can be said is that although both East and West seem similar to each other in a certain superficial way, they are, in fact, completely contradictory."<sup>15</sup>

Okada's strong belief was that "foreigners cannot wear a *kimono* smartly." This view was rather ethnocentric on the part of Okada. After all, he was a traditional "Oriental" at heart, as evidenced by his remark, "I assure you that I will challenge myself with the soul and fighting spirit of a man of the Orient."

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<sup>14</sup> The word "Yugenism" was derived from a Japanese aesthetic terminology, *yugen*, meaning elegance, mysterious depth, and ambiguity. In the early 1950s, one of Okada's friends in New York suggested him to call his paintings, "Yugenism," if he was going to champion a Japanese form of Modernism. In 1966, however, Okada said to a Nobel Laureate, Yasushi Inouye; "A painter has no business labeling what he does as if he was some sort of great teacher. I talked like that because I was young. Whenever I hear anyone use the word 'Yugenism' now, it's like a tonic. It's a funny thing. It's no good to talk about what school or 'ism' you belong to. By not good, I mean it's just not interesting. I myself don't yet understand the deep meaning of *yugen*." (Ogawa, 1989, p. 18, translated by Stanley N. Anderson.)

<sup>15</sup> Yamada, 1976, p. 301.

He must have thought that no one else, other than himself, was in a position to translate Oriental philosophy into the realm of paintings; he felt that he had the true soul of Orientalism which would be effectively infused into, and made the essence of, modern art, Oriental style. Sensing the new direction of artistic expression in which Western painters were struggling to move at that time, Okada quickly joined this movement with regained confidence, and succeeded in innovating the unique style of "Yugenism."

### His Concept and Method

In New York, in 1965, I had some opportunities to watch artist Okada paint in his studio-apartment at 51 West 11th Street, right on the edge of Greenwich Village. I used to live with the Okadas as their family friend while I was a student at the Parsons School of Design. By this time, he had firmly established himself as the leader among Japanese abstract painters anywhere. I distinctly remember that his works in those years were primarily in silver, blue, purple and white, and that his partially painted large canvases were placed directly on the floor leaning against the wall. Apparently, that was his favorite position for the canvas while he painted. When he had to paint the lower portion of a canvas, he sat cross-legged on the floor; in this sitting position, he sometimes looked as if he were a medicine man in deep contemplation prior to an act of magic (Fig. 4).

As I watched Okada paint, I often thought that his method of painting resembled a Zen priest quietly raking his garden to create beautifully abstracted lines. Before he laid his first brush stroke, he usually stared hard at a canvas for a while puffing on his cherished Dunhill pipe. This meditative pause was, perhaps, necessary for him because he worked directly on the canvas once his creative impulse was set in motion. Throughout his painting

session, he painted and meditated simultaneously. Thus, I categorize his paintings as *the records of meditation* (Fig. 5), whereas the works of such artists as Pollock are known as "the records of action" (Fig. 6).<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the process of completing his work lasted relatively long, for weeks; sometimes even months. Yet some works were finished simultaneously: Mrs. Okada told me (December, 1996) that he once left his wet canvas on the floor of their friends' house in New Mexico, and a dog walked on it leaving his paw prints across the canvas. Okada, always in good humor, incorporated the paw prints as part of his visual expression, and entitled the work, Footprints.

Many of the motifs laid out on his canvases are identifiably Japanese, such as a *torii* (a gate of Shinto shrine), a *Noh* theater stage, a *Zen* garden, a *kimono*, or Mount *Fuji* (Figs. 7 through 11). These motifs are, in a sense, the totemic symbols of his "tribe." However, the shapes he depicted are not referential to the phenomenal world: they are rather the abstract representations in true relationship to his inner content. But Okada's inner content is not as psychologically and violently skewed as that of de Kooning, for example (Fig. 12). They are the visual renditions of *the fond memories* of his long past in Japan. These memories are, however, *the captured fleeting moments* in his life. Thus, the images he rendered are blurred, reflecting his hazy memories (Fig. 13). Some others are partially hidden behind rectangles or other shapes, perhaps because his remembrance was only partial (Fig. 14). The quiet glow of colors that envelope shapes, too, are probably indicative of the particularities of light, mood and scent which associate with the fleeting moments in his memory. Strangely, however, the "memorable moments" he depicted are derived from the scenes found in the art of romantic ancient Japan. Some of these scenes date back to the tenth or eleventh century, the

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<sup>16</sup> Gardner, 1986, p. 940.

period known as "Heian" or "Peaceful" (Fig. 15), as if to erase his sad memories of the recent Japan which was defeated in World War II only a decade earlier.

Surface texturing was one of the essentials in expressing his emotive qualities. Unlike the violent paint-splashing style of Pollock, Okada's painting motions were gentle but masterful. Sometimes he painted in the long sweeping strokes of a calligrapher; other times his brush strokes were as short and active as an Impressionist. Sometimes he even utilized a paint roller to create a smooth surface. His paintings manifest a sense of ambiguity and mystery with quiet sensitivity.

### Nature and Thought in Unison

Kenzo Okada once said, "There is a definite relation between my work and nature. Sometimes it is a conscious relationship, sometimes otherwise. Realistic forms can be born from unconscious influences, just as abstract forms may emerge, on occasion, from the conscious activity of the mind. I do not know where my painting comes from, and to me its origin is irrelevant. But I feel myself in nature and I find nature in myself."<sup>17</sup> This statement is crucial in analyzing and understanding his concept and method of making art, for the "self" in relation to nature is an inherent Japanese way of thinking.

The inception of the concept of harmony with nature, as Okada stressed above, dates back to the sixth century, the time of the introduction of Buddhism and a writing system to Japan from the Chinese continent. Although the concept was originally adopted as a part of Buddhist teaching, it was eventually legislated as a guiding rule for the conduct of government officials of seventh century Japan. Later, as Buddhism spread to the general population, the concept came to constitute a fundamental component of

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<sup>17</sup> Bacci, 1980, p. 24.

Japanese mentality. The word "harmony", or *wa*, (和), soon became an integral part of the name of the nation, *Yamato* (大和), meaning "the great nation of harmony."<sup>18</sup>

In China, the word *wa* (和) was said to have originally meant "adding" (和) "mouths" (口), denoting that "when one person expresses an opinion, other people respond by 'adding' their voices." But as the word, *wa*, was adopted into Japanese culture, its meaning was altered to denote "assimilation," and eventually evolved to signify the "unity" or "merging of humanity and nature."<sup>19</sup>

The connotation of *watakushi* (私), a Japanese word for "I," is also significant in understanding how the Japanese treat "self" within the context of nature. The word "watakushi" is the derivative of "wa-takushi," which means "self-effacement" or "egolessness." Thus *watakushi* is a profound way of identifying self in the most minimum aspect as opposed to nature.<sup>20</sup> After the Zen sect of Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the twelfth century, again from China, the "Japanized" Zen teaching had further refined and deepened the meaning of "harmony of nature and self by abandoning self-ego," and subsequently its philosophy was asserted and exercised as the key element of Japanese aesthetics as well as of the pursuit of creative art.

### The Poetry of Impressions

One of the artistic forms developed under the auspices of Zen Buddhism was *haiku*, the most succinct style of Japanese poetry composed in the strict limit of seventeen syllables. *Haiku* is characteristically "the juxtaposition of

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<sup>18</sup> Sakamoto, 1994, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 12.



images, creating contrast and tensions."<sup>21</sup> It conveys "the fleeting or momentary impressions of existence, as well as sensations and subtle vibrations of the spirits as the poet finds himself before the most imperceptible changes of the climate and the seasons."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, *haiku* poets negate "I" by being completely absorbed in the landscape of verses. The following verse, the best known among the Japanese, best exemplifies the art of *haiku*:

<i>furuike ya</i>	The ancient pond__
<i>kawazu tobikomu</i>	A frog jumps in,
<i>mizu no oto</i>	The sound of water. <sup>23</sup>

This verse was composed in the spring of 1686 by Basho, perhaps the most celebrated *haiku* poet in history. Donald Keene, one of the foremost scholars on Japanese Literature, interprets Basho's poems as followed; "The effect achieved by Basho in this (*haiku* above) and many of his best poems was to capture at once *the eternal* and *the momentary*. The ancient pond is eternal, but in order for us to become aware of its eternity there must be some momentary disruption. The leap of the frog, suggested by the splash of the water, is the 'now' of haikai (*haiku*); but the pond immediately relapses into timelessness."<sup>24</sup>

After studying Okada's works, I have come to the conclusion that Okada was not only poetic but he must have been well-versed with *haiku*, and that he most likely transposed his knowledge of composing *haiku* into some of his paintings. His wife, Kimi Okada, confirmed in my telephone interview on

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<sup>21</sup> Ooka, 1991, p. 11

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> Keene, 1976, p. 88, translated by Donald Keene.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

April 13, 1997, that her late husband had occasionally composed *haiku* for fun, and that he even applied some of his verses in the form of calligraphy onto his Japanese folding screens. To demonstrate my point, I have selected two of his paintings, A Story (1966), and Plum (1965), to analyze and compare with the *haiku* poetry of Basho.

A Story (Fig. 16) expresses the serenity of winter. The season is indicated by the vast expanse of dense fog or snow as well as by the barely perceptible sprigs of dry grass. The painting is bisected vertically to simulate a two-paneled Japanese screen. On the right "panel," a *torii*, the gate of a Shinto shrine, is partially visible and juxtaposed with a landscape resembling a fragment of a Zen rock-garden. Okada entwines the integrity and subtlety of shapes with wondrous hues of white in such an ambiguous manner that he perplexes his viewers, herewith creating a sense of deep mystery. On the left "panel," a single organic shape, perhaps implying a frozen pond, serenely hovers above the expansive plane which is pigmented in the warm glow of pulsating white. In addition, Okada's contours delicately vibrate; this is, perhaps, one of Okada's ways of expressing his exultation of the harmonious beauty of nature which is both eternal and momentary.

My interpretation agrees with Carter Ratcliff, art historian, who aptly describes Okada's work; "Objects don't occupy space in Okada's paintings. They flow into it. This ambiguity about the borders of things is deliberately cultivated, so the eye will be reminded of the unity of vision imposed on all that is visible. De Kooning and the rest exacerbate the tension between space and what it contains, then release that tension in the apocalyptic leap to an overall image. Okada proceeds more gently."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ratclif, 1982, p. 128.

Plum (Fig. 17) is another example of Okada's flirtation with *haiku*. The painting boldly unfolds the arrival of spring. Once again, he covers the immense plane with a single color, this time in a rich and sensuous tone of beige. Above the beige field, a band of snowy white spreads across, probably signaling the seasonal transition. In the center of the canvas, a massive plum blossom singularly floats, perhaps expressing "the moment" of its separation from a branch. Historically, two kinds of blossoms, the plum and the cherry, have been the most widely revered flowers in Japanese art. Makoto Ooka, a distinguished modern Japanese poet, explains that as a central characteristic of many *haiku*, in order to depict blossoms at the height of radiance, poets concentrate on the moment of their fall. Its underlining concept is that flowers bloom only for the sake of falling, thus reflecting the Japanese philosophy of the inconstancy of life. Ooka further asserts:

"...the poets merge their identities with the falling flowers and fade into the passage of time. Somehow they see beauty in transience, (and) glory in the flower at the moment of fall. The idea seems to be that in the beauty of the moment, when we have lived out our limited span, we can see a glorious vision of the beyond."<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the two paintings I have examined above, A Story and Plum, both clearly reveal certain essences which are well-defined in Basho's verses as well as in the prescription for composing them as mentioned above. For example, Okada's painting and Basho's *haiku* are the manifestations of abstracted impressions of fleeting moments. They both convey the eternal and the transient aspects of human existence in nature, and are constructed in the minimalist's concept capturing only the substance with a few images. They

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<sup>26</sup> Ooka, 1991, p. 94.

leave the rest to their audiences to contemplate in their imaginations, thereby inviting intellectual and emotional participation.

However, there is a major difference between Basho and Okada in the treatment of the "fleeting moment"; whereas Basho's moment is fixed on the "now," Okada's fleeting moment is entrapped in his unconscious state of mind. The poet Basho is said to have composed his *haiku*, "The ancient pond...", while he was visiting the countryside north of Edo (the ancient name for the city of Tokyo). The following is the account of Basho's "moment" described by his disciple:

"...the rain was gently falling, the cooing of the pigeons was deep-throated, and the cherry blossoms were slowly falling in the soft wind. It was just the kind of day when one most regrets the passing of the third month. The sound of frogs leaping into the water could frequently be heard, and the Master, moved by this remarkable beauty, wrote a poem about the scene."<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to Basho, Okada, in order to extract the "moment" fixed in his "deep inside" or "unconscious," relied on his meditation in the solitary confines of his own studio. He, then, transformed the extracted moment into his painting. Rudolph Arnheim explains:

"...the mental layers most remote from consciousness are the "deepest" ones, and that, therefore, they are the most valuable for artistic creation. (They may be 'deepest' in a purely topological sense only.) Presumably, little of genuine value will arise either in the extreme depth, namely, from the crude primitivism of mainly "archetypal" vision, or at the extreme surface, that is, from the flatness of mainly perceptual or intellectual productions. Any true work of art requires the cooperation of all the essential layers of mind. Art is no occupation for relaxed people. The resources of the mind must be

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<sup>27</sup> Keene, 1976, pp. 88-89.

forged into organized shape by conscious and unconscious discipline, which requires the effort of concentration."<sup>28</sup>

This summation of Arnheim clearly explains why Okada necessitated his deep meditation prior to and during his art production as previously explained. Mrs. Okada has recently told me that while Okada was engaged in his painting sessions, she either kept herself absolutely quiet or left him alone in his studio due to his need for total concentration. She also mentioned that Okada was acutely aware that his paintings were the honest reflections of his "real-self," so that throughout his life, he made an enormous effort to maintain the purity of mind and soul via his own method of meditation. Thus, Okada's poetic and contemplative works painted in pure colors reveal the extent of his conscious effort as well.

## Conclusion

Kenzo Okada died of heart failure in Tokyo on July 25, 1982. He was seventy-nine years old. Only one day earlier, Betty Parsons, his long-time friend and patron, also died in New York. Shortly after his death, his widow, Kimi Okada, purchased a simple Buddhist family-shrine to house his soul. The shrine now sits quietly in the corner of his studio in Tokyo. Last December, when I stood in front of his shrine gazing at his photograph, and paid him my homage in a Buddhist ritual, I marveled at how such a gentle, shy intellectual, who spoke no other language but Japanese, could reach prominence on an international scale as he did in his relatively advanced age. What, indeed, were the keys to his success?

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<sup>28</sup> Arnheim, 1966, pp. 177-178.

First of all, once he was in New York, Okada became a confident and mature artist, and began to have deeper knowledge of himself as well as of his art. His paintings in Tokyo used to be merely the work of a conformist who had consciously denied the values of the history and culture of Japan in his eagerness to Westernize his paintings. But in America, he redeemed his mother country. He often remarked, "When I lived in Japan, I thought only of the West; now that I am here I dream only of Japan." American multiculturalism and Abstract Expressionism were certainly instrumental for his success by providing him the most flexible agent for exploring his inner self, his cultural inheritance, and his genius.

Secondly, his deep understanding and appreciation of Japanese history and culture, coupled with his artistic capacity cultivated through decades of practice, helped him establish his own original style which utilized Japanese images and sensitivity. Whereas the paintings of American Abstract Expressionists such as Pollock, de Kooning and Klein confront the viewers with their frenzied aggressions, Okada's paintings quietly invite the audience to contemplate with him the beauty of nature through his pulsatingly beautiful colors and delicately vibrating contours. Okada was rescued by the individualism of America, and by the undeniably rich cultural tradition of his native Japan. His work is timeless just like Basho's *haiku* are timeless. His painting has universality because he painted at the measured pace of his reflective, cross-cultural sensibility.

## FIGURES

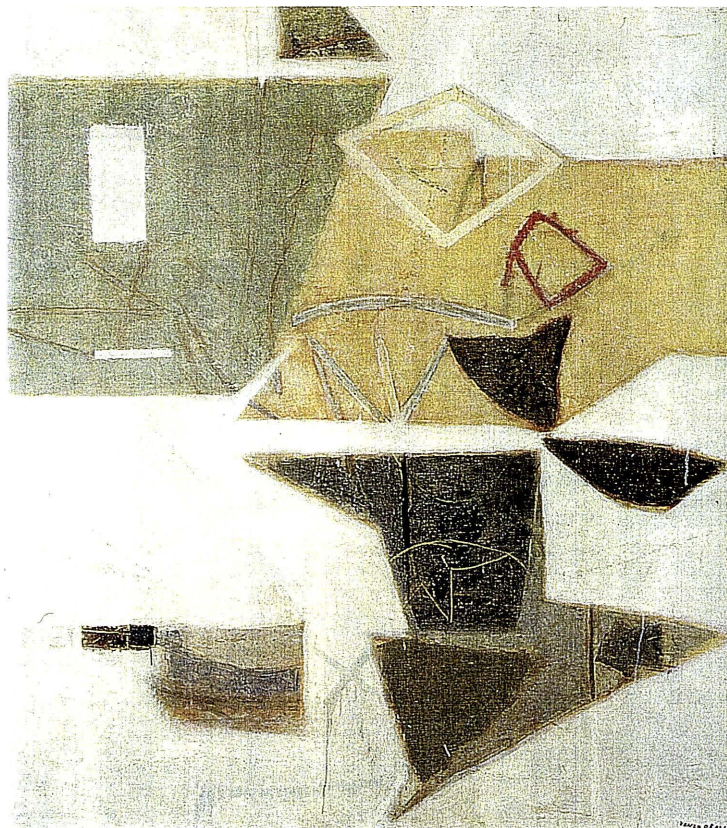


Figure 1.



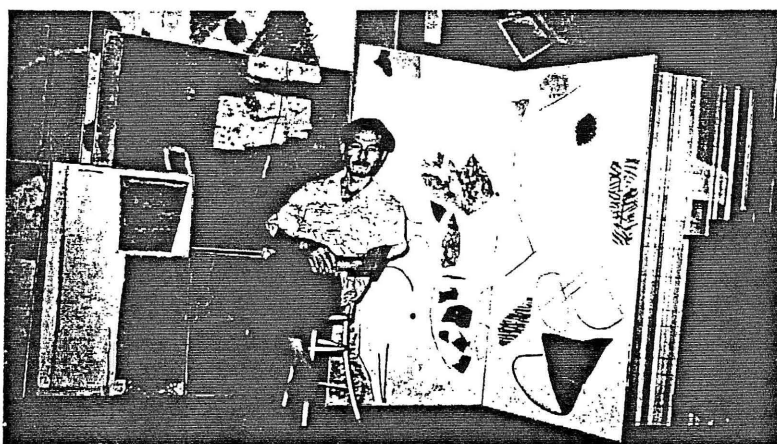


Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

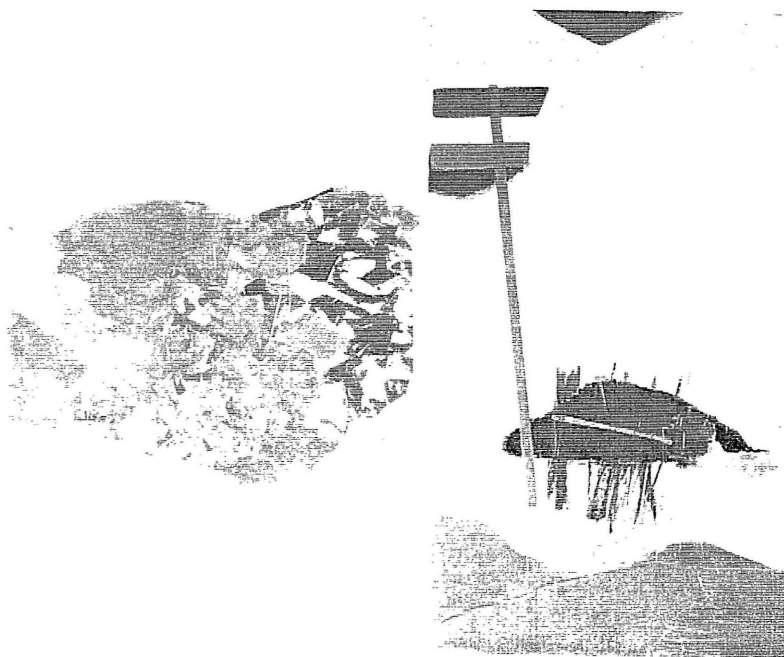


Figure 7.

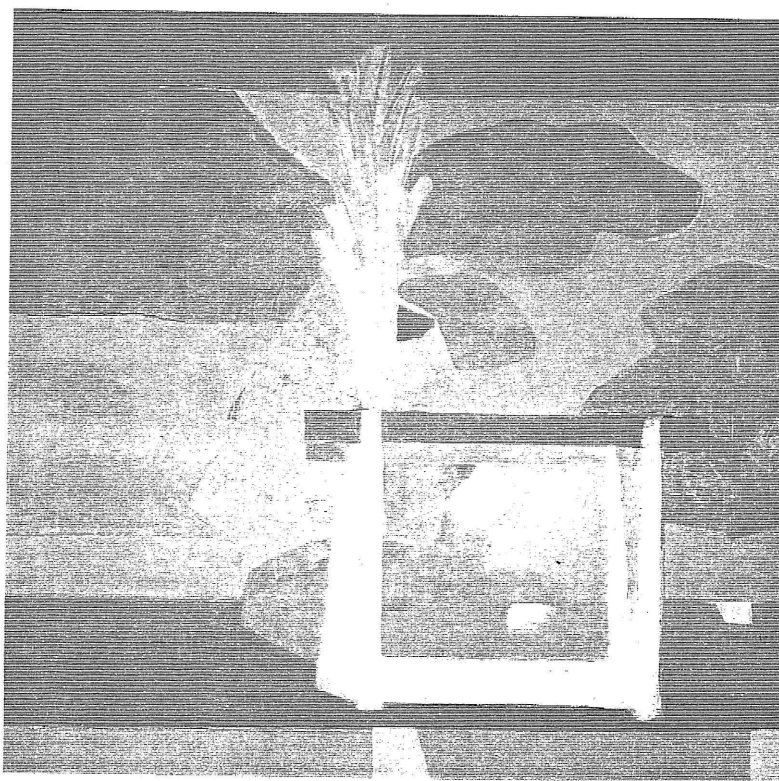


Figure 8.



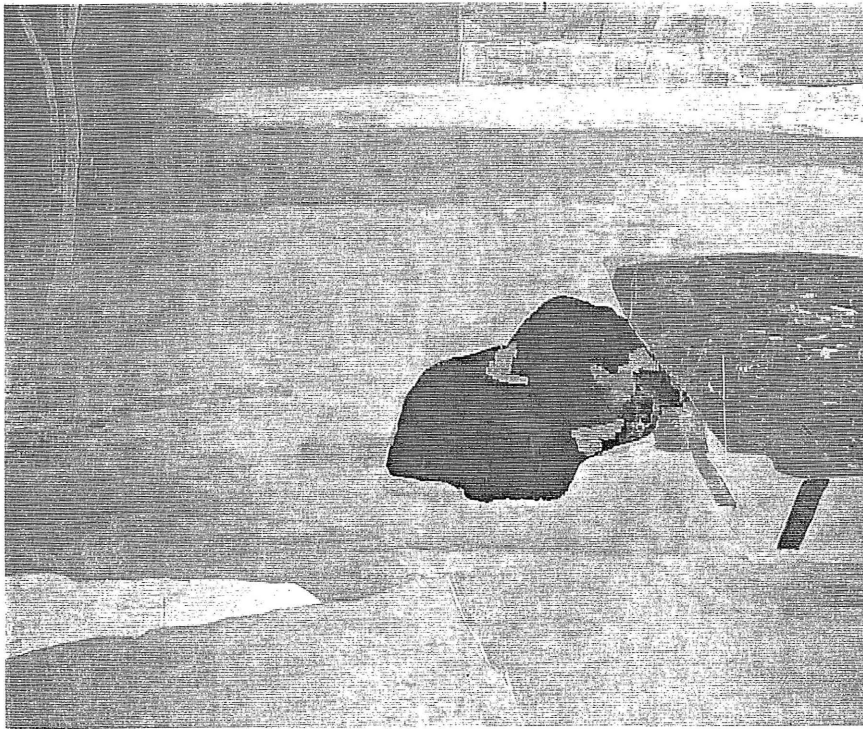


Figure 9.





Figure 10.

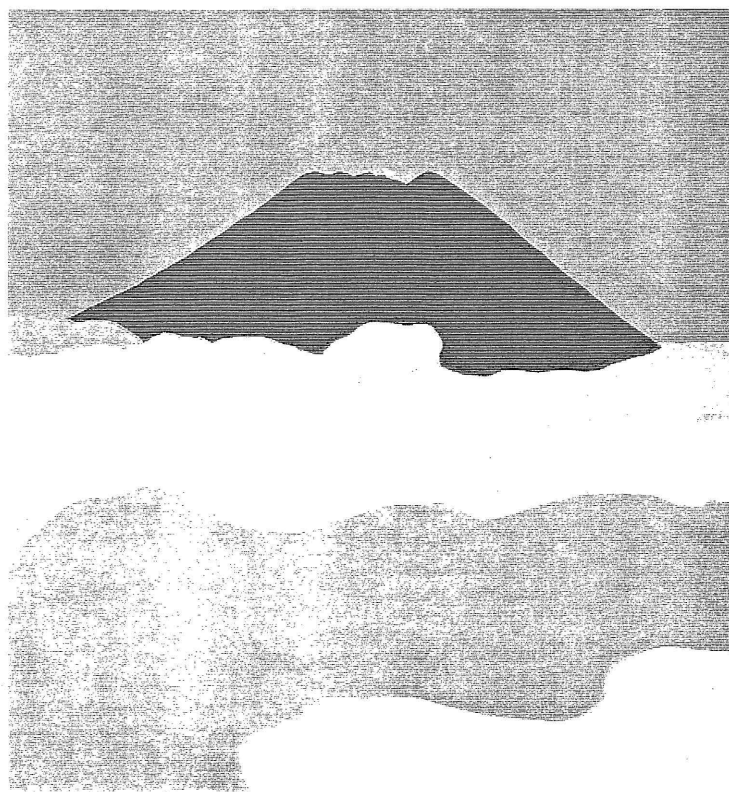


Figure 11.



Figure 12.

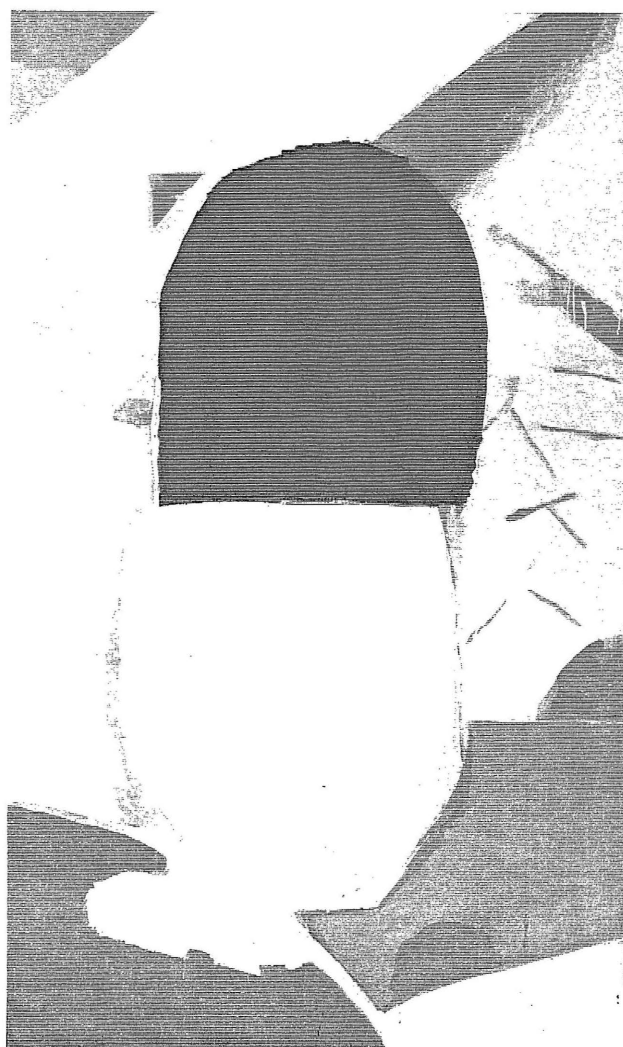


Figure 13.

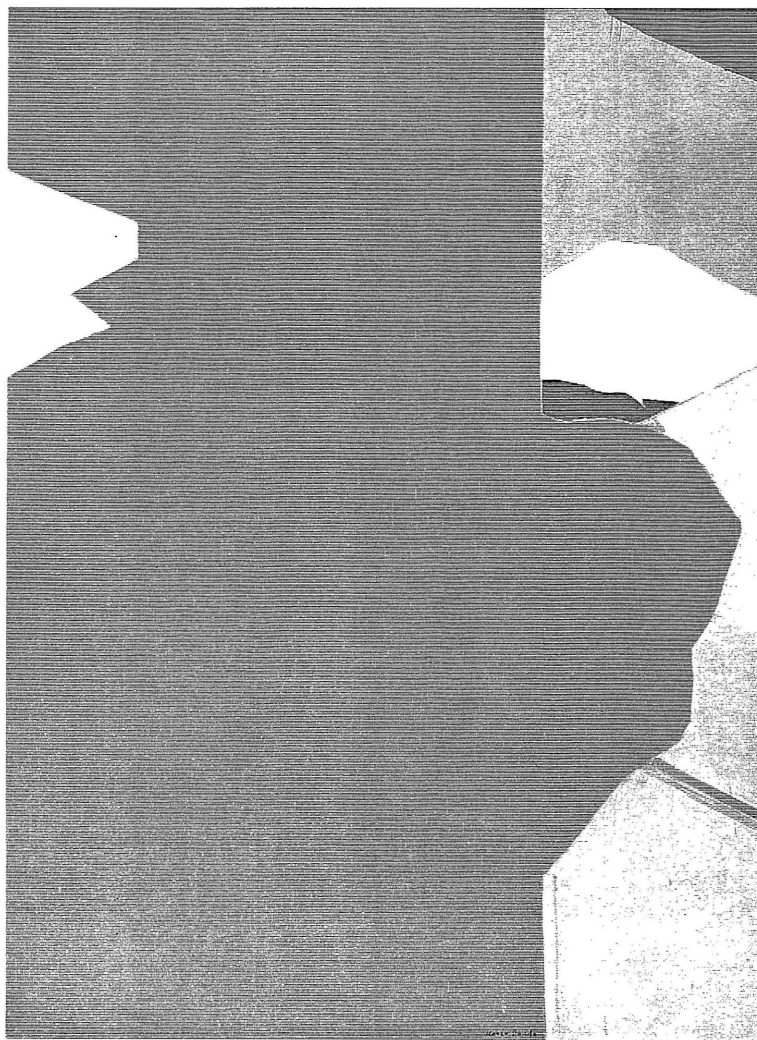


Figure 14.

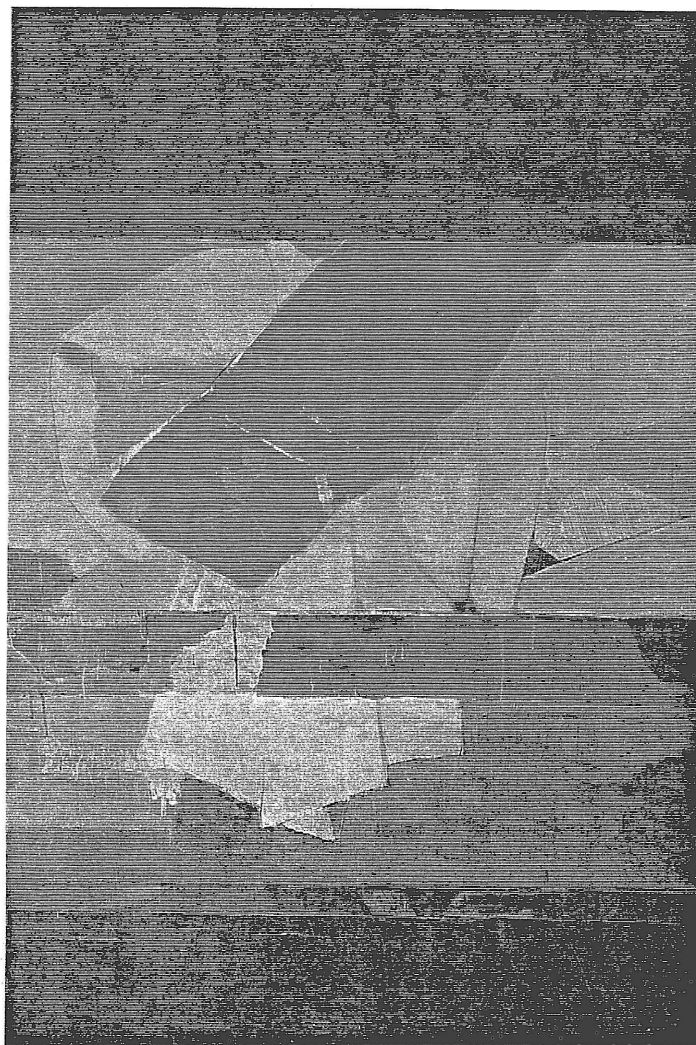


Figure 15.

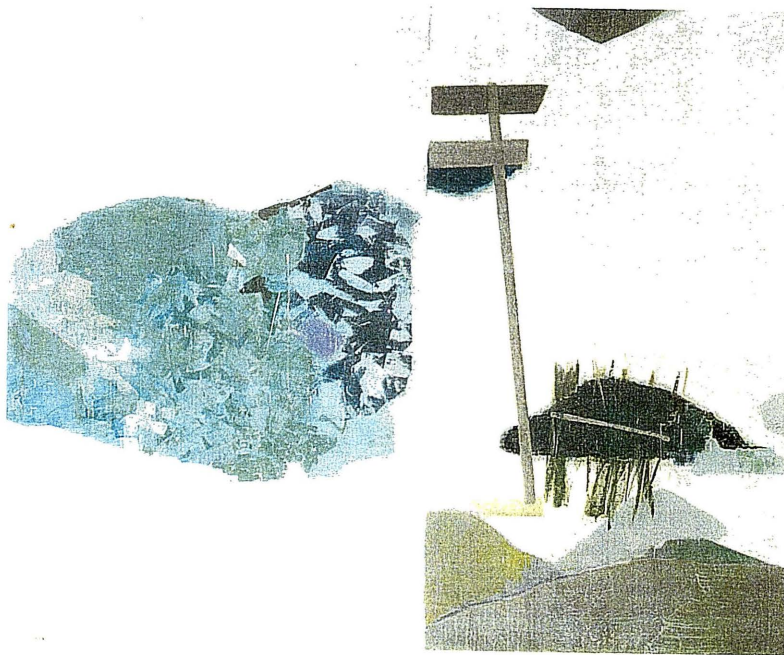


Figure 16.





Figure 17.



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Figure 16: See Fig. 7.

Figure 17: Kenzo Okada, Plum, 1965. oil on canvas, 203 x 140.4cm.  
Private collection. Source: Okada, K. Edt. *Kenzo Okada*.  
Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun Publishing Co. 1982. cat. no. 53.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

## BIOGRAPHY

1902

Kenzo Okada was born on September 28 in Yokohama city, Japan.

1922

Studied Western-style oil painting at the Tokyo Academy of Fine Arts ( today, Tokyo University of Fine Arts), the most prestigious arts school in Japan.

1924

Left the academy after two years, and sojourned in Paris.

1927

Returned to Japan, and began a career as a painter in Tokyo..

1928

First one-man show held at the Mitsukoshi Gallery in Tokyo.

1935

Married Kimi Kasomo.

1936

First one-man show at the Nichido Gallery in Tokyo where he exhibited through 1941. Received prize from the Nikka-kai, the largest association of Japanese contemporary artists.

1937

Became a member of the Nikka-kai.

1940-42

Taught at the School of Fine Arts of the Nippon University.

1942

Traveled to Manchuria, China with his wife.

1944-46

Evacuated from Tokyo with his wife and other Japanese artists to the northern Japan.

1947-48

Taught at the Musashino Art Institute. Had a one-man show at the Hakusho Gallery in Tokyo, followed by shows in the same gallery in 1948 and 1950.

1949

Exhibited at the United States Army Education Center in Tokyo.

1950

Exhibited at the United States Army Education Center in Yokohama. In August, left Japan with his wife to settle in New York City.

1953

First one-man show in the United States at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City. Received the rave reviews from the New York Times, New York Herald Tribune, Art Digest, The New Yorker, among others. Awarded the Annual Prize of the Art Institute of Chicago.

1954

Exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum.

1955

Awarded the Carnegie Institute International Prize, also the American Academy of Arts and Letters Prize. Represented the United States at the Sao Paulo Biennial in Brazil. Chosen by Art In America as one of 36 new talents in the United States: Okada was the only Asian artist among them.

1956

One-man show at the Fairweather-Hardin Gallery in Chicago.

1957

Received the First Prize at the South Carolina Biennial.

1958

Returned to Japan after seven years of absence. Represented Japan in the Venice Biennale. Also was chosen to represent the United States, but declined.

Awarded by the UNESCO. One-man show at the Takashimaya Gallery in Tokyo.

1959

Exhibited at the Whitney Museum.

1960

Received the Art Prize of \$10,000 from the Ford Foundation. Became a United States citizen.

1961

Appointed member of the jury at the Carnegie Institute International Prize. Held one-man show at the Yayoi Gallery in Tokyo. Taught at the University of Colorado during the summer.

1963

Awarded the Dunn International prize. Exhibited at the Tate Gallery in London.

1965

Retrospective exhibition at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York. This exhibition traveled to the following museums: the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto; the Honolulu Academy of Arts, Hawaii; M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco; and the University Art Museum, the University of Texas, Austin.

1982

Retrospective exhibition at the Seibu Museum of Art, Tokyo, and Fukuoka Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan.

Kenzo Okada died at his home in Tokyo on July 25 at age of seventy nine.

Sources: *Kenzo Okada*, exh. cat. New York: Marisa del Re Gallery. 1991.

*Kenzo Okada Exhibition*, exh. cat. Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun Publishing Co. 1989.

## SELECTED ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS

1941

Nichido Gallery, Tokyo.

1947

Hokuso Gallery, Tokyo.

1949

U.S. Army Education Center, Tokyo.

1950

U.S. Army Education Center, Yokohama.

1953

Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City.

1955

Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City.

1956

Fairweather-Hardin Gallery, Chicago.

1958

XXIX Venice Biennale

1959

Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City.

1961

Yayoi Gallery, Tokyo

1963

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass.

1964

Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City.



1965

Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

1966

Honolulu Academy of Arts, Hawaii.

1967

The University of Texas, Austin, Tx. Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City.

1969

Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City.

1971

Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City.

1973

Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City.

1976

Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City.

1978

Betty Parsons Gallery, New York City.

1982

Seibu Art Museum, Tokyo.

1984

Marisa del Re Gallery, New York City.

1988

Marisa del Re Gallery, New York. Gallery Urban, Paris.

1989

Traveling retrospective exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan; the Meguro Museum of Art, Tokyo; the Gunma Prefectural Museum of Modern Art; the Ohara

Traveling retrospective exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan; the Meguro Museum of Art, Tokyo; the Gunma Prefectural Museum of Modern Art; the Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki; the Mie Prefectural Art Museum; the Kure Municipal Museum of Art, and the Akita City Museum of Art.

1991

Marisa del Re Gallery, New York City.

Source: *Kenzo Okada*, exh. cat. New York: Marisa del Re Gallery. 1991.

## SELECTED MUSEUMS AND PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York  
Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois  
Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York  
Baltimore Museum Of Art, Maryland  
The Brooklyn Museum, New York City  
Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh  
Chase Manhattan Bank, New York City  
Columbia Museum, South Carolina  
Denver Art Museum, Denver  
Equitable Life Insurance Society, New York City  
Fukuoka Modern Art Museum, Japan  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome  
Honolulu Academy of Arts, Hawaii  
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana  
International Museum of Art, Kyoto  
International Museum of Art, Tokyo  
Kyoto Modern Art Museum, Japan  
Megro-Ward Museum of Art, Tokyo  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City  
Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
Museum of Modern Art, New York City  
Neuberger Museum, Purchase, New York  
New York University, New York City  
Osaka Hokusai Museum, Japan  
Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.  
Portland Art Museum, Oregon  
Reynolds Metals Building, Richmond, Virginia  
Rockefeller Institute, New York City  
Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California  
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City

St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York  
Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art, Japan  
Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio  
Tougaloo College, Mississippi  
Toyama Modern Museum, Japan  
University of Colorado, Boulder  
Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven

Source: *Kenzo Okada*, exh. cat. New York: Marisa del Re Gallery. 1991.

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Mrs. Kimi Okada

Personal interviews:

December 6, 1996.

December 13, 1996.

January 7, 1997.

Telephone interviews:

February 10, 1997.

April 13, 1997.