

The origins of ‘Art and Archaeology’ in Japan: the impact of Okamoto Taro on Japanese society

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Brief Biography Okamoto Taro

Okamoto Taro (1911-1996) is one of Japan’s most famous artists. He resided in Paris from 1930 to 1940 and participated in various avant-garde activities. In 1937 he published his first collection of images, *OKAMOTO*. After the end of the Second World War, Okamoto chose to focus his activities in Japan instead of returning to Paris, and he became a leader of Japanese avant-garde art. He held multiple personal exhibitions in other countries, mainly in the West, and he has public art pieces on display at the Palais des congrès de Paris. The filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch, who like Okamoto studied with Marcel Mauss, created a documentary film titled *Homage à Marcel Mauss: Taro Okamoto*, which won an award for best biographical film at Italy’s Asolo Art Film Festival in 1975. The following year, Editions Seghers published *L’Esthétique et le Sacré*, for which Okamoto’s friend Pierre Klossowski wrote the preface. However, his level of recognition outside Japan is low, and there have not been many opportunities for foreign researchers to learn more about his life and work, even about his time in Paris.

Within Japan, however, his name enjoys a much greater degree of familiarity, even beyond that of other artists. He has many famous pieces, the most famous being his “Tower of the Sun,” a giant tower reaching 70 meters in height that he created for the 1970 Japan World Exposition (1970). As a multi-disciplinary artist, he is rare in Japan, with work ranging from paintings to engraving, sculpture, photography, industrial design, architecture, calligraphy, poetry, and theater. At the same time, he was a TV personality, an intellectual and anthropologist.

Okamoto was born in 1911 as the eldest son of manga artist Okamoto Ippei and the author and poet Okamoto Kanoko. He moved to Paris at the age of 18, at 22 he became a member of the Abstraction-Création group which included Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, the leader of the Abstract art movement, then later moved closer to the Surrealists which included André Breton and Max Ernst. In addition to his artistic pursuits, he also studied philosophy at Paris University before moving on to study anthropology under the Marcel Mauss. He also had a close friendship with the intellectual Georges Bataille, joining the secret society Acéphale at Bataille’s recommendation. In Okamoto’s words, “What got me through the desperate doubts and troubles of my youth and provided me with answers was the writing of Nietzsche and the words and practices of Bataille.”

During the interval between the two World Wars, Paris was recognized as standing at the forefront of both ideology and art so living in the very heart of it, Okamoto was in a position to mix with world’s greatest intellects while establishing his own artistic views.

With the approach of war, Okamoto left Paris to return to Japan but was soon sent to fight on the Chinese Front as a new recruit at the age of 31. In 1946, after a period as prisoner-of-war in China, he finally returned to Japan only to find that his parents’ house

in Aoyama had burnt to the ground during an air raid, destroying all his work that had been stored there.

Okamoto soon rented a studio in the Kaminoge district of Tokyo's Setagaya Ward where he recommenced his creative activities. It was here that he produced many of his representative works. He also began to aggressively put his ideas forward, writing in a newspaper article that "the stone-age of art is finished." Possessing his own artistic ideology, he attacked the outdated art world that remained entrenched in Japan.

In 1952, Okamoto published an influential paper on Jōmon pottery, introducing it to a wider audience beyond archaeology. Today, I introduce him as the originator of Japanese 'Art and Archaeology'.

Okamoto Taro's Encounter with Jōmon Pottery

In November of 1951, Okamoto by chance came upon Jōmon pottery in a case displaying ancient archaeological piece in the Tokyo National Museum. At this time, he was disappointed with the Japanese art world, which lagged behind that of Europe, and he felt hopeless about Japanese traditional culture. He saw Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and statuary of Nara and Kyoto, which were considered representative of Japanese culture, as formal culture borrowed from China and Korea. In addition, he had serious misgivings about the way Japanese people viewed these forms of culture fondly as relics from the past, admiring them as part of a Japanese aesthetic that privileged the ideals of *wabi* and *sabi*.

In this display case he saw forms that would not normally be considered "Japanese." Looking back on the impact of this encounter in his later years, he said:

*It was a shock to see the Jōmon pieces, so thick and bulky, and I knew that this was the thing for me. It was like I got hit by a powerful electric current. All the flesh and blood in my body felt complete, and burning hot. It was the joy of finding something for which I'd been searching for a long time. (Okamoto, *Watashi no gendai geijutsu* [My Modern Art])*

The Beginning Japanese "Art and Archaeology"

In February of 1952 Okamoto published "Jōmondoki-ron Yojigen tonō taiwa" [Theory of Jōmon Pottery: Dialogue with a Different Dimension] in the art journal *Mizue*. At the time, objects from the Jōmon Period (roughly 14,000 BC to 900 BC) were not generally seen in the art history world as having any aesthetic value, and Japanese people saw them as handicrafts made by prehistoric people of a different ethnic group. Prior to his essay about Jōmon wares, the beginning of Japanese art history was generally located in the earthenware and bronze ware of the Yayoi Period (900 BC to 300 AD), when rice farming began, and the *haniwa* of the Kofun Period.

However, Okamoto rejected the flat forms of the Yayoi Period, in which the origins of Japanese traditional aesthetics and art history were found, deriding them as "symmetrical formalism." He described the three-dimensional forms of the Jōmon Period as having "ruthless asymmetry," insisting that people recognize the strong, unharmonious balance of Jōmon pottery. His assertion that the origins of Japanese culture and tradition were found in the Jōmon Period went against the conventional wisdom of his time; his recognition of Jōmon pottery as the starting point for Japanese art was revolutionary. Thus, his essay influenced people even outside the art world, including experts in

architecture, design and literature. He also shared his views with the general public through books and newspaper columns, rapidly building interest in the Jōmon period.

Why Okamoto Taro Continues to be Ignored by Japanese Archaeologists

I consider Okamoto's work as being groundbreaking in the fields of 'Art and Archaeology' and Public Archaeology in Japan. However, Okamoto isn't seen this way in Japanese archeology today. Japanese archaeologists continue to treat him with a cool attitude of indifference. His work led to Jōmon pottery being mentioned at the outset of many overviews of Japanese art history written in the 1960's, which themselves were edited by Japanese archaeologists. However, they made no mention of Okamoto or his work in these compilations, neither quoting nor referencing him. Since then, with a few exceptions, Okamoto's work has continued to be ignored by Japanese archaeologists.

In my opinion, one reason for overlooking Okamoto is that his work was seen as unrelated to archaeology. Perhaps it was hard for archaeologists to accept Okamoto's arguments regarding Jōmon pottery, which involved many subjective conclusions even while presenting themselves as ethnological theory. Another major reason that he continues to be ignored may be that from the 1980's he began to appear frequently in commercials and variety shows, gaining a reputation as a strange person who made unusual remarks and sought to be seen as a colorful individual by archaeologists, artists, and the general public alike. The way he often said that "Art is an explosion!" led people to refer to him with both affection and sarcasm as the "explosion man." However, many archaeologists would likely reject this superficial image if they undertook a careful reading of his work. From his words one can see that his ideas are based on anthropological knowledge.

Okamoto Taro's Mission

Okamoto was trying to carry out two missions in his article on Jōmon pottery. The first was to fundamentally change the way people commonly thought about "traditional Japan." The second was, through Jōmon pottery, for people to regain the human wildness and dignity of living that had been lost through modernization. For him, art was not just a matter of creating work, but for a human to "live like a human" – that is, life itself.

I would like to close this presentation with quotes from two of his books that express his thoughts towards Jōmon culture.

Fighting with animals, eating their meat – humans themselves are animals, either eating or being eaten, struggling against other living things. We are always continuing this tension of existence while alive.

As we interact with other living things, there is no clear distinction between human being and animal. This is cruel romanticism.

Not only animals - Everything in nature – rain, wind, ocean and trees – form one whole. This is precisely the shocking appeal of Jōmon pottery. It's a way of understanding space that doesn't distinguish between substance and emptiness. The space that has been hollowed out and embraced carries real weight. I'm jealous of this worldview. I feel an intense sympathy with it. This is exactly the dignity of living.

(Okamoto, *Shinpi Nihon* [Mysteries in Japan])

And second:

The strong, magical, mysterious power of Jōmon culture shines on us from deep in history like fire and light in the depths of the earth, and warms us. The passion and vitality of a people with a past like this cannot wither and die out. This is the confidence we have towards them.

Thus, we shouldn't focus on the so-called "Japanese-ness" of delicate, austere and elegant things. In our blood there is something so intense to drive one mad, something fresh and young, and we must awaken to this overwhelming essence in our blood.

People living in the modern era should feel intense sympathy and through this push forward with issues in the present. I believe that this is the only way to bring to life the unfairly forgotten past and get in touch with tradition.

*It is not thanks to the past that we have the present. On the contrary - it is only because of the present that the past exists. People somehow misunderstand this process. Anyone can seize the past through their vitality and passion in the present. This is tradition. (Okamoto, *Watashi no gendai geijutsu* [My Modern Art])*