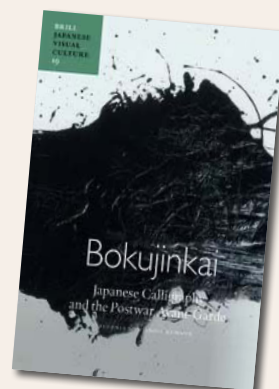


BOOK REVIEW

Bokujinkai: Japanese Calligraphy and the Postwar Avant-Garde

By Eugenia Bogdanova-Kummer

Brill, 2020
xi + 181 pages.



Reviewed by Matthew LARKING

The Bokujinkai (People of the Ink) were founded in Kyoto on 1 January 1952, an early postwar manifestation of the calligraphy avant-garde. The group's goals were conventional ones—pursuit of artistic freedom and escape from such authoritative hierarchies as traditions, teachers, schools/salons, and exhibiting forums and their judges. Abstraction, or calligraphic variations resembling these vogues in mid-twentieth-century American and European art, was the Bokujinkai's vehicle for modern artistic reform and international outreach. The group promoted an emphasis on line and space, asserted primitivism as the common source for both modernism and calligraphy, and eventually resorted to interpretative obscurantisms sourced from Zen metaphysics (p. 57).

Bokujinkai opens with an illustration of the idealism of the period. In 1954, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held an exhibition of Japanese modernist calligraphers, while across town the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum displayed “Younger American Painters,” including Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell. A number of American critics, ignorant of Japanese tradition and buoyed by the postwar wave of Japanese cultural-religious faddism, drew parallels between the two exhibitions. Visual similarity, which Bogdanova-Kummer refers to using the linguistic analogy of “false friends” (p. 4), and the elision of cultural contexts, were key to the conflation of modernist calligraphy with mid-twentieth century abstract expressionist painting, as was the early postwar period's ebullient optimism.

Bokujinkai wishes to recover this optimism. Bogdanova-Kummer envisions reclaiming her calligrapher subjects from contemporary neglect in Western scholarship, where they allegedly have been “wiped out from the records of postwar art history” (p. 141). She wants to elevate the Bokujinkai's status to that enjoyed by their American and European abstract expressionist painting contemporaries, doing for the Bokujinkai what has been attempted for the Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai (Gutai Art Association) in recent decades (p. 3).¹ More ambitiously still, she seeks to assert that her calligraphers' abstract works played a crucial role in the development of mid-twentieth century Western modernism.

1 Among the most significant English texts are Munroe 1994, Tiampo 2011, and Tiampo and Munroe 2013.

By the final lines of the book, however, the expectations established at the book's outset appear to have been revised. The author concludes that "The names of the People of the Ink—Morita Shiryū, Inoue Yūichi, Eguchi Sōgen, Sekiya Yoshimichi, and Nakamura Bokushi—need to be reinscribed in the history of art next to those of the artists with whom they once exhibited and collaborated, including Franz Kline, Yoshihara Jirō, Pierre Soulages, Georges Mathieu, Pierre Alechinsky, and Hans Hartung" (p. 147). The art-historical reputations of Morita and Inoue may yet rise to join this company, but this list of names points to a distinctly second-tier modernism.

A more significant issue also lurks here. Of the five Bokujinkai calligraphers listed in this denouement, only two, Morita and Inoue, have a substantial presence in the book. The calligraphers themselves are overshadowed by Bokujinkai collaborators like Hasegawa Saburō, the Zen promotion and theorizing of Hisamatsu Shin'ichi and Ijima Tsutomu, and diversions such as the American and European receptions of Sengai Gibon's *Circle, Triangle and Square* (Edo period). The book's narrative makes clear that Gibon's geometric calligraphy can be considered the more conventionally influential in postwar Western and Japanese art (pp. 109–117).

The approach is a global modernist one, though the author prefers the "transcultural" terminology (p. 8). The focus is on how artists and interlocutors ("global art players," p. 35), and, perhaps to a lesser degree, actual art objects, were valorized by their connections to "postwar global artistic networks," in which some Bokujinkai calligraphers were "central nodes" (p. 146). The aim is to reconsider the Bokujinkai within art historian Partha Mitter's postcolonial concept of "multi-centered modernisms." The effect, however, is the insertion of Japan, the country, between the art center cities of New York and Paris, resulting in a "triangular structure" of modernist interaction somewhat antithetical to Mitter's more inclusive ideal (pp. 8–9).

More problematic from an art object approach is how the author skates over intricacies of influence, their directional flows, and creative cooption. Bogdanova-Kummer's visual analysis can appear remarkably disengaged at times, as with Morita and Pierre Soulages: "It is clear that both artists were interested in the same questions and looked to each other's works for solutions" (p. 74). Even a cursory glance at the visual comparisons between pp. 71–73 demonstrates that Morita and Soulages were doing extremely different kinds of "painting." In addressing another pairing, the author falls back onto the conceptually weak visual similarity approach criticized earlier in the text: "Looking at Inoue and Kline together, the difference between American painting and Japanese calligraphy ... disappears" (p. 131).

Bokujinkai engagingly wrestles with a topic in drastic need of further art-historical attention, and is an intriguing contribution to the embryonic field of modern Japanese art history. Bogdanova-Kummer can be especially judicious in her commentaries and analyses, reveling as much in the hypocrisies as in the achievements of the Bokujinkai calligraphers and their interpreters. But this judiciousness is unevenly applied. In the global modernist approach adopted here, the principal significance of the Bokujinkai is outside Japan, with the domestic art context either absent or relegated to the level of background information. The author barely considers the debt of her subjects to earlier traditions of calligraphy, Japanese and Chinese, and relies upon the invocation of modern Western painters to bring

prestige to her Japanese calligrapher subjects.² The book is therefore less about the evident merits of modern calligraphy *as* calligraphy (as much Bokujinkai output can hardly be considered “abstract”), and instead considers calligraphy as a form of painting that failed to take firm hold within the Western modernist pantheon and its scholarship. Crucially, however, this implies that calligraphy is less “transcultural” than the author would have us believe.

REFERENCES

Hirai 2004

Hirai Shōichi 平井章一. “Gutai – Toward a Reconsideration.” In “*Gutai*” *tte nan da? Kessei 50 shūnen no zen’ei bijutsu gurūpu 18 nen no kiroku* [具体] ってなんだ? 結成 50 周年の前衛美術グループ18年の記録, trans. Christopher Stephens, pp. 168–173. Bijutsu Shuppansha, 2004.

Munroe 1994

Alexandra Munroe, ed. *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*. Harry N. Abrams Inc. and Yokohama Bijutsukan, 1994.

Tiampo 2011

Ming Tiampo. *Gutai: Decentering Modernism*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Tiampo and Munroe 2013

Ming Tiampo and Alexandra Munroe, eds. *Gutai: Splendid Playground*. Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2013.

² This situation recalls Hirai Shōichi’s claim that in studying the Gutai Art Association, scholars should be “transferring our focus from Gutai as an international movement to a peculiarly Japanese one.” Hirai 2004, p. 173.