

Discovery of the Islandscape: The Reception of Paul Gauguin by Japanese Painters in the 1910s

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the process through which young painters in the Kyoto art scene, such as Bakusen Tsuchida and Chikkyo Ono, discovered their islandscapes through the reception of Paul Gauguin in the 1910s. Bakusen's *Women in an Island* (1912) and *Woman Divers* (1913) and Chikkyo's *Southern Country* (1911), *Two Island Scenes* (1916), and *Nakiri Village* (1918), which are discussed in this paper, all settle on the subject of the island. It is interesting that both Bakusen and Chikkyo were born and grew up near islands. In addition, their island works were executed concurrently with the innovation of the Kyoto art scene and while Post-Impressionists such as Gauguin, van Gogh, and Cézanne were introduced in Kyoto. Based on this background, this paper reveals how Bakusen and Chikkyo discovered their islandscapes, relying on their painting techniques, letters, and retrospect.

要旨

本稿は、1910年代の日本におけるゴーギャン受容を通じて、土田麦僊および小野竹喬ら京都画壇の若手画家が島風景を発見する過程を明らかにするものである。本稿で取り上げる麦僊の《島の女》(1912)《海女》(1913)、および竹喬の《南国》(1911)《島二作》(1916)《波切村》(1918)はどれも島が題材となった作品である。興味深い点として、二人ともが島に近い環境で生まれ育っていることがある。加えてこれらの作品は、京都画壇で変革が起こり、またゴーギャンやセザンヌ、ゴッホらポスト印象派が紹介されるなか制作されている。こうした背景を踏まえて本稿では、麦僊と竹喬の表現技法および書簡や回想に依拠しながら、彼らが島風景をいかに見出したかを追求する。

Introduction

In 1912, Bakusen Tsuchida 土田麦僊 (1887-1936), a young Japanese-style painter, presented his painting, *Women in an Island* 島の女 [fig.1]. Then, in 1913, he painted *Woman Divers* 海女 [fig.2]. The critics commented on these paintings by reflecting on the style of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), a French painter in the 19th century.

In Japan around 1910, literary magazines of the day such as *the White Birch* 白樺 or *the Pleiades* スバル, helped introduce Western modern and contemporary artists and their exhibitions to young Japanese artists. For example, *the White Birch* actively presented Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, Futurists, and so on, with lots of illustrations. In particular, the article “Revolutionary Painters 革命の画家,” published in the January 1912 edition of the magazine, introduced Post-Impressionists like Cézanne, van Gogh, and Gauguin and attracted young Western-style and Japanese-style painters, insisting that painters’ identities or lifestyles led to the creation of their original works. Young painters collaborated to copy the painting style of Post-Impressionists. It can be said that Bakusen was also influenced by such an artistic trend in those days.

It is interesting that the subject of Bakusen’s two works was the island. Bakusen was born on Sado Island 佐渡島 in Niigata 新潟, located on the side of the Sea of Japan. As a young artist, he visited Hachijo Island 八丈島 and Nakiri Village 波切村, located on the Pacific side, for painting *Women in an Island* and *Woman Divers*. Hachijo Island is 300 km south of Tokyo; around 1910, there was only one ship providing service from Yokohama each month. Yet, Bakusen visited the island several times. Nakiri is a village on a finger of the Shima Peninsula 志摩半島; besides Bakusen, there was another painter inspired here. Chikkyo Ono 小野竹喬 (1889-1979) was also a young Japanese-style painter in Kyoto who established the Association for the Creation of National Painting 国画創作協会 in 1918; for the first exhibition of that association, Chikkyo executed the painting *Nakiri Village* 波切村 [fig.3]. He described the seascape from this village as a mixed view of calmness and storminess, comparing it to the Seto Inland Sea 瀬戸内海 seascape, where he grew up.¹⁾ Chikkyo had already painted islandscapes for the Seto Inland Sea toward the beginning of the 1910s; generally, his paintings remind us of the works of Cézanne or Gauguin. Furthermore, *The Island* 島 [fig.4] by Sohaku Ito 伊藤草白 and *River Stream in the Early Summer* 初夏の流れ [fig.5] by Banka Nonagase 野長瀬晩花 both have as their subject the islandscape; they were also displayed at the first exhibition of the Association for the Creation of National Painting.

As just described, in the Kyoto art scene, we can see the reception of Gauguin by young painters who borrowed from not only Gauguin’s painting technique but also from visits to Tahiti in the southern sea. However, their reception of Gauguin was indicative of their relationship with the Kyoto art scene in those days. Bakusen and Chikkyo executed their paintings of islandscapes in their attempts to promote new Japanese-style paintings as emerging painters in Kyoto. These two men were born and grew up near islands. Thus, this paper will pursue the process by which Bakusen and Chikkyo discovered their islandscapes.

1. The relationship between early works by Bakusen and his gaze toward the island

Bakusen Tsuchida was born on Sado Island in 1887; at age 16, he left for Kyoto. His talent as a painter blossomed under Seiho Takeuchi 竹内栖鳳. Chikkyo, who was two years younger than Bakusen, also studied under Seiho.

The relationship between Bakusen and the island has its roots in his birthplace. However, it is believed that Bakusen began to recognize the islandscape after leaving Sado. Generally speaking, for recognizing an object as a landscape, we need the gap of space and time between us and the object.

Here, we would like to focus on Bakusen's early works, painted from 1907 to 1909. *Song of Spring* 春の歌, *Punishment* 罰 [fig.6], and *Tax Day* 徴税日 are paintings based on his visits to Sado. These works covered fresh themes, different from those associated with the Kyoto art scene; accordingly, they received high acclaim.

Takeo Uchiyama evaluates these paintings as follows: "Every work is a figure painting under the theme of country life, and in those paintings Bakusen's youthful feeling was expressed with longing for his homeland and boyhood." ²⁾

Aya Ueda considers how these three paintings were executed from Bakusen's sketchbook in those days. Bakusen was copying Western paintings that evoked memories of his everyday life or experiences. When he sketched, he used a figure or composition from Western paintings to sketch real people or scenes, described as "the process by which Bakusen expands his inner images and makes them stable so that he can form his original painting style." Therefore, Ueda brings her view that Bakusen's works show how he was challenged to complete new Japanese-style paintings by accepting the Western style of painting. ³⁾

Although both arguments are clear, here we would like to make sure that Bakusen chose Sado Island for his new painting. ⁴⁾ Thus, it can be said that Bakusen's perspective on the islandscape had already appeared by this time as he looked for new ways of painting. However, his view of the islandscape was to be changed through innovations on the Kyoto art scene and the introduction of Gauguin in Kyoto beginning in 1909.

2. Kyoto's art scene around 1910 and the introduction of Gauguin

In the Kyoto art scene that Bakusen and Chikkyo studied in those days, the traditional theme and style of painting were still dominant. However, after 1909, the tendency changed. In that year, the Kyoto Municipal College of Art 京都市立絵画専門学校 was established and Bakusen, Chikkyo, and Banka entered a special course to learn practical skills. They also participated in lectures for the regular course. A young aesthetician, Sotaro Nakai 中井宗太郎, was there and he influenced them intellectually. Moreover, in January 1910, Kisaku Tanaka 田中喜作, an art historian, had returned from his study abroad in Paris and began the workshop named *the Anonymous Workshop*

無名会 with Nakai. Accordingly, they introduced the method and theory of modern and contemporary Western art. Bakusen and Chikkyo joined this workshop. The fresh sensitivity brought to the Kyoto art scene in 1909 also resulted in the introduction of Gauguin.

In order to consider the relationship between Gauguin and the Kyoto art scene, the statement of Tanaka at *the Anonymous Workshop* in March 1910 seems important. A newspaper article reported a speech by Tanaka as including the following: "Painting is music occurring in our sight, and [a] living painting is the one on which [a] painter's feelings are living with harmony of color and the rhythm of line. It doesn't matter if [the] painting has meaning or not."⁵⁾ Afterward, Chikkyo reflected on this statement and said, "That was a naturalistic statement against Academism" and a "new type of art theory in those days."⁶⁾

In April 1910, a month after Tanaka's speech, Gauguin's article was referenced by Bin Ueda 上田敏, a scholar at Kyoto Imperial University and published on *the Beauty* 美, the bulletin of the Kyoto Municipal College of Art. Ueda's article starts with the following sentence: "In order to make contemporary art full of life, I suppose that we need some savageness so that I speak of Paul Gauguin who is not much talked about." In his article, Ueda described mainly the life of Gauguin but also mentioned Gauguin's attitude toward painting as follows: "Gauguin's aim was taking primitive beauty with [an] unadulterated view and expressing natural rhythm with color and form." Finally, he gave insight into Gauguin's personality, noting that the artist left Western civilized society for an uncivilized one, citing Gauguin's words "I am the savage" from a letter sent later in his life.⁷⁾

How did Bakusen or Chikkyo accept this introduction of Gauguin, which overlapped with the statement regarding a living painting? Tanaka, Bakusen, and Chikkyo started two circles, Le Chat Noir 黒猫会 (December 1910) and Le Masque 仮面会 (May 1911). Le Chat Noir was a roundtable in which members learned about Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Le Masque, established after the breakup of Le Chat Noir, consisted of painters who attempted to hold an exhibition for their works. In the preface to the first exhibition's catalog, the passionate declaration was expressed that the exhibition would be a living one featuring living paintings.⁸⁾

There is another article about Gauguin in Kyoto written by Nakai. His article was published in *the Beauty* in September 1911, and it showed that Gauguin's lineage and boyhood in the tropics had an impact on his adventurous life and art execution. In Nakai's article, Gauguin's painting philosophy was introduced in detail as follows: "A. Summarizing colors to be simple, B. Making a picture plane a more decorative one, C. Drawing bold lines on sketches."⁹⁾ This introduction had not yet been published when Le Masque was established. However, Bakusen and Chikkyo had opportunities to hear Gauguin's story from Nakai directly. Moreover, in the spring of 1911, an exhibition featuring Gauguin's posthumous works was held in Berlin. Presumably, members of Le Chat Noir or Le Masque would have discussed it as a timely issue.

Whatever the case, we can confirm here that the theory describing art as living paintings appeared around 1910 in Kyoto, and Gauguin was introduced as supporting the theory. Years later,

Chikkyo said that he and Bakusen had become aware of their individualities since spring 1911, that is sometime around the time they graduated from college and established Le Masque. They were inspired by “the reality expressed by Cézanne, the sensual beauty by Renoir, the innocence of Rousseau, the passion of van Gogh, and the savage beauty by Gauguin,” which were introduced rapidly at that time.¹⁰⁾

In the meantime, Bakusen and Chikkyo actively painted their original works, namely new Japanese-style paintings. It was during this period that they discovered the islandscape.

3. Landscapes expressed by Chikkyo and Bakusen

Southern Country 南国 [fig.7], which Chikkyo displayed at the first exhibition of Le Masque in May 1911, has some characteristics evoking works by Cézanne or Gauguin. At the same time, this painting shows the first gaze by Chikkyo toward the islandscape.

Southern Country contains the early spring scenery on Kono Island 神島 in Chikkyo's homeland (i.e., Kasaoka 笠岡, Okayama 岡山). In traditional Japanese-style paintings, there are common painting subjects of seashore or waterfront such as *the Eight Views of Omi* 近江八景. However, the work of Chikkyo shows us a new type of islandscape influenced by Post-Impressionists. In this painting, a simplified color plane covers a flat sea and mountains, which are seen from a higher perspective. A decorative picture screen obtained in this manner shows us the rhythmic movement of long narrow trees painted at intervals in the foreground. Chikkyo expressed Kono Island as “the place [where] we can see a variety of seascape[s] because there is a temple regularly visited by pilgrims so that roads have great vertical interval[s].”¹¹⁾ Chikkyo described the landscape of Kasaoka, including Kono Island, as follows: “The scenery around here is always idyllic and [a] pastoral paradise.”¹²⁾

After completing *Southern Country*, Chikkyo executed several paintings of islandscapes. *Two Island Scenes* 島二作 (1916) [fig.8] and *Nakiri Village* are regarded as major works in which Chikkyo envisioned an entire island from a higher perspective. This same view describes *Southern Country* as well. From these works, we understand that Chikkyo became interested in various islandscapes because of his initial fascination with the islandscape in his homeland. Furthermore, his depictions of islandscapes were symbolic of his acceptance of modern Western art techniques, just as Japan, an island nation, rediscovered itself by capitalizing on Western modernization.

By contrast, Bakusen seemed to be absorbed in painting rustic scenes at that time. For example, in the winter of 1911, Bakusen was staying in Kitahira Village 北比良村 in Shiga 滋賀 to draw country folk for the Le Masque exhibition to be held the next spring. In a letter to his friend, Bakusen stated, “I can't find any simple and honest villagers nearby Kyoto because they are already civilized, so that I wonder if I can see anything real here, the inconvenient place called Taiwan in Omi 近江. Then, I make sketches by hiring some peasants as models every day.”¹³⁾ Furthermore, when Bakusen visited Seto Inner Sea with Chikkyo, he compared the easiness of peasants there to

the burdened peasants in Sado, and he was excited to observe their different characters, which seemed to be linked to differences in climate.¹⁴⁾ From his comments, we can understand that Bakusen—a city dweller—viewed the country as rustic.

In 1912, Bakusen travelled to Hachijo Island. In a letter to an acquaintance at that time, he expressed his interest in things pertaining to the island, but he had trouble with the seemingly incomprehensible language.¹⁵⁾ Be that as it may, through his travels and research, *Women in an Island* was completed. The outline of a tree trunk and figures are drawn with pale inkstick, and the color is summarized and simplified. With the motion of the figures and blank spaces, we can see loose movement on the decorative picture plane. Although Bakusen criticized this painting as “only a painting of color,”¹⁶⁾ it can be said that this work has both the harmony of color and the rhythm of line.

Next, Bakusen painted *Woman Divers*, based on Nakiri Village, in 1913. This painting has a more decorative plane than the one painted the previous year. Its color and bold, thick outlines make the picture very decorative. However, there is both movement and stillness in the picture with its white waves, walking women, resting women, and a ship (placed so that we can see rhythmic harmony in this picture). Besides, woman divers' poses are similar to those in *Siesta* [fig.9] painted by Gauguin.¹⁷⁾

Works of Bakusen, as compared to works of Chikkyo, contain full movements with painted figures. Moreover, we can see the difference between the two painters' contemplations of landscapes. After completing the two works described herein, Bakusen did not paint other landscapes; rather, he executed works in which he tried to integrate humans into nature. Thus, his attitude may reflect the analogy that the city was becoming more civilized with the trend toward modernization; consequently, he may have begun to regard the country as nature.

Conclusion

As discussed above, we have considered that both the change in the Kyoto art scene and the introduction of Gauguin in the 1910s fascinated young painters at that time. The landscapes of Chikkyo and Bakusen reflect their attempts to produce living paintings as new Japanese-style paintings; clearly, they were inspired by the art and life of Gauguin or Post Impressionists. However, the discovery of the landscape by these artists overlaps with the social movement represented by the rediscovery and reevaluation of the Japanese landscape at the end of the 19th century. Later, this movement would connect with colonialism which the Empire of Japan implemented under the thought that “the root of Japan was the South.” Yet, it is an obvious fact that the landscape appeared before us through such intersecting gazes, so that we have to comprehend how landscapes are recognized individually and collectively

Notes

- 1) Chikkyo Ono, *The Winter Diary*, Kyuryudo, 1979, pp. 18-19.
- 2) Takeo Uchiyama, "The Research Report about the Early Works of Bakusen," *The Annual Report of The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto*, 1968.
- 3) Aya Ueda, "Bakusen Tsuchida: A Study about His Early Works," *The Art History*, No. 151, 2001, pp. 31-44.
- 4) At Sado in those days, socialistic thought was in vogue and Kyoson Tsuchida 土田杏村, a younger brother of Bakusen, was one who adhered to this type of thought. So, it is possible that Bakusen employed socialistic themes espoused by his brother.
- 5) See *The Kyoto Hinode Newspaper* on March 21, 1911.
- 6) Ono, *op. cit.*, 1979, p. 225.
- 7) Bin Ueda, "Paul Gauguin," *The Beauty*, Vol. 1, No. 10, 1910.
- 8) See Chiyo Seki, "Memorandum on 'Le Chat Noir' and 'Le Masque': A Small Movement of Two Painters' Groups in Kyoto in the Last Years of Meiji Era.," *The Art Research*, No. 232, pp. 31-32.
- 9) Sotaro Nakai, "Paul Gauguin," *The Beauty*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1911.
- 10) Ono, *op. cit.*, 1979, p. 144.
- 11) *Ibid.* p. 17.
- 12) *Ibid.*
- 13) See a letter to Isshi Nomura, December 6, 1911, letter No. 3. In: Hisao Tanaka, ed., "Letters of Bakusen Tsuchida," *The Journal of the Aesthetics and the Art History*, No. 4, 2nd part, 1984.
- 14) Ono, *op. cit.*, 1979, p. 17.
- 15) See a letter to Isshi Nomura, July 17, 1912, letter No. 14. In: Tanaka, *op.cit.* 1984.
- 16) See a letter to Isshi Nomura, November 22, 1912, letter No. 23. In: Tanaka, *op.cit.* 1984.
- 17) The illustration of *Siesta* was published in *The Bijutsu Shinpo* in 1912.

Photo Credits

Fig.1, 2, 6: Asahi Shimbun (ed.), *Asahi Graph Additional Volume Special Number of Fine Art: Bakusen Tsuchida*, Japan edition 64, 1990.

Fig.3, 4, 5: Heisaku Harada, Yasuhiro Sonoda, and Shiro Ueda (eds.), *Whole Pictures of the Association for the Creation of National Painting*, Mitsumura-Suiko shoin, 1996.

Fig.7, 8: Shiro Ueda (ed.), *Chikkyo Ono*, Mitsumura-Suiko shoin, 1999.

Fig.9: Richard R. Brettell (ed.), *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, The National Gallery of Art, 1988.



fig.1. Bakusen Tsuchida, *Women in an Island*, 1912, each 166.5 × 184.0 cm, color on silk/ a pair of two-fold screens, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.



fig.2. Bakusen Tsuchida, *Woman Divers*, 1918, each 170.0 × 366.0 cm, color on silk/ a pair of six-panel folding screens, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.

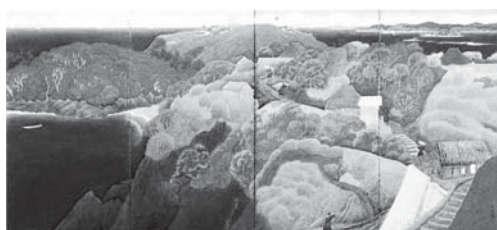


fig.3. Chikkyo Ono, *Nakiri Village*, 1918, each 167.5 × 370.0 cm, color on silk/ a pair of four-fold screens, private collection.

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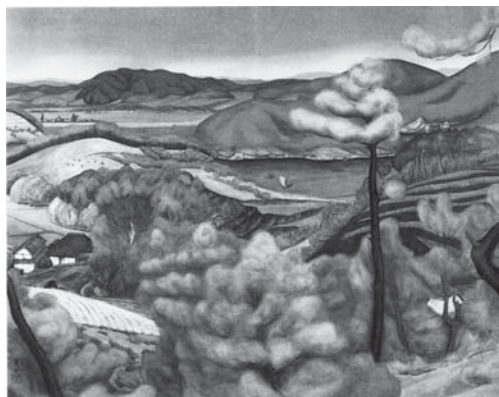


fig.4. Sohaku Ito, *The Island*, 1918, 109.7 × 139.0 cm, color on silk/ a pair of two-fold screens, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.



fig.5. Banka Nonagase, *River Stream in the Early Summer*, each 176.5 × 557.0 cm, color on silk/ a pair of six-fold screens, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art.



fig.6. Bakusen Tsuchida, *Punishment*, 1908, 154.3 × 198.8 cm, color on silk/framed, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.



fig.7. Chikkyo Ono, *Sothern Country*, 1911, 68.5 × 68.0 cm, color on silk/hanging scroll, University Art Museum, Kyoto City University of Arts.



fig.8. Chikkyo Ono, *Two Island Scenes (Early Spring, Winter Hills)*, 1916, each 150.0 × 50.0 cm, color on silk/hanging scroll, Chikkyo Art Museum.



fig.9. Paul Gauguin, *The Siesta*, c.1891-1892, 87.0 × 116.0 cm, oil on canvas, private collection.