

Teaching

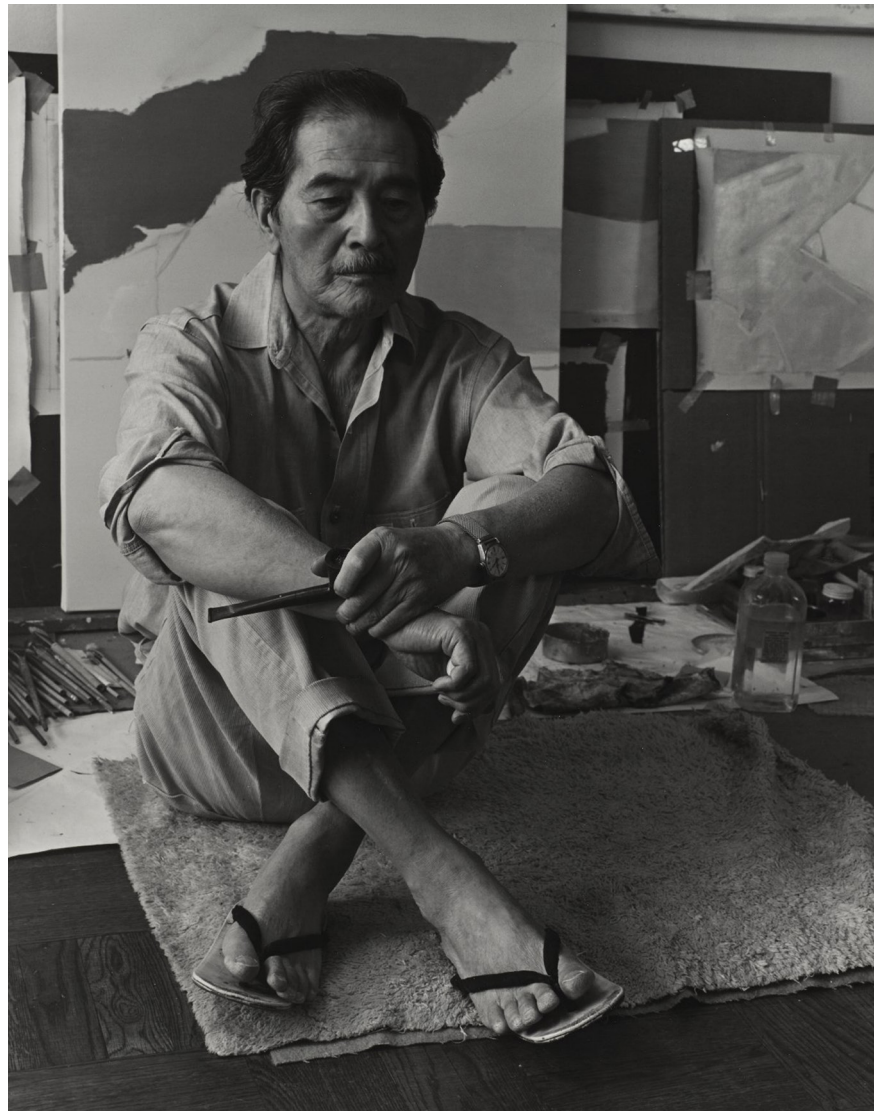
Kenzo Okada

ARTIST

Kenzo OKADA

(ken-zo o-ka-da)

岡田 謙三



Kenzo Okada, 1981. Portrait by Arthur Mones. Gelatin silver print, 35.6 x 27.2 cm. Brooklyn Museum, New York, Gift of the artist, 1997

BORN

1902, Yokohama, Japan

DIED

1982, Tokyo

THEMES

**Nature
Materials and Process**

“My trouble was that when I was in Japan I was always thinking about Western things. That trouble is gone because I am here in the West.”¹

ART MEDIUM

Painting

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

Born in Yokohama, Japan, in 1902 to an affluent family, Kenzo Okada wanted to be a painter from a young age. In 1922 he enrolled at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, but just two years later, his fascination with Western art movements led him to Paris, where he briefly studied with the Japanese artist Foujita Tsuguharu (Léonard Foujita). Following his return to Japan in 1927, Okada spent the next twenty years building a successful career as a painter and a professor.

After World War II, there was a revival of avant-garde art in Japan, but Okada became frustrated with the infighting in the art community and moved New York in 1950. He quickly became part of the group of artists known as the Abstract Expressionists. Inspired by the radical shifts in the idea of what painting could be—a gestural, nonrepresentational form on canvas rather than a neat depiction of reality—Okada abandoned figurative painting and began to create abstractions. During this time of experimentation, he forged a unique identity by evoking Japanese aesthetic sensibilities while working loosely within the Abstract Expressionist style. He drew on eclectic Japanese sources, including the classical aesthetic of *yūgen*, which describes the beauty of transient forms like clouds of the flight of geese, and called his style “*yūgenism*.” Many of his paintings evoke the natural world, either by suggestive forms of mountains, mists, and the moon, or by the titles. His dry, matte, flat surfaces and his application of

thin oil paint—diluted to look watery like sumi ink—reference the torn-paper collage techniques that served as ground for the art and calligraphy of the Heian period (794–1185 CE)

Okada shared the Abstract Expressionists’ interest in tapping into the subconscious. While in New York, he often recalled his old home in Japan and drew from memory. He painted without preconceived ideas, often developing images by first composing with natural materials, such as sticks and stones. Okada was highly experimental in his techniques, which included scraping away paint and splattering paint onto a dry surface.

Created soon after his arrival in the United States, *Solstice* (1954) is among Okada’s early forays into abstraction. While it is not completely representational, it evokes nature through the sunlike imagery in a patch of black sky and through its palette of earth tones. The title, referring to either the longest or shortest day of the year, suggests themes such as seasons, change, and ephemerality.

¹ Kenzo Okada, interview with Forrest Selvig, November 22, 1968. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-kenzo-okada-12022#transc>.



Kenzo Okada, *Solstice*, March 1954. Oil on canvas, 145.5 × 179.4 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 54.1407

View and Discuss

→ Look at the painting *Solstice* (1954).

What do you notice about the colors, shapes, and composition of the work?

Thinking of the painting, complete this sentence in several ways:

This looks like _____.

→ The title of this work is *Solstice*.

What do you think of when you think of solstices? How do you think the title relates to this painting?

→ Okada was trained in depicting landscapes and people exactly as they looked, but for this work, he experimented with techniques of abstraction.

Where do you see realism and where do you see abstraction? Why might an artist choose to use abstraction?

→ Okada tried many different methods of applying paint. Sometimes he splattered it on. Other times he scraped it away. Look back at the painting with this in mind.

What techniques do you think Okada used? How do they relate to the subject?

Classroom Activities

Compose with Natural Materials

Okada often developed his compositions by placing natural materials, such as sticks and stones, on a canvas.

For this activity, challenge students to create compositions using only natural materials they have collected. They do not have to glue these down but rather can create several different arrangements by moving the materials. Next, challenge them to choose a composition to translate into a drawing or painting. What did they have to change in order to create a two-dimensional translation of their composition?

Abstract Expressionism

When he moved to the United States in 1950, Okada became friends with Abstract Expressionist painters such as Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. His work differed from theirs, however, in that it retained some imagery from the natural world.

Challenge each student to research one Abstract Expressionist artist. They should investigate how their chosen artist developed their style. What materials and techniques did they use? What did they make as a younger artist, and how did their work change over time? What was their philosophy behind their approach? How does their work compare to Okada's?

Classroom Activities

Tap into the Subconscious Mind

The Abstract Expressionists were influenced by the gestural expressionism of sumi-e, or Japanese ink painting, and the Zen Buddhist approach of “letting the mind go,” a way of forgoing conscious control in favor of direct action and even chance. By adopting such attitudes, they believed they were able to make work that arose from the subconscious levels of their brain. Okada also explored this approach.

For this activity, offer students some methods for tapping into their subconscious while painting and then ask them to create some of their own. For instance, students could splatter paint rather than applying it to the canvas with a paintbrush. How does this act introduce chance and free up conscious control? What other methods could they use for applying paint to canvas that would introduce chance? Allow them to experiment and then share as a group. What did it feel like to not be in total control of their work? Do they believe these techniques tapped into their subconscious? Why or why not?

Resources

Websites

- Phillips Collection. https://www.phillipscollection.org/research/american_art/bios/okada-bio.htm. See also https://www.phillipscollection.org/research/american_art/artwork/Okada-Footsteps.htm.

Articles

- Okada, Kenzo. Interview by Forrest Selvig, November 22, 1968. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art. https://www.si.edu/object/AAADCD_oh_216545.
- Waggoner, Walter H. "Kenzo Okada, Painter, Dead; Noted for Tender Modernism." *New York Times*, July 28, 1982. <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/07/28/obituaries/kenzo-okada-painter-dead-noted-for-tender-modernism.html>.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist's surname is capitalized to differentiate it from his given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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