### Abstract Expressionism in Japan, (抽象表現主義, chūshō hyōgenshugi)

Abstract Expressionism developed in Japan in 1954, after the end of the American Occupation, and only nine years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when a group of seventeen artists living in Osaka founded the *Gutai* (具体, embodiment) artists association. More than any other group in Japan, the *Gutai* artists considered and engaged with Abstract Expressionism, particularly the works of Jackson Pollock. Arguably one of the most successful Japanese disciples of American Abstract Expressionism was Okada Kenzō, who migrated to the United States in the 1950s and made a name for himself through using the decorative effects of traditional Japanese paintings in his works. Just as the Japanese artistic Diaspora had infused Abstract Expressionism with their alterity in New York, American Expressionism was also transposed in Japan through *Gutai* artists, whose overly derivative Abstract-Expressionistic paintings were the rebellions of a younger generation of artists against a society responsible for the destruction of the war. The post-war Japanese assimilation of Western institutions and values is often described as a knee-jerk reaction against Japanese militarism and a means of expressing the freedom of the newly embraced democratic reforms.

Post-war Japanese artists broke with the established tradition of taking inspiration from Europe and particularly Paris, and refocused on the emerging centre of New York. In the 1950s a large vanguard of Japanese artists relocated to the United States, including Hasegawa Saburō (長谷川三郎), Inokuma Gen’ichirō (猪熊弦一郎), Kawabata Minoru (川端実), Masatoyo Kishi (政豊岸), Niizuma Minoru (新妻実), Okada Kenzō (岡田謙三), Teiji Takai (伊藤ていじ), and James Hiroshi Suzuki.

Japanese Abstract Expressionism was an international offshoot of the American post-World War II graphic art movement, which developed into a globally pervasive force throughout the 1950s. Despite the fact that Asian and in particular Japanese influences on Abstract Expressionism were tenuous, the internalisation of ‘oriental thought’ and especially Zen was an important ingredient in juxtaposing nationalistic American aesthetic trends in its opposition to European art, after the successful defeat of Japan in the Asia-Pacific theatre.

Abstract expressionism was also a politically motivated articulation of American identity in the Post-World War II world. In this sense the radical native *Gutai* and Japanese influence on Abstract Expressionism in the United States was regarded as evidence of the imperialistic success of the American way in the Asia-Pacific region.

Following in the wake of Surrealism and European Expressionism, which opened art to the exploration of the unconscious, some of the defining characteristics of Abstract Axpressionism are: giant canvases, surfaces with indistinguishable centres, and de-structured ‘all-over’ fragmentation, where the canvas is thought of as the field for the drawing action of an artist.



Kenzō Okada, *Footsteps*, 1954, oil on canvas, 153x177.5 cm, The Phillips Collection, Washington.

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