

Saburo Hasegawa

A Brief Biography

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This biography is based on recent scholarship by Mark Dean Johnson, Koichi Kawasaki and Bert Winther-Tamaki, published in the concurrent exhibition catalogue.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION, 1906–1929

Saburo Hasegawa was born at the southern end of Japan's Honshu Island in Yamaguchi Prefecture in 1906, the son of a trading company executive who had previously lived in London and Hong Kong. His father was transferred to Kobe in 1910, and moved with his family to nearby Ashiya, a resort city for Osaka and the greater Kansai region merchants that was well connected by railway service. Saburo was tutored in English and attended prestigious private schools, the Konan Junior and Senior High Schools. Today, Konan Gakuen, the high school and junior high school campus, houses a major collection and gallery devoted to Saburo Hasegawa's work.

Hasegawa's interest in painting became evident in junior high school, and in high school, with three friends, the young artist co-organized an art club called the White Elephant Group (Hakuzokai). In 1924, at the age of eighteen, Hasegawa began studying in Osaka with Narashige Koide (1887–1931), an oil painter whose work was informed by post-impressionism, which Koide had experienced firsthand during a visit to Paris a few years earlier. In 1926, Hasegawa began his study in the art history department of Tokyo Imperial University (his father, who hoped Saburo would help take over the family businesses, discouraged his study of studio art), and he later completed his degree by authoring a thesis on the work of the renowned Muromachi-period ink painter Sesshu (1420–1506).

FIRST INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

After graduating in 1929, Hasegawa embarked on a trip to Europe with a stopover in the United States. Hasegawa first visited San Francisco, New York, and Boston before continuing to England and then France; he also visited both Spain and Italy. In 1931, one of his works was selected for display at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. There, he married Viola de Boer (life dates unknown), a Dutch woman who was the daughter of a British art critic. After living in Paris for nineteen months, where he encountered Piet Mondrian's work and witnessed the range of contemporaneous developments in abstract art and surrealism, Hasegawa learned that his father had died. He immediately returned with his wife to Japan.

HASEGAWA'S CAREER IN JAPAN DURING THE 1930S

Hasegawa began exhibiting his own work in Tokyo in 1932 and soon became an important ambassador of European modernism in Japan. Initially he produced loosely representational oil paintings characterized by brusque paint handling. He concurrently established a reputation as an art writer, with essays appearing in several important Japanese journals. The first was an art historical appreciation entitled "On Sesshu," published in 1934 and reproduced in the *Reader*.¹ But in 1935, a different conceptual direction surfaced in an essay entitled "The New Japanese Art," which began with a discussion of Pablo Picasso and ended with a self-prophetic articulation of a new Japanese-centric approach to modern art.² A 1936 essay entitled "Abstract Art" chronicled recent developments in European modernism.³ This was followed in 1937 by an essay about Paul Cézanne, Wassily Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso, and Jean Arp entitled "On Abstract Painting."⁴ In 1937, the Japanese publisher Atelier issued Hasegawa's *Abusutorakuto ato* (Abstract Art), the first book about abstraction in Japan, establishing Hasegawa as a leading authority on avant-garde art. Also in 1937 he published "Avant-Garde Art and Eastern Classics," an essay that juxtaposed discussion of Chinese classical painting, the tea ceremony, and ikebana (the Japanese art of flower arranging) with modernist European architecture and art and that reads as a kind of manifesto.⁵ In another 1937 essay, "Avant-Garde Painting," Hasegawa wrote, "The classics are a mirror."⁶ His synthetic approach of interrelating aspects of Asian classical art with modernist aesthetics was becoming the central thesis of both his creative and intellectual work.

Hasegawa became involved with a few art clubs associated with new directions in oil painting reflecting European influences in the early and mid-1930s. He reorganized one of these groups as the Free Artists Association (Jiyu Bijutsuka Kyokai) in 1937, soon recognized as the most important proponent of abstraction in Japanese art circles. Hasegawa's increasingly abstract works, both oil paintings and collages made with materials that included yarn and found objects, sometimes referenced architecture and featured meandering linear compositional elements.

At this time, Hasegawa worked in a fashionable studio at Osaki Chojamaru, Tokyo, that was featured in the art magazine *Atelier*. In 1938, the artist began making photographs, among them a series from a trip to China, which was published in an art journal in 1939, and in the same year he created semi-abstract documentary photographs of details of Japanese village life. The Free Artists Association exhibitions began including photography in 1939. During the late 1930s, Hasegawa became more deeply engaged with the tea ceremony and also with writing haiku. His personal life transformed during this period as well: Viola de Boers had borne Saburo a daughter (Sumire, 1934–1996), but the couple separated and then divorced in April 1936. Hasegawa married his second wife, Kiyoko (1913–2006), in October 1936, and his family later grew to include a son (Shobu, 1940–2015) and a second daughter (Michiko, b. 1943).

A PERIOD OF INTROSPECTION

In 1940, Hasegawa produced a new suite of highly formal still-life photographs and moved with his family back to Ashiya. Later that year, he was arrested for refusing to participate in war drills and spent several days in jail. After his release was arranged, Hasegawa moved with his family to Nagahama, near Lake Biwa, north of Kyoto. His son, Shobu, recounted that the relative comfort of the family's life in Ashiya was replaced by extreme poverty when the Hasegawas' cash assets became worthless during the war, and the artist and his family subsequently made their home in a converted chicken coop. Hasegawa began subsistence farming and studying Daoism and Zen Buddhism in greater depth. He stopped writing art essays and halted his painting except for a series of oil paintings of landscape and still life imagery made in 1943. After the war, he initiated an informal philosophy and literature reading group for young people of this area, and he shared his own personal library of paperback books with the students; the books' inside covers were soon covered with his students' notes confirming that they had read and returned the books. In these years, Hasegawa also visited and corresponded with Zen priests and Buddhist scholars, and continued to strengthen his interests in the spiritual dimensions of philosophy and art.

POSTWAR REEMERGENCE

In 1948, Hasegawa reemerged as an artist and writer, publishing several essays that reflected a deeper engagement with the aesthetics of Japanese and Chinese art in parallel with a critical perspective on European influences. Two essays from this moment are reproduced in the *Reader*: "New Art"⁷ and "Sesshu."⁸ Around this time, Hasegawa moved with his family to a small house in Tsujido, in the coastal town of Fujisawa in Kanagawa Prefecture, southwest of Yokohama. He later described and illustrated this home in an essay entitled "My House," ultimately

published in English by the University of California Press in 1956.⁹ His oil paintings from the late 1940s sometimes incorporated imagery based on Jomon figures, and he also painted modernist renditions of family scenes, landscapes, and surreal forms. Because of his fluency in English and established reputation as an artist and art writer, Hasegawa was invited to serve as Noguchi's guide during the American artist's tour of Japan in 1950. Together they visited the Katsura Imperial Villa, the Tai-an tearoom, and several temples, including Ryoan-ji and Ise Shrine, as well as the nearby town of Chigasaki, where Noguchi had lived in his youth. The two discovered they shared many experiences and ideas, and became personally close at a time when Hasegawa was becoming increasingly isolated from his friends in Japan, who felt that Hasegawa's growing embrace of and advocacy for Asian classical culture reflected a problematic level of neo-nationalism.

Hasegawa's essays from 1950 include "The Art of East and West"¹⁰ as well as "Rambling Words on Song-Yuan Flower-and-Bird Painting"¹¹ and "Days with Isamu Noguchi";¹² the latter two are featured in the *Reader*. These essays are filled with the passion of an important moment in Hasegawa's intellectual development. Late in 1950, this passion precipitated a break in the artist's oeuvre. He stopped working with oil paint altogether and began experimenting with ink and gouache on paper, albeit in a completely abstract fashion. Many of these works were displayed as folding screens or hanging scrolls, using non-objective imagery often made with techniques that included stamping (Hasegawa's unconventional approach to block printing) and rubbing (known as *takuhon* in Japan and *frottage* in European surrealist circles) while reflecting the stylistic influence of artists such as Piet Mondrian and Jean Arp. Hasegawa discussed the work of Mondrian and Arp in concurrent essays published in 1951,¹³ both of which are included in the *Reader*.

At the same time, Hasegawa became an increasingly important advocate of a burgeoning abstract aesthetic. He became closely associated with the nascent abstract calligraphy movement in Japan that explored illegible mark-making with ink, contributing lead articles for new journals such as *Bokubi* (Beauty of Ink), founded by Shiryu Morita in 1951, and curating the "Alpha section" in several journals that reproduced imagery of the most experimental works of abstract calligraphy. In 1951, he was especially prolific as a writer, authoring reviews of current exhibitions, appreciations of classical art like "Making Katsura Imperial Villa Abstract"¹⁴ (which outlines his own artistic thinking at that time, and is reproduced here), and essays introducing contemporary trends from the West. His "Letters from France and America,"¹⁵ originally published as the inaugural 1951 cover story for *Bokubi*, featured the work of Franz Kline on the cover, and his 1952 "Calligraphy and New Painting,"¹⁶ also for *Bokubi*, showcased the work of L. Alcopley (Alfred Lewin Coppley) on the cover, serving to introduce contemporary European and American artists to Japanese audiences. Both essays are included in the *Reader*. Other articles published in 1952 include "New American Painting,"¹⁷ in which Hasegawa tried to make sense of contemporary international trends. In 1953, he published the provocative

“New Photography and Painting”¹⁸ (included in the *Reader*), which signaled his own experimentation with photographs of assemblages and photograms. Some of his photographs, done in collaboration with other artists, were later published in the acclaimed series sponsored by *Asahi Picture News*. The cover for the June 1955 issue of *Bokubi* featured a work of Josef Albers, who also sometimes self-identified as a Daoist, completing the arc of Hasegawa’s influence with the *Bokubi* journal. Articles like “Nanga and Modern Times: Live to Paint,” which argues for the contemporary relevance of Chinese aesthetics as represented by the Nanga tradition in Japan, remind us that Hasegawa’s perspective was still grounded in Asian philosophy.¹⁹

Hasegawa’s work was featured in the first postwar group exhibition of contemporary Japanese art presented in the United States, which premiered in San Francisco in 1952 and subsequently traveled to several cities in the western United States. The artist’s work was singled out in the press for its innovative strength. Hasegawa was asked to help curate an exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York of contemporary Japanese calligraphy, which was planned to open in 1954, and his own work was featured in a 1953 solo exhibition at New York’s New Gallery. Isamu Noguchi appeared at the New Gallery opening as Hasegawa was unable to travel for that reception, and reviewers of the exhibition were very impressed by the work.

HASEGAWA IN NEW YORK

In January 1954, Hasegawa traveled to New York via San Francisco to help install the first exhibition of Asian abstract art held in the United States, an exhibition that Hasegawa had curated. The exhibition was held at Manhattan’s Riverside Museum and featured the work of ten Japanese artists, including Hasegawa. The invitation to curate this exhibition had been extended by the American Abstract Artists group, prompted by Hasegawa’s friendship with Noguchi and Franz Kline. Hasegawa participated in a related symposium at MoMA, appearing with speakers such as Albers, Alfred H. Barr Jr., and Kline. Hasegawa’s subsequent 1954 solo exhibition at New York’s Contemporaries Gallery attracted preeminent curators and artists, among them Dore Ashton, Barr, Louise Bourgeois, Arthur Drexler, Marcel Duchamp, Charles Egan, Fritz Glarner, Fairfield Porter, and many more, and was reviewed in *Time* magazine and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Hasegawa spent a busy ten months in New York lecturing during 1954, on at least four occasions speaking at programs hosted at the Eighth Street Club, a nexus for abstract expressionism at that time. He also shared the tea ceremony with artists like Marcel Duchamp, authored an English-language review that was critical of Henri Matisse’s late work in *ARTnews*,²⁰ and published his work in art and poetry journals.²¹ He was the embodiment of the influence of Zen during the postwar “Japan Boom,” when Japanese films and fine art were highly popular in New York, and his work was displayed at the home of prominent collectors, among

them that of Blanchette Rockefeller. In New York he created a suite of lithographs and made ink paintings referencing chapters from the *Dao De Jing*. During an extended stopover in San Francisco on his return to Japan in late 1954, Hasegawa appeared on television and lectured at both the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) and the American Academy of Asian Studies (AAAS), where Alan Watts was then dean. He accepted an invitation to return as a teacher at both institutions the following year.

HASEGAWA IN SAN FRANCISCO

Before returning to San Francisco in early 1955, Hasegawa organized and mounted a major exhibition of Japanese and American abstraction for the Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, but the critical response in Japan was clouded with misunderstanding. He authored another burst of essays that suggest his focus was clearly on recent projects. These include “The Fate of American Artists,”²² which began with an expression of chagrin about his own 1954 interview in *Time*; “Present-Day American Abstract Art,”²³ an essay that discussed the exhibition he had just organized for the Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; and a long interview published as “Nationalism and Universalism in Japanese Art.”²⁴ All three are included in the *Reader*.

Hasegawa returned to San Francisco in September of 1955 to assume his position as a visiting artist at AAAS, where his lectures were accessible and very popular. He established friendships with artists and poets like Gordon Onslow Ford and Gary Snyder, who were influential in the growing Beat movement and interested in Zen. He introduced the tea ceremony to many students and teachers, and one participant remembers his affable encouragement: “If you’re born clumsy it’s not bad, and if you’re born clever it’s not good. The proper way to serve tea is to find your own way.”²⁵ As a teacher of drawing and Asian art history at CCAC, also beginning in 1955, Hasegawa was admired by his students for introducing them to Asian philosophy. He authored English-language essays for an anthology published by the University of California Press and another published by the American Abstract Artists.²⁶

In 1956, he mounted several major exhibitions, including a remarkably immersive installation at Gump’s department store gallery in downtown San Francisco,²⁷ another at the new gallery of KPFA Radio in Berkeley, and two exhibitions at the Oakland Art Museum. The second Oakland exhibition was a complex curatorial project Hasegawa entitled *The Modern Spirit of Japanese Art* and for which he wrote the catalogue essay.²⁸ The show included historical Japanese painting and ceramics as well as contemporary work by Noguchi and the ceramist J. B. Blunk, whom Hasegawa had met in Japan, as well as his own work. During this time he created several immense calligraphy works on wallboard and burlap, incorporating phrases from poems by Basho and short phrases that alluded to Buddhism. In September 1956 he also moved his family to San Francisco, but he soon was diag-

nosed with cancer of the mouth. During his illness he made ink paintings inspired by folk art of San Francisco cityscapes and park scenes. In February of 1957, Grace McCann Morley at the San Francisco Museum of [Modern] Art hastily mounted a retrospective, which the artist attended in a wheelchair. The Oakland Museum planned a memorial volume of essays by and about the artist, but it remained unpublished until now (in part I of the *Reader*).

Saburo Hasegawa died in March 1957 at the age of fifty. His family stayed on in San Francisco, according to his wishes. His wife, Kiyoko, worked as a secretary and bookkeeper, and finally as a receptionist at Mitsubishi San Francisco to support her family.

Saburo Hasegawa's late work appeared in several important exhibitions in 1958. But eventually, except for a two-volume retrospective monograph featuring his paintings and essays that was published in Japanese by Sansai-sha in 1977, much of his late work fell into relative obscurity. The present volume and the related exhibition and catalogue, *Changing and Unchanging Things: Noguchi and Hasegawa in Postwar Japan*, were organized in part to address that lacuna and provide access to Hasegawa's provocative ideas and work in ink, valuable contributions that blended Japanese and Chinese aesthetics and philosophy with an internationally informed approach to reductive abstraction.