

**SPECTERS OF THE VESSEL: SŌDEISHA, ISAMU NOGUCHI,
AND NONFUNCTIONAL CERAMIC ART IN POSTWAR JAPAN**

by

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B.A., Arcadia University, 2015

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES
(Art History and Theory)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

June 2020

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Specters of the Vessel: Sōdeisha, Isamu Noguchi, and Nonfunctional Ceramic Art
in Postwar Japan

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the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

Created in 1954 by potter Yagi Kazuo (1918-1979), *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* is known as the quintessential *obuje-yaki*, or ‘kiln-fired object.’ Used by proponents of Japan’s ceramic avant-garde, and particularly associated with Sōdeisha—a collective of ceramicists co-founded by Yagi in 1948—the neologism introduced a renewed questioning of functionality into the language of ceramics by referencing *objets trouvés*, ‘found objects’ appropriated by proponents of Dada and Surrealism. However, in the context of postwar Japan, the term *obuje-yaki* did not denote found objects but works of nonfunctional, abstract, ceramic sculpture. Yagi’s *Mr. Samsa* is considered to be a chief example of the genre because it clearly departs from the ceramic convention of functionality. The members of Sōdeisha often declared their work as fine art, but by working with the medium of clay they applied this declaration to a medium more often associated with the creation of practical objects. Frustrating scholarly attempts at defining Sōdeisha is this assumed conflict between traditionalism and modernism. Some see the group’s references to foreign culture or their lack of functionality as attempts to escape the dogma of Japanese ceramic tradition.

In response to the pursuits of the folk-craft movement (*mingei undō*) and Japanese traditionalists, Sōdeisha argued for an alternative conceptualization of the medium that might incorporate both functional *and* nonfunctional objects. I argue that Sōdeisha’s allusions to ‘foreign’ cultural forms and terminology did not merely serve to escape tradition, but to make an argument within the debate on tradition (*dentō ronsō*). This was also the case for their allusions to ‘Japanese’ cultural forms: they engaged with nonfunctional, prehistoric and historic ceramics of the Japanese archipelago. Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), through exhibitions of his own quasi *obuje-yaki* in the early postwar period, can be credited with encouraging Sōdeisha to adopt forms reminiscent of *dogū*, clay figures from the Jōmon period, and *haniwa*, the funerary ceramics of the Kofun period. These ritual items of Japan’s distant past embodied the spiritual potentialities of the ceramic medium and allowed Sōdeisha to complicate the binaries of ‘fine’ and ‘folk,’ ‘foreign’ and ‘Japanese,’ that underpinned the theories promulgated by mainstream traditionalists.

Lay Summary

The Walk of Mr. Samsa, a ceramic sculpture created by potter Yagi Kazuo in 1954, is known as the quintessential *obuje-yaki* or ‘kiln-fired object.’ This neologism, which borrows from the terminology of Dada and Surrealism, renewed the language of ceramics by declaring that ceramics could function as fine art. The works of Sōdeisha, a collective of ceramicists co-founded by Yagi, often made declarations such as this. Scholars have since concluded that their goal was to escape the dogma of Japanese tradition, which favored the practical functionality of ceramic objects. I argue that Sōdeisha’s embrace of non-functionality did not serve to escape tradition, but to assert its position within a debate on tradition. The group argued for a conceptualization of the medium that might incorporate functional *and* nonfunctional objects by engaging with ritual ceramics of Japan’s prehistory. These items embodied the spiritual potentialities of the medium left unacknowledged by traditionalists.

Preface

The following master's thesis is the original, unpublished, and independent work of the author, Jeremy J. Kramer.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Lay Summary	iv
Preface	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Figures	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Dedication	x
Introduction	1
I. Two Mouths, Two Voices: An Introduction to Sōdeisha	6
II. Redirecting <i>The Walk of Mr. Samsa</i>	15
III. The Vessel Folk and the Voice of Tradition	23
IV. Vital/Aesthetic: Primitivism and Ceramics in Japan	29
V. A Hole Through Which to Speak: Sōdeisha and Isamu Noguchi	40
Conclusion	46
Figures	48
Bibliography	56

List of Figures

Figure 1. Yagi Kazuo. <i>The Walk of Mr. Samsa (Zamuza-shi no sanpo)</i> , 1954. Private collection.	48
Figure 2. Suzuki Osamu. <i>Tall Vase with Kuro-e Deisgn (Kuro-e chōtsubo)</i> , 1951-52. © National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.	49
Figure 3. Yagi Kazuo. <i>Vase with Two Mouths (Futakuchi tsubo)</i> , 1950. © National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.	49
Figure 4. Vessel. Middle Jōmon Period (c. 2500-1500 BCE). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.	50
Figure 5. <i>Dogū</i> , known as <i>Jōmon Venus (Jōmon no biinasu)</i> . Middle Jōmon Period (c. 2500- 1500 BCE). Togariishi Museum of Jōmon Archaeology, Chino.....	50
Figure 6. Fragmentary <i>haniwa</i> cylinder. Kofun Period (c. 300-710). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.....	51
Figure 7. Fragmentary <i>haniwa</i> of a warrior. 5 th to early 6 th century. Kofun Period (c. 300-710). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.	51
Figure 8. Isamu Noguchi. <i>The Policeman (Junsa)</i> , 1950. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., New York.....	52
Figure 9. Isamu Noguchi. <i>My Mu (Watashi no mu)</i> , 1950. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., New York.....	52
Figure 10. Isamu Noguchi. <i>Torso #378</i> , 1952. © Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville. ...	53
Figure 11. Suzuki Osamu. <i>Samurai (Nobushi)</i> , 1959. © Kitamura Museum, Kyoto.	54
Figure 12. Suzuki Osamu. <i>Walking Child (Aruku ko)</i> , 1962. Private collection.	54
Figure 13. Yagi Kazuo. <i>Work (Sakuhin)</i> , 1958-59. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.	55

Acknowledgements

First, I offer my gratitude to the Musqueam (*xʷməθkʷəy̓əm*) First Nation, on whose ancestral, unceded territory I have had the privilege to live and study over the past few years. I was born in southeastern Pennsylvania, an area originally inhabited by the Lenape people. They call this land Lenapehoking. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the Lenape and their neighbors were decimated by disease, famine, and forced migration. Many individuals who now live in the Mid-Atlantic United States and Canada remain ignorant about the histories of colonial violence that are carved into its landscape. The Musqueam people have shown me that the voices of the global indigenous community are resilient, and that I have a responsibility to listen to them and to take action in solidarity.

My sincerest thanks go to Dr. Ignacio Adriasola for guiding my research as primary supervisor to this project. His astounding patience and insight have been invaluable to my growth as a scholar of modern art. I also thank Dr. Jessica Main, whose contributions as a member of my supervisory committee have greatly improved the quality of my writing. Special thanks are also due to those professors who have imparted their knowledge to me over the recent years: Drs. Nam-lin Hur, Carol Knicely, Jaleh Mansoor, John O'Brian, Saygin Salgirli, T'ai Smith, and Catherine Soussloff. I am also indebted to the Hugo E. Meilicke Memorial Fellowship and the Itoko Muraoka Fellowship, which funded the second academic year of my studies and allowed me to conduct research in Kyoto, Sōdeisha's place of inception. Lastly, I want to express my appreciation for the support given to me by the staff at the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies and the Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory, particularly that of Bryn Dharmaratne.

I thank the staff and resident fellows at St. John's College: Dr. Yūko Higashiizumi and Tomoharu Hirota, both of whom have given me helpful advice concerning the usage of Japanese terms and names, and Dr. Kyōko Matsunaga, whose expertise in indigenous literature has broadened my understanding of modern primitivism, the works of Isamu Noguchi, and the global impacts of atomic warfare and nuclear power. To all the friends and fellow graduate students who have enriched my personal and academic life—most notably Sherena Razek, Jihyun Shin, and Madeline Ullrich—I greatly treasure the memories we have shared and look forward to a lifelong friendship.

Finally, I am grateful for Dr. Ainsley Cameron, whose mentorship during my time in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's South Asian Art Department led me to pursue graduate studies with a greater emphasis on the arts of Asia. I am similarly indebted to Dr. Felice Fischer, who,

during our impromptu visits to the Museum's storage, infected me with her passion for modern and contemporary craft objects made in East Asia and North America. I thank you both for your tremendous kindness and generosity.

*to my dear mother,
Deborah Louise Kretzmann Kramer*

Introduction

Created in 1954 by potter Yagi Kazuo (1918-1979),¹ *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* (*Zamuza-shi no sanpo*) is known as the quintessential *obuje-yaki*, or kiln-fired *objet* (Fig.1). The vaguely anthropomorphic piece of stoneware was assembled from components thrown on the potter's wheel: cylindrical tubes that resemble appendages and the circular band of clay from which they protrude. Used by proponents of Japan's avant-garde ceramics scene, and particularly associated with the activities of Sōdeisha—a collective of ceramicists co-founded by Yagi in 1948—the neologism *obuje-yaki* renewed the language of ceramics by referencing *objets trouvés*, 'found objects' used by proponents of Dada and Surrealism to make assemblages and readymades. These artists altered the forms of everyday items in such a way as to obviate or otherwise confuse their intended uses. In effect, the *objet trouvé* was "an ordinary object rendered disquieting by an unaccountable deformation."² And it did not take much to render an object disquieting. Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985) covered a tea set in fur; Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) upended a bicycle wheel and attached it to a stool. While *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* was not made from 'found objects' such as these, it participated in a similar dialogue on functionality. Yagi's *obuje-yaki* removes, obstructs, multiplies, and distorts the very features of a ceramic vessel that allow it to function, and in doing so it cannot function as a vessel would. In this way, the 'found object' of *Mr. Samsa* is the ceramic vessel itself.

The Japanese avant-garde did not shy away from citations of ostensibly foreign terminology like the *objet trouvé*. Given this observation, scholars have suggested that such

¹ In this essay, its footnotes, list of figures, and bibliography, names of Japanese origin are written in the customary format, with the person's family name listed first and the person's given name listed second. Exceptions to this convention include individuals like Isamu Noguchi who, while bearing a Japanese name, are more commonly referred to with the opposite name order.

² Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 120.

citations reveal an effort on the part of Japanese artists to mimic the strategies of other, predominantly European, avant-garde movements. Bert Winther-Tamaki identifies in the title of Yagi's *Mr. Samsa* a reference to Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915) before observing, "As has often been the case for the Japanese modern artist, the mechanism of departure from tradition is persistently tagged with a European-American identity. And yet, in one important respect, Yagi's *Mr. Samsa* was not the product of his absorption with a foreign culture."³ The issue that Winther-Tamaki raises in this passage, that which counters Yagi's recurrent citations of foreign culture, is a fundamentally material matter. The medium of clay, so often recognized as a marker of Japanese tradition, inevitably resituates *Mr. Samsa* within a local framework, despite all of Yagi's supposed efforts to escape the confines of twentieth-century Japan. Frustrating attempts at defining the specificities of Sōdeisha, and indeed those of most modern artists who engaged with traditional materials and techniques, is this essential conflict. In Sōdeisha's case, it is a conflict intensified by the involvement of Japanese American architect and sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), who created many ceramic sculptures during his extended visits to Japan after World War II that resonate both formally and rhetorically with those of the Japanese ceramic avant-garde. Inscribed within these clay forms are two supposedly irreconcilable artistic ideologies: traditionalism and modernism. Are these two concepts truly incompatible, or is it possible to approach the work of Sōdeisha without assuming that their references to foreign culture, or their adoption of sculptural forms, were superficial attempts to escape the dogma of Japanese ceramic tradition through a mimicry of the European avant-garde?

³ Bert Winther-Tamaki, "Yagi Kazuo: The Admission of the Nonfunctional Object into the Japanese Pottery World," *Journal of Design History* 12, no. 2 (1999): 134.

The subject of Japan's ceramic avant-garde is somewhat underrepresented in literature outside of Japan. With the exception of essays that appear in exhibition catalogs like *Japon des avant-gardes* (1984), *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (1994), *Isamu Noguchi and Modern Ceramics: A Close Embrace of the Earth* (2003), Winther-Tamaki's *Art in the Encounter of Nations: Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years* (2001), and essays by Louise Allison Cort, discussions of Sōdeisha and its contemporaries are far and few between. In most cases, whether their work is seen through that of Noguchi or within a survey of avant-garde artists, Sōdeisha's ceramic sculptures are often assumed to be part of a grander narrative of modernism, one that constantly advances toward innovation, abstraction, or the rejection of tradition. Unfortunately, placing Sōdeisha in this narrative does not sufficiently engage with the material itself. It fails to address why the members of Sōdeisha chose to remain wedded to the medium of clay and what the significance of that choice might have been in the context of postwar Japan. Alexandra Munroe, in an excerpt from the exhibition catalog of *Japanese Art After 1945*, admits that the reasoning behind her inclusion of "radical forms of traditional, non-Western art" in a study of the Japanese avant-garde is to question the assertion that the concepts of modernity and 'Western-ness' are synonymous with one another.⁴ The issue of how the Sōdeisha questions this assertion has yet to be fully interrogated.

In the following, I argue that Sōdeisha's allusions to ostensibly foreign cultural forms and terminology were not meant to escape the dogma of ceramic tradition, but rather to express the historical and political concerns of the collective and to assert its position within the mid-century debate on tradition (*dentō ronsō*) in Japan. Sōdeisha's formative works embodied conflicts

⁴ Alexandra Munroe, "Circle: Modernism and Tradition," in *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 134.

integral to the medium itself and challenged fixed definitions of ceramic tradition maintained by Japanese cultural figures such as Yanagi Sōetsu (1889-1961), a folk-craft theorist who placed nearly exclusive emphasis on utilitarian ceramics (*jitsuyō tōki*) and the vessel-form. In response to the sometimes-nationalistic pursuits of the folk-craft movement (*mingei undō*), which impacted ceramic production throughout the twentieth century within Japan and abroad, Sōdeisha argued for an alternative conceptualization of the medium that might incorporate both functional *and* non-functional objects. In fact, members of the collective may very well have considered this distinction, one based wholly on the concept of functionality, to be an arbitrary one, for it only served to limit the affordances of the ceramic medium.

The members of Sōdeisha also approached ceramic practice through an engagement with prehistoric, ritualistic ceramic forms of the Japanese archipelago—a fact that makes arguments that Japanese avant-garde ceramics are mimics of ‘Western’ art untenable. Many of these objects were not functional in the traditional sense of the word; their value did not reside in their capacity to hold food, drink, or some other form of physical matter. Noguchi, through the exhibition of his own quasi *obu-ye-yaki* in the early 1950s, can be credited with encouraging the members of Sōdeisha to adopt such forms as clay figures (*dogū*) dating from the Jōmon period (c. 14,000-300 BCE) and *haniwa*, funerary ceramics of the Kofun period (300-538 CE). These ritual objects of pre-Japan, comfortably distanced from modern ceramic conventions, embodied the spiritual and animistic potentialities of the medium—what I call ‘specters of the vessel’—that the keepers of Japanese aesthetic tradition left unacknowledged in their definitions of ‘Japaneseness.’ While the formal connections between Noguchi’s series of ceramic sculptures and the work of Sōdeisha have been discussed by Cort, Munroe, and Winther-Tamaki to great success,

Sōdeisha's own engagement with *dogū* and *haniwa*, and the qualities they represent, has yet to be examined.

The essay that follows is divided into five parts. The first, "Two Mouths, Two Voices: An Introduction to Sōdeisha," presents the early works of Sōdeisha without prioritizing the group's rejection of ceramic tradition, exploring instead how they might express the dissonances of the medium through their use of the potter's wheel and their adoption of motifs found within and outside of ceramic practice. Second, "Redirecting *The Walk of Mr. Samsa*" examines how Yagi's token *obuje-yaki* reiterates the issue of functionality that troubles ceramic practice because of, not in spite of, its citation of *The Metamorphosis*. Thirdly, "The Vessel Folk and the Debate on Tradition" brings cultural context to the work of Sōdeisha, placing it within a larger discussion dominated by folk-craft theorists about what makes an object 'traditional' in the context of postwar Japan. "Vital/Aesthetic: Primitivism and the History of Ceramics in Japan," the fourth part of the essay, recounts the known histories of *dogū* and *haniwa* and introduces the arguments of Okamoto Tarō (1911-1996) and Tange Kenzō (1913-2005), two figures whose writings acknowledged the role of so-called 'primitive,' ritualistic ceramic practices in forming the visual culture of modern Japan. Lastly, "A Hole Through Which to Speak: Sōdeisha and the Work of Isamu Noguchi" examines the impact that Noguchi's ceramic sculptures had within the debate on tradition and how the members of Sōdeisha drew upon their own experiences and understandings of the medium in an artistic dialogue with prehistoric ceramic forms.

I. Two Mouths, Two Voices: An Introduction to Sōdeisha

Sōdeisha (走泥者) was founded in 1948 by a small group of Kyoto-based potters, of which Suzuki Osamu (1926-2001), Yagi Kazuo, and Yamada Hikaru (1923-2001) were founding members.⁵ Inui Yoshiaki (1927-2017), a preeminent scholar of modern Japanese ceramics, celebrated Yagi's work in particular for its departure from the convention of functionality, which was fully achieved in *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* (Fig. 1). Yagi was perceived to be the group's leader, although it would grow to include as many as twenty members, each with their own practice.⁶ In 1950, Sōdeisha achieved international recognition when their work was chosen to be apart of an exhibition titled *Japan—Contemporary Ceramics* at the Cernuschi Museum in Paris. Here the works of Suzuki, Yagi, and Yamada were grouped under the category of 'avant-garde ceramics,' which included the likes of Isamu Noguchi and Uno Sango (1902-1988), founding member of the contemporaneous Japanese ceramicist collective Shikōkai.⁷

The members of Sōdeisha and their peers were part of a twentieth-century wave of Japanese ceramic artists who resisted practices that were metonymic with the medium itself. They did so in part by ceasing to submit their work to annual, government-sponsored art exhibitions. The first of these events, The Ministry of Education Fine Arts Exhibition (*Monbushō*

⁵ Kanō Tetsuo (d. 1998), Kumamura Junkichi (1920-1985), and Matsui Yoshisuke (b. 1926) were also founding members.

⁶ Hamamura Jun, "Sōdeisha: Kyōto tōgeika gurūpu," *Bijutsu Techō* 8, no. 192 (1961): 70. As recorded by Hamamura in 1961, Sōdeisha grew to include as many as twenty members: Fujimoto Yoshimichi (藤本能道), Hara Teruo (原照夫), Kadoi Yoshie (門井嘉衛), Kanzaki Kenzō (神崎健三), Kanō Satoshi (叶敏), Kawai Tadashi (河合紀), Kawashima Kōzō (河島浩三), Kumakura Junkichi (熊倉順吉), Miura Atsuo (三浦篤雄), Morisato Tadao (森里忠男), Murai Jirō (村井次郎), Satō Masahiko (佐藤雅彦), Suzuki Osamu (鈴木治), Tanabe Saiko (田辺彩子), Terao Kōji (侍尾恍示), Toba Katsumasa (鳥羽克昌), Tsuji Kanji (辻勘之), Yagi Kazuo (八木一夫), and Yamada Hikaru (山田光).

⁷ Louise Allison Cort, "Japanese Encounter with Clay," in *Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics: A Close Embrace of the Earth*, edited by Louise Allison Cort and Bert Winther-Tamaki (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2003), 107.

Bijutsu Tenrankai) (1907-18) or Bunten, was held in 1907. The Bunten had three categories of submission: Japanese-style painting (*nihonga*), Western-style painting (*yōga*), and sculpture. It wasn't until 1927, though, after the exhibition had been renamed the Imperial Fine Art Academy Exhibition (*Teikoku Bijutsu-in Tenrankai*) (1919-34) or Teiten, that the designation of 'art-crafts' (*bijutsu kōgei*) was added to its roster, allowing ceramic artists to submit their work.⁸ Before this point in time, the primary alternative for potters looking to exhibit their work was the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce Crafts Exhibition (*Nōshōmushō Kōgei Tenrankai*), which began in 1913. These events allowed artists and craftsmen to gain recognition, establish their careers, and ultimately make a living. However, they also reinforced an unambiguous divide between 'fine art' and 'industrial art.'⁹ In an effort to avoid these harsh divisions, ceramicists began to hold their own annual exhibitions, wherein they could exhibit nearly anything. One of the first ceramic collectives to do so was the Red Clay Group.¹⁰ Founded in 1919 by Kusube Yaichi (1897-1984), Kawamura Kitarō (1899-1966), and Yagi Issō (1894-1973)—Yagi Kazuo's father—the Red Clay Group became known for its adoption of alternative naming conventions. Instead of naming their creations after a form, pattern, glaze, or technique (a common practice within the pottery world), members of the Red Clay Group often gave their works allegorical titles that accentuated their aspirational status as fine art objects. Although many of the elder Yagi's pieces conformed to accepted ceramic types—the vase, the bowl, the jar, and so on—he gave them titles like

⁸ The Bunten, Teiten, and Shin-Bunten or New Ministry of Education Fine Arts Exhibition (*Shin Monbushō Bijutsu Tenrankai*) (1935-44) are all antecedents of the modern-day Nitten, the Japan Fine Arts Exhibition (*Nihon Bijutsu Tenrankai*) (1946-present).

⁹ Winther-Tamaki, "Yagi Kazuo," 127.

¹⁰ The characters that make up the Red Clay Group's name are unclear, as are their readings; both 赤土会 (*Sekidokai*) and 赤土社 (*Sekidosha*) have been used. For this reason, it is sometimes written as 'Sekidokai' or simply 'Akatsuchi' in English. All terms refer to the same group.

Spring Awakening and *Praise of Life*. The younger Yagi named his works in a similar manner. *Annular Eclipse (Kinkanshoku)*, a tall vase coated in white slip and inlaid with black pigment, won him the Mayor's Prize at the 1948 Kyoto Exhibition (*Kyōten*), which was held at the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Modern Art.

At the behest of his father, Yagi studied ceramics at the Kyoto Municipal College of Art and Craft. After graduating in 1937, he entered a three-year program at the Ceramic Research Institute, where he took classes in ceramic sculpture (*tōchō*). His teacher, an artist named Numata Ichiga (1873-1954), was an internationally renowned sculptor and medal recipient at the Exposition Universelle of 1900. During two extended periods of study in Europe, Numata worked in the studio of Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) and observed firing techniques at the Sèvres Porcelain Factory that were tailored for ornamental and sculptural ceramics, techniques he passed on to his students in Japan. But while clay was used in places like Sèvres to make nonfunctional ceramics without much ado, it might be said that in Japan ceramic sculpture was considered a foreign phenomenon. In fact, the primary market for nonfunctional clay figures made in Japan had been almost exclusively a foreign one. Japan's salon system also posed an issue for artists like Numata—were his creations to be considered ceramic or sculpture? These two categories were, at the time, irreconcilable; the structure of most government exhibitions dictated that art-crafts were to be separate from sculpture. It may have been for this reason that Numata created the Japan Ceramic Sculpture Association (*Nihon Tōchō-kai*), which held its own annual exhibitions beginning in 1937.¹¹ Numata also encouraged his students to submit their

¹¹ The Japan Ceramic Sculpture Association continues to exhibit work annually, with its 65th exhibition being held at the Seira Gallery, Tokyo in 2018.

ceramic work to the sculpture division of the Shin-Bunten in place of the art-crafts division.¹²

While his father reportedly forbade him to do so, this must have impacted Yagi's understanding of clay as a material with great potential to spark discord. He would, of course, go on to found his own collectives: first a short-lived group called the Young Ceramicist Group (*Seinen Sakutōka Shūdan*), of which Suzuki and Yamada were also founding members,¹³ and subsequently Sōdeisha.

The artistic legacy of Sōdeisha, its primary contribution to the history of ceramic practice in Japan, is understood to be its pursuit of an entirely new form: the *obuje-yaki*. These abstract, ceramic sculptures were wholly nonfunctional, and thus approached the realm of fine art. As the harbingers of an avant-garde movement, they rejected conventional practices associated with the ceramic medium. However, their use of the term *obuje-yaki* is sometimes misinterpreted as an attempt to escape the confines of tradition by way of European modernism and its terminology. It is almost as if these objects and their makers could not have had a longing for contemporaneity without sacrificing their own material and historical relevance. The term *obuje-yaki* makes specific reference to the *objet trouvé* or 'found object,' a term paradigmatically associated with Dada and Surrealism. In these contexts, the *objet trouvé* was often a mass-produced item with an intended use, and a particular form that accommodated that use. Examples include such objects as a teacup and saucer, a bottle rack, and a urinal. By altering these objects to varying degrees, artists like as Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985) and Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) expanded upon

¹² Cort, "Japanese Encounter with Clay," 120.

¹³ Nakajima Kiyoshi (1907-1986), another founding member of the Young Ceramicist Group, would later join Sōdeisha in 1951.

what media might reasonably constitute a work of fine art and questioned the inherent functionality of the ‘found object.’

Not unlike these artists, the members of Sōdeisha interrogated the notion of functionality by creating novel assemblages out of known materials. Their chosen medium of clay, though not ‘found’ in the same sense as the *objet trouvé*, had its own connotations that they sought to obstruct and/or subvert. Unfortunately, how Yagi and his peers used the medium of clay to subvert these connotations has been left somewhat unarticulated in English-language scholarship. It is largely assumed that, because Sōdeisha’s *obuje-yaki* took the form of nonfunctional, abstract sculpture, the group sought to release Japanese ceramics from the ‘burdens of tradition.’ While this observation may be true, albeit to a limited extent, the objects created by the members of Sōdeisha retained important vestiges of the exact tradition they appear to be fleeing. It is in part because of their entanglements with tradition that these artists were able to critique it with such success. Here the ‘found object’ is clay itself, which upon firing ossifies into a material well suited for carrying consumable goods, and thus took on standardized forms: the bowl, the vase, the jar. The ceramic medium’s connotation of utility—particularly in relation to food storage and consumption—is something it only appears to have had since its conception. The works of Sōdeisha, by contrast, not only expand upon this accepted usage, but also attest to an alternative ceramic tradition that embraces the spiritual practices associated with the medium in early Japanese history.

The members of Sōdeisha operated a communal kiln located in Gojōzaka, a neighborhood in the southeastern part of Kyoto with a long reputation for pottery making.¹⁴ Named after the arterial roadways that stretch westward from Kiyomizu Temple, across the Kamo River, and towards the commercial center of Kyoto, Gojōzaka produced ceramics beginning in the late eighteenth century. Prior to this moment, the Sanjō area, just north of Gojōzaka, had acted as the city's primary hub of ceramic production. Here a high-fired, glazed ceramic called Awata ware, otherwise known as Awataguchi ware, was made for use in the imperial court and shogunal government. Starting in the early seventeenth century, these Sanjō wares were increasingly made using materials and technologies borrowed from the regional ceramic centers of Seto and Mino, over eighty miles east of Kyoto. The kilns that began to appear in Gojōzaka were more eclectic in their wares. They produced fine porcelains using stone imported from the distant Amakusa Island as well as stoneware vessels using clay from Shigaraki and other locations outside of the city. Gojōzaka wares were often decorated with colored, lead-silicate enamels in a style known as 'Old Kiyomizu' (*ko-kiyomizu*), while others were adorned with designs more indicative of Chinese wares.¹⁵

The ceramic workshops of Sanjō and Gojōzaka made a tradition out of borrowing forms, materials, and technologies from areas of Japan and East Asia that bore the resources their immediate surroundings did not.¹⁶ Through their exposure to such a diverse set of stimuli, many

¹⁴ Although Gojōzaka does not currently boast the ceramic production it once did, a yearly pottery festival (*tōki matsuri*) continues to take place there every August.

¹⁵ Cort, "Japanese Encounter with Clay," 113-114.

¹⁶ Japan's history of appropriation in ceramic practice continued during the country's occupation of Korea (1910-1945), during which Japanese colonialists were afforded many materials opportunities. These included affordable ceramics bought from Korean potters and merchants and, in some cases, wares freshly unearthed from previously unknown kiln sites such those at Mount Gyeryong in Chungcheong Province.

Kyoto potters became associated with the manufacture of informed copies (*utsushi*) while others prided themselves as *ninbanshi*, craftsmen who created near exact replicas of their desired ceramic type.¹⁷ These traditions of imitation take on new relevance when reflecting on Sōdeisha's namesake, which appropriates a term used by Japanese connoisseurs of Chinese pottery that designates a glaze pattern resembling the sinewy trails of an earthworm crawling through mud.¹⁸ The term (*sōdei*) quite literally means 'moving through the mud' or 'mire.' This name is the perfect allegory for the group's fraught relationship with ceramic tradition, something its members simultaneously disavowed and embraced.

As Cort suggests, while it was not Sōdeisha's intent to replicate Chinese wares, the group's early work does bear certain resemblances to Cizhou ware (Chinese: *Cízhōu yáo*), especially those with decoration in white and black slip. In fact, co-founder Suzuki Osamu would often use this exact combination in his work, as in *Tall Vase with Kuro-e Design* (Fig. 2). The large, thickly walled vase is coated in white slip from its broad mouth nearly to its base and is brushed in wide strokes with black slip to create an abstract, arboreal image. While the piece is functional, its impressive size and weight suggests that it was intended to act as a stationary vessel, perhaps for flower arrangement (*ikebana*). In fact, there is evidence to suggest that several of Sōdeisha's early vessels were used for this purpose.¹⁹ Created during Sōdeisha's formative years, *Tall Vase with Kuro-e Design* or *Two-Headed Jar* may evidence Suzuki's reluctance to depart entirely from functional forms. It attests to a dissonance that he was intimately aware of, and one that the members of Sōdeisha came to embrace. Objects like *Vase*

¹⁷ Cort, "Japanese Encounter with Clay," 112-113.

¹⁸ Winther-Tamaki, "Yagi Kazuo," 129.

¹⁹ Cort, "Japanese Encounter with Clay," 166. Following its showing at the third annual Sōdeisha Exhibition in 1951, another work by Suzuki titled *Two-Headed Jar* (*Sōtōko*) was used to house a flower arrangement by Miyamoto Keiyū, an artist taught in the Ikenobō school of *ikebana*.

with Two Mouths (Futakuchi tsubo) (Fig. 3), created by Yagi in 1950, clearly attest to the collective's willingness to critique functionality, not by renouncing 'traditional' materials and techniques, but by using those materials and techniques in unorthodox ways.

The mouth of any given ceramic vessel is typically a direct consequence of the method or instrument used to make it. When using a potter's wheel, a technology that prioritizes vertical symmetry, the resulting mouth is typically a singular, circular opening that resides at the very apex of the vessel. This mouth was, and continues to be, the hallmark of the ceramic medium. Even vessels that are traditionally made without the use of a potter's wheel, such as raku ware (*raku-yaki*), tend to mimic the mouths shaped by the potter's wheel. Yagi's *Vase with Two Mouths*, as its title straightforwardly implies, bears not one but two openings. Atop the vessel's conical base is perched a globular body of clay where, within a concaved area, the two stout, cylindrical forms have been artificially placed. It might be surprising to learn that *Vase with Two Mouths* was formed using the potter's wheel. Rather than being rendered in one sitting, as would the shape of most ceramic vessels, it was assembled from four components that were thrown on the wheel individually. The main body of the work, which is the most irregular of its components, was purportedly made from a cylindrical form that Yagi manipulated whilst it remained pliable.²⁰ Using the vase would be a somewhat awkward task, as the placement of its mouths was done in such a way to complicate its use. If, for example, a flower were to be placed in each mouth they would inevitably touch. Nearly the entire piece is dipped in white slip save for the bottom half of its base, which retains the color and texture of stoneware. Its uniform, off-white surface serves as a canvas for primary-colored enamels that are placed in splotches the size of fingerprints,

²⁰ Cort, "Japanese Encounter with Clay," 163.

overlapping inlay in black pigment similar to that seen on the exterior of *Annular Eclipse*. Here the inlay forms straight and curved lines and dots that gather at irregular points on the vase's surface. In assembly, these designs might recall the geometries of modernist painters like Joan Miró or Vasily Kandinsky, once again revealing a propensity for 'foreign' modes of artistic practice. But they equally recall the designs of Cizhou ware or certain variations of buncheong ware (Korean: *buncheong sagi*) that contain white slip and motifs in iron pigment.

Yagi's *Vase with Two Mouths* takes the ceramic vessel as its *objet trouvé*, which is distorted to the point of unrecognizability. As it deconstructs form so too does it deconstruct material, technique, and the history of the medium itself. The enamels used are comparable to those found on Kyoto wares of the Old Kiyomizu style and the pairing of white slip and black pigment resembles that of Chinese Cizhou ware and Korean buncheong wares. The works of Sōdeisha contain both of these voices: one that proclaims their contemporaneity and another that remains wedded to clay and the history of its use in Japan and East Asia. These two voices existed side-by-side. Artists like Suzuki and Yagi could very well have left their given medium for other materials that were decidedly more 'modern,' but they instead chose to remain committed to it. This choice is what separates their work from that of artists like Isamu Noguchi, Okamoto Tarō (1911-1996), or Tsuji Shindo (1910-2004) who, while having made art objects in clay, used the material as one of many that were at their disposal. They did not necessarily have the experience or knowledge of the medium and its conventions that Suzuki and Yagi possessed, for they did not approach the medium as ceramicists first.

II. Redirecting *The Walk of Mr. Samsa*

Yagi Kazuo's *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* is, in more than one way, the veritable symbol of Sōdeisha (Fig. 1). It signals the entrance of the *obuje-yaki* into modern Japan and suggests a wholesale refusal of ceramic tradition via the terminology of European modernism. And yet, to repeat Winther-Tamaki's observation, Yagi's departure from tradition was not exclusively borne of his preoccupation with a foreign culture. As discussed above, the work of Sōdeisha bares two dissonant voices: one that asserts its newness and another that belies its very efforts to be new. No other work created by Yagi is quite as illustrative of this paradox, for it is the first to directly cite a product of foreign culture: Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915). While nearly every study on Sōdeisha discusses the importance of *Mr. Samsa* and its citation of *The Metamorphosis*, the question of why Yagi chose to reference the novella in place of another piece of fiction, foreign or Japanese in attribution, has not yet been answered. By more closely analyzing *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* and its affinities for the content of *The Metamorphosis*, we might better understand how it serves as an archetypical *obuje-yaki*—a term whose definition I hope to articulate more fully.

Speckled with what appears to be an ash glaze, a byproduct of being passed through the communal, wood-fired kiln at Gojōzaka, *Mr. Samsa* stands on tubular appendages that extend from a wide, circular band of stoneware made on the potter's wheel. Several protrusions of varying lengths and articulations reach outward from the main body of the work. Similarly to *Vase with Two Mouths*, Yagi's *Mr. Samsa* is made exclusively of pre-thrown components, none of which are fully functional on their own—and they remain less-than-functional in their new formation. The space they contain is largely inaccessible and unusable, although Inui argues that

it may have been used to hold flowers for a time.²¹ The aforementioned band of clay that, in any other circumstance, would constitute the walls of a vessel is instead flipped onto its side, framing the empty space it might have otherwise contained. The resulting object is functionally impractical in every way, not unlike Yagi's previous critiques on traditional form and functionality. However, it is *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* that has been singled out as an artistic revelation—the first product of a modern Japanese potter to fully escape the tyranny of the vessel as a prime example of abstract, ceramic sculpture.²² Although Yagi's magnum opus, *Mr. Samsa*, is his first work to be recognized as fine art in its own right, the work itself is not revelatory. It is given a status that its methodological predecessors are not, but that they nonetheless deserve. I contend that *Mr. Samsa's* revelatory status is due, rather, to it being the first to make clear reference to a foreign, literary work. Notwithstanding, it is important analyze the citations of *Mr. Samsa* with the goal of identifying what makes the work significant in its own right.

The Metamorphosis (German: *Die Verwandlung*), first published in 1915, is a story that has entered the curricula of many a high school class, both in its language of origin and in its numerous translations.²³ It is a fictional, third-person account of a bizarre episode in the life of Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman who awakes one morning to find that he has become a large insect. The novella takes place almost exclusively in Gregor's bedroom, where the protagonist is sequestered after having been transformed. Because of his transformation, Gregor is forced to

²¹ Inui Yoshiaki, "De la poterie traditionnelle aux œuvres d'art," translated by Takeshi Matsumura, in *Japon des avant gardes, 1910-1970* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1986), 447.

²² Contesting this observation are art historians like Marilyn Rose Swan who argue that Hayashi Yasuo (b. 1928) of Shikōkai ought to be given credit for making the first *obuje-yaki*: a work called *Cloud (Kumo)* that was exhibited at the group's second annual exhibition in 1948. The purpose of this essay is not to argue otherwise, but rather to articulate the specificities of Sōdeisha and those of Yagi's *Mr. Samsa*.

²³ I read *The Metamorphosis* for the first time in high school, as an assigned reading for Ms. Guarierri's fourth-year English class. In truth, I found the writing to be so grotesquely detailed that I never finished the novella that year.

relinquish all societal responsibilities. This has dire consequences for him and his family, who now face financial instability. Ultimately, the novella ends in Gregor's death, which—for better or for worse—allows the Samsa family to return to their normal lives.

Shinchōsha Publishing Company produced the first Japanese translation of *The Metamorphosis* (*Henshin*) in 1952, two years before Yagi created *The Walk of Mr. Samsa*. Given that Yagi is purported to have been an avid reader of Kafka, it is safe to assume that he was at least moderately aware of the themes present in the novella. Yet the topic of Yagi's citation of *The Metamorphosis* tends to occupy only one or two sentences in art historical analyses of *Mr. Samsa*. This has inadvertently given the perception that Yagi's citation of the work was superficial; the citation is perceived as a means to transcend ceramic tradition by taking on a foreign identity. However, a passage from the novella that describes how Gregor occupied himself while confined to his own bedroom—one that Winther-Tamaki also cites—attests to Yagi's familiarity with the thematic content of *The Metamorphosis*. Kafka writes,

... there wasn't much crawling he could do in the few square meters of space the floor provided, lying still was already difficult for him to endure during the night, eating had soon ceased to give him even the slightest pleasure, and so to divert himself he took up the habit of crawling back and forth across the walls and ceiling. He particularly liked hanging from the ceiling high above the room; it was completely different from lying on the floor; one could breathe more freely there; a gentle swaying motion racked his body;

and in the almost happy absentmindedness Gregor experienced, it might happen, to his astonishment, that he would let go and crash to the floor.²⁴

The above excerpt, which recounts one of the very few moments when Gregor seems to enjoy his new insectile form, is thought by Winther-Tamaki to have “resonated with a joy Yagi felt in his new mastery of the self-expressive voice of the artist disengaged from the tyranny of the vessel.”²⁵ Winther-Tamaki goes on to argue that the voice that Yagi discovered in *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* was not necessarily his own; it was through the foreign voice of Kafka, and through the artistic models of people like Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), that Yagi was able to fully extricate himself from the ceramic vessel.²⁶ In my view, the correlation between these two happenings—Yagi’s supposed rejection of the vessel and his citation of foreign phenomena—has been somewhat overstated in contemporary scholarship. The correlation assumes that, for Yagi, there existed a vital distinction between the vessel and non-vessel. (I argue that this is not entirely true.) It also fails to recognize the ways in which works like Yagi’s *Vase with Two Mouths* or Suzuki’s *Two-Headed Jar* built a visual vocabulary around the critical issue of functionality—that is, these works had already moved beyond the ‘functional’ vessel. While *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* marked a shift in the production of ceramic art, it used techniques that had already been matriculating within the collective. Finally, the assumed correlation between non-vessel forms and the Westernization of Japanese ceramic art inadvertently reinforces the perception that Yagi’s citation of *The Metamorphosis* was simply a

²⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, translated by Susan Bernofsky (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 70-71.

²⁵ Winther-Tamaki, “Yagi Kazuo,” 133.

²⁶ Winther-Tamaki, “Yagi Kazuo,” 133-134.

means to an end, a way to transcend Japanese ceramic tradition by tagging his work with a foreign, European identity.

The Walk of Mr. Samsa is not transcend functionality so much as it continues a dialogue concerning the role of functionality in ceramic practice, one that began for Sōdeisha with works like *Vase with Two Mouths*. In fact, Yagi continued to make wares in the same methodological vein as *Vase with Two Mouths* after exhibiting *Mr. Samsa*, using pre-thrown components to deconstruct and reconstruct the vessel form. One such example is *Deutzia (Unohana)*, a deconstructed cylindrical vase made by Yagi in the latter half of the 1950s that, like *Vase with Two Mouths*, is comprised of a closed vessel form turned onto its side and set atop a conical base. Additionally, two elongated mouths are affixed to its main body, which is decorated with white slip, iron oxide glaze, and a stamped, floral design. What separates *Mr. Samsa* from works such as this, apart from its citation of *The Metamorphosis*, is that it reveals the empty space that the others contain. While this is indeed an important distinction, all of these objects ought to be considered *obuje-yaki*, for they appropriate accepted ceramic forms (ie. the vase, the mouth) and technologies (the potter's wheel) in order to subvert the viewer's expectation—not unlike the assemblages and ready-mades of the artists whose terminology they appropriate. Rather than rejecting functionality and the vessel form outright, they instead question the state of functionality itself and the primary position it occupied within Japanese ceramic tradition. Yagi's citation of Kafka's novella should be understood as attempt to reinforce this rhetoric.

Yagi chose to reference *The Metamorphosis*, not as a means of escape, but as way to address the issue of functionality as a ceramicist *and* as a witness to postwar Japanese society. How Yagi makes this citation is significant. He names his work similarly to how tea masters and

feudal lords of old named highly prized tea utensils (*chadōgu*), after a carefully selected verse of poetry or literature.²⁷ The literary verse cited by Yagi is, of course, quoted above. *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* does not refer to Gregor’s transformation per se; it signifies a particular activity that occurs afterward. The main character’s late-night meanderings are here crystalized in ceramic form. One could almost envision the peculiar object crawling back and forth, up and down, and across the surfaces of Gregor’s bedroom with abandon. By gesturing toward these movements, Yagi imbues the object with qualities of a living thing, giving it the ability (at least metaphorically) to act outside of its expected role as a passive, ceramic vessel. This animism is what truly separates the work from Yagi’s previous examples of *obuje-yaki*. *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* is a remarkable object, not by virtue of its literary reference or its impracticality, but due to its biomorphic features. Reinforced by its very specific citation of *The Metamorphosis*, it embodies the animistic potentialities of the ceramic medium.

The implications of *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* go beyond the confines of ceramic practice, though. While giving *Mr. Samsa* corporeal qualities that clash with the practical functionalisms of the ceramic medium, Gregor’s wanton, nocturnal movements also suggest the demoralized state of Japan following its defeat in the Pacific War (1941-1945). For the United States, World War II began with the attack on Pearl Harbor, but Japan’s war began over ten years prior, with its invasion of Manchuria. During a period of fifteen years, Japanese men and women were geared for death and, in the most extreme cases, suicide. As a result, the Allied occupation of Japan that followed the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the surrender of Imperial Japan

²⁷ Oka Yoshiko, “The Changing Value of ‘Things’: From *Gusoku* to *Dōgu*,” in *Around Chigusa: Teas and the Arts of Sixteenth-Century Japan*, edited by Dora C.Y. Ching, Louise Allison Cort, and Andrew M. Watsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 39. During the height of tea practice (*chanoyu*), certain items used in the consumption and/or storage of tea would be lauded as *meibutsu*, or ‘famed objects.’

represented a reprieve, for many, from a fatalistic way of life. But the ‘*kyodatsu* condition,’ what was described in popular discourse as a psychological state of exhaustion or dejection, had permeated to the core of Japanese society.²⁸ Historian John W. Dower connects the growing *kyodatsu* condition to a rise in alcoholism, drug addiction, and crime that occurred after the war.²⁹ The Japanese public increasingly partook in commercialized forms of entertainment (both authorized and illicit), perhaps in an effort to forget the atrocities they faced—and the atrocities they were, at best, complicit in. Well into the fifties, so-called ‘*panpan* girls’ satiated the sexual hungers of the occupying American soldiers, though not exclusively out of their own financial need.³⁰ Japanese men frequented cabarets and strip shows where voluptuous female performers modeled themselves after the denizens of Hollywood. *Kasutori shōchū*, cheap liquor made from the dregs of sake, gave this influx of debauched behavior its name: ‘*kasutori* culture’ (*kasutori bunka*). Writers such as Dazai Osamu (1909-1948) chronicled *kasutori* culture by way of the ‘flesh novel’ (*nikutai shōsetsu*), a literary genre characterized by the carnal pleasures of the period.

The frivolities of postwar Japan, like those of Gregor Samsa, were fraught with uncertainty and danger, and they often ended poorly. Starvation grew rapidly as a result of political and bureaucratic ineptitude and crime, much of which involved the theft of food. Ninety percent of the women who worked for the Recreation and Amusement Association (*Tokushu Ian Shisetsu Kyōkai*), a government-sanctioned network of brothels, had some kind of sexually

²⁸ John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 87-89. A medical term, *kyodatsu* was first used to denote the physical and/or emotional prostration or collapse of individual patients.

²⁹ Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 107.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133-134. Contemporaneous surveys of female sex workers found that, although some *panpan* used their meager earnings to help support their families, many spent their money frivolously; other surveys identified a surprising number of women who entered prostitution “simply ‘out of curiosity.’”

transmitted infection by January 1946, when ‘public’ prostitution was official abolished.³¹ In the summer of 1948, Dazai Osamu, himself unable to escape the realities of the *kyodatsu* condition, was found drowned in Tokyo’s Tamagawa Aqueduct alongside his mistress. So too does Gregor’s story end in circumstances that are morally dubious. Utterly changed and with no societal function left, he chooses death over an anguish that he cannot escape. Just as Yagi’s *Mr. Samsa* questions the role of functionality within modern ceramic practice, it also questions the individual’s ability to function within postwar Japanese society. How might a person continue after being stripped of their goals and defining characteristics? How might an object function once its means to do so have vanished?

³¹ Ibid., 130.

III. The Vessel Folk and the Voice of Tradition

In an essay titled “An Introduction to Tradition,” artist Okamoto Tarō was one of the first proponents the Japanese avant-garde to publically make critical observations about the concept of ‘Japanese tradition’ and how it was mobilized during the postwar period by, effectively limiting understandings of what constitutes art made in Japan. According to Okamoto, the rapid commercialization and globalization of Japan that occurred as a result of the Meiji Restoration (1868) provoked responses from those who feared an imminent loss of ‘traditional Japan,’ and sought to recuperate it in some way. Many of these responses were nationalistic in nature and led to the revival of tea practices (*chanoyu*), feudal arts, and ‘Japanese-style’ painting (*nihonga*).³² A similar revival occurred after Japan’s defeat in Pacific War, and during its subsequent US occupation.

Okamoto begins his essay by recounting an interview with a former rickshaw driver that he overheard on the radio. As the man expressed his contempt for cars and taxis, he described his former occupation with great longing and fondness, describing moonlit nights, beautiful women, and narrow alleyways. To Okamoto’s surprise (and amusement), when the man was asked of his current occupation, he candidly replied that he worked as taxi dispatcher at Nakano Station. This interaction was, for Okamoto, an uncanny metaphor for how individuals with cultural influence and authority had continuously used the concept of ‘Japanese tradition’ not to encourage new forms of art, but rather to place limitations upon them. “What charmers they are. I don’t take issue with their attitude at all,” says Okamoto, “except when they advance their cause under the

³² Okamoto Tarō, “An Introduction to Tradition (1955),” translated by Maiko Behr, in *From Postwar to Postmodern, Art in Japan 1945-1989: Primary Documents*, edited by Hayashi Michio (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 67.

authority of the great banner of Culture.”³³ There was no shortage of these so-called “charmners” in wartime Japan. In fact, it might be said that the efforts of Imperial Japan were sustained in part by the work of such traditionalists who did exactly as Okamoto described.

As it pertains to this study, there is one wartime figure who stands out in his ability to shape what is considered to be Japanese ceramic art: Yanagi Sōetsu, Japanese philosopher and co-founder of the folk-craft movement (*mingei undō*). Also known as Yanagi Muneyoshi, he and his peers held that traditional handicrafts made by skilled artisans (*shokunin*) were of the utmost beauty and most fittingly represented the markers of Japanese aesthetic tradition. These objects were given the designation of *mingei*, a neologism and contraction of the phrase ‘popular crafts’ (*minshūtekina kōgei*), the invention of which is often attributed to Yanagi. The medium of ceramic played an important role for proponents of Mingei.³⁴ In fact, the ceramicists Hamada Shōji (1894-1978), Kawai Kanjirō (1890-1966), and Bernard Leach (1887-1979) are all considered to be major authors of the movement and its theories. To better understand these theories, we must take a closer look at the writings of Yanagi.

Yanagi outlines the defining characteristics of *mingei* in a 1926 essay that he published in his own journal, *Kōgei no michi (The Way of Craft)*. He states,

True *mingei* (or *getemono*) was (1) functional; (2) used in the daily life of common people; (3) thus produced in large quantities; (4) therefore inexpensive; (5) produced in a cooperative or collective fashion; (6) handmade; (7) produced using natural, locally specific materials; (8) produced according to traditional techniques and designs; (9)

³³ Okamoto Tarō, “An Introduction to Tradition (1955),” 62-63.

³⁴ I treat the term ‘Mingei’ as a proper noun, by capitalizing its first letter and leaving it un-italicized, to encourage that it be understood as a movement sustained by the concerted effort of Japanese scholars and artists. In its italicized form, ‘*mingei*’ refers to the actual folk-crafts valued by proponents of the movement.

produced by anonymous artisans without self-conscious, individualistic aesthetic intent; and the primary quality of the *mingei* aesthetic was (10) simplicity.³⁵

Yanagi speaks of *mingei* in the past tense, accentuating their status as recuperated relics of Japan's past. Published over twenty years before the founding of Sōdeisha, these tenets outlined what became the orthodoxy of craft practice, which Yanagi and his contemporaries extolled domestically and abroad. Ceramic artists of the twentieth-century thus carried with them the burden of this 'Japanese tradition,' as it was defined by Mingei theorists. As such, any discussion of ceramics made in Japan—even those perceived as unabashedly modern in character—must also examine the issue of tradition (*dentō*), a topic that was fiercely discussed in the postwar period by artists and scholars in what is known as the debate on tradition (*dentō ronsō*).

As Okamoto suggests, tradition only becomes a point of contention within modernization. In *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*, anthropologist Marilyn Ivy describes how the concept of 'traditional Japan' was defined and disseminated during the twentieth century. She argues that Japan's many successes as a nation resulted in a "nexus of unease about culture itself and its transmission and stability," which drove individuals to ensure that Japan's traditions remain intact.³⁶ This anxiety, as Ivy explains, has manifested itself in many corners of Japanese society: ad campaigns, oral histories, museum installations, and theatrical performances. It most often takes the form of nostalgia, a longing for the past, for a Japan that has retained its traditions; at its core, it perceives a loss. Of course, the past itself could not be recuperated, and so Japanese traditionalists supported a revival of practices that bore

³⁵ Kim Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 52.

³⁶ Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 9.

the weight of the past. Paradigmatically located in the agrarian countryside (*inaka*), these practices were carried out by ‘the folk’ (*jōmin* in the terminology of folklore studies, or *minzoku*) the common people of Japan who existed outside of history, untouched by modernization.³⁷ From these locations emanates what Ivy calls ‘the voice,’ which, in its transmission from the past to the present, “stands in for the heterogeneity of all voices threatened by the homogenizing trajectory of modern nation-statehood.”³⁸ With this greater understanding of how tradition is typically defined, one begins to understand how, in the context of twentieth-century Japan, a revival of folk practices was indirectly linked to an anxiety about the encroachment of foreign culture and the stability of Japan’s cultural institutions. As such, the ideals of collectives like Sōdeisha were in conflict with those of the Mingei movement.

In *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan*, Kim Brandt closely analyzes how the activities of Mingei theorists bolstered the colonial apparatus of Japan during the first half of the twentieth century. More specifically, Brandt discusses material opportunities that wartime colonialists like Yanagi were afforded within the occupied territories of Japan. Following Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910, Japanese scholars were able to obtain wares and artifacts at very little to no cost, often removing them from the peninsula permanently.³⁹ These objects now reside in museums across North America, Korea, and Japan. In some cases, they were excavated from kiln sites previously unknown to or untouched by the Korean public, such as those located at Mount Gyeryong in Korea’s Chungcheong Province. Yanagi and his wife participated in these excavations alongside brothers Noritaka Asakawa

³⁷ Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

³⁹ Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty*, 20.

(1884-1964) and Takumi (1891-1931), both of whom championed the study of Korean ceramics within Japan, and Langdon Warner (1981-1955), a Harvard professor and Curator of Oriental Art.⁴⁰ The discovery of these kilns sites in 1927 led to an increased interest in Korean ceramics within Japan. Of particular interest to Yanagi was *buncheong* ware (Korean: *buncheong sagi*), a gray-colored stoneware made during the early Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). This ware is characterized by the presence of white slip and a translucent, celadon-type glaze and is often accompanied by stamping, inlay, or designs in iron pigment.

It is important to clarify here that proponents of Mingei did not concern themselves exclusively with the folk-crafts of Japan. In fact, the movement depended on the identification and categorization of many cultural practices that were visually distinct from one another, especially during the colonial period. One of the ways in which Yanagi practiced this taxonomy was through his founding of the Korean Folk Art Museum, Seoul in 1924, where he exhibited various objects made by unknown Korean craftsmen that included *buncheong* ware. While there remains some disagreement as to where the efforts of Yanagi and his contemporaries fit into the administrative policy of ‘cultural rule’ (*bunka seiji*) implemented by the Governor-General of Korea in response to the March 1st Movement (Korean: *Samil undong*) of 1919, as the conservators of East Asian culture, scholarly colonialists like Yanagi effectively drew the cultural boundaries Japan and its colonies.

Unlike Mingei artists, Yagi and the members of Sōdeisha did not profess to recuperate traditional practices as they were. On the contrary, they employed the use of imagery, techniques,

⁴⁰ Seung Yeon Sang, “Fragments That Mattered: Buncheong Ceramics from Mount Gyeryong,” (presentation, One Asia Forum Talk Series, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, October 26, 2017).

and motifs that were traditional and untraditional, functional and nonfunctional, without favoritism. While it might be said that both movements were appropriative in nature, I would argue that Sōdeisha's method of appropriation is unique in that it imposes no structure upon the objects they appropriate. While Yagi's *Vase with Two Mouths* exhibits similar materials and techniques to those used in *buncheong sagi* or even *ko-kiyomizu* ware, it is not simulacrum. In stark contrast, Yanagi and his contemporaries curated the folk art of Japan and its neighboring countries—thanks in part to their status as colonialists—in order to strengthen the conceptualization of Japanese tradition as singular and unique. As such, it required a close adherence to replication and standardization. Sōdeisha was not simply seeking to invent a new tradition upon which to ground a new modernism, but to radically change what might be considered traditional in the first place.

IV. Vital/Aesthetic: Primitivism and Ceramics in Japan

According to Mingei theorists and practitioners, the ceramic traditions of Japan subsisted in the realm of ‘the folk,’ an idyllic place where craftsmen adhered to an unspoken policy of practical functionalism. As I have discussed above, this conceptualization of ceramic tradition—purported by theorists such as Yanagi Sōetsu—was at times sympathetic to Japan’s imperialistic agenda. Acting perhaps from a desire to unite the ‘Asian race’ and its cultures, colonialists actively appropriated the ceramic wares of Japan’s occupied territories, which they curated and categorized. The vessel form, a ubiquitous component of nearly every material culture, united the ceramic traditions of Asia whilst adhering to the standards of beauty recognized by the Mingei movement. During the period after Japan’s defeat in the Pacific War, a time when the country’s national and cultural identity was in flux, artists and scholars began to seriously question the credibility of the folk-craft movement and its standards of beauty. Some found value in the so-called ‘primitive’ cultures of Japan’s prehistory, which produced ceramic objects that did not hold to these standards. Often associated with modernism and/or the Japanese avant-garde, these individuals admired the earliest ceramic objects for their sculptural qualities and their attunement to the intangible forces of nature. Painter-sculptor Okamoto Tarō and architect Tange Kenzō were among those to first promote this practice in Japan, which is perhaps best described as an alternative form of ‘primitivism.’ Okamoto and Tange challenged suppositions about Japanese ceramic tradition through their writings on prehistoric ceramic objects. These writings laid the groundwork for the members of Sōdeisha to freely adopt prehistoric, ritual ceramic forms in their work.

First, I would like to define the term ‘primitivism,’ as its usage is somewhat contested

within art historical scholarship. It is also unclear how primitivism operated in Japan as opposed to other regions. “In the context of modernism,” state Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, “‘primitivism’ is an act on the part of artists and writers seeking to celebrate the features of the art and culture of peoples deemed ‘primitive’ and to appropriate their supposed simplicity and authenticity to the project of transforming Western art.”⁴¹ This definition of primitivism most closely describes the practices of artists like Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), Henri Matisse (1869-1954), or Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), painters who drew heavily upon motifs found in so-called ‘primitive art’ in order to question the strictures of ‘Western art.’ Taking hold in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this variant of primitivism was an artistic response to evolutionist theories of the colonial era, which stated that indigenous peoples were inferior to their colonizers and framed the violence committed against them as inevitable. While primitivists disavowed these theories and openly admired indigenous forms of art, by denoting a people and/or their culture as ‘primitive,’ they also reproduced the stereotypes that fueled colonial violence in the first place.

As an artistic practice, primitivism operated somewhat differently in postwar Japan than it did in earlier, Euro-American contexts. However, this is not to say that primitivists in Japan did not make potentially harmful generalizations about indigenous cultures. First and foremost, the project of individuals like Okamoto and Tange was not to transform ‘Western art,’ but rather to critique and expand upon the artistic traditions of Japan. Furthermore, primitivists in postwar Japan tended not to concern themselves, save for a few exceptions, with the arts of Africa, Polynesia, or the Pre-Columbian Americas; nor did they actively appropriate the arts of regions

⁴¹ Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, “Primitive,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 1st edition, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 170.

that had been colonized by Japan in recent years. They instead looked inward, to Japan's prehistory, wherein they found the discarded fragments of their own culture. Unlike Gauguin, Matisse, or Picasso, artists who attributed value almost exclusively to cultures that were spatially removed from (and colonized by) the nations of Europe, the primitivists of postwar Japan more often attributed value to cultures that were native to the Japanese archipelago, but nonetheless remained detached from Japanese modernity. This observation echoes a distinction made by Armin W. Geertz between what he calls 'cultural primitivism' and 'chronological primitivism.' According to Geertz, the first distributes artistic value across spatial and/or cultural boundaries, and thus concerns itself with the 'exotic' and 'foreign;' the second distributes said value into the past, and is thus associated with the 'native' and 'local.'⁴² There is, of course, some overlap between these two categories, but because the primitivists of postwar Japan fell more closer into latter, they had to rely on the material findings of archaeologists—not goods acquired by colonialists—in order to make their appropriations.⁴³

Archaeologists tend to divide the late prehistory of the Japanese archipelago into three major periods: the Jōmon, the Yayoi, and the Kofun. The Jōmon (c. 12,000 BP-400 BCE) was a society of primarily nomadic hunter-gatherers that occupied Eastern Honshū and parts of Hokkaidō. The Yayoi (c. 400 BCE-250 CE), which first appeared on the islands of Kyūshū, Shikoku, and Western Honshū, was a sedentary society marked by increased agricultural activity and social stratification. The Kofun (c. 250-600 CE) was culturally very similar to the Yayoi. However, its massive, key-shaped burial mounds (*kofun*) evidence a more clearly defined

⁴² Armin W. Geertz, "Can we move beyond primitivism? On recovering the indigenes of indigenous religions in the academic study of religion," in *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Routledge, 2004), 37-70.

⁴³ The same cannot necessarily be said for members of the Japanese folk-craft movement, whose figurehead had privileged access to foreign-made ceramic objects due to his station as a colonialist.

sociopolitical hierarchy. In Japan, the above distinctions were codified by archaeologists whose project it was—especially following the Second World War—to locate the origins of the Japanese state and its imperial genealogy. They did so perhaps in response to the collapse of imperial Japan, which left the efficacy of the emperor system up for critical debate. Shortly after the war, archaeologist Egami Namio (1906-2002) presented a theory that placed the beginnings of Japan squarely within the Kofun period and claimed that the Yamato court (*Yamato chōtei*), Japan’s first identifiable governing body, was comprised of individuals who emigrated from the Korean peninsula beginning in the Yayoi period.⁴⁴ Known as the ‘Kiba Race Hypothesis,’ Egami’s theory has been accepted as more-or-less authentic narrative, one that is reflected in how the periods of Japan’s prehistory have been characterized over the twentieth century.

Due to a lack of documentation that might recount the details of its history or society, the Jōmon period is primarily defined by its material culture, which includes some of the oldest pottery found on Earth. Because the Jōmon period predates the advent of the potter’s wheel, ceramic vessels were assembled from the bottom up, using many consecutive coils of clay. The surface of these unglazed, earthenware jars is often covered in cord markings (*jōmon*), which were made with a rope-like material (Fig. 4). During the Middle Jōmon period (c. 2500-1500 BCE), some of these pots were deeply incised and/or given three-dimensional appliqué. The most extreme examples of this design resemble flames that engulf the vessel and extend upward

⁴⁴ Mizuo Hiroshi, “Patterns of Kofun Culture,” *Japan Quarterly*, 16, no. 1 (1969): 71. Egami first presented his theory in 1948 as part of a symposium entitled *The Japanese Race: Origins of Culture and the Formation of the Japanese State*, wherein he traced the origins of the Yamato court to the proto-Korean Buryeo kingdom (c. 100 BCE-494 CE), which was centered around what is now China’s Jilin Province.

from its mouth.⁴⁵ The exact function of these vessels—especially the most elaborate of their kind—is unknown. However, given their proximity to clay masks (*domen*) and figurines (*dogū*) within archaeological sites, their purpose was probably ritualistic in nature.

In stark contrast to Jōmon objects, artifacts from the Yayoi and Kofun periods are visibly practical in both form and functionality, if not attributed with political significance. The arrival of the Yayoi on the Japanese archipelago heralded the coming of certain industrial innovations that originated in Mainland China. These innovations included wet-rice cultivation, metallurgy, and the potter's wheel, all of which facilitated the creation of more refined, standardized objects, whether by encouraging a sedentary lifestyle or by expediting the production of material objects. As such, it is during the Yayoi period that pottery begins to take on the standard, functional forms that are commonly associated with the medium: storage jars, cooking vessels, plates, cups, and bowls. These objects were minimally decorated—if at all—with incised, geometric patterns. From this style of pottery developed Haji ware (*hajiki*), a type of unglazed earthenware that became extremely prevalent during in the Kofun period.

Studying the Yayoi and Kofun periods proved most fruitful for scholars who wanted to locate the political beginnings of Japan. These periods coincided with a dramatic increase in sedentariness as well as the first written references to what might be considered Japan.⁴⁶ In comparison, the Jōmon period must have seemed nebulous and ahistorical. Thanks to the Records of Ancient Matters (*Kojiki*) and the Chronicles of Japan (*Nihon-shoki*), early documents that recount the origin myths of Japan and the reigns of its first emperors, it was much easier for

⁴⁵ Instances of this style have been primarily excavated in Eastern Honshū (especially between the Japanese Alps and the Kantō Plain) and are commonly designated as ‘flame-type’ vessels (*kaengata-doki*).

⁴⁶ The first recorded reference to ‘Japan’ is in the Chinese *Book of Han*, a history of the Western Han dynasty completed around 82 CE, wherein the divided kingdoms of the Japanese archipelago are collectively called Wa.

scholars to historicize the Yayoi and Kofun periods.⁴⁷ This may explain why material findings from the Yayoi and Kofun periods are disproportionately given political significance. For example, ceremonial bronze bells (*dōtaku*) from the Yayoi period are often described as political gifts due to their regular distribution. Because of this, their ritual significance is rarely examined in detail. Mizuo Hiroshi goes as far as to suggest that the shape of *dōtaku* was consciously reflected in the construction of *kofun*, structures whose importance was, and continues to be, inherently political.⁴⁸ Although the Jōmon period bore a rich ceramic chronology, it does not benefit from the same depth of analysis. Instead, the Jōmon is seen as a time before time, before civilization, and certainly before the creation of Japan. These two discrete archaeologies constitute what Mizoguchi Kōji describes as ‘discursive spaces of prehistory,’ domains of popular discourse that delineate the Japanese body politic from its supposedly ahistorical, genealogically unrelated antecedent. “In this paradigm,” Mizoguchi argues, the Jōmon was “the culture of the Other in the same way that the culture of the subsequent periods was the culture of the Same.”⁴⁹ Surprisingly, figures like Okamoto and Tange found in this “culture of the Other” vital components of Japan’s aesthetic traditions that persisted into, and should be recognized as part of, Japanese modernity.

Okamoto, in a 1952 essay titled “On Jōmon Ceramics,” argues that clay objects made during the Jōmon period, specifically those associated with ritual practice, played an important but underappreciated role in fashioning the material culture of Japan. This was a contentious

⁴⁷ The *Kojiki* and the *Nihon-shoki* were completed in around 711 and 720 CE, during the early Nara period (710-794 CE).

⁴⁸ Mizuo Hiroshi, “Patterns of Kofun Culture,” *Japan Quarterly*, 16, no. 1 (1969): 74.

⁴⁹ Mizoguchi Kōji, “Self-Identity in the Modern and Post-Modern World and Archaeological Research: A Case Study from Japan,” in *Archaeology of Asia*, edited by Miriam T. Stark (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, Inc., 2006), 58.

opinion, as the principal features of Jōmon ceramics—their irregularity and crudeness—were thought to be incompatible with the ceramic traditions of modern Japan, which overwhelmingly favored the aesthetic qualities of simplicity and restraint. As such, those who traced the origins of Japanese society and its ceramic traditions to the Yayoi period necessarily overlooked Jōmon pottery. It is perhaps for these reasons that Okamoto argues an understanding and creative use of space declined during the Yayoi period, because the potter's wheel shifted focus from asymmetry to symmetry and from three-dimensionality to two-dimensional surface design. Okamoto continues to argue that Yayoi ceramics lost all contact with “the fourth dimension” (*yojigen*): a quality that he says animated ceramics of the Jōmon period.⁵⁰ So what is this dialogue ‘forth dimension’ that Okamoto speaks of? It is not only a spatial awareness that results in a dynamic form, but also a spiritual awareness that allows for the existence of the formless. Ultimately, Okamoto argues that this kind of dialogue is lost to the modern man, who dismissively labels Jōmon objects as products of a ‘primitive’ people to whom he bears no historical or genealogical relation.

In *Ise: Prototype of Japanese Architecture*, a publication that marks the fifty-ninth reconstruction of the shrine buildings at Ise, which occurred in 1953, Tange and architectural critic Kawazoe Noboru (1926-2015) examine how Shinto architecture took shape over the course of Japan's early history. Tange locates its beginnings in primordial Japan, a time before the personification of gods and before religion itself. It was then that humankind “trembled before the incomprehensible forces (*ke*) that filled primeval natural and space,” says Tange, “[forces]

⁵⁰ Okamoto Tarō, “On Jōmon Ceramics,” translated by Jonathan M. Reynolds, *Art in Translation* 1, no. 1 (2009): 56.

believed to permeate palpable matter and formless space (collectively *mono* in Japanese).”⁵¹ In their attempt to delimit the ‘mysterious force in all things’ (or *mononoke*), the peoples of proto-Japan began to practice an aesthetic tradition that was functionally similar to many examples of Shinto architecture. “Instead of thinking in terms of images of the deities,” Tange argues, “man thought in terms of an image of the space in which the deities moved, and proceeded in various ways to symbolize this space.”⁵² Tange uses the example of rice straw ropes (*shimenawa*), among others, to illustrate this point. *Shimenawa* are commonly used to demarcate sacred spaces, be it that which exists between two rocks or is contained by a man-made structure such as a shrine. One might also consider the Shinto gate (*torii*), an architectural element that marks a spatial transition from the profane to the sacred.

While the history of Shinto architecture is of marginal relevance to this essay, Tange’s discussion of *mononoke* is significant. It resembles Okamoto’s discussion of Jōmon ceramics, whose dialogue with the ‘fourth dimension’ waned at the start of the Yayoi period. Tange makes a similar distinction between the Jōmon and the Yayoi: “I hold the view that there have been two strains within Japanese culture,” he says, “the Jōmon and the Yayoi, the vital and the aesthetic, and that [Japan’s] cultural development has been the history of their interplay.”⁵³ Here Tange proposes a new theory, that the spiritual and visual practices of the Jōmon culture did not disappear upon the arrival of the Yayoi, but rather that they continued into Japanese modernity. The Jōmon and the Yayoi represent artistic inclinations that are distinct, but not separate; they overlap and interconnect. For staunch advocates of Egami’s hypothesis, this point must have

⁵¹ Tange Kenzō and Kawazoe Noboru, *Ise: Prototype of Japanese Architecture* (Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1965), 21.

⁵² Tange, *Ise: Prototype of Japanese Architecture*, 32-33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 17.

been hard to concede, because it implied that the Jōmon people and their traditions were not in fact unrelated to those of the modern Japanese people. The contribution of Okamoto and Tange was to acknowledge the interplay of these two opposing ideologies—the vital and the aesthetic—one of which had been ignored due to its association with ‘primitive’ art and culture. I argue that artists like Isamu Noguchi, and indeed the members of Sōdeisha, render ambiguous the artificial divisions that existed between the vital and aesthetic, the sculptural and the functional, in part by appropriating ritualistic ceramic forms. Of these citations, Jōmon clay figurines (*dogū*) and funerary ceramics of the Kofun period (*haniwa*) were the most prominent. Although these two ceramic forms were temporally distanced from one another, they shared a certain animistic potential, a potential to contain something entirely immaterial.

Admittedly, very little is known about *dogū*. These clay figures seem to represent deities or the like, although there is no way to be certain. The irregular distribution of *dogū* suggests that the objects were not used continuously; they were part of a cycle of manufacture, enshrinement, abandonment, and/or burial. Because many were broken at the time of discard, it appears that *dogū* functioned as ritual idols.⁵⁴ One example unearthed at the Tanabatake site in Chino, bears stereotypically feminine features that place it in the same category as fertility idols found in other parts of the world (Fig. 5). The figure is given breasts, exaggerated hips, and appears to be pregnant. Its eyes, mouth, and navel are marked by small holes that provide a glimpse into the space its body contains. *Haniwa* are typically found in geometrical arrangements that surround burial mounds erected during the Kofun period. The earliest examples of these objects were quite

⁵⁴ Richard Pearson, “Jōmon Ceramics: The Creative Expressions of Affluent Foragers,” in *The Rise of a Great Tradition: Japanese Archaeological Ceramics from Jōmon through Heian Periods*, ed. Erica H. Weeder (New York: Japan Society, 1990), 23.

simple in construction; they were made almost entirely on the potter's wheel and were thus cylindrical in form (Fig. 6). However, the typical *haniwa* had no base and could not function as a vessel. It appears to have functioned instead as a kind of marker or fencepost, which would be planted into the earth. Beginning in latter half of the Kofun period, these clay cylinders were crowned with symbolic images that were sculpted by hand: weapons, houses, animals, and humans figures. One such example depicts a soldier whose armor is carefully rendered and whose eyes and mouth are represented by ovals pierced into the clay (Fig. 7). Another more famous example depicts a layperson whose tentacular arms are raised in dance. The bases of these figures were textured with markings not unlike those found on Jōmon vessels, and were perforated with circular holes, perhaps to aid in the firing process.

While *haniwa* were not functional in the same sense as a jar or bowl, there is some evidence to suggest that they were made by the same potters who constructed Haji ware vessels, examples of which have been found in and around the tombs that *haniwa* demarcate. The myth surrounding the inception of *haniwa*, though not entirely reputable as a historic account, supports this hypothesis. According to the *Nihon-shoki*, the tradition of making *haniwa* began with the death of an emperor's younger brother. As was custom, subjects were buried up to their necks around the key-shaped tumulus. However, their slow deaths were so disturbing to witnesses of the event that a new method had to be sought out. Officials called upon the help of potters who resided in the nearby town of Izumo—makers of Haji ware. These artisans purportedly made

countless clay figures in the images of men, horses, and various objects to outfit the burial mound of the late empress. Henceforth, this became standard practice in place of live burial.⁵⁵

In contemporary Japan, *dogū* and *haniwa* are a package deal. In popular culture and museum installations they can be seen side by side, and for good reason. The two ceramic forms share more than one common characteristic; they both served a function that was primarily ritualistic in nature and their makers created both ‘functional’ and ‘nonfunctional’ ceramics, invoking techniques they acquired from both disciplines. Moreover, both *dogū* and *haniwa* were known to assume the form of a living thing, whether it was that of a human, animal, or deity. However, they differ in one important way. *Dogū* were made before the arrival of the Yayoi, whose kin supposedly established the first ‘Japanese’ state. *Haniwa*, on the other hand, were made after this state had developed into a more sophisticated apparatus. And yet, both objects attest to the persistence of a certain aesthetic, what Tange refers to as ‘the vital.’ In emulating these practices, artists like Yagi, Suzuki, and Noguchi made the implicit argument that no ceramic object was inherently ‘traditional’ by virtue of its function; clay had been used to create both functional and nonfunctional objects since humans first discovered the medium. The recurrent pairings of *haniwa* and *dogu* within cultural institutions attest to the persistence of Okamoto and Tange’s vision of the primordial past as a source of tradition alternative to Mingei theories. Artists such as those associated with Sōdeisha were among the first to visualize the ceramic object through this lens.

⁵⁵ Edward J. Kidder, “Ceramics of the Burial Mounds (Kofun),” in *The Rise of a Great Tradition: Japanese Archaeological Ceramics from Jōmon through Heian Periods*, ed. Erica H. Weeder (New York: Japan Society, 1990), 44.

V. A Hole Through Which to Speak: Sōdeisha and Isamu Noguchi

Japan's discursive spaces of prehistory—the vital and the aesthetic, the Jōmon and the Yayoi—operated during the postwar period to reinforce certain assumptions about the origin of the Japanese people, their government, and their artistic traditions. The writings of Okamoto Tarō and Tange Kenzo challenged these assumptions by taking prehistoric, ritual objects as their primary subject, and by arguing that they represented a facet of Japanese artistic tradition that was equally as important as the feudal arts. By the time Okamoto's "On Jōmon Ceramics" was published in 1952, artists in Japan had already begun to implement the motifs of so-called 'primitive' objects within their own practices, perhaps because they ascribed themselves to the same opinion. As it pertains to ceramics made in Japan, architect and sculptor Isamu Noguchi was among the first individuals to do so. During prolonged visits to Japan in the early 1950s, Noguchi exhibited two major series of ceramic sculptures, both of which referenced the forms of *dogū* and *haniwa*. While these exhibitions clearly impacted the work of ceramic collectives like Sōdeisha and Shikōkai, there remains some uncertainty as to how. The goal of this section is to clarify the extent of Noguchi's artistic contribution.

I argue above that Sōdeisha experimented with traditional ceramic techniques and forms in order to challenge the concept of functionality. While their experimentations sometimes resulted in works of abstract, ceramic sculpture, they were more often described as *obuje-yaki* because they deliberately reiterated the vessel form; they were, in effect, ceramics vessels that were deconstructed and then reassembled. As such, I argue that Noguchi's primary contribution to this genre of Japanese ceramic art, and specifically to the works of Sōdeisha, was not in fact a refusal of tradition. It was a willingness to appropriate prehistoric, ritual ceramic forms. In other

words, Noguchi's series of ceramic sculptures made it acceptable for avant-garde ceramicists like the members of Sōdeisha, who were at one point hesitant to cite historical forms in their work, to do so without sacrificing their relevance. In turn, by adopting the characteristics of objects like *dogū* and *haniwa*, Yagi Kazuo, Suzuki Osamu, and their peers were able to redefine the role of functionality within ceramic practice in a way that was not entirely foreign to the artistic traditions of Japan. After briefly discussing the circumstances of Noguchi's ceramic work, I will examine how Yagi and Suzuki invoked the qualities of these ritual objects, putting their work within an artistic dialogue about tradition and functionality.

Following World War II, Noguchi was greatly involved within the Japanese art and architecture community. He lived and worked for a time in the Kamakura residence of studio potter Kitaōji Rosanjin (1883-1959) and collaborated with Teshigahara Sōfū (1900-1979), *ikebana* artist and founder of the Sōgetsu school, to create flower arrangements using his clay sculptures. Among other notable projects, Noguchi was commissioned by Tange Kenzō to design structures for the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. These included the Peace Bridge and a cenotaph for the victims of the atomic bombing, the latter of which was never realized. Noguchi's design for the cenotaph was a parabolic, mound-like structure whose legs burrowed deep into the earth. Between them, in an underpass accessible to guests, rested a container bearing the names of those who were killed during the blast and its aftermath. In function, the memorial would not have been so different from tumuli of the Kofun period, around which *haniwa* stood watch. The ceramics that Noguchi made whilst in Japan reference these ritual objects, which operated as stand-ins for human beings.

Noguchi's ceramic work was first exhibited in Japan at the Mitsukoshi Department Store,

Nihonbashi, Tokyo in 1950 and then at the Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura in 1952. Here Noguchi displayed objects that he made alongside well-known Japanese potters like Rosanjin and Kaneshige Tōyō (1896-1967) over the course of three years. Via these ceramic sculptures, Noguchi clearly cites the form of *haniwa*. However, Noguchi's affinity for ritual ceramics began at least two decades prior, as is evidenced by a series of terra-cotta sculptures that he made while visiting Japan before the war. The most emblematic of these was a large figure called *The Queen*. A photograph of the work displayed in Noguchi's 1950 exhibition bore a more straightforward title: *Haniwa*.

As discussed above, anthropomorphic *haniwa* take on a variety of roles, both literally and figuratively. They depict men and women, the old and the young; they have unique occupations and social statuses. The same might be said for Noguchi's body of ceramic work, which encompasses a range of forms that deliberately blur the line between object and living thing. However, Noguchi was not particularly interested in reviving traditions wholesale, nor did he create one-to-one replicas of prehistoric ceramics types. He instead used motifs from said ceramic types to create objects that were at once 'primitive' and unabashedly modern. Two works exhibited at the Mitsukoshi Department Store, *Policeman (Junsa)* (Fig. 8) and *My Mu (Watashi no mu)* (Fig. 9), are prime examples of this effort. Although abstract, these objects demonstrate the qualities of living things. They bear pores and perforations, which simultaneously recall the orifices of a human body and the holes pierced into the walls of *haniwa*. *Policeman*, which clings to itself by a dangling, flesh-like appendage, is given an occupation that only a human could have. As a leg of *My Mu* touches the ground, it recoils in response to the texture of the ground. While Noguchi suggests the sentience of these objects, he also alludes to

the vessel form. The title of *My Mu*, for example, is translated as ‘my nothing,’ an appellation that Winther-Tamaki suggests may refer to the Zen Buddhist concept of nothingness (*mu*).⁵⁶ However, it might equally allude to the fundamental properties of the ceramic vessel: its emptiness and its concaveness. In doing so, it also calls attention to the object’s clear lack of functionality. Not unlike Yagi’s *The Walk of Mr. Samsa*, *My Mu* is effectively a bottomless vessel turned onto its side. Elevated atop three, slender legs, it frames the empty space that it might have otherwise contained.

The above examples of Noguchi’s ceramic sculptures, although simplistic in form, are relatively refined in execution. However, the artist also made countless other works that were crude, visceral, and evocative of the material itself. Through these objects one can see the physical process and can visualize the artist articulating coils of clay that become limbs and slabs of clay that become articles of clothing. Due to their irregularity, many of these creations could not stand upright on their own, so Noguchi devised methods of display that would raise them off of the ground. These included wall mountings, systems of ropes, and wooden pedestals—devices that accentuated the objects’ status as nonfunctional works of fine art. One such example is called *Torso #378* (Fig. 10). The headless body, mounted on a base of wood, appears to be that of a young boy. His arms, suggested by two rounded stubs that jut upward and outward from his shoulders, resemble those of a *dogū* excavated in Chino (Fig. 5). Like the tendrils of a plant, a pattern of unglazed clay (likely the result of using a ‘resist’ substance, such as wax) stretches over its shoulders and down its chest. Hugging its waist are three-dimensional appliques, coils of

⁵⁶ Bert Winther-Tamaki, “The Ceramic Art of Isamu Noguchi: A Close Embrace of the Earth,” in *Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics: A Close Embrace of the Earth*, edited by Louise Allison Cort and Bert Winther-Tamaki (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2003), 24.

clay affixed to the clay body. A small, oval-shaped indentation marks the figure's navel; its right nipple is carved rather naturalistically into the clay, while the other is suggested by a hole that pierces through its chest.

A later work by Suzuki called *Samurai (Nobushi)* (Fig. 11) greatly resembles *Torso #378* in the way it is presented, atop a wooden pedestal. Like Noguchi's work, *Nobushi* would not be able to stand on its own, nor would many fragmentary *haniwa* that are displayed in encyclopedic museums across the world. The object's surface is partially covered by a mixture of white and black slip—materials we are now very familiar with—which creates a geometrical pattern. Unlike his previous work, wherein black slip is applied atop a layer of white slip with a brush, here the black was likely applied with a stamp; the resultant image is reminiscent of the cord markings that have since come to characterize ceramic vessels of the Jōmon period. Another example by Suzuki titled *Walking Child (Aruku ko)*, made over a decade after Noguchi's first exhibition of ceramic work in Japan, exhibits anthropomorphic features that are present in many of Noguchi's ceramic works. It places one of its feet forward and with its back arched it looks upward. Staring back at us, through two round openings, in the belly of this *Walking Child*, is perhaps the true artwork: nothing, or rather nothing of physical substance. It is in this way that the works of Sōdeisha most resemble the prehistoric ceramics of Japan, which were not praised for their ability to hold, store, and transport foodstuffs, but were perceived as having ritual, animistic value.

And so we return to the *obuje-yaki* that began it all, the ceramic work that—in the context of postwar Japan—was meant to spirit the medium away from tyranny of the vessel and to refuse ceramic tradition: *The Walk of Mr. Samsa*. As we have come to understand, Yagi Kazuo's great

work was indeed great, not by virtue of its reference to *The Metamorphosis*, nor primarily by its lack of function or its mere existence as sculpture, but due to its embrace of the transformative, animistic properties of the ceramic medium. The efforts of Noguchi exist in the work of Sōdeisha to this extent. However, the work of Sōdeisha differs from that of Noguchi in at least one important way; it is also the reason why *The Walk of Mr. Samsa* remains so enigmatic, even to contemporary observers. It straddles two seemingly distinct worlds: the functional and the nonfunctional, the traditional and the nontraditional, the prehistoric and the modern. Noguchi was, in a certain respect, able to create such radical works of ceramic art because he used clay as a sculptor would. In this respect, almost any form was available to him. On the other hand, Yagi's entrenchment with the ceramic medium allowed him to stretch the means of ceramic production to the point of breaking. The resulting object was one almost entirely alien to the medium itself.

Conclusion

There is a misconception that the works of Sōdeisha and its contemporaries were primarily works of abstract, ceramic sculpture. The purpose of the above thesis has been to make an intervention upon this narrative, which inevitably reinstates the assumption that ideas flowed in an Easterly direction, from Euro-America towards East Asia. While this may be partially true in the context of modern and contemporary Japanese ceramics, it overlooks the ways in which artists like Yagi Kazuo, Suzuki Osamu, and even Isamu Noguchi, played upon the local meanings of the medium of clay, both ancient and contemporary, not with the goal of achieving abstraction or rejection tradition outright, but with the goal of redefining Japanese ceramic tradition to include both functional *and* non-functional forms. This is, in effect, what separated the *obuje-yaki* from pure works of ceramic sculpture (*tōchō*): its subject is the vessel form, first and foremost. There is no better example of this than Yagi's *The Walk of Mr. Samsa*, which deliberately calls attention to its inability to contain much of anything. The literary subject of *Mr. Samsa*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, actually serves to reinforce its status as a kiln-fired *objet*.

Within the postwar debate on tradition (*dentō ronsō*) in Japan, Sōdeisha and other proponents of the avant-garde ceramics scene took a position that was inherently opposed to that of the folk-craft movement, or *mingei undō*. Mingei theorists like Yanagi Sōetsu greatly valued the functional object and had a narrow view of what should be included under the umbrella of 'Japanese tradition.' On the other hand, figures such as Okamoto Tarō, Tange Kenzō, and Noguchi encouraged a more diverse definition of tradition, one that Sōdeisha embraced. This resulted in the adoption of non-functional ceramic forms once deemed 'primitive,' especially

Jōmon clay figurines (*dogū*) and Kofun funerary ceramics (*haniwa*), in order to expand upon what traditions ought to be considered uniquely Japanese. Noguchi played an important role in propagating this practice through exhibitions of his ceramic work that, while different from the work of Sōdeisha in its derivation, impacted the work of Yagi and Suzuki in various ways. This imparted greater freedom to the members of Sōdeisha in appropriating motifs from prehistoric ritual ceramics, allowing them to continue their critique on the role of functionality within ceramic practice.

The topics discussed in this essay are incredibly complex and expansive; there are also many avenues of related research that are begging to be explored. Of note are the recurrent overlaps between the *obuje-yaki* discussed in this essay and the practice of flower arrangement (*ikebana*). Furthermore, the ceramic works of other avant-garde artists—Okamoto Tarō, Uno Sango, and Tsuji Shindō, for example—have not yet been subject to extensive analysis, with a few exceptions. These bodies of work may be equally rewarding to research and certainly offer more ways to discuss the topics of functionality, primitivism, and tradition as they relate to ceramics in postwar Japan.

Figures

Figure 1. Yagi Kazuo. *The Walk of Mr. Samsa (Zamuza-shi no sanpo)*, 1954. H. 27.5 cm; W. 27.0 cm; D. 14.0 cm. Stoneware with wood ash or Jogan glaze. Private collection. [This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.]



Figure 2. Suzuki Osamu. *Tall Vase with Kuro-e Design (Kuro-e chōtsubo)*, 1951-52. Stoneware with white and black slip. H. 44.0 cm; W. 20.0 cm. © National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto. Photograph by Jeremy Kramer.

Figure 3. Yagi Kazuo. *Vase with Two Mouths (Futakuchi tsubo)*, 1950. H. 20.0 cm; W. 19.0 cm. Stoneware with white slip, inlaid black pigment, and enamel. © National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto. [This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.]



Figure 4. Vessel. Middle Jōmon Period (c. 2500-1500 BCE). Unglazed earthenware. H. 69.8 cm; W. 41.9 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 5. *Dogū*, known as *Jōmon Venus* (*Jōmon no biinasu*). Middle Jōmon Period (c. 2500-1500 BCE). Unglazed earthenware. H. 27.0 cm. Togariishi Museum of Jōmon Archaeology, Chino. [This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.]
<https://www.city.chino.lg.jp/uploaded/image/3819.jpg>



Figure 6. Fragmentary *haniwa* cylinder. Kofun Period (c. 300-710). Unglazed earthenware. H. 48.3 cm; Diam. 25.4 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 7. Fragmentary *haniwa* of a warrior. 5th to early 6th century. Kofun Period (c. 300-710). Unglazed earthenware. H. 33.3 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 8. Isamu Noguchi. *The Policeman (Junsa)*, 1950. Unglazed Seto red stoneware. H. 34.0 cm; W. 13.0 cm; D. 22.2 cm. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., New York. [This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.]

Figure 9. Isamu Noguchi. *My Mu (Watashi no mu)*, 1950. Unglazed Seto red stoneware. H. 34.3 cm; W. 24.1 cm; D. 16.8 cm. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., New York. [This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.]

Figure 10. Isamu Noguchi. *Torso #378*, 1952. Unglazed Kasama red stoneware. H. 50.8 cm; W. 33.0 cm; D. 5.7 cm. © Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville. [This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.]
<http://www.colby.edu/museum/?s=isamu%20noguchi&obj=/Obj1477?sid=581&x=4738>

Figure 11. Suzuki Osamu. *Samurai (Nobushi)*, 1959. H. 60.5 cm; W. 15.5 cm; D. 11.0 cm). Unglazed stoneware with white and black slip. © Kitamura Museum, Kyoto. [This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.]

Figure 12. Suzuki Osamu. *Walking Child (Aruku ko)*, 1962. H. 21.5 cm; W. 20.0 cm; D. 22.5 cm. Stoneware with white and black slip. Private collection. [This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.]



Figure 13. Yagi Kazuo. *Work (Sakuhin)*, 1958-59. Unglazed stoneware. H. 45 cm; W. 19 cm; D. 21 cm. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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