

佐久間ダムと1955年のメキシコ美術展： 利根山光人への衝撃

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二十世紀初頭から、日本人の現代・前衛芸術家は北米やヨーロッパの美術に注目し、その芸術理論、技術、インスピレーションなどを追求した。しかし、1950年代に入ると、世界中の他の地域の様々な芸術が日本で注目され始めた。

日本におけるメキシコ文化の紹介と普及に貢献し、1972年メキシコ政府より文化勲章アギラ・アステカ賞を受賞した利根山光人は、新たなインスピレーションを求めていたアーティストの一人である。1955年に、利根山光人は「佐久間ダム」工事現場でのスケッチおよび、東京国立博物館にて開催された「メキシコ美術展」の訪問という、彼の人生と画業の発展にとって転機となった二つの出来事を経験した。この研究では、これらの出来事を通して、利根山の経験、そこからの影響、彼の思考や態度、そしてその後のメキシコへのアプローチなど、複数の関連を明らかにすることを目的としている。

The Sakuma Dam and the Mexican Art Exhibition of 1955: Their Impact on Kojin Toneyama—

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Introduction

Mexico and Japan have had relations for more than 400 years, having signed the Japan-Mexico Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation (1) on November 30, 1888, in Washington. In 1942, due to World War II, the treaty was broken, and in 1952 diplomatic relations were re-established (2).

Modern and Avant-Garde artists in Japan were focused on European and North American Art, seeking inspiration, technique, and theory (3). However, some artists eager to do something different were looking for diverse kinds of art, and Mexican art, little by little, was becoming known for its Muralist Movement, which had its roots in the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Following the Mexican Art Exhibition of 1952 in Paris, in the year 1955, the Great Mexican Art Exhibition was held at the National Museum of Tokyo, an unprecedented exhibition displaying more than 1000 pieces in total, divided into "Ancient Art", "Modern Art", and "Folk Art". Including pieces from the ancient Mayan and Aztec civilizations, as well as artworks of the three great Mexican muralists, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros (4). Many artists were astonished by such an exhibition, among them Taro Okamoto, Shinzaburo Takeda, Kiyoshi Takahashi (5), On Kawara, and Kojin Toneyama.

Toneyama was an artist who received the Order of the Aztec Eagle from the Mexican government in 1972 for his contribution and efforts to introduce

and spread the Mexican culture in Japan. He made more than 50 murals in many cities in Japan (6).

Evidently, he found something deep in the Mexican culture to such a degree that he became heavily involved in it. After seeing the exhibition, he traveled to Mexico several times, and he even called himself half Japanese, half Mexican. What led Toneyama to be so interested in Mexico and his passion for this country?

This article aims to explain two events that opened this path for the artist. The first one was his adventure at the Sakuma Dam, where he spent time with construction site workers, observing and sketching the situations around him.

This was an essential event in Toneyama's career; his courage to go outside, where the ordinary person would not see any relation between a construction site and art.

The second event was the Mexican Art Exhibition, held in Tokyo, which had a significant impact on Japan at that time. We can find texts and articles in which Toneyama talked about it and remarked, even many years after visiting it, how important it was for him to encounter this exhibition. There are texts and critics who commented that too; however, what was the focus of his attention? What were the artworks he emphasized and the thoughts behind this event? This research focuses on the effect of this exhibition on Toneyama and what he said about it, the paintings, the artists, and the Mexican situation that he saw.

In the next chapters, these two events are

approached and analyzed as the major events that inspired him to further his skills as an artist.

Chapter 1

Toneyama's background and the Sakuma Dam

Kojin Toneyama was an artist avid about the events and circumstances around him. He debuted as an artist at the age of 30 in 1951, participating in the third Yomiuri Independent Exhibition held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum with two of his artworks. <<雨>> (Rain) and <<風>> (Wind) (7). After that, he continued displaying his paintings in the following Yomiuri Independent Exhibitions, which gave him some prestige.

Two events marked his life in 1955 when Japan was recovering from World War II at an accelerated speed. One of the occurrences was a documentary film, "Iwanami's Sakuma Dam," that he happened to watch, and the other was the Mexican Art Exhibition held at the Tokyo National Museum (8). In an article in 1956, Toneyama described himself as a person who liked to be involved in the situations happening around him. He felt more inspired being surrounded by the outrage in the city and the noises downtown, more than being alone in front of the desk drawing (9). But it is conceivable that this way of thinking originated from his involvement in the Sakuma Dam (fig. 1, 2), located in Hamamatsu city in Shizuoka Prefecture. The dam was constructed in the Tenryu River, which runs between the prefectures of Aichi and Shizuoka; it took three years until its completion in 1956 (10).

He went to the dam while it was under construction in 1955 after watching the "Iwanami's Sakuma Dam" documentary film, which was released in two parts, the first in 1955 and the second in 1956 (11).

The first film shows the beginning of the construction until the construction of the bypass water tunnels for more than one year. The second part begins with the termination of the bypass and the initiation of the dam's wall. An incredible amount of

effort and resources was put into this construction of epic proportions. With an altitude of 150 meters and 1.2 million cubic meters of concrete, it was the sixth biggest dam in the world at the time (12, 13). All the work done in three years was impressive; despite cold and hot weather, rain, typhoons, and other adversities, workers continued their hard work every day without rest.

Some young people from Iwanami who were involved in the filming of the dam, living with the workers for a period of two years, raised a question to all writers and artists, asking them why they would not come to the dam, being a place not far from the city and of concern to everyone. Toneyama, hearing this, had a greater impulse to visit the dam (14).

Toneyama was driven to go to the Sakuma Dam to see the structure, the effect this would generate on society, and certainly, the impact that would generate in his artworks. When Toneyama watched the first part, wonder and many concerns arose from this experience. Being part of a generation who lost their identity after the war, and having undergone the rapid and exhausting progress to recover from it, he wanted to understand more about the development of Japan in order to recognize the real world. Before being an artist, he must consider his position as a person in society. Using his skills as an artist, he felt that



Figure 1. Side view of the Sakuma Dam.
(出典：『美術批評』、「佐久間ダムへ行く・ルポルタージュ」Reportage, going to the Sakuma Dam”, November 1955, p.16)



Figure 2. Front view of the Sakuma Dam.
(出典：『新建築』10-31, "Tenryu Sakuma Dam", 1956, p. 55)



Figure 3. Sketch of the dam by Kojin Toneyama.
(出典：『美術批評』, 「佐久間ダムへ行く・ルポルタージュ」
Reportage, going to the Sakuma Dam", November 1955,
p. 18).



Figure 4. Sketch of a worker by Kojin Toneyama.
(出典：『美術批評』, 「佐久間ダムへ行く・ルポルタージュ」
Reportage, going to the Sakuma Dam", November 1955,
p. 18).

he should go out to confront the reality that this country was living.

He examined the place not only by observing and spending his days and nights with the workers but by sketching as well, as he mentioned in a brief article he wrote for the monthly art magazine *Bijutsu Techo* (『美術手帖』), "Besides sketching for the process of making artworks, I sketch as a way to collect data" (15). This tells us that he tried to capture the energy flowing in the place (fig. 3). However, it was not like that from the beginning. When he started his sketches, he was confused and a little lost; as he explained in a report, "How can I express in my drawings and confront the great structure and magnificence of the machines in my artworks?" (16). He encountered a significant barrier when he started analyzing what in reality was the construction site and the problem of expressing the energy and dynamism happening around it.

He noted that he could not express all the power, the movement, the fierceness of the modern machines used on the construction site, so he started to draw his perception of the workers' portraits (fig. 4) despite his feeling of disconnection; by doing that, he began to notice the form and constitution of the dam little by little, sketching as many objects, items, and tools he saw during the construction.

He was committed to what he sensed in the dam. Probably, this was the first experience of

Toneyama in which he felt a degree of social responsibility. He felt that his social obligation as an artist was beyond observing and sketching; he was involved in ways that did not concern him before. He described the work shifts, where the workers slept, the technical details of the dam, and other processes, such as the pouring of the concrete from the trucks, how was the cooling system of the dam, the machines used, and specific data as the size of the area, the amount of concrete used, temperature, etcetera.

It is interesting to ponder how his artworks would have changed if he had only remained watching the documentary and not decided to go there. The fact of going to the dam may have had a big influence on his artworks and those which he created after that. He expressed, "By going to the Sakuma Dam, for the first time, I could deepen my sense of reality as well as having a psychological aspect to my artworks." (17). He felt he could paint the existence of society adequately by persistently examining the action of why he had to go and, furthermore, by calmly staring at the reality of Japan explicitly indicated at the place called Sakuma Dam.

We could assert that many artists, find it important to experience firsthand the desired subject to express artistically. Toneyama was looking to express not only visually but to impregnate everything he could sense by being on



Figure 5. Kojin Toneyama, 1955, 《働く人々 (A) (佐久間ダムシリーズ)》, Lithograph, 74.3 x 55.6 cm. (出典: 『メヒコの衝撃』図録 “The impact of Mexico” Exhibition catalog, 2021, p.38).

the spot, what he could see, smell, touch, hear, and feel.

Watching the movie of the construction was a very important thing in Toneyama's process; nevertheless, it was the act of going to the actual spot and being so close to the action, noises, heat, adrenaline, and sweat of the workers right in front of him that made this event something unprecedented. Toneyama was hoping to find something in the middle of the orchestrated chaos, and he found it. We can see it in his artworks displayed in the solo exhibition he held at the Takemiya Gallery (タケミヤ画廊) in Tokyo after coming back from Sakuma (fig. 5, 7).

Each artist seeks inspiration in order to create their artworks. Some try to convey our necessities in the world, socially, politically, or morally; and there are those who only want to express how they see the world or the beauty in it. Toneyama was more on the side of comprehending the modern world. And we can see his determination in the Sakuma Dam; he went three times in a span of several months, slept, ate, and sketched with the workers until he felt he had captured the essence of what he was trying to understand.

While ordinary people are not interested in constructions or events of this kind, we can say that Toneyama was interested in how the dam structure would help and make the lifestyle of Japanese people easier. This was an opportunity to understand a little bit of it by being in the place

and doing what he could from an artistic perspective.

It is important to point out that some of the workers regarded him as a stranger, someone who did not belong there. Probably that was something he continuously felt in his subsequent trips and experiences, always relating with people different from him; as he noted (after attending some exhibitions), society had problems in common, and those issues lie in the position and foundation of artists or in people themselves. Modern painting problems do not lie in the materials or styles applied in the techniques; issues come from the purpose of the artists, they do not paint with a concrete goal in mind, and their only motivation is painting itself. New ideas cannot be born by being around the same kind of people and having the same discussions (18).

He makes an invitation to go beyond the thoughtless actions of creating artworks and understand our environment and social position better in the process of creating art.

He could notice some of society's issues once he returned from the dam and performed a solo exhibition displaying paintings about the Sakuma Dam at the Takemiya gallery in Kanda, Tokyo, celebrated from October 21 to 31, 1955. A laborer of the dam, whom Toneyama had contact with, visited the exhibition hoping to find beautiful images of the construction site and got disappointed and confused when seeing the artworks displayed (fig. 6). The laborer did not understand nor appreciate them. Toneyama felt the urge to explain it to the worker (19). He

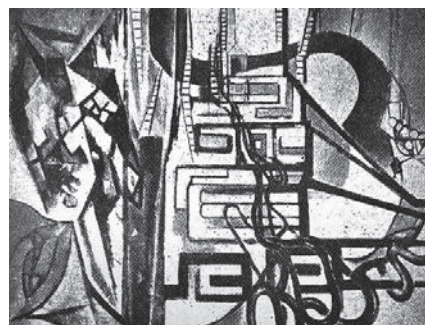


Figure 6. Kojin Toneyama, 1955, 《佐久間ダムに寄す》, oil painting, 2910 x 2182 cm. (出典: 『美術批評』, 『佐久間ダムへ行く・ルポルターージュ』 Reportage, going to the Sakuma Dam, November 1955, p. 19).

thought that this was a problem concerning society, and the distance between what the artist wanted to express and what people perceived was evidently big; Toneyama's artworks weren't conveyed as he wanted. This was not a problem in his paintings but a problem in society; presumably, this was a signal for him to keep this path involving art with society.

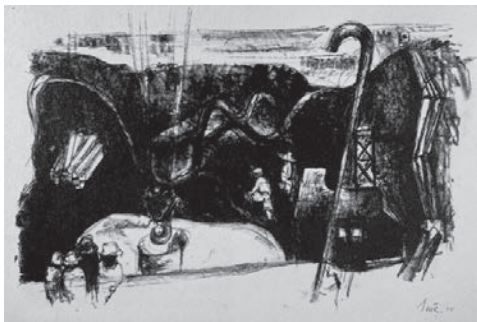


Figure 7. Kojin Toneyama, 1955, 《工場 (B)》(佐久間ダムシリーズ), Lithograph, 29.6 x 45.5 cm. (出典: 『メヒコの衝撃』図録 "The impact of Mexico" Exhibition catalog, 2021, p.38).

Chapter 2

The Mexican Exhibition

In 1952, the Mexican Art Exhibition was held in Paris, which was noticed and named in many publications and art magazines worldwide. It was called "The exhibition of the century" (20).

In an article written by Fernando Gamboa, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Institute of Fine Arts Mexico) deputy director, he describes how the Mexican Art Exhibition in Paris was a success, and it was solicited by many countries: "It is difficult to specify the information. The exhibition has been insistently requested by several countries..."(21), among them art museums and municipal museums of England, Italy, Holland, Swiss, Belgium, Norway, and Brazil.

"However, the exhibition is going only to Stockholm" (22), Gamboa affirmed in the article. Therefore, following the exhibition in Paris, the Mexican Art Exhibition was taken to Stockholm, Sweden, and held in the gallery of Lilevalchs, from September 8 to November 2, 1952.

Also, in 1952, Octavio Paz, who served as a diplomat in Japan, was sent to establish the

Mexican Embassy in Tokyo after resuming the diplomatic relations that Mexico and Japan had agreed upon in the San Francisco Treaty of Peace (23). Along with Eikichi Hayashiya, Octavio Paz translated into Spanish the poetic artwork of Matsuo Basho: "Sendas de Oku" (『奥の細道』, "The narrow road to the deep North" English translation), in 1955, being published in April 1957 (24). Thus, the Cultural Treaty between Mexico and Japan was established in 1955 (25). It is believed that the Mexican Art Exhibition was part of the beginning of this cultural treaty between the two nations.



Figure 8. Cover of the Mexican Art Exhibition catalog. (出典: 『ディエゴ・リベラの生涯と壁画』, 2011, p. 737).

It was called the Great Mexican Art Exhibition by some magazines in Japan, held at the National Museum of Tokyo from September 10 to October 20 in 1955 (fig. 8). The exhibition was noticed by a large audience, and it was appreciated and recognized by many art critics and artists.

Toneyama followed Mexican art to some extent before attending the Mexican Art Exhibition. Like many artists and critics of the time, he admired the great three muralists, Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros, as well as Tamayo, an artist acclaimed in Europe at the time. He saw and compared some artworks, including Orozco with the works of Fernand Léger and Rufino Tamayo's Indian Zapoteca's odor (<<サポテカ・インディアンの体臭>>) (note 1), noting how they radiated Picassism influences (fig. 9). Within its mexicanism and rich culture, modern Mexican art had a lot of influence from Europe. And Toneyama was anxiously waiting for the exhibition to happen, as he



Figure 9. Rufino Tamayo, 1947, "Fumador", unknown technique, unknown size. (MUSEUM magazine, October 1955, p.14).

mentioned that he watched a miniature painting from Diego Rivera in a previous International Exhibition, which he described as "a small piece that shines like a crystal of sagacity along a dark surface" (26). He believed that overlooking the Mexican art exhibition would be a shame.

It is intriguing that Toneyama, knowing the energy, size, and vibrance of Mexican art, was amazed by a small and obscure piece of art. Perhaps for the first time, he discovered another aspect of Mexican art besides the muralism and colorful paintings that México was famous for. He asserted that it was a grateful coincidence to be able to see this painting before the exhibition came to Japan.

After returning from the Dam, Toneyama visited the exhibition expecting to see Mexican art's power, dynamism, and vitality. He wanted to see with his own eyes the country's vernacularism and the enormous artworks of the great three muralists. Surprisingly he stared at a small lithography of Orozco; he dedicated one space in the newspaper of Yomiuri Shinbun to this piece of art from 1929, "Rear Guard" (fig. 10) (*La retaguardia*, translated in Japanese as <<男子を背負う兵士の妻>>), a 35.4 × 47.4 cm lithography (27).

The lithography of Orozco that we can see here was made with one crayon (the simplest technique) but drawn with outstanding ability. His oil paintings show the transformation of society. In the case of this lithograph, by the

texture given, the intention of the change [in society] is expressed more frankly. Moreover, from the bottom of human nature, the drama of sorrow and love wells up in a tense dusk in the middle of the war, where the soldiers carrying their rifles and their wives embracing their children are heading in the same direction lumped together, glancing at one point in the horizon (28).



Figure 10. José Clemente Orozco, 1929. "La retaguardia (Rear Guard)", lithograph, 35.4 × 47.4 cm

(出典：『メキシコ美術展』図録, catalog of the "Mexican Art Exhibition", 1955, p. 62).

We can analyze the fascination of Toneyama regarding this artwork in two aspects.

The topic was one of the events that Toneyama paid particular attention to due to the involvement of the people with the current situation at the time, the Mexican Revolution (1910). Soldiers, children, and women go together in the same direction, exhausted, walking into the twilight. This revolution was something concerning everyone in Mexico, and Toneyama could perceive that in the artwork.

Another characteristic that enchanted him was the technical skills used in the lithography; Orozco used only one crayon to make the piece, being the simplest technique in the medium, yet he performed it with great ability and precision. Toneyama was absorbed by it.

Regardless of the monumental artworks displayed in the exhibition, including murals, it was surprising that he focused on this small piece. He may have found in this lithography the folklore and a bit of understanding of what he was looking about Mexico.

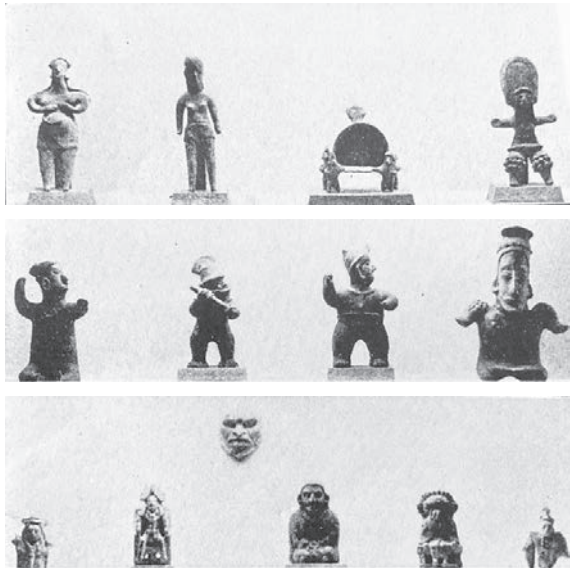


Figure 11. Archaic and Mayan figures exhibited at the Mexican Art Exhibition. (MUSEUM magazine, October 1955, p.13).

The issues happening on Mexican soil were reflected in the exhibition, and Toneyama felt the artist's commitment to their involvement and the community. This was a particular aspect that gave him the courage to visit Mexico and experience the situations of another culture.

The pre-Columbian items and figures were other things he watched with interest (fig. 11). He said that the connection between the past and the present of Mexico was in the three hundred years of Spanish colonization, and the modern art and paintings were not so different from the pre-Columbian figures displayed. Everything was connected, and he noted it, giving him wonder.

As if Toneyama had a particular linkage with the Mexican soil, on his first travel to Mexico, he found the ruins of Mayan and Aztec cultures astonishing, and he would create art relating to that as well as research the ancient cultures and extend the exposure of them.

He believed that in order to improve the future, it was essential to deeply understand the culture's roots and the past of the culture.

The Mexican Exhibition opened his eyes to a new world and to a bond he had never found before.

Conclusion

Toneyama's background led him to be the so-called artist of the sun, and the two events in 1955 greatly influenced his life, attitude, and perspective.

The experience in the Sakuma Dam forged his character as an artist in search of his interests; living and working with the laborers, his perspective on how art can be related to social circumstances was built. In the beginning, everything was overwhelming, and he did not know where and how to start, but as soon as he got used to being there, he found the energy he was looking for and, step by step, started to understand, then he could sketch and create artworks.

He tried to comprehend the constitution of circumstances deeply and convey that in his paintings, expressing the hard work and suffering of the laborers in the Dam; he cared about the events of progress and development in a post-war society.

He learned how to be part of society from an artistic point of view and do something for it.

Toneyama always liked to work alone, excluding when he worked with his intimate friends, like Luis Nishizawa. He said that there were two types of working ways for an artist; the first one is when the artist belongs to a group or movement and acts accordingly, conveying everything to them. The other type of artist is the one that seeks internal growth connected to their artworks and moves alone in search of a better understanding. He affirmed that he is one of the latter (29).

This way of thinking was decisive for taking him where he went; without this paradigm, he would get stuck in a group of artists, probably not going as far as he got. Feeding his internal growth and interests, his thirst for knowledge and social understanding took him to Mexico – a country regarded by many Japanese as exotic.

We can say that this was connected to the Mexican Exhibition of Art. With his previous exposure to the Sakuma Dam and the involvement he had there, his passion for discovering the world led him to a new path, and he was ready to be

part of another experience.

It was fascinating that Toneyama paid particular attention to a small painting made by Orozco in a big exhibition that had never displayed Mexican art before. The tumult generated by more than one thousand pieces, colorful artwork, and big murals on display did not divert his attention from this special artwork. Toneyama could find the impressive work on a small piece of paper.

He found empathy in the exhibition and in the artworks he saw there; the same feelings and thoughts he had were something he experienced in his own art. The commitment in the paintings to the people made him want to go to the place and experience the culture and art with his own flesh. The experience at “The Sakuma Dam” gave him a deeper perspective of his surroundings and involvement in society, and by visiting “The Mexican Art Exhibition” Toneyama realized the connection between the past and future in Mexico; the elements he saw transported him to another reality that other artists did not expect.

Forthcoming investigations will be focused on a profound approach of Toneyama to Mexican art, what led him to be awarded the Mexican Order of the Aztec Eagle; his travels to Mexico, artistic activities, what he finds and brings to Japan; and the evolution of his artworks.

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29) 「佐久間ダムへ行く」、14－15頁。

Footnotes

1) This artwork was written in Japanese, and it could not be matched it with any artwork of Tamayo in English.