

Abstract

Transcultural Interactions: Calligraphy and abstract art in Denmark and Japan

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This presentation looks at the contact between the Danish artist and theorist Asger Jorn (1914-1973) and the Japanese calligrapher and theorist Morita Shiryū (1912-1998). Asger Jorn was one of the founders of the European avant-garde artist group Cobra, while Morita Shiryū was a founding member of the Japanese avant-garde calligraphy group Bokujinkai. The two artists are representative of the global connections between avant-garde calligraphy and abstract art in the 1950s, in which artists from around the world sought to communicate across national, aesthetic, and conceptual boundaries. Correspondence between Morita and Jorn shows the eagerness with which the two artists were engaged in a transcultural network.

While recent years have seen numerous studies on the relationship between Japanese avant-garde calligraphy and American Abstract Expressionism and European Art Informel, there has been little or no attention to the artistic collaboration between Danish and Japanese artists within modernist art. Individual artists and groups in both Denmark and Japan were negotiating their cultural identity within a contradictory framework of being a citizen of a particular nation state and being a creative human being with aesthetic sensibilities and artistic practices that formed alliances across national and ethnic borders.

A transcultural approach aims at dismantling the conventional dichotomy between the West and the non-West, which rests on an asymmetrical relationship of power. In this presentation, I apply a transcultural approach to archival and primary source material, while also arguing that Asger Jorn and Morita Shiryū themselves took a transcultural position in the way in which they envisioned non-figurative art as a means to re-build a global humanity in the Postwar period.

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