

# The Birth of the Gutai Group

By Iseki Masaaki

Looking back at post-Meiji art, one will see that the basic idea was to follow and mimic the numerous trends of Western art. Of these, Fauvism and Expressionism were well suited to the tastes of the Japanese and have pretty much dominated Western art circles in Japan throughout this century.

Of course, quite a few other artists also followed the avant-garde movements of Western art and carried out some marvelous experiments. But an avant-garde movement original to Japan did not come about until after World War II.

Meanwhile, paralleling the fashion to tail Western art, many artists maintained an original Japanese mental expression. This is why Nihonga, or Japanese-style painting, lives on today. This type of painting, together with Western painting, creates a duality in Japan's art scene unknown to Western countries.

The question these artists faced was how to incorporate Japanese sensitivity into Western forms of art. (Whether this was at all possible was of course yet another debate.) Toward this end,

although some exploration had been made before the war, the real quest did not come until after WWII. Perhaps this was because following the war, artists were more confident in freely digesting Western thoughts, however new they might be. In postwar Japan, because of the push towards major reform and the desire to keep abreast with the times of the West, Japanese artists, particularly the vanguard, were more prepared to incorporate Japanese sensitivity into their own art. Encouraged by democracy—something that did not exist before the war—rather than simply copying the West, they had a stronger desire to create something of their own.

It was in this environment that a unique artist group, known as the Gutai Group, came into being at the beginning of 1950s in the Kanto area. Yoshihara Jiro, father of the group, shortly after Japan lost the war, began examining his own series of representational paintings. From there, he came to feel that a major art revolution unprecedented in the prewar years had to be initiated for the sake of the development of Japanese art. With the idea of painting "something totally unforeseen anywhere

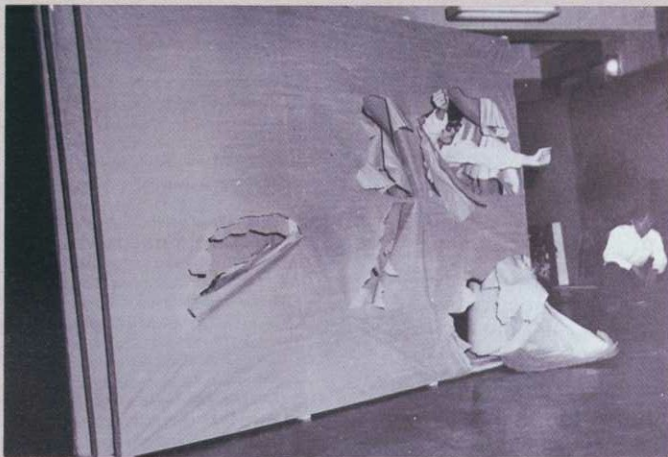
else," he took to the task of gathering together a group of young artists which included Shimamoto Shozo, Shiraga Kazuo, Murakami Saburo, Motonaga Sadamasa and Tanaka Atsuko.

Inevitably, the group moved in a very new, avant-garde direction. But it was not until July 1955 that the group started to strengthen their activities. They sent their publication, *Gutai*, to major museums and artists abroad, and through this medium were able to introduce their activities to the rest of the world.

To give you an example of the early works of the group, Yoshihara designed a piece which contained three florescent lights wrapped in red, blue and yellow cellophane paper that are arranged perpendicularly to three pillars. Another piece has 10 logs painted in red. The logs, with ax cuttings, were bound together to form a cone shape (by Shiraga). There was also a piece with a polyethylene bag containing red water being dangled in the air from a height of two meters (by Motonaga). These were works of an outdoor exhibition created in the spirit that daring experiments must be carried out because abstract painting had become too formalized and had totally lost its charm.

From the late '50s on, Japan came under the influence of Informel, a new abstract expressionist thinking which swept Europe at the time. Under this discipline, the Gutai Group's works, while still maintaining abstractness, also returned to the flat, one-dimensional form of painting.

As to the contributions this group made to Japanese art in the postwar period, they early on adopted the so-called "conceptual art" which, in the West, was an elevated avant-garde concept that grew out of the Informel movement. In addition, the Gutai Group actually carried out a quest for the expression between material and human behavior—the very ideology of conceptual art. That this was possible at all had



Murakami, 1955



Tanaka, 1956

much to do with their ability to maintain their individual sense of Japanese sensitivity while applying their artistic ability to their works. Not to mention they also had a great passion for, and the foresight to see the need to, express the changes of time.

At the time of its birth, the Gutai Group was not well received in Japan

because they lacked a clear cut ideology. Since they were introduced at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in the "Avant-Garde Japan" show, however they began to draw more attention in Europe. Since the '90s, after a series of "Gutai Group" exhibitions held in Germany and various Italian cities, the group started to become established. To

put it another way, their works are gaining a reputation in Japan as the first successful art created specifically from the originality of Japanese artists.

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