

INTRODUCTION.

Achille Bonito¹ Oliva describes Shōzō Shimamoto as a modern samurai who wields 'the energy of matter' rather than the sword. The production of the katana, the steel sword of the samurai, consist in a unique combination of beauty, technique and precision, a slow and careful process, the product of an ancient tradition. To obtain the metal, made from an alloy of carbon and iron sand the will be transformed through an intricate process into martensite, a cast is prepared and once it has been removed from its matrix, the raw steel, known as *tamahagane*, is beaten out. This can only be carried out a specific temperature so that the blade can be precision-sharpened. Only the craftsman's expertise guides him in judging when the incandescent colour of the metal has reached just the right point of shaping. Those who dedicate their lives to this art undergo a training and apprenticeship that not only gives them technical knowledge, but involves a dedication and spiritual discipline that require them to meditate and to keep the *tatara*, the furnace in which the cast is made, fed continuously for days on end. Forging the samurai sword is a discipline handed down from master to disciple.

Each sword is unique due to the fact that it is not the word of one master. After the first phase, a second master takes over for the polishing and sharpening; he too is an expert in his particular art.

The steel of the bimetallic *katana* blade, obtained from the molecular fusion of carbon and martensite, which is in turn covered with a second layer of steel, allows the form itself to produce maximum hardness, strength and flexibility.

The end result, in all its beauty, is the fruit of the union of the material itself with the lightness, power, and fine edge of the blade. The expertise lies in the careful technical procedures and the strict inner discipline that go into its production, as the final aim is not actually the sharp

¹ Achille Bonito Oliva, Shōzō Shimamoto. Samurai, acrobata dello sguardo 1950-2008 Skira Editore, 2008

blade of the *katana*, but rather to keep alive an ancient culture² that has been handed down from generation to generation.

The master craftsman prepares other, his assistants, to forge the sword, and thus he hands down the training that will prepare future generations for the ethical role that the samurai must also fulfil. The beauty and aesthetic significance of the sword are the result of the essential transfer of the energy encompassed within its form, which the passes from the hand of the master craftsman to the hand, body, and mind of the samurai who will use it, to form a whole whose elements are discipline, spirituality and art. To break this ethical rule is tantamount to altering the dynamic equilibrium of life, ignoring the forces that govern it. If this happens, the result is punishment and death, even of the samurai himself, if it is he who has broken it.

The preparation of the sword in the ancient Western tradition is very different, using different metal, with a different form, meaning, and purpose.

Physical strength is needed to grasp it, lift it and use it. The predominant feature is thus its heaviness. The men using it have to be physically strong.

On its cross-shaped hilt we find decoration that indicates ownership or intended use. In the West, the sword of a king, studded with precious stones, is a sign of royalty – the power of his authority being symbolised by the magnificence of the ornament.

Power is the element that allows it to be used; its purpose is dominion over, and annihilation of, the enemy, while its beauty resides in the elements that adorn it, in the wealth and splendour of its precious decoration.

The meaning of the decoration of the sword, its form and method of production procedure, like its use, differ in Japan and in the West in terms of how the ethical and philosophical principles governing the two civilisations are considered. Of course, in today's world, the process of cultural integration is a widespread phenomenon, as is the globalisation of the world, centred on a monoculture, and a single model of development, i.e. the Western

² The tradition of manufacturing the samurai sword, the *katana*, dates back to the sixteenth century

model. In Japan, modernisation, rooted in its Westernisation, has particularly hybrid characteristics, where a hyper-technological society cohabits with ancient ways of thinking, embedded in rigid social hierarchies. In this way, it has hung on to its own traditions, concealing them behind the race for Westernisation represented by cutting-edge technological development from the sixties onwards. However, what is certain is that losing the Second World War led to an inferiority complex with respect to Europe and America.

In 1987, Shōzō Shimamoto published an article in *Poetic Struggle* on the Gutai movement of which he had been part until 1970, and whose name he himself had chosen. He specifically referred to the above-mentioned inferiority complex in the article. He writes: "In 1950, I discussed this subject with my master Jiro Yoshihara. In Japan, artists are not considered talented until they have been accepted by artists in Europe and America and have spent a long time among them. (...) Japanese art critics are highly expert in language and history, but have no common sense. They are quick to praise work that is already highly valued in Europe and America, but do not pay any attention to new output produced in Japan. They act like people in underdeveloped countries who admire everything that comes from the advanced nations. Japanese art was controlled in the period immediately after surrender. There were, however, a number of problems."³

During Shimamoto's youth, (he was born in Osaka 1928), the Westernisation of the country, which had a basis in the feudal tradition dating back to the mid-nine-teenth century, and which continued throughout the twentieth century, was at turning point. The ordinary life of Japanese society, revolving around the sacred figure of the Emperor, has a hierarchy that marks social relations vertically within the family and in public life.

After the Second World War, Japan, which had been defeated with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an event which had a psychological and physical effect on the whole population, began a process of democratisation after the period of militarisation known as *Japanese Fascism*.⁴

³ Published in Shōzō Shimamoto

⁴ *Japanese Fascism* refers to the historical period from the beginning of the thirties until the end of the World War. It was analogous to the Italian and German dictatorships of the same period. It was characterised by a political regime,

As Shimamoto hints, there was a kind of inferiority complex towards America and Europa after the war. At the same time, Marxist ideas began to circulate in the world of art.⁵

During the twentieth century, the Westernisation of art meant a sort of desperate fidelity to the models of the twentieth-century avant-garde in Europe. In fact, in the Japanese tradition, the skill of the artist lies in the ability to copy the master with slavish fidelity.

In the first decade after the Second World War, there were avant-garde groups of different artistic generations, including Yoshihara himself⁶, who conducted research into abstractionism which had been repressed during the fascist period. Immediately after the tragic end of the war, some painters developed 'atomic bomb painting. In addition, during the period of American occupation and the to a form of democracy in Japan, a large number of artists, whose heritage was rooted in Surrealism and Socialist Realism became committed to the avant-garde, examining social issues, Western and European modernism and a more easily comprehensible realism. It was in this period that numerous politically committed groups were formed and the key players were the abstract artists, among whom was Taro Okamoto. A strange mixture of activities between the avant-garde and a kind of⁷ realist anarchism developed, which led to the formation of the Neo Dada Organisers group in 1960,

which rather than being considered fascist, was pre-eminently and heavily militarised and strongly nationalist to the point that it can be defined more precisely as Japanese Militarism or Japanese Ultra-Nationalism. The figure of the dictator was not necessary in Japan, being replaced in part by the sacred figure of the Emperor, and by a division of powers among the various members of the government, and in particular among officials of the civil service. Some historians, also in Japan, prefer to speak of the *Fascism of the Imperial System* or *Tennosei-fashizumu*.

⁵ Communist ideas and Marxism were the starting point for an unusual type of study in Japan and the Asian world. Japanese Marxist intellectuals in the twenties and thirties were sceptical about the possibility of a revolution in the Japanese archipelago and were geared to more peaceful forms of struggle. The diverse history of Japan was, in itself, both the cause and effect of Japanese cultural originality, and the influence of Marxism on Japanese intellectuals in the twenties and thirties was particularly strong. The sixties and seventies were a time of fierce social clashes leading to the occupation of universities and scuffles between students and police. The Communist Left challenged the alliance with the United States, considered to be the architect of a new imperialism. The events of the Vietnam War seemed to legitimise these criticisms. The artistic environment was also affected by a politicised cultural climate expressed through individual and highly anarchical acts on the part of the post-atomic bomb generation and groups such as the *High Red Center*, whereas the Gutai group refused to have anything to do with any form of criticism or politicisation of their artistic research.

⁶ In 1952, Yoshihara, along with other artists, founded the *Genbi* (Association of Contemporary Art), whose goal was to hold study meetings and organise a series of exhibitions. Veterans, including Yoshihara, helped numerous young people to show their work at the *genbi* exhibitions. The Kansai district was therefore extremely active. Yoshihara had also been an active member of the *Nikakai* group since before the war and his leadership, along with Shōzō Shimamoto and Yoshihara Michio, was very important for young artists in founding the Association of avant-garde Artists.

⁷ Masa'ki Iseki, *Historical Background and Development of the Gutai Group as a Central Question* in the *Japanese Gutai Avant-Gard 1954/1965* Darmstadt 1991, p.83

a "confused blend of the art of rejection, happenings and anarchy as a reaction to the informal expressionism of pictorial art."⁸ Their goal was to get away from European Modernism and a concerted rebellion against society, and this trend gave rise to the group known in the '60s as the *High Red Center*. A pioneer and precursor of the avant-garde, and also of Gutai, was Taro Okamoto, from an older generation than Yoshihara. Okamoto encourages young artists with his actions and explanations at a time when Japanese academic expressionism was regaining popularity. Other important artists in this renewal included On Kawara, of a later generation, born in '33, and Hiroshi Nakamura. Both harshly criticised society, developing a strange mixture of avant-garde and realist anarchy amid a climate of renewed freedom and the problems arising from the economic depression that characterises post-war periods.

With his *Secret Room Pictures Series*, On Kawara adopted and suggested a policy of not copying from Europe and the West.

In 1954, when Shimamoto gave a name to the movement of young artists in the Kansai region, a movement consisting of youngsters who had grown up around its Master and muse, what interested Jiro Yoshihara and what insisted on when students approached him was doing 'things never seen before'. Not only was it a question of breaking away from the rules of beautiful painting or sculpture, but of working with real experience in space and concrete time. Since place, colour (unusual in artistic procedure), and materials are objects from everyday life, they form, in combination with natural elements, the 'living' structure of works that become manifest in events and happenings.

The boundary of what can be defined as "art" is crossed. The choice of the name Gutai expresses the poetics of the movement: *Gutai* is a word made up from two ideograms, the first of which means 'implement', and the second, *tai*, means 'body/form'. The link between matter and the body is the energy that passes through it: life. The words of Yoshihara: "What is life made of?" are particularly telling. Right up to the end of his intense output, he was

⁸ Yoshiaki Tono, *Neo Dada et anti-art in Arts Plastiques in Gutai: l'extraordinaire intuition*, in *Japon des Avant-Gardes, 1910-1970*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, Paris 1986.

faithful to the Master's precept, i.e., to do what others have never done before, in a spirit that in its transparency represents the 'innocence' of artistic research 'without purpose'.

From the earliest pre-Gutai works, the individual subjectivity of the artist was always secondary. Every action is governed by a sense of discovery of the world and things, where the purpose of doing is the doing itself: from the search for unusual materials, dictated also by poverty, to the way in which the work is presented and prepared, and the energy that is released in so doing.

In the innocence of doing – interpreted in the West as a spontaneous and destructive action, a vehicle, for impulses that have been removed by the conscience, and renamed as the 'vitality of the negative' – there is a philosophy of action, a logic of chance, followed by Shimamoto and by later generations of artists. It is marked by a world-view far removed from that of the West, even in the case of those who moved to, and took up residence in, Europe or the USA. It is the practice of an artistic discipline originating with Zen, Shintoism, and Buddhism, and which distances itself, in terms of content, from the formal and procedural results of enlarging the field of expression seen in the later avant-garde of the sixties, and which took root in Europe and the United States.

On the philosophical level, Shimamoto and Gutai, together with the artists of the Mono-Ha group, which was even more short-lived, were imbued with the ideas of Nishida. Certainly, it is marked by a spirituality dear to the East, where 'practice' is the way, and emptiness dictates the action; aesthetics is inseparable from ethics. References in the West are thinkers such as Heidegger and Nietzsche. The importance of Nishida, the founder of the Kyoto School, lies not only in the fact that he was the first Japanese philosopher, but that he was the first to bring together the thought and practice of Zen and philosophy. It is a first that will make its mark on the East and on Japan, especially in this field, but which also opened the way for a search for common matrices between East and West. His friend and teacher Suzuki would bring Zen to the West.

Especially in the Mono-Ha group, his theoretical legacy, which dates from the early nineteen-twenties⁹, is emblematic of the thought of the artist who promoted it, U Fan Lee.

After reaching a first level of awakening, Nishida believed in abandoning the practice of Zen to arrive at an innovative form of philosophy through Zen. His reflections regard the concept of *pure-experience* body, and reality, which, with the logic aware of them. These are the topics on which this essay will focus, finding a parallel between the work and artistic life of Shōzō Shimamoto and that of the Gutai group.

Their research echoes the ancient Japanese tradition where the image of a people reflects the permeation of Shinto and Buddhist ethics, despite presenting itself as a modern and technologically advanced society.¹⁰

In contrast, the West, which sees itself as the most cosmopolitan of all cultures, has found itself on the verge of an epoch-making reversal. The spirituality and ethics of a way of life guided by ancient wisdom re-emerged in the West, forgetful of itself and its origins, as the European historical and economic process and subsequent Americanisation brought about the collapse of other cultures, first through colonisation, and later through globalisation. Now it was the West that, thanks to its materialist victory over the world – catastrophically transformed into a place of micro-conflict and war against the human race itself – found itself having to face domination by the East, now the victor in economic terms. And at the same time, the West has witnessed the spread of the eastern spirituality that characterises it, whose strength emerges in the practice of everyday life, yet running a parallel course.

As we have seen, it is Nishida's philosophy that will guide us in understanding Shōzō Shimamoto's poetics of art and life. It is a poetics borne out by the innocence of practising 'pure-experience' with the eye and curiosity of those who look for the unusual in life. Innocence is seen as the 'natural state' and, for Nishida, emerges in direct experience, where subject and object are not yet separated. As practical experience, it is not a concept or an

⁹ See Nishida Kitaro, *Uno studio sul bene* edited by Enrico Fongaro – Introduction by Giangiorgio Pasqualotto, Bollati Boringhieri, 2007

¹⁰ Applying Zen to the creative life together with supplements from the Shinto tradition, even in the arts, testifies to how much the ancient traditions influence daily life in Japan.

abstraction, and we know how Shimamoto and Gutai were opposed to the idea of producing an abstract art from. In his reflections on the artists¹¹, it is the 'real concrete intuitive' that gives the body the role of sole mediator, or indoors, the idea of *place* as the reality of the works is paramount. But which reality if not that which relates to the logic of place on which Nishida reflected in his unique thinking?

The themes brought together in parallel in the analysis and reflection on the work of Shimamoto and other members of the Gutai movement discussed in the various sections of this essay are *pure experience*, the *body*, *logic of place*, reality as *concrete reality*, and the idea of *time*, concluding with an examination of the intangible aesthetic in Gutai.

The appendix contains Shimamoto's own writings, some hitherto unpublished in a western language and which serve as a corollary and amplification of the subjects discussed here.

¹¹ See G. Dalesio, *Guerre invisibili*, ch.1 *L'arte in questione* – Pironti Eds. 2011