

Takao Tanabe

Painter, printmaker

Born September 16, 1926 in Prince Rupert, British Columbia; married twice. *Education:* Winnipeg School of Art, 1946-49; Brooklyn Museum Art School, 1951-52; Central School of Arts and Crafts, London, England, 1954; Tokyo University of Fine Arts, 1959.

Career

Began exhibiting works around 1950; Instructor, Vancouver School of Art, 1962-67; Head of Art Department and Artist-in-Residence, Banff Centre School of Fine Arts, 1973-80; commissions include mural, Sir John Carling Building, Ottawa, silk hangings, Winnipeg Concert Hall.

Selected awards: Emily Carr Foundation Scholarship, 1953; Canada Council Scholarship, 1959; elected Associate Member of the Royal Canadian Academy, 1967, became a Full Member, 1969, resigned, 1979; Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal, 1977; Order of British Columbia, 1993; honorary doctorate, University of Lethbridge, 1995.

Sidelights

Over his lifetime Takao Tanabe has lived and studied art in places as various as Philadelphia, New York City, Tokyo, London (England), and western Canada, and in the mid-1950s he travelled through Europe on an Emily Carr Scholarship. But his paintings paradoxically contradict these apparently nomadic wanderings with their sense of tranquility, clarity and stillness as individual works, as well as through their largely unified effect as a body of work.



Photo by Anona Thorne. Courtesy of the Artist

Tanabe was born September 26, 1926, in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. The son of a commercial fisherman, he spent his summers in fishing camps on the Skeena River. At the age of 11, his family moved to Vancouver. At the start of World War II, he was interned inland, along with most other Japanese-Canadians at that time. He studied at the Winnipeg School of Art between 1946-49, and by 1951 was exhibiting work at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' Spring Show. Also in 1951, Tanabe studied in New York City with painters Reuben Tam, at the Brooklyn Museum School, and with Hans Hofmann, and he met other artists, such as Philip Guston and Franz Kline. His work of this period and in the years directly following in Europe was described as that of a young artist who had not yet arrived at his own metier. Joyce Zemans wrote for Tanabe's 1987 *Flatlands* exhibition at Canada House in London that works from the New York period "reveal a familiarity and ease with the abstract expressionists' approach," and that Tanabe's subsequent drawings from Italy were "those of a young artist, overwhelmed by the experience of the Renaissance; they are documentary and literal." However, she drew the viewer's attention to the sketches and paintings that Tanabe made of the coastal dunes in Denmark during a rainy winter in 1954. About them, she said, "The works from this sojourn are strangely prescient of his later

painting. Like Mondrian in Holland half a century earlier, Tanabe sketched and painted the dunes, struck by the endless vista, the energy of the sea, and the simplicity and immutability of the horizon line that define the experience of the coast."

On his return to Canada, Tanabe's next series of paintings appeared to be based largely on this experience, abstracted into formalist elements. The series referred to as his "white paintings" (1955) worked with the dark line he had observed on the Danish Coast "dividing the land from the sky" and with the contours of the sand. In Montreal's *La Presse*, according to Zemans, the well-known Canadian artist and critic Rudolphe De Repentigny saw these Danish landscapes as "impressions of nature, a series of paintings which evolved progressively towards invention, pure and simple." She emphasized that he further described the work as the creation of "another sort of realism—the representation of the process of vision itself, reduced to its most minimal and evanescent aspects."

Beginning in 1959, the artist spent two years in Japan on a cultural scholarship, studying sumi-e painting and calligraphy with Ikuo Hirayama at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts. Tanabe's own process of simplification and serialization was reinforced by the contemplation and discipline with which the sumi-e artist captures the essence of the subject. But, on his return home in 1961, Tanabe's landscape vision took the form of hard-edge abstracts rendered in bright colours. It was in 1972 that Tanabe, possibly seeking to marry the "Eastern" and "Western" elements in his work, began to narrow the focus of his subject to the prairies and the flatlands of western Canada. The challenge of painting this particular landscape seemed worthy of and sufficient for the purposes of intense study, repetition and serialization. He later explained, "I had travelled across (the prairies and the flatlands) in the 1950s and I had thought they were an impossible subject to paint. In 1972, I was able to cope with the challenge of the big prairie." The idea was not so much to represent the particulars of a given view, but to work with the prairie landscape as a kind of model for ultimately arriving at what he called his "interior landscapes." As Patricia Morley's headline aptly put it for the *Ottawa Citizen* in 1981, "Prairie shapes mindscapes." Or, perhaps, as Nancy Dillow suggested in more detail for the exhibition *Takao Tanabe: the Land, 1972-1976*, "We in Canada are weaned on the Group of Seven and the landscape painting of the turn of the century in which the details of nature—trees, rivers, grasses and weeds, clouds and the fundamental structure of the terrain are the focus of the artist's observation and the foundation of his composition. For Tanabe, as an artist, those traditional details have little interest; it is the broad general sweep of nature, universal in scope, to which subtleties of line, texture and colour give character, for which he searches. His is an introspective

rather than a visual or emotional approach."

From 1972 Tanabe began a process of gradually imposing limits to his production methods, drawing from his experience of Japanese painting that requires intellectual discipline and technical and emotional restraint. In time his brushwork became less obvious until, in critic Nancy E. Dillow's words, "by 1973 it was virtually eliminated." Eventually, references to the topographically specific—rivers, lakes, patterns of fields and hills—were reduced or eschewed.

Tanabe had begun to severely limit colour. "Working flat," as Dillow described it, he applied "each area of colour in a single wash over a plastic sizing," which he would then manipulate with a brush or by tilting the canvas. Each area was set to dry before the next was started. As his painting process evolved over the next few years, Tanabe demonstrated his continued interest in abstraction by visually binding together the various planes with a fine black wash over the entire surface. This acted against the sense of vast horizon and space in his paintings by reinforcing the two-dimensional plane. It effectively suspended the paintings somewhere between the effects of landscape and the non-representational (more formal) concerns of the painted surface.

While Takao Tanabe's working methods require a disciplined, meditative approach on his part, the results also demand the full attention of the viewer. Of an exhibition of his watercolours and acrylics (1981), Patricia Morley wrote in the *Ottawa Citizen*: "His colors are sombre; his signature colours, charcoal and blackish green. Large colour masses, which might appear undifferentiated at a distance, prove surprisingly suggestive on close inspection and reveal subtle details to the patient viewer. These paintings are not meant to be looked at quickly." In particular she noted an acrylic painting, *Prairie Winter 1/79*, which "sets black soil against a whitish sky touched with blue. As the eye rests on the land, some half dozen sloughs emerge from the mass." She concluded, "Tanabe's scenes are as changeable as the land they portray. His subdued colours and almost abstract forms suggest immensities, and mystery." She added, "There is a spiritual quality to these landscapes. They should wear well."

Towards the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s, Tanabe's subject expanded to include seascapes. "Using paint thinned down to the consistency of watercolour or ink," John Bentley Mays noted in the *Globe and Mail*, "Tanabe stains his canvases with the tints and lights of moist ocean air, creating an anthology of the terrain's myriad moods, and of the artist's shifting sense of himself within that dramatic landscape." For Mays, these seascapes are potent images, in a "still, almost melancholy way," with works

such as *Strait of Georgia 1/94* (1994) and *Strait of Georgia 2/94* (1994) "delivering a sense of place almost too inhumanely vast, too beautifully grand for comfortable human dwelling."

Though Tanabe is an accomplished printmaker, very little critical attention has been given to his etching and woodblock printing. Nonetheless, in 1995, Mays reserves his most enthusiastic praise for the woodblock prints of these later years. "These traditional Japanese woodblock prints, realized in cooperation with Vancouver printer Masato Arikushi, are technical masterworks, intense and crisp." They contain, in Mays's view, "much wise, joyful vitality."

Selected Exhibitions: Tanabe's work has been shown at venues including the Agnes Lefort Gallery, Montreal, Quebec (1956, 1968), Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia (1957), Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba (1952, 1969, 1976), Norman Mackenzie Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan (1976), Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (1976), Edmonton Art Gallery, Alberta (1976), Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, Ontario (1977), Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta (1978), Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta (1979), Canada House Cultural Centre, London, England (1987), and the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York (1988). Tanabe has participated in many group exhibitions over the years at the Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia (1953, 1963, 1965, 1978), Sao Paulo Biennial Exhibition, Brazil, (1953, 1957), London Art Gallery, Ontario (1955, 1957, 1978), Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba (1955, 1956, 1975, 1958, 1964), Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C. (1956), Milan Triennale, Italy (1957), First Inter-American Biennial of Arts & Crafts, Mexico City (1958), National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario (1959, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1967, 1968), Art Gallery of Toronto (1958, 1961, 1965,

1976), Brussels World's Fair (1958), Seattle World's Fair (1962), Seattle Art Museum (1964, 1965), Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Quebec (1965), Philadelphia Art Museum (1971), Canada Council Art Bank, Paris, France (1973), Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York (1974), Galeria d'Arte, Pescara, Italy (1976).

Selected Collections: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Confederation Art Centre, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island; Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta; London Regional Art and Historical Museums, Ontario; Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal, Quebec; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, Quebec.

Sources

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Ottawa Citizen, March 28, 1981.

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