Starting with Enkū

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I. *Spiritual Training Ground*

Since the name of this seventeenth-century itinerant Japanese priest seems so out of context, I should perhaps begin the essay by explaining why I chose the title.

The group of Buddhist statues that Enkū carved around the country astonishes and inspires us today on account of the originality of their form. This artist, who not only lived three centuries ago but did not even belong to what is considered the category of orthodox Buddhist sculpture, was suddenly discovered in the early 1950s by the modern eye interested in contemporary art. Why did I name the essay "Starting with Enkū" and choose to focus on this unorthodox sculptor who lived so long ago? My choice had nothing to do with trying to establish his rightful place in the history of Japanese sculpture. Rather, I wished to stress the eye that discovered him. Although it may seem like an anachronism, I hope that no misunderstanding arises.

In modern art, the impetus for transformation is constantly discovered in the creative energy found in the cultural legacy inherited from the past. This is not only true, though, of modern art. For those interested in music, the phrase "starting with Enkū" may bring to mind a similar nuance in the remark once made by the American composer Morton Feldman, who, on meeting John Cage, discovered new significance in the relationship between "sound" and "silence." Although inaccurate, Feldman declared that modern music begins with Cage. This, I think, manifests an awareness of what lies at the roots of the creative act and the way things come into being.

Enkū was born in 1632 during an age when the Tokugawa government's seclusion policy was strictly enforced, prohibiting interaction with other countries. Virtually his entire life was spend making pilgrimages around Japan. He died in 1695 at Mirokuji Temple in his native province of Mino (present-day Gifu prefecture) while praying for the attainment of Buddhahood while in a bodily existence (*sokushin jōbutsu*). This belief is realized in the Zen concept of *ban'yū isshin*, which expresses the idea that all things have a Buddha nature.

Enkū chose as an act of piety the creation of 120,000 statues during his lifetime. The number still in existence is uncertain, but his statues seem to convey the sound of Enkū's chisel, and the sight of them strongly moves modern viewers, transcending the passage of time. Below, I would like to explore why this is so.

Enkū was widely heralded at the beginning of the 1950s. Although many artists and critics have mentioned the originality of the forms created by him, the most convincing explanation, I think, is provided by Takiguchi Shūzō (1903–1979), a critic who had a major influence on the Japanese avant-garde movement:

> At times Enkū took up pieces of wood that could be described as fragments of nature, and by acting in concert with the natural life inherent in the material itself infused forms with life. This corresponds to the basic truth behind creating the forms found in the art of primitive man, ancient peoples, and savages, which, to a greater or lesser extent, is magical. It also unexpectedly happens to coincide with the basic attitude of modern sculptors who are trying to revive this principle.

This observation bears witness to the power of nature and feeling of awe sensed anew in Enkū's work at a time when these feelings lay buried in silence as a result of modernization, whose aim is rationality. One can interpret this as a search for a method that would serve as a seed for revitalizing modern Japanese art after losing a war. The stress on the life that form possesses to a small extent may reflect the mood of the time. But when one considers the state of modern man—the spiritual barrenness that leaves us without a center—recovering the primitive life of art is by no means a problem that should be shoved aside and ignored. The reason is that it forces us to realize that we no longer have believable, valid concepts of a comprehensive nature when, with a jumble of unconnected fragments in our brain, we try to understand aspects of an age bearing an ominous future.

Carl Jung made the following remark in "Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of

Things Seen in the Skies." He said that it was impossible even to imagine what would restore the totality. Dreamlike ideas that attempt to change the world have lost value and past remedies are no longer effective. Even if believed in, they are regarded half skeptically.

Leaving aside the structure of their fantasies, modern artists living in the same reality must seek out a "spiritual training ground" in the act of creating things, in order to bestow a living form on a historically fragmented imagination. Behind my choice of "Starting with Enkū" as a title lies the hope that it offers a strategy for modern artists to ascertain the place where creativity can be fostered in its original context.

II. *Dialogue with Wood*

Enkū very successfully brings to life the nature of wood as a material. His method is to discover and elicit the shape that lies in the material. Moreover, his technique of bringing to life the knots and twists in the grain is proof of his success at discovering a kind of animistic feeling of life in the wood. The only way to describe it is to say that it has been converted into Enkū's "spiritual training ground."

Traditionally, trees in Japan were said to be sacred or divine, and before they were given shape they were considered pure objects. This holiness possessed by trees was treasured very highly. Looking back on the development of Buddhist sculpture in Japan, one sees many outstanding works that were made using modeling techniques, gilded bronze, lacquer, and stone, but the central place was held by wood—the inevitable result of an affinity for it. To put it another way, it can be said to reflect the most Japanese-like characteristic in the realm of sculpture.

This consciously recognized response to wood can be traced back to Buddhist sculpture at the beginning of the ninth century. However, following the "Kamakura Renaissance" in Japanese sculpture which took place in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, sculpture entered a permanent state of decline. The social system and religious problems were major factors. In any case, sculpture disappeared from the center stage in a country that produced uncommonly fine wooden sculpture, even when judged against the history of sculpture around the world. Shortly after the Meiji Restoration, the new government in 1875 abolished Buddhism, dealing a fatal blow to Buddhist sculpture, which represented the mainstream in the history of Japanese sculpture and which used *hinoki* (cypress) as a material. Buddhist sculptors, who had been engaged in ornamental work for shrines and temples since the fifteenth century, were cast adrift and had to make a living producing small crafts for export, such as *netsuke* and ivory carvings.

It was during this period that the techniques of Western sculpture were first introduced in Japan. Specifically, Vincenzo Ragusa (1841–1927), a native of Sicily, was sent from Italy at the request of the Japanese government to teach at the art school attached to the Kōbushō. The first page in modern Japanese sculpture could be said to have been written by Ragusa. The basic technique of modeling with clay was introduced at this time, and academic Western sculpture transformed the perception of *horimono* ("carving") that had existed until then. However, Buddhist sculptors such as Takamura Kōun (1852–1934), who had long been involved in wooden sculpture, used wooden carvings rather than clay to create plaster models. This illustrates how closely attached Japanese artists were to wood as a material.

More than a century has passed since Western sculpture first took over as the mainstream of modern Japanese sculpture. In the interim, Japanese sculptors time after time have sought new meaning in the tradition of Japanese wooden sculpture. Judging from the overriding generality of modern sculpture, artists who have tried hard to achieve a conscious transformation in conjunction with the tradition seem to have been placed in a somewhat anti-modern position. Tradition, however, is based on experience. Only if it is constantly renewed will it restore reality. A tense reality begins to emerge in the dramatic clash between tradition and innovation. It is hard to tell whether artists succeeded in making this reality the subject of their own artistic expression and approach. However, it was by no means completely unknown. It is just that artists did not display such things consciously with regard to the outer world.

Although differences in the cultural environment historically must be made clear, I do not intent to stress this. Even though the subject lies at the root of aesthetic consciousness, it is not persuasive unless everything is explained intensively. I wish rather to explore the problem in terms of changes in the creative activity of Japanese artists. Not surprisingly, this means looking at individual cases.

When the horizons of understanding are widened, the phrase "starting with Enkū" will likewise become a matter of criticism that applies to the outside world. At this point, it is limited to an examination of the changes in Japanese artists since the Meiji period (1868–1912). Japanese artists can be characterized as being extremely

sensitive to the nature of materials, whereas shape is something that emerges as the basis by which the material gives rise to what I call the spiritual training ground.

III. *Sacred Space*

At this point, I would like to introduce a sculptor who encountered the works of Enkū. The artist's name is Hashimoto Heihachi (1897–1935). As a creator of wooden sculptures, he is regarded as an unorthodox figure in the history of modern Japanese sculpture. In 1931 he came across the carvings of Enkū and discovered their astonishingly free, uninhibited form; at the same time, he discovered the wonderful way that the nature of the wood itself was brought to life, namely, the splendidness of the hatchet strokes made by the *nata* and the sword marks. However, there would be no reason to go to the trouble of introducing Heihachi here just because of a question of technique. In his diary, Heihachi writes that he felt a "pure, clean feeling akin to jasper" from Enkū's sculpture. It is this remark that I would like to stress instead, for it reveals a spiritual affinity between Enkū and Heihachi. The latter could be said to have been able to perceive the miraculous unity of art and spirit in Enkū's sculpture. At the same time, Heihachi's response reveals the point of origin of his own creativity. In *Junsui Chōkoku Ron* (A Theory of Pure Sculpture), he wrote, "Art provides a bridge to the spirit, and the spirit constitutes an artistic law."

A great distance lies between us today and this kind of mystical experience, but Heihachi's spiritual response resulting from his encounter with Enkū takes the clearcut form of a response to "something holy." Although difficult to explain, it is not vague at all. It arises from a feeling of contentment and confidence regarding what lies within the self. A person who has this kind of response is not someone who is stimulated only by an encounter of this sort with his own country's tradition. It must be regarded as something freely transmitted by the artistic heritage of mankind. Heihachi is indeed an example of someone who, in encountering Enkū, found the same epicenter where creativity is generated. It also seems possible to imagine an encounter between Brancusi and Heihachi.

In 1928, Heihachi created an enigmatic work called "About Stone." It consists of an ordinary stone carved out of wood, of the sort found lying around anywhere. It is 10 cm. high, and down to the fine details looks just like a stone. It tends at first to be seen as the pursuit of realism in a wooden sculpture. But Heihachi's aim surely lay elsewhere. In my opinion, it is none other than an attempt to perceive "the phenomenon" of nature inherent in stone.

This kind of counterpoint on the part of the artist regarding the phenomenon of nature can also be seen, for example, in "Wooden Boulder" (1980) by the contemporary English sculptor David Nash. Nash could be said to have cast the work into nature, whereas Heihachi sees nature in a work. What both have in common is the idea that nature, in the aspect of transformation, becomes a venue for generating a work. Moreover, this kind of work, which conceives of endless change as a form possessing life, presupposes the experience of living together with nature. Heihachi already placed the phenomenon of nature itself at the foundation of his ideas, something that had not been treated as a subject in sculpture. This was a very innovative approach, and it is no exaggeration to say that it conveys a very stimulating message with regard to sculpture today.

For Heihachi, the dialogue with nature lodged in the wood from which Enkū carved his figures represented a kind of mystical experience. We viewers should not simply take "the life of the form" presented by Enkū's carvings and regard it in terms of the impasse caused by rationalism. Rather, we should actively receive the message transmitted by Enkū and create a space for contemplating what is sacred and lies in the realm of the spirit.

The three artists in the Japanese exhibit this year, Toya Shigeo, Uematsu Keiji, and Funakoshi Katsura, were selected with this in mind. Since the artists' creative experiences are different, their mode of expression is obviously different even though their works are made out of the same material, namely, wood. What they share in common is a boundless interest in the multifaceted identity of wood as they pursue new aspects. Modern artists have long since lost the "poetics" of form, and no longer fit into any mode of classification. But they cannot help but be interested in tradition, which lies concealed like a shadow beneath their feet and ought to be revived. This, in a sense, unknown world that they encounter belongs to the future, at the same time that it is opened onto the living past. If, under these circumstances, the chance for a fresh dialogue with the Japanese tradition is possible, I would like to call it intoxication in the realm of the spiritual training ground. What I say sounds all too obvious, but if artists living today do not from the outset have any interest in ascertaining the place where creative activity is innately encouraged to arise, my call to "start with Enkū" will remain a lifeless shadow.