

## **Ikko Tanaka: Once in a Lifetime**

One of the founding fathers of Japanese design, he has spent a lifetime using traditional customs and rituals to produce startling contemporary images.

By Maggie Kinser Saiki





"Ichigo, ichie." If this Japanese saying is true—"one life, one encounter"—then I'm glad Ikko Tanaka and I spent a recent evening talking about the way of Tea and the art of the Noh theater. These two elements of Japanese culture still fascinate him, and are still teaching him. What a waste of that moment if we had talked only of design, the world he has conquered already. "The Emperor of Graphic Design" is how art publisher Katsuhiko Yamane describes Tanaka, adding that he had not yet found the courage to actually walk up and speak to the man: "If Mr. Tanaka were to speak to me, I could probably reply, but for people of my generation (Yamane is fifty-one), he has been an authority since we were young. When the English word 'design' came into use, he was already at the top. That distance is too great to traverse."

Though not a towering figure, Tanaka is substantial. His face, surprisingly unlined for a man of sixty-eight, reminds me in its balance of the Great Buddha at Kamakura. The tranquility in his eyes,

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looking right back at you, inspires trust and implies the possibility of spiritual embrace. Visually, he is not dramatic or exaggerated in any way. A week after our conversation, his image was already fading. I couldn't remember what he'd been wearing, except that it had been tasteful, quiet, and elegant. As we spoke, what surfaced just as quietly, and overcame any physical impression, were his interests and a depth of understanding that might come with age, but I suspect has always been present in Ikko Tanaka.

Tanaka was born in the ancient capital of Nara in 1930, studied art in Kyoto, joined the Sankei newspaper in Osaka, and at twenty-four won the Mainichi newspaper's Industrial Design Prize. A few years after joining Nissenbi (The Japan Advertising Artists' Club), he won the Members' Prize. That was the moment when he knew he had made it, joining the ranks of such greats as Yusaku Kamekura and Yoshio Hayakawa, and wowing even the general public. One year later, in 1960, he helped found the Nippon Design Center, a kind of house agency for major corporations and a place for graphic designers to set higher standards for the then-infant industry. Despite his youth, he was subsequently involved in every important step the industry took.

Tanaka designed the poster for the World Graphic Design exhibition accompanying the Tokyo-hosted tenth World Design Conference. He worked under Kamekura to design the symbols and signage for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. The following year he designed the successful and innovative Persona exhibition, featuring sixteen artists from around the world and setting several on their way to success. In 1973 he started doing the posters for the Seibu Theater, and in 1975 he became creative director for the entire Seibu Group, whose confident expansion into every imaginable area of retail in the 1980s, including the self-consciously "ecological" no-name brand "Muji," practically defined the mood of the boom economy, when a flood of flash and cash precluded any genuine return to simplicity. The "bubble economy" of those golden days has since burst, and Japan is in the deepest recession it has known since the end of World War II. "My business hasn't changed much," Tanaka says with a light laugh. This makes the point he refused to concede earlier when I asked him about his place in the design hierarchy—he is at the top. "Much of it is continuing work, for clients with whom I've had a long relationship." For the past fifteen years he has been designing posters on the "Man and Writing" theme, begun on the strength of a whim when Tanaka discovered graffiti in New York's Soho, and took an ambitious worldwide research plan to the

type giant Morisawa & Co., Ltd. This year the theme is Bulgaria.

Tanaka jokes that the department store work he did so much of for the Seibu Group made him "encyclopedic." More seriously, he surmises that the work he did for the theater in particular forced him to broaden his efforts at visual expression. So is he a jack-of-all-trades because book design comes as easily to him as posters, display, or package design? Or is he a craftsman, unfettered by the form, but obsessed with the process? "In Japan," he says, "the word for 'craftsman' depicts someone who uses his hands well, but not his head. For people who use their heads too, the word 'sakka,' for creator or artist, is used." Clarifying himself, he mentions that in Italy he was once called a "maestro," which pleases him immensely.

**Tanaka the actor, Tanaka the cook:** Ikko Tanaka loves the theater and finds comfort in the formal drama of Tea, for which preparation takes all morning and includes cooking dishes the guest of honor is known to appreciate. He has said that design is like cooking, in that it requires ingenuity and technique, and that the guest's satisfaction determines the success or failure of the design. The designer and the cook are both agents of transient processes, Tanaka has written, and he likens himself to a kind of medium in the communication process. "My way of interacting with design," he says in connection with the varied work he does for the Seibu Theater, comedy following drama and followed by classical music, "is exactly the way of an actor who gets the script and thinks, 'Oh, this character is an arrogant guy, wears a beard, and struts around.'" Tanaka doesn't grow the beard, but immerses himself in the scenario and then designs a poster that will arrest passersby with the image.

Tanaka explains that the Japanese public would never put up with some European theaters' policy of consistency achieved through typography, and that his "sense of service" has denied him the option of settling into a single recognizable style. But Tanaka's escape from the trap of "artistry" in which designers create styles so unique that, as Tanaka puts it, "if you cover the client's name, you can't tell one poster from another" cannot be explained away by three decades of demanding work. Tanaka's traffic with the world at large is more considered and considerate than it need be for any one occupation, and yet at the same time has been fully realized by his work in design.

**Tanaka the outsider:** Growing up in Nara, Tanaka was surrounded by ancient Japanese architecture, but not by the kind of cosmopolitan culture neighboring Kyoto developed after it lost the capital to Tokyo. Once the politicians left, the populace was made up mostly of farmers and their descendants. "I hated Nara and all the old prescribed manners, and couldn't wait to get out" he says. Now he runs an office in Tokyo, seven floors up from the intersection of an avenue that leads to the youth haven of Shibuya, and one that dead-ends at the shrine to the emperor Meiji, who sanctioned the Westernization of Japan.

In this office, Tanaka tells me that the world of Tea teaches poverty and the beauty of simple things, even if it's just a stump of bamboo. Taking that bamboo overseas, where it may be initially seen as garbage, excites Tanaka. "From the inside, you can't understand the world of Tea. Looking at Tea from atop many experiences lets me understand things I couldn't see before. I may actually be seeing Tea through the eyes of an outsider."

There isn't another Japanese designer whose work is as internationally viable as Tanaka's, particularly his work that deals with Japanese subjects or is heavily typographic. How does Tanaka make Japanese culture and lettering so accessible? "By stepping outside the problem," he says. In the beginning of his career, Tanaka came to an impasse when every illustration he did resembled that of his idol Yoshio Hayakawa. He was paralyzed for some time, but recovered by abandoning illustration for an art director's approach to design, and concentrating on typography. "I've always worked with the assumption that if I understood color, type, and printing, I could be a graphic designer." Tanaka made an early jump into new surroundings and away from the illustration-heavy design still com-



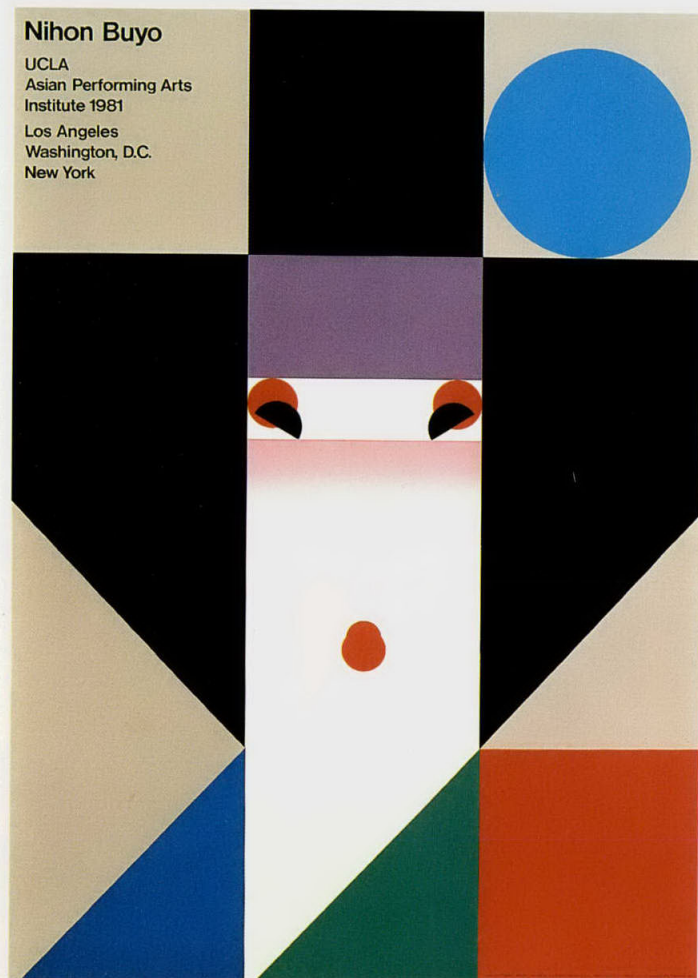
(Previous spread)  
Ikko Tanaka. Portrait by  
Yasuhiro Ishimoto.

(This page, left)  
Nihon Buyo (Japanese Dance)  
poster, 1981. Client: Asian Performing  
Arts Institute, UCLA.

(This page, right)  
Japan Style exhibition, 1979.  
Photographer: Jumonji Bishin.

mon in Japan today. He then used the talents of others, photographers and illustrators alike, to tackle such great problems as popularizing Noh, or explaining things like Japanese color.

**Tanaka the host:** "In tea, you meet with a person with the understanding that this person, this time, and this situation will converge only once in a lifetime. For that visit, you imagine every possible 'service'. You plan the menu and ready a suitable tea bowl, perhaps one made in his native prefecture.



Thinking of this and nothing else, you receive the guest."

Ikko Tanaka's rational problem solving is what makes his design closer to western design than much Japanese design, but the sympathetic aspect of the host of the tea ceremony is equally evident. "The host does not go to greet the guest," he explains, "but waits in the tea room. The guest, following a trail the host has left, a mound of salt, a sprinkling of water, a slightly open door, considers the host's feelings as he approaches, where he finds the host waiting." Tanaka's visual clues, particularly those that lead us into the depths of culture, are open-hearted and audience-specific, and pave the approach with delight in the details he has chosen.

After the bombing of Japan, there were few small Noh theaters left standing, and a movement began to popularize the art. Halls of several thousand seats became the new venues, and Ikko Tanaka, in his twenties, was charged with making it work. Employed by a newspaper, he was asked to do the very first Noh poster, replacing the previously handwritten slips which only aficionados could interpret. "The actors' names would have been written with brush and ink,

and the roles would be understood simply by the position of the lettering," Tanaka explains. "It was a world of professionals."

Tanaka says he is still in the process of learning how to visualize the profundity of Noh, because "a poster has to strike the viewer, but to glimpse the world of Noh, one has to approach it from deep within oneself." The symbolism and subtlety of Noh, in which elderly characters or ghosts often recall their prime, transforming themselves and the set with a single gesture, "is the opposite of today's communication." And yet the mystery is palpable in his Noh posters.

**Tanaka the veteran climber:** Ikko Tanaka definitely chose the path less traveled, and now he is at the top of the mountain. He's been particularly devoted to typography, insisting that the real contest begins after the illustration or motif is chosen. He has created numerous successful logos and, over the space of several



years, a Bodoni-inspired typeface called "kocho" that attempts to do with the three writing systems of Japanese what Bodoni did with the 26-letter alphabet. Tanaka at first found the Japanese writing system "hopeless." Now, with the toil behind him, he says, "I rather enjoy the variety, which allows all kinds of thinking."

The age and experience Tanaka has accumulated serve his design, and although he struggled to broaden his abilities in the early years, he says that now, "after climbing this hill for years, and seeing this smoky, unclear world before me, I thought, it's not so bad to be a designer. It's been more interesting than preserving a single style and then being hemmed in by it." Tanaka identifies with the Noh actor who at sixty has finally reached the height of his powers. "Only when he can truly compare youth and his present age is he able for the first time to express himself generously." The Noh actor wears a mask and kimono, and expresses the philosophy of life through simple gestures imbued with his experience. Ikko Tanaka wears no masks or many, and with the simplicity of his art, expounds his philosophy. We would do well to listen. ■



Ryumin, Shin koten shugi, 1973.  
Client: Morisawa & Co. Ltd.  
(typeface company).

## 新古典主義

活字明朝の格調が写植書体として完璧に生まれ変わりました。新しい正調明朝「リユミン」そのファミリーの誕生です。「リユミン」は、戦前印刷界で定評のあった森川龍文堂書体をもとに、あらためて現代の組版に最も適した写植用明朝としてデザインされたものです。活字明朝の持つ鋭い彫刻刀の跡を左右のハイヤ点の形に生かしながら、縦横の直線にソフトなデクセントを持たせた、文字通りの正調明朝の傑作と呼ぶにふさわしい書体です。



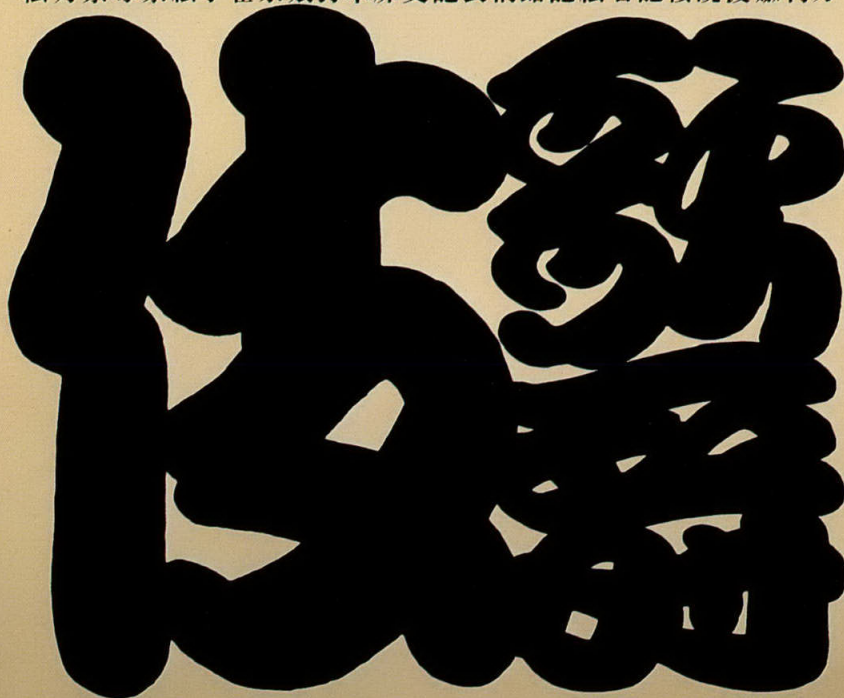
写植用字  
リユミン



# 歌舞伎の発見

誰でもわかる歌舞伎の見方  
富田鉄之助著 白金書房刊

助六由縁江戸桜勧進帳鳴神矢の根毛抜解脫不破燵  
暫不動象引寿曾我対面菅原伝授手習鑑神靈矢口渡  
国性爺合戦蘆屋道満大内鑑福山姥小野道風青柳硯  
仮名手本忠臣蔵平家女護島傾城反魂香義経千本桜  
博多小女郎浪枕源平布引滝二谷嫩軍記壇浦兜軍記  
奥州安達原鬼一法眼三略卷八陣守護城忍夜恋曲者  
御所桜堀川夜討祇園祭礼信仰記加賀見山田錦絵  
本朝廿四孝鎌倉三代記妹背山婦女庭訓絵本太功記  
敵討天下茶屋聚伊賀越道中双六近江源氏先陣館  
恋女房染分手綱撰州合邦辻伽羅先代萩楼門五三桐  
曾根崎心中近頃河原の達引桂川連理榊艶容女舞衣  
天竺徳兵衛韓漸東海道四谷怪談双蝶々曲輪日記  
女殺油地獄大経師昔曆恋飛脚大和往来新版歌祭文  
生写朝顔話心中天網島伊達娘恋緋鹿子積恋雪関扉  
夏祭浪花鑑伊勢音頭恋寝刀廓文章お染の七役茶木  
京鹿子娘道成寺連獅子草摺引素襖落上蜘蛛紅葉狩  
春興鏡獅子六歌仙容彩船弁慶舌出三番叟釣女藤娘  
与話情浮名横櫛色彩間菊豆乗合船恵方万歳三社祭  
四千両小判梅葉水天宮利生深川十六夜清心吉原雀  
籠釣瓶花街酔醒神明裏和合取組五大力恋緋手習子  
人情咄文七元結怪異談牡丹燈籠佐倉義民伝鳥羽絵  
葛紅葉宇都谷峠東海道中膝栗毛明烏花濡衣神田祭  
天衣紛上野初花梅雨小袖昔八丈天坊大岡政談黒塚  
盲長屋梅加賀鳶巷談宵宮雨元禄忠臣蔵名月八幡祭  
刺青奇偶桐葉番町皿屋敷二本刀士俵入双面水照月  
杳手鳥孤城落月鳥辺山心中修禪寺物語暗闇の丑松





(This page, left)  
Japan exhibition, 1986.  
Client: Japan Graphic Designers  
Association.

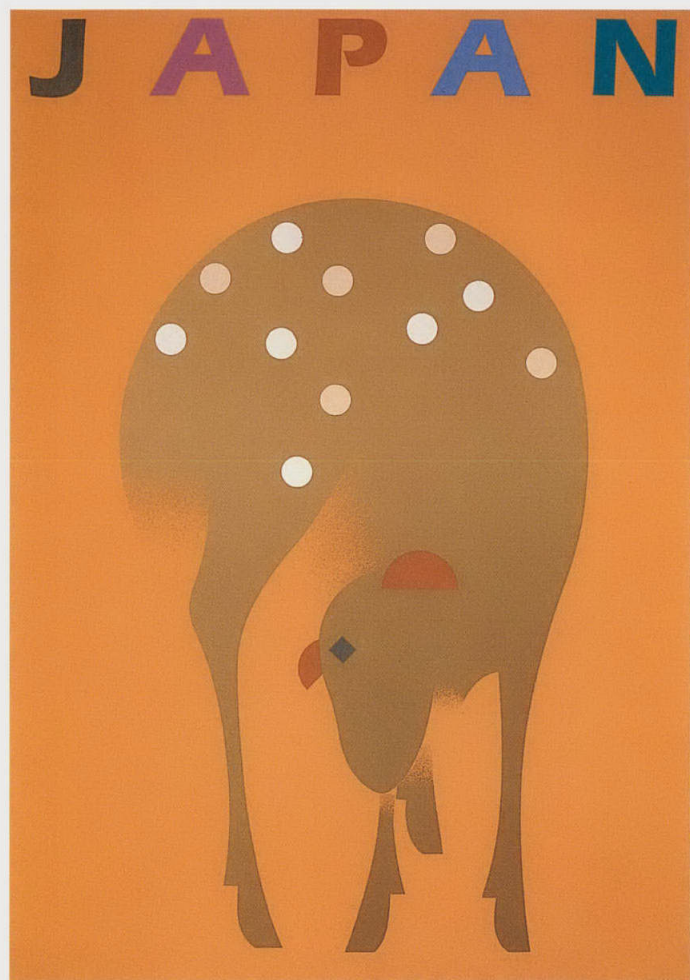
(This page, right)  
Sankei Kanze No. XXVIII  
(performing arts), 1983.  
Client: The Sankei Newspaper Co. Ltd.

(Opposite, top left)  
Salvatore Ferragamo shop  
promotion, 1997.  
Client: Salvatore Ferragamo Italia, S.p.A.

(Opposite, top right)  
Hanae Mori brand symbol, 1978.  
Client: Hanae Mori International.

(Opposite, bottom left)  
Yabo to Natsukusa  
(The Ambition and Summer Grass)  
theater, 1998. Client: New National  
Theater, Tokyo.

(Opposite, bottom right)  
Concert Projection de Films Toru  
Takemitsu, 1997. Client: Maison de la  
Culture du Japon a Paris.







# 夏野草と望

主催=新国立劇場  
作=山崎正和 演出=西川信廣

津島山正徳 / 内野聖陽  
井上純一 / 三木敬彦 / たかお直 / 村田剛男  
清郷流等 / 松野雄一 / 青山良吉 / 笠生 功  
尾崎右宗 / 立川修也 / 島崎洋人 / 永井 誠  
竹下明子 / 金久美子 / 秀生あつき / 高橋記恵  
家村廉子 / 伊藤知子 / 角部典子 / 堀 梨雄  
堀 順恵

美術=横田あつみ / 照明=山口 聡  
音楽=後藤浩明 / 音響=井上正弘  
衣裳=岸井龍巳 / 振付=重町あかね  
演出助手=道場祐一 / 舞台監督=水戸部雅史

12月2日(水)~20日(日)  
新国立劇場  
小劇場 THE PIT

1998/99シーズン・オフィシャルパートナー  
三井物産株式会社 TBS 日本放送 朝日 富士電機 マクドナルド

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101 rue de la Harpe, 75005 Paris, France

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TAKAGI CO., LTD.  
TOKUSHU PAPER MFG. CO., LTD.



(Opposite)  
Sogetsu—The Creation of  
Space exhibition, 1982.  
Client: Sogetsu Foundation.

(This page)  
Ginza Saison Gekijo theater  
opening, 1986.

# OPEN 銀座セゾン劇場

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