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Modernism, Africanism, or Orientalism?

—Jacob Lawrence's Artistic Techniques—

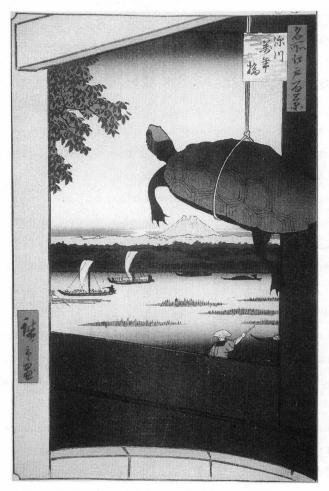
Fumihisa Matsumoto

The seemingly naive art of Jacob Lawrence poses an intriguing question as to the nature of his basic techniques: whether they are most properly called modernist, African, or Oriental. True, critics agree that his is a combination of cubism and expressionism—thus called expressive cubism—in that he relies on "non-illusionistic" construction of colors, lines, and forms, which tend to be flat, geometrical and abstract to a certain extent, with plural vantage points, and in that, through such means, he tries to express emotions that are otherwise inexpressible in order to convey messages of social significance. Critics also seem to concur that Lawrence's style has been developed under the influence of African (as well as Mexican) art: (2) it is often characterized by some primitive elements, such as highly stylized forms, strong lines, bands of colors, and other folk art techniques and subjects. But the question is: is that all?

The present writer, a student of American art, who has been familiarized with Oriental art for almost half a century, had the feelings of strangeness and familiarity at the same time on seeing a group of Lawrence's works (mostly from *The Migration of the Negro* series) for the first time. They were strange in the sense that they were different from any of the American paintings the writer had been studying, from those of John Singleton Copley, William Sidney Mount, Winslow Homer, to those of Norman Rockwell and Andrew Wyeth: all

the figures in these paintings, including black figures, are highly representational and "individualized," as in Copley's Death of Major Peirson or Watson and Shark, Mount's The Banjo Player or Farmers Nooning, Homer's The Gulf Stream or The Cotton Pickers, Rockwell's The Problem We All Live With, or Wyeth's Willard Snowden pictures. They were familiar, on the other hand, in the sense that the writer had seen something like them before, or had been seeing it all the time not in American art, of course, but somewhere else. As the subject matters were not of particular interest to him at that moment, it must have been the color, the form, the movement or the composition that immediately appealed to him. The fact, moreover, that the same format was used for the whole series (12 x 18" or 18 x 12" for The Migration series [approximately 10 x 15" or 15 x 10" for the Japanese woodcuts, large size]), and that the figures were treated en masse, as certain types, instead of being meticulously treated as individuals, must have intensified such an impression: here was a "floating world" (the world of common people in former Japan) transplanted in a different land, the American South and the Northern cities.

Lawrence himself acknowledges indebtedness to certain artists. Among those he was interested in while he was at the Harlem Art Workshop (1932–34), "there were the Mexican muralists (Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros), the Chinese [sic] woodcut artists, Käthe Kollwitz, William Gropper, and George Grosz." He also admits that, as a young boy, he was fascinated by his mother's oriental rugs, after which he "used to do bright patterns," and from which he "got ideas, the arabesque movements and so on." These testimonies, given in conversation with one of the Lawrence scholars in the 1980s, seem to suggest that it was not just European and African art, but also Oriental art, that contributed to the formulation of Lawrence's artistic



Hiroshige Ando, Selling the Tortoise on the Mannen Bridge. Color woodcut, Ōban [large-size].

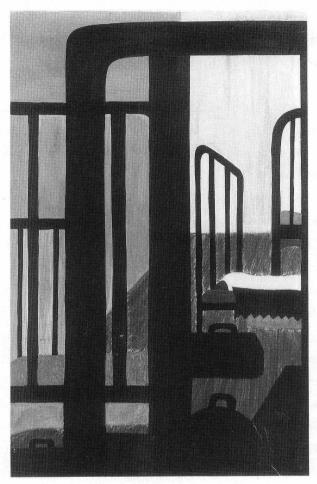
Ota Memorial Museum of Art, Tokyo.

One of the best-known "close-up" compositions, like Hokusai's Great Wave.

techniques. He may even have seen a collection of Japanese prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or in some picture books at the New York Public Library, the Schomburg Collection, even though he may not remember the exact names of the artists or the titles. John La Farge, for one, who did murals for the churches in New York and Boston areas, had published a book on a woodcut artist (*Hokūsai*, 1897) based upon his experience in Japan with his sponsor and companion, Henry Adams. (5) A glance would have been enough for Lawrence to grasp the meanings of this exotic art not so much in its content as in its technical devices: flat colors, simplified forms, and unusual compositions — especially so if he had been predisposed in the same direction.

It may still be argued that the influences on Lawrence's art have been predominantly European and African (i.e. modernistic), and that Oriental influences, if any, have been negligible. It should be pointed out, however, that even Western modernists who admittedly left deep impression on young Lawrence, such as Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, had learned much from Oriental art before they turned to African art for inspiration. European art alone, even if it is fortified (or modified) by African art, cannot explain the origin and development of modernism, which is indeed a "revolutionary" movement away from post-Renaissance illusionism; new devices of color, composition, and form had to come from somewhere else. As an art historian puts it, "Even the later incorporation of Black African sculpture in Cubism would have been unthinkable without the previous phenomenon of Japonisme: geometrical abstraction comes after decorative simplification." (6)

Take van Gogh, for example. In the prime of his artistic career, which was very short, he was virtually in love with Japan and Japanese art ("Japanese woodcuts, when once you love them, you never regret it" [Letter 483]; "The more you see things with a Japanese eye, the more subtly you perceive color" [Letter 500])," and made at least three copies of Japanese prints in oil: *The Plum Tree Garden* after



Jacob Lawrence, The Migration of the Negro Series, 1940-41. No. 48: Housing for the Negroes was a very difficult problem. Tempera on hardboard (gessoed composition board), 18×12 ". Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Hiroshige, which has a typical "close-up" composition, *Sudden Shower* on the Atake Bridge after Hiroshige, which has a high vantage point, and *Japonaiserie*: Oiran after Yeisen. He also included Japanese prints in the background of *Père Tanguy* (in two of the three versions, 1887)

and *Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889) as a tribute to Japanese art.⁽⁸⁾ If you refer to his *Starry Night* (1888) in connection with Lawrence's *Harriet Tubman* series, panel 10,⁽⁹⁾ you should also talk about its indebtedness to Hiroshige's print of the same (translated) title, *Starry Night*.⁽¹⁰⁾

Matisse, likewise, was enarmored by Japanese prints, especially in his later period, and applied their techniques in the goldfish series and the female figures done in the 1910s, notably The Three Sisters Triptych (1917) which resembles in color combination and composition Toyokuni's Actor and Utamaro's Female Figures Producing Prints. (11) Albert C. Barnes, the founder of the Barnes Collection in Merion. Pennsylvania, had this to say about Matisse's art: "Point by point comparison between a late print and a painting by Matisse shows that both are compositions of color-compartments characterized by daring contrasts between exotic colors and by the prevalence of bands, stripes and arabesques. More specifically, almost identical tones of blue, green, lavender-coral, yellow, tan, gray, rose and brown enter into similar relationships in each." Barnes, however, did not forget to warn us that Matisse's "assimilation of the Japanese influence is so complete that a trained observer could look at scores of Matisses without conscious reference to Japanese prints," and that "in their totality the two are completely distinguished."(12)

While Cézanne, one of the forerunners of cubism, found in Japanese art "the possibility of what may be called a 'free scale,' in which above and below, before and behind, large and small, become fluid, interchangeable, freely recombinable, as elements of the formal design," (13) Picasso, the master of cubism, starting from Toulouse-Lautrec's planar abstraction, or foreshortening in depth, which had been inspired by Japanese art, also paid tribute to it by including



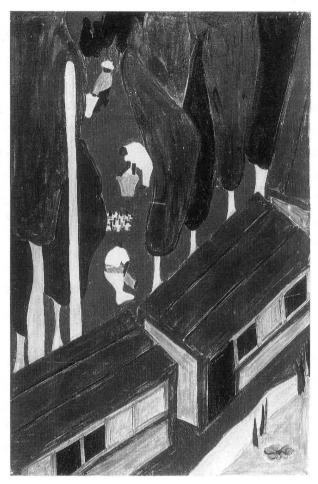
Hiroshige Ando, *Overlooking Acres*.

Color woodcut Ōban [large-size].

Ota Memorial Museum of Art, Tokyo.

One of the earliest examples of bird's-eye-view.

calligraphic paintings in *The Lovers* (1919) and making a caricature of Kiyonobu in *Embrace* (1970).⁽¹⁴⁾ Even George Grosz, whose social comment left a lasting impression on young Lawrence, had studied Japanese prints, especially their rapid drawing techniques, at the



Jacob Lawrence, Frederick Douglass Series, 1938—39.

No. 15: Frederick Douglass's escape from slavery was a hazardous and exciting twenty-four hours. Douglass disguised as a sailor....

Tempera on hardboard, 17 7/8 x 12".

Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia.

suggestion of his tutor Orlik while he was in Berlin, ⁽¹⁵⁾ and Honoré Daumier, another social critic with whose works Lawrence was deeply impressed, was likened to Hokusai (or vice versa) for his master

draftsmanship,(16) i.e. for his reductive shorthand lines.

To say that you have been influenced by these artists, therefore, almost automatically means that you have been under the influence of Oriental art, regardless of the nature or intensity of such an influence. Since modernism means many things, however, having incorporated such diverse elements as African art, pre-Columbian American art, Egyptian and Greek art, as well as Oriental art, it is imperative to sort out each element and decide which element played which part in the formation of an artist's style—a task which is extremely difficult because of the complexity of combination and for the very fact that the artist has developed his own style.

The case of Lawrence is no exception. In addition to the artists mentioned just above, he had been interested in African art (masks and sculpture), Mexican murals, Greek and Egyptian art, and early Renaissance art (Giotto, Crivelli, Botticelli et al.), as well as such European artists as Francisco Goya, Pieter Breughel, Georges Braque and Giorgio de Chirio, and such American modernists as Arthur Dove, Charles Sheeler, Ben Shahn (and possibly Yasuo Kuniyoshi, a Japanese-American), all of whom belonged to Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery as he also did. (17) Indeed he has responded to so many artists that none of them are represented in any distinct form in his art, except by broadest techniques. You can even say with an anonymous critic, "[Lawrence] has always been his own man," (18) or with another anonymous critic, "Never belonging to any particular school or trend, he has created a style that is not easily classifiable, [though] his pictures contain elements of each style [realist, abstract and symbolist]."(19) To the question "How do you see your influences," the artist himself once answered as follows: "Everything. They come from every source. We are influenced by elements, facts, and other



Harunobu Suzuki, $Confucian\ Education:$ Learning Calligraphy. Color woodcut, Chūban [medium-size].

MOA Museum of Art, Tokyo.

Harunobu never used one-point-perspective. His compositions are very often oblique.

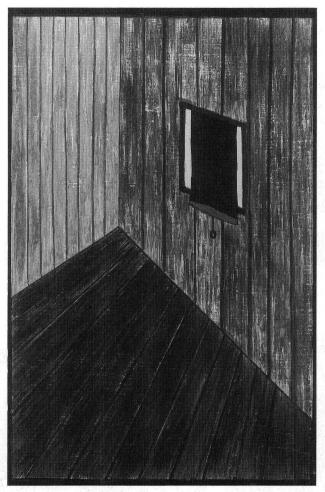
things we are unaware of. I don't have one particular strong influence." $^{(20)}$

Lawrence's style, as has been noted, is visually characterized by

(1) flat areas of limited colors — primary colors and secondary colors — with little gradation and no chiaroscuro, (2) simplified forms, sometimes with gross exaggeration or deformation, which create a sense of movement or dramatic action, (3) vertical, horizontal, or triangular composition, which tends to be asymmetrical or oblique and very shallow in depth, and (4) various points of view, from high above (bird's-eye-view), from down below (worm's-eye-view), from near by (close-up or truncation), but seldom from afar.

Japanese artists, woodcut artists in particular, had relied on all these techniques except, perhaps, deformation. Why they did so is quite clear: first, since the number of woodblocks cut for one print (each block for one color) was limited, the colors available to them were also limited, usually five or six, with no device for gradation or chiaroscuro, which, in turn, obliged them to depend heavily on lines and decorative effects. Second, since they had no tradition of realism in the Western sense of the word, they had to depend on stylization, or certain types with mask-like faces, often presented in silhouette, instead of individualization or exact likeness; one of the results was an emphasis on movement or dramatic gesture. And third, since one-pointperspective was a relatively new finding to them (it came from Holland in the 18th century), many of them stuck to traditional Oriental perspective, which put larger objects in the foreground and smaller objects in the back with no idea of convergence, while a few of them, notably Hokusai and Hiroshige, hit upon a new device of carrying the newly-learned one-point-perspective to the extreme by freely changing their points of view, up and down, and back and forth.

Although Lawrence's style can most accurately be called cubist, therfore, his basic techniques are largely Oriental — at least akin to Oriental techniques, especially those of Japanese prints. Even his



Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro* Series, 1940-41. No. 25: *After a while some communities were almost bare*. Tempera on hardboard, 18 x 12". The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

practice of painting the same color on the different panels in the same series at once (a darker color first) (21) and then doing the same thing with another color, or that of moving the small panels on his lap or



Hiroshige Ando, *Early Morning in Miyanokoshi : Moving Out*. Color woodcut, Ōban [large-size]. Private collection.



Jacob Lawrence, Frederick Douglass Series, 1938—39.

No. 31: During the exodus, thousands of poor Negroes left the South....

Tempera on hardboard, 12 x 17 7/8".

Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia.

based medium with a view to finish his painting as quickly as possible—all these practices are not different from the procedures of print-making, (22) though part of them, no doubt, must have been self-taught or learned from the works of Grosz, Daumier et al. As for his preference for a narrative format (i.e. depicting important incidents in series) and his tendency to turn to folk life and humor, you can find counterparts in Hokusai and Hiroshige, who did landscapes in series (travelogues as a matter of fact) and caricatured human figures and animals, though here again the artist's natural inclination and the influences of Giotto, Goya (*Disasters of War* series or *The Caprice* series, for example) and Breughel (*The Seven Deadly Sins* or *The Seven Cardinal Virtues*, for example) are unmistakable.

But then, what about the African influences, which seem to have come to him so naturally, and which, as is widely known, played a key role in breaking down the old tradition of illusionism and bringing forth a new way of expression - cubism? Lawrence, as he tells us, had seen African sculpture exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935, which made such a great impact on him that, returning home, he carved two wooden sculptures himself (sometime before he also made papiermache masks) (23) and, while being careful not to "work like the African, [lest] the black American artist becomes pseudo something,"(24) he was almost instinctively attracted to African art and soil, as is shown by his visit to Nigeria in 1962 and again in 1964 (April – November) to do a number of paintings there. Nor did he forget the advice of Alain Locke, his mentor, that "there still slumbers in the blood [of Afro-Americans] something which once stirred," and that "in the struggle for a racial idiom of expression, there would come to some creative minds, from a closer knowledge of [African art], hints of new technique, enlightening and interpretative revelations of the mysterious substrata of feeling under our characteristically intense emotionality, or at the very least, incentives toward fresher and bolder forms of artistic expression and a lessening of that timid imitativeness which at present hampers all but our very best artists."⁽²⁵⁾

It is more than probable, therefore, that the artist had assimilated (or developed) African techniques at a very early stage of his artistic career: highly stylized forms that are often geometrical, an unusual sense of proportion verging on exaggeration or caricature, a unique combination of colors (you can find a red mask with green and black striation in African art, for example), and inevitably "unconventional" (at least to the Western eyes) points of view. (26) Even if he had not been directly influenced by African art, he would have been under its indirect influence, just as he had been under Oriental influence, through the works of European modernists. Picasso and Matisse, in particular, having seen a mask and statues possessed by André Derain (who obtained them from Maurice de Vlaminck), were overwhelmed by them and carried the movement forward which was to be called cubism. (27) Whatever the sources, whether they came from African art, or through European modernists, or were developed by himself, the African elements will go far to explain Lawrence's basic techniques, if not farther than Oriental elements.

A question naturally follows whether there is something common between African art and Oriental art, which may possibly have contributed jointly to the formation of Lawrence's mature style. If you accept the definition by Henri Ghent (director of the Brooklyn Museum) of the African heritage as "the intuitive sense of design, the extraordinary sense of color, and gift of improvisation [together with] naturalness of expression, vitality and humor," (28) you can surely say the same thing about Oriental art. Oriental art, in comparison with

Western art, is characterized by intuitiveness rather than logic or intellect which "divides and discriminates, resists and rejects, chooses and decides, and prevents [the free exercise of our will]" (see the works of Zen masters), (29) suggestiveness or symbolism rather than representation (as in calligraphic art or the masks of Noh drama), (30) directness or spontaneity, with which the artists appealed to the ordinary people (as in woodblock prints) and, among other things, craftsmanship or dexterity in design (as in "the patterns on plates, cushions, and what not, arranged with geometrical accuracy.")(31) African art and Oriental art, in short, have much in common both technically and esthetically: they both belong to a non-Western tradition — i.e. what may be termed "pre-logical" or "preillusionistic" tradition - and, with all the differences in minor techniques, they try to express the collective sense of beauty by the simplest means possible; beauty to them is not something that appears to the scientific eye but something that is perceived by esthetic sensibility or intuition. It is, therefore, often difficult to distinguish between African elements and Oriental elements in Lawrence's work, as it is to separate Mexican elements, which may also be called "preillusionistic" if they come from pre-Columbian (i.e. Astecan) tradition.

A further question may be raised, in this connection, as to the appropriateness of considering Lawrence just modernist. Unlike Cézanne or Gogh, Matisse or Picasso, who needed Oriental or African elements as catalyst or whatever, he did not need them technically to break away from the old tradition; indeed he had been racially endowed with "non-illusionistic" insight from the very beginning. Modernist techniques inspired by non-Western art must have come to him quite naturally, not as something exotic but as something congenial, or even as confirmation. It is true that modernism has made its

own development (transformation if you like), and that, unlike Rivera who finally rejected it in favor of an indigenous tradition, Lawrence has mostly accepted it, so that he can rightly be called a modernist; still his modernism is something different from that of Picasso, Brague, or Modigliani, which is basically "post—illusionistic"— another reason that he, like other Afro-American artists, should be treated separately from other American artists while, at the same time, he should be considered in the context of general American art.

NOTES

- (1) Patricia Hills, "Jacob Lawrence's Expressive Cubism," in Ellen Harkins Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 15–19; *idem.*, "Jacob Lawrence as Pictorial Griot: The *Harriet Tubman Series*," *American Art* 7 (Winter 1993), 46; Wheat, *op. cit.*, 74.
- (2) Ellen Harkins Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence*: *The* Frederick Douglass *and* Harriet Tubman *Series of 1938–40* (Hampton, Virginia: Hampton University Museum in association with University of Washington Press), 15–16; *idem., Jacob Lawrence: American Painter*, 29–38, 110–12; Hills, "Jacob Lawrence's Expressive Cubism," 17.
- (3) Quoted in Wheat, Jacob Lawrence: American Painter, 36.
- (4) Wheat, Jacob Lawrence: American Painter, 29; Samella Lewis, African American Art and Artists (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 130.
- (5) Cf. John La Farge, Hokūsai: A Talk about Hokūsai, the Japanese Painter, at the Century Club, March 28, 1896 (New York: William C. Martin Printing House, 1897); idem., An Artist's Letters from Japan (New York: Century Co., 1897); J. C. Levenson, Ernest Samuels, Charles Vandersee, and Viola Hopkins Winner, eds., The Letters of Henry Adams, vol. III (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- (6) Klaus Berger, Japonisme in Western Painting from Whistler to Matisse, translated by David Britt (Cambridge, New York, Mel-

- bourne: Cambridge University Press, 1992 [originally published in Germany in 1980]), 2.
- (7) Quoted in Berger, op. cit., 125-26.
- (8) *Ibid.*, 125-45; Albert J. Lubin, *Stranger on the Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent van Gogh* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1972), 129-130, 151-52, 221; Melissa McQuillan, *Van Gogh* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 50, 99, 132-34
- (9) Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: The* Frederick Douglass *and* Harriet Tubman *Series of 1938-40*, 34.
- (10) See Berger, op. cit., 136.
- (11) *Ibid.*, 315; Jack Flam, *Matisse: The Man and His Art*, 1869 1918 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 456 57.
- (12) Albert C. Barnes and Violette de Maza, *The Art of Henri Matisse* (New York and London: C. Scribner's Sons, 1933), 57–64.
- (13) Kurt Badt, *The Art of Cézanne*, translated by Sheila Ann Ogilvie (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1985), 115-16; Berger, *op. cit.*, 112-19.
- (14) Susan Grace Galassi, *Picasso's Variations on the Masters : Confrontations with the Past* (New York : Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 33—34, 50—53; Berger, op. cit., 323—24.
- (15) M. Kay Flavell, George Grosz: A Biography (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 22; Beth Irwin Lewis, George Grosz: Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 16.
- (16) Berger, op. cit., 110.
- (17) Wheat, Jacob Lawrence: American Artist, 36–38; Wheat, Jacob Lawrence: The Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman Series of 1938–40, 15; Diane Tepfer, "Edith Gregor Halpert: Impresario of Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series," in Elizabeth Hutton Turner, ed., Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series (Washington, D.C.: The Rappahannock Press in association with The Phillips Collection, 1993), 128–39; Avis Berman, "Jacob Lawrence and the Making of Americans," Artnews 83 (February 1984), 83–84.
- (18) "Bright Sorrow," Time 77 (February 24, 1961), 44.
- (19) "Jacob Lawrence," Ebony 6 (April 1951), 74.
- (20) Clarence Major, "Clarence Major Interviews: Jacob Lawrence, the Expressionist," *Black Scholar* 9:3 (November 1977), 22.

- (21) Elizabeth Steele and Susana M. Halpine, "Precision and Spontaneity: Jacob Lawrence's Materials and Techniques," in Turner, op. cit., 155-59; Berman, op. cit., 84; Wheat, Jacob Lawrence: The Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman Series of 1938-40, 21; Hills, "Jacob Lawrence as Pictorial Griot: The Harriet Tubman Series," 47 (her comment that Lawrence painted all the light colors first is at odds with those of the others.)
- (22) Lawrence himself began executing prints from 1963. See Peter Nesbett, ed., *Jacob Lawrence: Thirty Years of Prints* (1963 1993), *A Catalogue Raisonné* (Seattle: Francine Seders Gallery Ltd. in association with University of Washington Press, 1994).
- (23) Wheat, Jacob Lawrence: American Artist, 32, 36.
- (24) Major, op. cit., 17-18.
- (25) Jeffrey C. Stewart, ed., *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke*: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1983), 135; cf. idem., "(Un)Locke(ing) Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series," in Turner, op. cit., 41-51; James B. Barnes, "Alain Locke and the Sense of the African Legacy," in Russell J. Linnemann, ed., Alain Locke: Reflections on a Modern Renaissance Man (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 100-108.
- (26) Frank Willet, *African Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 144; Michel Leiris and Jacqueline Delange, *African Art*, translated by Michael Ross (London: Thames and Husdon, 1968), 35-55.
- (27) Flam, op. cit., 172-97; Timothy Hilton, Picasso (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 79-89.
- (28) Henri Ghent, "Notes to the Young Black Artist: Revolution or Evolution?" *Art International* 15:6 (Summer 1971), 34.
- (29) Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 144.
- (30) Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats, in particular, were deeply impressed by Noh drama. Cf. Akiko Miyake, Sanehide Kodama and Nicholas Teele, eds., A Guide to Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa's Classic Noh Theatre of Japan (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine and The Ezra Pound Society of Japan, Shiga University, 1994), see pictures between 308-09; Richard Taylor, The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese No. (New Haven and

- London: Yale University Press, 1976).
- (31) Basil Hall Chamberlain, *Things Japanese Being Notes on Various Subjects Connected with Japan* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1905), 52-53.