



Ikko Tanaka's

Abstract

Visual

Noh

By: INKBRUSHMOOD

editorial@inkbrushmood.com

Ikko Tanaka (田中一光; 1930 – 2002) was a Japanese grandmaster of graphic design. Vibrant and highly geometric, Tanaka unites stylistic elements of Japanese art and Western Modernism with abstract flair.

Nihon Buyo

Most of Tanaka's renowned works echo his early involvement with the theatre as a set designer. In 1981, Tanaka printed a poster for "Nihon Buyo", an academic event at UCLA about the eponymous traditional Japanese dance that originated in the 17th CE. As a style of dance, Nihon-buyō is characterized by methodical head, neck, and feet movements, choreographed to the Japanese lute (*shamisen*). In the "Nihon Buyo" poster, Tanaka artfully expresses the shamisen-led dance style's controlled, essential nature using sharp, angular contours that frame the geisha's abstracted facial expression.

Besides their characteristic geometricity and minimalism, most of Tanaka's pieces stand out for their high-contrast saturation. In "Nihon Buyo", the geisha's robe depicts essential shades of red, blue, green in their full chromatic value. Set against a matte shade of beige, the dark values applied on her hair complement the sans-serif type in the block of text, feeling like an extension of the message. Color's adherence to the grid creates an engaging image of playful pixelation. Not yet quite postmodern, Tanaka's *Nihon Buyo* poster nevertheless feels like a Polaroid of a nascent digital age.



“Nihon Buyo” (1981) by Ikko Tanaka. Paper, Printer Ink, Screen Print. 75.5cm x 49.2cm. Source: [Design is History](#)

Kanze Noh Play

Another example of Tanaka's theater-centered work is his 1973 poster for *Kanze Noh Play*. Briefly, Noh is a style of acting dating back to the 14th CE. It evolved from the ceremonial dances and religious Shinto rites of earlier centuries, retaining a sense of abstraction in performance and theme. Dialogues are sparse, meant instead to emphasize expression and reaction. Noh plays fall into five distinct categories, each depicting an important facet of human existence. *Kami* plays, for instance, present a story sacred in nature, while *Katsura mono* plays feature a female protagonist. In Tanaka's *Kanze Noh Play* (1973), feminine features are the focal point in the plane, with a block of text aligned under her eye to resemble a stream of tears. Thus, the arrangement of type and the female form are also suggestive of *kyōjo mono*, or "madwoman play", a type of Noh play where the female protagonist goes mad with grief over the loss of a child or a lover. Bold outlines and strong shading of the woman's lips are intense and emotive in nature, but also allude to the principle of *yūgen*, meaning "dark" or beauty "only partially perceived". The woman's features are strongly emphasized and almost appear disembodied on the plane, creating a focus on her inner experience. Alternatively, Tanaka may be alluding to the concept of *yūgen* itself.



Ikko Tanaka (1973). Kanze Noh Play. Silkscreen. 40 1/2 x 28 5/8" (102.8 x 72.5 cm). Source: [MoMA](#)

Kanze Noh Play's (1973) earthly-amber color scheme resembles that of Kyoto's Rinpa school of painting, where subjects are presented against elegant golden backgrounds. Tanaka himself was once described as "the modern embodiment" of the Rinpa school of painting, and while he accepted Rinpa's influence on his work, he also described the Rinpa movement as portraying an idea of beauty that is "too far removed from who we really are" (Calza, 1997). Formed in a multicultural era, Tanaka was also influenced by Western movements like the New York School of Design. In *Kanze Noh Play* (1973), the stair-like element containing the

typography feels like an homage to the style of Saul Bass, whom he met in the 1960's. Later works, like *Kanze Noh Play* (1981) express a Pop Art style reminiscent of Warhol.

Ginza Saison Theatre

Tanaka's *Ginza Saison Theatre* (1986) poster is another example of Tanaka's shapely consideration of contrast and signature use of bold hue. For context, Ginza Saison Theater was founded in 1987 by Seiji Tsutsumi, a talented individual who was both poet and businessman, as well as patron of the arts. Ginza Saison Theater, owned then by the Saison Group, was notable for their progressive stance on women's employment. Though Ginza Saison Theater ultimately closed in 2013 following Tsutsumi's passing, they successfully presented multiple performances, from *kyōgen* —brief comedic interludes in Noh performances— to *buhto*, a post-war, experimental type of dance which emphasizes depth and commonality. According to Midori Okuyama, theater producer who started her career at Ginza Saison, *buhto* dancers embrace gravity and often “face the ground”, as a nod to Japan's agricultural roots.

For *Ginza Saison Theatre* (1986), consider the playful, minimalistic contrast between the stark onyx background and the gestaltism of what appears to be a bird's head. The bird head figure's arrangement is simple yet instantly engaging. For one, geometric shapes constructing the figure are both asymmetrical and mathematically precise. Though the overall outline of the bird's head is balanced, each

half of the whole is different in color and presentation. Presumably, the poster advertised the launch of the theater, which opened its doors in 1987. The teal circle on the left is reminiscent of the moon in *Nihon Buyo* (1981), communicating Ginza Saison Theatre's experimental offerings. Likewise, the teal moon appears to hover over a theater stage, cleverly advertising the theater's nightly entertainment fare.



Ginza Saison Theatre (1986) by Ikko Tanaka. Offset print. Source: [National Crafts Museum at Ishikawa, Japan](#).



3rd International Biennial Exhibition of Prints in Tokyo (1962). Photolithograph.
28 1/2 x 40" (72.4 x 101.5 cm). Source: [MoMA](#)



Kanze Noh Play (1981). Offset lithograph. 40 1/2 x 28 5/8" (102.8 x 72.5 cm).

Source: [MoMA](#)

Conclusion

Ikko Tanaka was an accomplished graphic designer with a flair for abstraction. Many of his celebrated works combine traditional Japanese aesthetics with bold color and geometric precision. Tanaka's background in set design also informs his design output as many of his works are related to theatrical production. Before Tanaka, theatrical posters were simple and to-the-point, emphasizing function over form. However, Tanaka's avant-garde vision helped revitalize post-war interest in Noh and theater production in Japan, with more experimental performance arts, such as *butoh*, still popular today.

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- The two main elements in Noh acting were monomane, “an imitation of things,” or the representational aspect, and yūgen, the symbolic aspect and spiritual core of the Noh, which took precedence, and which became the touchstone of excellence in the Noh. Zeami wrote, “The essence of yūgen is true beauty and gentleness,” but not mere outward beauty: it had to suggest behind the text of the plays and the noble gestures of the actors a world impossible to define yet ultimately real.*
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