



Ikko Tanaka

the graphic master

~1947, Kyoto
Studied Ancient Japanese Art at the City College of Arts and Textile Design at the University of Fine Arts

1959, Toyko
Designed poster for World Commercial Design Exhibition

1960, Tokyo
Joined the Nippon Design Center as one of the founders

1970, Osaka
Designed posters for Government Pavillion (History of Japan) as art director of the Seibu Group at Expo 70

1930, Kyoto
Born in Nara

1952, Tokyo
Joined the Sankei Shinbun Press as a designer

1963, Tokyo
Established the Tanaka Design Atelier (later the Ikko Tanaka Design Studio)

1980, Tokyo
Designed poster and catalogue for "Japan Style" exhibition at the V&A

1985, Tsukuba
Designed symbols for Expo 85

2001, Tokyo
Left Muji

2002, Tokyo
Died at the age of 72

Besides Tanaka's strong, clean and impactful compositions on graphical designs, his life in others' mind seems as unacceptable desire to work, which makes him like an all-day machine running on creating visual impacts. As a pluralist designer, Tanaka's design can be seen as a perfect fusion of the simplicity of Japan symbol and the complexity of the Western symbol. Jeremy Aynsley, professor of Design History from the University of Brighton, wrote about Tanaka's incredible efforts on his book *Pioneers of Modern Graphic Design: A Complete History*, "His designs combine a respect for tradition and spirituality, both of which are customarily accorded great value on traditional Japanese style, with a fascination with modern excellence in materials and technique" (Aynsley 196). Through out his life till 2002, Tanaka is not only awarded by his incredible works on visual and communicational arts, but also his contributions on the development of the modern art and design society in Japan and Asia.

1964, Tokyo
Designed for the Tokyo Olympic Games (including posters, logotype and medals)

1981, Los Angeles
Nihon Buyo posters Design

1996, Tokyo
Designed World City Expo 96



World Commercial Design Exhibitio
1959, Tokyo, Japan

Although Tanaka is not the first master in using the Japanese typography onto the graphic composition, he is definitely a pioneer on mastering each characteristic of the grid-like Asian typography onto his modern geometric designs. Such collaboration of "old and modern" brings up an interesting comparison of modern Swiss style spirit marrying the traditional Japanese moji (letter).

According to Caroline Roberts' *Graphic Design Visionaries*, "There was a strong Modernist influence on Japanese design at this time, strengthened further by the World Design Conference held in Tokyo in 1960, which featured speakers such as Saul Bass, Josef Muller-Brockmann and Herbert Bayer" (Roberts 181). Yusaku Kamekura, a dominant figure in the 20th century Japan design society, aimed to gather domestic designers and expose their goodness for developing the following trends on designs and aesthetics. Also, as the World Commercial Design Exhibition will be held in Tokyo, 1959, Tanaka helped design a strong composition of typographical graphics for the exhibition (display on previous page), which is one of his famous example on pioneering typography on to graphical matters. On this masterpiece, Tanaka intended on using variety of different arrows as subject-hood pointing toward different angles to illustrate a dynamic and complex business feature,

Typographical poster designs



types are well neatly lineup at the bottom telling all the information needed. This is an example of featuring the International Swiss Style design.

Moreover, as Tanaka was being so successful on mastering typographic posters, years later he also developed posters for Kimono Exhibition held in Tokyo 1991 and his exhibition held at the Ginza Graphic Gallery: *Imagination of Letters*, 1993. Different than his poster of the World Commercial Design Exhibition, these two later development have no text lining up somewhere to demonstrate information, instead, Tanaka masterfully incorporate text onto the forms. Curvy and fluid-like patterns were set on to a geometric form of the kimono background, texts were inserted into the patterns showing and hiding parts of the "moji" which is the title of the exhibition. And the strokes from "moji" are also an interesting element for the *Imagination of Letters*, as Tanaka said, "Japanese letters are incredibly diverse...Writing can be vertical or horizontal, old or new, Eastern or Western-the styles abound" (Tanaka ggg.com). Indeed, Tanaka's exploration of the essence of letters give an impression of a new form of communication and a unique image. His modern sense on graphical design was not about to take the old tradition away, but to elaborate it onto another level of fineness.



Left
Kimono Exhibition
1991, Tokyo, Japan

Right
Imagination of Letters
1993, Tokyo, Japan



Top
Nihon Buyo
1981, Los Angeles, USA

Bottom Left
Close-up of Japan
1985, London, UK

Bottom Right
The New Spirit of Japanese Design: Print
1984, New York, USA

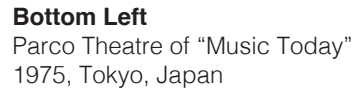
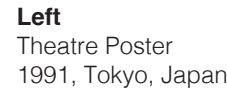
The 1980s was an unforgettable decade for Tanaka in life. In 1981, nine of the Japanese graphic designers were invited by UCLA to design posters on promoting Japanese Noh theater, traditional dance, Kyogen and other traditional arts. Tanaka, as one of the invited designers, innovated his best-known poster for the Nihon Buyo Performance, referring to a traditional Japanese performing art that can be a mixture of dance and pantomime by geisha (traditional Japanese female entertainer). On Tanaka's cultural subjects, he created head and shoulders out of stark and geometric forms on girds, which make up the geisha's hair, face and clothes. Colors are in strong contrast for distinguishing and livening each element of the subject, it is a typical of simplicity and elegance outcome of Tanaka's creations and recreations on marrying old content with new society in a modern manner. Philip Meggs was an American graphic designer, art historian and author of the book *A History of Graphic Design*. He wrote about Tanaka's poster of the Nihon Buyo, "color planes are arranged on a gird to signify abstracted and expressive portraits, and these visages have remarkable individual character and personality" (Meggs 451-453). It is agreed that Tanaka not only succeed on marrying past and present in graphic compositions that were strong and clean, colorful and playful, but also mastered on using negative space and text to arrange information on a very neat and elegant way. (other displays are later designs on promoting Japanese tradition spirit as well)

The New Spirit of Japanese Design: **Print**

Culture Subject

the new spirit of Japan

Close-up of Japan London 1985

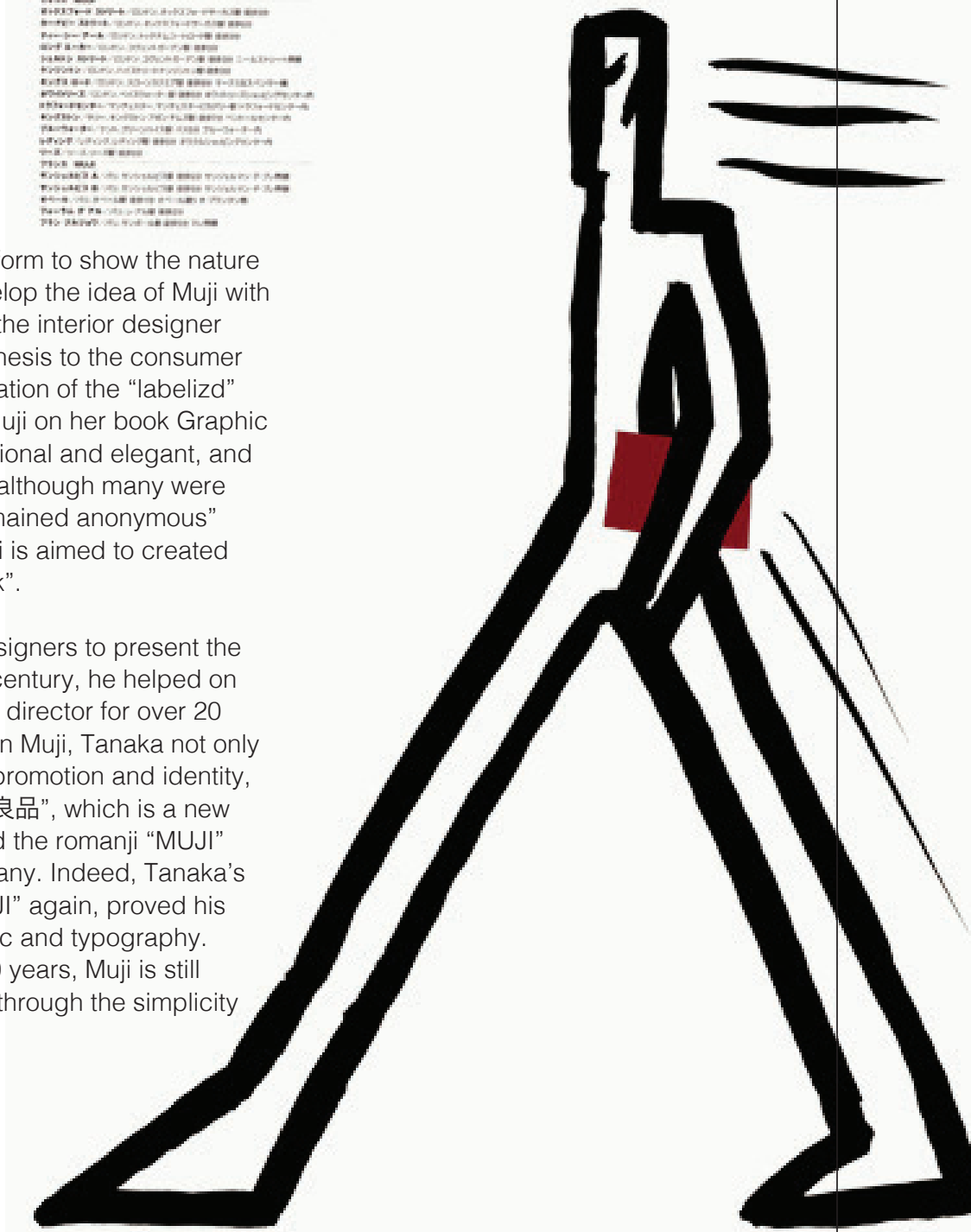


The poster for dance group is also an strong composition of collaborating graphics with types. The dancer's foot is easy to recognized on the center against the blue background and Tanaka intellectually used the red bar to organize type and the subjects, the color of red is transferring from the bottom to the human foot as the dancer's toe dipping onto the edge of the red bar. The other composition for the Ginza Saison theatre is also an clean and tidy illustration of modern graphical design.



Fashion and Commercial

In 1980, Tanaka took "the most appropriate form to show the nature of the product" as the guiding theory to develop the idea of Muji with the marketing consultant Kazuko Koike and the interior designer Takashi Sugimoto. Muji was born as an antithesis to the consumer society and also as a criticism to such a situation of the "labeled" products. Caroline Roberts also talk about Muji on her book *Graphic Design Visionaries*, "the products were functional and elegant, and the packaging and graphics were minimal - although many were designed by high-profile designers, they remained anonymous" (Roberts 181). Therefore, the creation of Muji is aimed to created an environment of "goodness" and "no mark".



Posters of Muji (this and the following page)
Relevant posters designed during 1980-2001 as a
director in Muji, also included logotype and several
products designs.

"When I think of Tanaka, there is an image I always associated him with: that of a mountain", said by a poet Takahashi Mutsu on Meggs' Six Chapters in Designs (Meggs 242). In metaphor, Ikko Tanaka is a gentle, sloping mountain that accepts all the climbers, his exalted effort and spirit made him more like a culture creator rather than just design master.

Through his works, the most intensive feelings that brought to the viewers are his bold and fearless imagination with the expression of conciseness. For his forty years of design activities, it is obvious to see the sense of advocating simple and concise on Tanaka's palette, which is not about something dramatic or Rococo, is a spirit of full of vitality, pure and ease.

無印良品

食生活それぞれに応じて、良い。
 グッドは単品のグッドな品々をまとめた
 グッズ(食品群)です。
 素材の生の食と、工程や調理をシンプルに
 した食と、変えられる理の理を持てます。
 生活全般にわたるグッツを伸ばしにしてい
 る「食」の発想が御座います。
 いつもショップで、良いライフスタイルの
 提案ができる、それを求めているので20
 成長した三田食品は
 さらにグッドな品々をのびます。

[illegible]

20年前は40品。いま四千を数える良品群です

Brand Identity

Muji

Cove

Ikko Tanaka
Photo by: Mitsumasa Fujitsuka

Back cover

Photo by Kazumi Kurigami

Typography

Helvetica **bold** *A History of Graphic Design*
light Philip B. Meggs & Alston Purvis

light oblique
regular

Graphic Design Visionaries
Caroline Roberts

Accordion designed by nytimes.com/ikkotanaka

Xiaoling Cai NEU2016 muji.com/ikkotanaka

Pioneers of Modern Graphic

Design: A Complete History
Jeremy Aynsley

Six Chapters in

Philip B. Meggs

Typography and Graphic

Design: From Antiquity to the Present
Roxanne Jubert

www.dnp.co.jp/ggg/ikkotanaka