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## Research Notes

# Yasuda Kan's White Bronze Sculptures: *Tenpi* and *Sokyo*

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Born in Bibai City, Hokkaido in 1945, the sculptor Yasuda Kan moved to Italy in 1970 and established a studio in Pietrasanta, Tuscany, renowned for the quality of its white marble, where he has been producing sculptures in white marble and bronze. Yasuda's work is especially well known for soft, rounded forms sculpted from Pietrasanta's white marble, but white bronze is another material Yasuda has used frequently in recent years.

The Ishibashi Foundation acquired Yasuda's white bronze sculptures *Tenpi* (fig. 1) and *Sokyo* (fig. 2) in 2019, and the two works are permanently installed in the garden in front of the Ishibashi Foundation Art Research Center (Machida City, Tokyo) (figs. 3 and 4). This article will examine the processes by which Yasuda created the *Tenpi* and *Sokyo* series as a whole, as well as his white bronze works in general which have not been discussed in print before, with a focus on these two pieces.

### 1. Toward Abstract Forms

After completing the master's program in sculpture at Tokyo University of the Arts (class of Funakoshi Yasutake [1912–2002]), Yasuda moved to Rome in 1970 on a fellowship from the Italian government and enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, where he studied under the figurative sculptor Pericle Fazzini (1913–1987). From before he went to Italy until approximately a year after going abroad, Yasuda produced figurative work with motifs such as the human torso, head, and body, as well as cats.

It was in 1972 during his second year of study abroad that Yasuda, who had not yet worked in stone, began sculpting white marble. Upon seeing Michelangelo Buonarroti's (1475–1564) unfinished *Ronandini Pietà* (1559–64) at the Pinacoteca del Castello Sforzesco in Milan, Yasuda was strongly impacted by the work's profound spirituality. It is said that Michelangelo, in his final years, groped with a chisel while progressively losing his eyesight yet continued to work on this sculpture until just before his death. Yasuda says of his first encounter with the work:

When I saw Michelangelo's *Ronandini Pietà*, I thought: this is what it looks like when pure spirit is given form. When you put your life into sculpting, your soul takes shape in the material. So, isn't it possible to create something different – work that embodies pure spirit – rather than pursuing the formal beauty called figurative sculpture? At the time I had a strong desire to create sculpture that gave form to spirit, and would stand the test of time. After all, truly great art does stand the test of time. I believe the art that endures is

meant to endure. The art that does not falls prey to natural selection.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time he was fascinated by the beauty and power of masses of marble in and of themselves, and the act of sculpting them. Shortly after encountering the *Ronandini Pietà*, Yasuda approached Fazzini and said he wished to try sculpting stone. Fazzini readily introduced Yasuda to his acquaintance the master stone artisan Quaderni and Yasuda began learning the techniques of carving and shaping marble at his workshop. Quaderni procured his stone in Pietrasanta, which remains Yasuda's base of activity in Italy to this day.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently, Yasuda's work became gradually more abstract. In 1973 he had his first Italian solo exhibition at Gallery 88 in Rome. The *Seitan* series, which appeared in this show and featured egg-shaped forms, was for all intents and purposes the first non-figurative work Yasuda exhibited. While searching for a form that he could make his own, he continued the work of carving and polishing stone, and what emerged was the egg, a primal form of life.<sup>3</sup>

These egg-like forms were key to the lineage of Yasuda's distinctive body of work, and connect to the later *Tenpi* and *Sokyo* series.

### 2. The *Tenpi* Series

*Tenpi* is a series that has its basic form as an oblate disc enfolded in a soft curve, and the works are made of white marble, bronze, or white bronze. When installed on the ground as in fig. 1, the form interacts powerfully with the sky and makes the viewer aware of its expanse. There is a slight indentation in the center, and the form, evoking the palm of the hand, does not convey whatsoever the hardness of materials, but on the contrary makes a highly soft and warm impression. Works in the *Tenpi* series vary in width from about 300 cm to about 30 cm, and the shapes of the rounded curves differ from work to work, showing abundant variations. Among them are forms closer to ellipses than to circles, and works installed vertically (fig. 5) or as reliefs (fig. 6). *Tenpi* works of the flat type, as shown in fig. 1, may be installed as a single piece or as two pieces with a gap between. The large flat *Tenpi* in particular have an inviting and welcoming power that naturally draws viewers and makes them want to sit or lie down and look up at the sky.

The first work in the *Tenpi* series, made of white marble, was produced in 1996 and installed in February 1997 as a site-specific work for a space at the Benesse House Museum in

Naoshima, Kagawa Prefecture. Yasuda described the pair of sculptures for this outdoor space, surrounded on four sides by 9m concrete walls, as “a form that emerged by invisible spiritual energy from the sky pressed white marble.”<sup>4</sup> About this first *Tenpi*, Yasuda says “you can lie spread-eagled on the sculpture, gaze up at the blue sky above the space, and receive the secret that descends from heaven, a secret of your own.”<sup>5</sup>

The well-known *Tenpi* series became one of the representative of Yasuda’s oeuvre as a whole. White marble works from the series are in collections, or are installed at sites including Astellas Lotus Garden (Itabashi-ku, Tokyo), Yokohama International Swimming Pool (Yokohama City, Kanagawa), the Boboli Gardens (Florence, Italy), Kan Yasuda Sculpture Museum Arte Piazza Bibai (Bibai City, Hokkaido), Higashiyama Park (Iwamizawa City, Hokkaido), Niigata Convention Center Toki Messe (Niigata City, Niigata), Shibuya Cultural Center Owada (Shibuya-ku, Tokyo), and Soseigawa Park (Sapporo City, Hokkaido), and a bronze work is at the Hyogo Performing Arts Center (Nishinomiya City, Hyogo) and a white bronze work at JR Asahikawa Station (Asahikawa City, Hokkaido).

### 3. The *Sokyo* Series

*Sokyo* infused with the meaning of “echoing each other” was also first produced in 1996 and began as a white marble series. It similarly features a sublimation of the egg, a primal manifestation of life, and a form with which Yasuda has engaged since he began working in an abstract mode. “*Sokyo* is my first work in which I gave form to a sound,” says Yasuda and “the image is of something inflated by energy from the earth.”<sup>6</sup> As can be seen in fig. 2, the form of *Sokyo*, which gently swells toward the center, also creates a gentle impression and gives viewers an urge to reach out and touch it. Like those in the *Tenpi* series, works in the *Sokyo* series vary in size and curvature.

There are three *Sokyo* works, each one representing the music notes “do,” “re,” and “mi” in white marble installed at the Sapporo Concert Hall Kitara (Sapporo City, Hokkaido), and the Kan Yasuda Sculpture Museum Arte Piazza Bibai also has a *Sokyo* work in bronze.

### 4. *Tenpi* and *Sokyo* Works in White Bronze

Yasuda first sculpted in bronze in 1968 while enrolled in the Tokyo University of the Arts master’s program in sculpture (class of Funakoshi Yasutake), and he worked for two years in wax-mold bronze fabrication as an assistant to a senior classmate. He has been engaged with bronze since the early days, when he was working in a figurative mode, and even after moving toward abstraction he continues to produce works in bronze, including large pieces.

Yasuda’s first exhibited white bronze work was *Ishinki*, permanently installed in Trajan’s Market during the exhibition *Touching the Time* held in Rome from September 2007 to March 2008. When Yasuda encountered white bronze as a material, he was attracted by the color of the bare metal brought out by polishing. As well as white marble, the whiteness and the texture of white bronze complement the soft forms of Yasuda’s work, enabling his expression. One characteristic of white bronze is its exquisite surface colors generated by

slight differences in metallic composition and environment during casting. The polishing process, too, gives rise to diverse surfaces, and the depth and variations of color evoke realms of the natural world such as outer space and the deep sea. Its appearance changes depending on the weather, and it is oxidized by ultraviolet rays, its color and look evolving over time like a living organism. White bronze embodies the organic creative process that characterizes Yasuda’s work as well as white marble.

His white bronze works are based on plaster prototypes. The surface of the molded plaster is abraded or more plaster is added to shape it before casting. The white bronze *Tenpi* and *Sokyo* pieces, which make the same soft impression as their white marble counterparts, were formed by Yasuda’s thorough polishing of the prototypes’ curved surfaces (fig. 7). Yasuda’s white bronze works are cast with sand molds. Depending on the part of the work, Yasuda employs a self-hardening mold or a gas-hardening process. In the self-hardening mold process, molding is carried out by kneading resin and curing agent together with the sand, and molded forms are left to harden at room temperature. Large-scale pieces produced in separate parts are welded after casting to form the final work.

White bronze is a copper and nickel alloy with various additives, and has approximately twice the hardness of ordinary bronze. Bronze is an alloy of copper, tin, zinc and lead, while white bronze is mainly composed of copper, nickel and zinc. Nickel increases the material’s strength and generates a lustrous silver-white sheen. *Tenpi* (fig. 1) and *Sokyo* (fig. 2) have the same metallic composition, but their surfaces differ in terms of color and finish, and each has its own distinct character. This stems from subtle variations in the above-described processes depending on conditions like temperature and humidity at the time of casting and the timing of the mold lid’s opening after casting, and the rich uniqueness of each individual piece’s appearance gives white bronze its special appeal. Additives tint the surface of white bronze which can sometimes resemble iridescence immediately after casting (fig. 8). In many cases this iridescence fades and the tint changes as the surface temperature drops, but sometimes it remains in places, as in fig. 6.

White bronze is a material that is generally polished, but Yasuda often leaves parts unpolished so as to let their unaltered surfaces of bare metal show. *Tenpi* (fig. 1) combines two different textures in one work, and the left side of the photograph shows the unpolished form showcasing the underlying color of white bronze, while the right side shows the polished form. *Sokyo* (fig. 2) is unpolished, and the natural tones of the light-and-dark patterns resulting from the flow of the metal are left intact over the entire piece.

*Sokyo* (fig. 2), which bulges toward the sky as opposed to *Tenpi* (fig. 1) which is slightly concave in the middle, is installed as a pair that seem to respond to one another and blend harmoniously into the surrounding environment, creating a well-balanced space (figs. 3 and 4). The Ishibashi Foundation Art Research Center, where the two works are installed, is an Artizon Museum research facility which is not always open to the public, but lectures and workshops are held regularly. *Tenpi* (fig. 1) and *Sokyo* (fig. 2) in the front garden are soft, rounded forms that warmly welcome visitors (figs. 3 and 4).

Yasuda sees giving the invisible and intangible a visible and tangible sculptural form as his mission. His works, which present viewers with abstract forms on which they can project their emotions, guide viewers toward them and beckon them into the world of the spirit. The way Yasuda's sculptures seem to speak for themselves is key to their appeal. In describing them, Bruno Munari (1907–1998), an Italian artist, designer, picture book author, and art education expert, wrote: "A work of art that represents nothing is a work of art that contains everything. There is not just one 'meaning' but there are a hundred thousand stimuli depending on the moment."<sup>7</sup> Yasuda says of his own work, "each viewer derives from it a different meaning. That is why I pursue simple forms that can offer answers to any question a person may have."<sup>8</sup>

When *Tenpi* (fig. 1) and *Sokyo* (fig. 2) were installed on September 19, 2019, Yasuda also stated that "*Tenpi* means revealing secrets to the sky." On *Tenpi*, one can feel the presence of the heavens and one's own presence spread out beneath them at the same time. The secret of the limitlessly high, deep vault of the heavens is only revealed to those who actually come into contact with *Tenpi*. Yasuda has said that a sculpture needs no name, only form and presence. "What a sculpture needs is the capability to emanate energy, for hundreds or thousands of years. A sculptor needs to create something that goes beyond what he or she can imagine. What appeals directly to people are not works that can be explained in words, but works that are beyond explanation."<sup>9</sup> At the Ishibashi Foundation Art Research Center, one can see that energy when visitors naturally reach out their hands and interact with *Tenpi* (fig. 1) and *Sokyo* (fig. 2).

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(Translated by Christopher Stephens)

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#### Notes

1. Ayakusa Jinko, *Yasuda Kan, Sculptor of the Soul*, Shueisha, 2005, pp. 16–17.
2. Kume Atsushi, *Yasuda Kan: Connecting to Heaven, Binding Earth*, Hokkaido Shimbun Press, 2014, pp. 82–83.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 87–88.
4. Interview with Yasuda Kan at Studio Shisui, August 29, 2020.
5. Interview with Yasuda Kan at Studio Kan, October 20, 2020.
6. *Op. cit.*, Note 4.
7. *KAN YASUDA*, Leonardo-De Luca Editori s.r.l., 1991, p. 46.  
*Kan Yasuda Toccare il Tempo*, Pacini Editore, Pisa, 2016, exh. cat., p. 10.
8. *Op. cit.*, Note 5.
9. *Op. cit.*, Note 4.

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