

## AICHI ART MUSEUMS AND GENDER BALANCE As revealed by When Two Collections Meet

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### Abstract

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This is a review of the exhibition When Two Collections Meet organized jointly by the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art and Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum, paying particular attention to Chapter 2 'Woman Made', devoted exclusively to work by female artists, and touching also on the distinguishing features of Aichi Prefecture in the Japanese context, and circumstances behind the establishment of prefectural art museums. The discussion covers local-authority-art-museum relationships, plus issues and recent developments with regard to the social status and evaluation of female artists.

**KEY WORDS:** Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum , Collection, Gender balance, Animus

### Resumen

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Esta es una revisión de la exposición Cuando Dos Colecciones se Encuentran, organizada conjuntamente por el Museo de Arte de la Prefectura de Aichi y el Museo de Cerámica de la Prefectura de Aichi, prestando especial atención al Capítulo 2 'Woman Made', dedicado exclusivamente al trabajo de artistas femeninas, y abordando también la características distintivas de la Prefectura de Aichi en el contexto japonés y circunstancias detrás del establecimiento de museos de arte en la prefectura. La discusión cubre las relaciones entre las autoridades locales, los museos de arte, además de cuestiones y desarrollos recientes con respecto al estatus social y la evaluación de las artistas femeninas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Museo de Arte de la Prefectura de Aichi, Museo de Cerámica de la Prefectura de Aichi, Colección, Equilibrio de género, Ánimo

# ARTÍCULOS

## AICHI ART MUSEUMS AND GENDER BALANCE

*As revealed by When  
Two Collections Meet*

## 1. Introduction

Located approximately in Japan's geographic centre, Aichi Prefecture takes pride in its prowess and profile as a manufacturing powerhouse for transport equipment, chiefly cars. It is also home to the city of Seto, a major pottery production centre with a rich ceramics tradition that has evolved over centuries.

Yet despite ranking in Japan's top three cities by population alongside Tokyo and Osaka, and its convenience as midway point between these two other metropolises, it must be admitted that Aichi's prefectural capital Nagoya has never had much of a cultural profile, or scored highly for the availability of culture.

Contemporary art in Aichi after World War II was to an extent characterized by an outflow of lateral-thinking, idiosyncratic artists' to Tokyo and the rest of the world. With its business background, Aichi has also long been seen as a place with a lot of private collectors, and contemporary art galleries flourished here especially from the mid-1980s to early 1990s. Aside from this mobility of people and artworks, a vital element of art in the region has been the commitment of the prefectural art museums (the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art and Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum) to establishing and preserving the value of these people and artworks, and their worth as resources. Yet another major influence on the arts environment in Aichi has been the Aichi Triennale international exhibition, launched in 2010 in the wake of the prefecture's hosting of Expo 2005, and held ever since.

This essay deals with the exhibition *When Two Collections Meet*<sup>2</sup> jointly organized by the aforementioned museums, and of the four chapters in the exhibition, focuses particularly on Chapter 2 'Woman Made', a gathering of work by female artists. Discussion will cover the post-war relationship between art museums and local authorities, and issues around the social status and evaluation of female artists.

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1 Well-known international artists of Aichi origin include Shusaku Arakawa (1936–2010), On Kawara (1932–2014), Tadaaki Kuwayama (1932–2023), and Yoshitomo Nara (b. 1959) who was not born in Aichi but studied at the Aichi University of the Arts.

2 *When Two Collections Meet: Co-curated by the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art and the Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum*, 16 January–14 April, 2024.  
<https://www-art.aac.pref.aichi.jp/exhibition/000431.html>

## 2. Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art and Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum

The Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art that opened in 1992 in the Aichi Arts Center has as its forerunner the Aichi Art Gallery. A project to commemorate the San Francisco Treaty of 1951, the Aichi Art Gallery was constructed in 1955. A complex incorporating an art museum, art theatre and library, the gallery served as a tangible symbol of the post-war recovery of Japanese society, offering a diverse and democratic art-viewing experience. The construction of the Aichi Arts Center in 1988 was in part ‘revenge’ for the prefecture’s failure in 1981 to gain hosting rights for the 1988 summer Olympics, the governor of the time, eager to overcome Aichi’s sense of cultural inferiority, declaring that it would ‘build the best cultural facility in Japan’. This drive for cultural cachet was also a motivation for hosting the World Expo in 2005.

Plans for the Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum meanwhile began in 1972 as an Aichi Prefecture centennial project, the museum opening in 1978 in the hills of Seto. Next-door in the town of Nagakute, the Aichi University of the Arts opened in 1966, its goal to help build ‘a unique cultural area located midway between Japan’s east and west, contributing to the advancement of culture in the region in response to the remarkable development of the industrial economy of Chubu, particularly in Aichi’.<sup>3</sup> Thus the provision of an arts university and museums reflected a belief that the prefecture needed a level of culture befitting its industrial might.

In 2005 the World Expo was staged in the vicinity of both university and museums, with the site later being turned into a commemorative park. In recent years a Ghibli Park<sup>4</sup> has been built there, its final stage opening in March 2024. The fifth Aichi Triennale, ‘Aichi 2025’<sup>5</sup> will also be staged at the Aichi Arts Center, Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum, and locations in the city of Seto.

## 3. When Two Collections Meet

*When Two Collections Meet* arose from the temporary closure of the Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum for renovations ahead of the Aichi Triennale in 2025. The combined collections of the two museums contain over 17,000 items, from which around 150 were selected. Volleying views back and forth in the manner of a tennis match (hence the Japanese title for the exhibition: ‘Collections Rally’), four curators from the museums<sup>6</sup> together

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3 From the Aichi University of the Arts website  
<https://www.aichi-fam-u.ac.jp/guide/summary/08.html>

4 From the Ghibli Park website  
<https://ghibli-park.jp>

5 See the official Aichi 2025 website  
<https://aichitriennale.jp>

6 Curators were Chapter 1: Masako Sakuna (curator, Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum), Chapter 2: Takashi Ishizaki



organized an exhibition in omnibus format, each curator nominating a theme from their own particular viewpoint.

Taking as its theme the eponymous era of Japanese prehistory that began 13,000 years ago and lasted for around 10,000 years, Chapter 1 'JOMON' presented examples of plastic art evoking the diverse culture of this period. Ten pieces of Jomon earthenware were on display, placed alongside modern and contemporary artworks to offer a fresh setting for their appreciation. Presenting these pieces as artworks in moulded clay rather than archaeological artifacts encouraged viewers to make associations that transcended the intervening millennia. Larger-than-life *The Verbal Communication is Not Yet Born in the Island* (2020) by Yusuke Asai (b. 1981) for example, is painted using soil collected by the artist, and on close contemplation the concentrated renderings of flora and fauna may be found to echo the Jomon view of life and death.

Yusuke Asai, *The Verbal Communication is Not Yet Born in the Island*, 2020, soil, paint and India ink on canvas Jomon earthenware, cylindrical jar, early-middle Jomon period, ca 3000 BC, ceramic.  
Photo courtesy of the author.

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(chief curator, Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art), Chapter 3: Haruka Nakano (curator, Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art), and Chapter 4: Ryou Ohnishi (curator, Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum).

Chapter 2 ‘Woman Made’ will be discussed in due course. For the moment, note that its name comes from *What a Woman Made*,<sup>7</sup> title of the memoir of filmmaker Mako Idemitsu (b. 1940), and it featured hitherto largely unexhibited works by female artists, plus new acquisitions also by female artists. Chapter 3 had the witty title ‘Hard rock/Heavy metal’, a direct description of its contents, and demonstrated the myriad delights of material, technique, and form.

The final chapter, ‘Prayer’, was a survey of Buddhist art and grave goods, plus works addressing questions of the afterlife.

A clever touch was posting pairs of *koma-inu* shrine guardian dogs, many Aichi-designated cultural properties, on either side of the entrance to each chapter, to act as guideposts. These were gifted by local businesspeople, such as Shizuo Honda (1988–1999). Honda was one of Japan’s top scholars and collectors of ceramics, with a special admiration for ceramic shrine dogs. He is also one of those who worked tirelessly to establish a ceramics museum in Aichi. The presence of the Teizou Kimura (1913–2003) collection in the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art is another important element of Chapter 4. Kimura, also known as a collector of works by Morikazu Kumagai (1880–1977), expanded the temporal scope of the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art collection through his donation of archaeological craft ephemera.

Decisions around what to choose from the collections of both museums, and where to position those choices, were of course the domain of curators and their curation, but the preconditions on which those decisions were inevitably based still need to be interrogated. That is, how the museums went about selecting works for acquisition in the past, and collecting those works.

## 4. Gender balance

The term *gender balance* has begun to appear in various societal settings in recent years, with questions raised around the realities of that balance. In the arts domain, allow me to refer to a recent survey covering the ten years from 2011 to 2020.<sup>8</sup> In the fine arts, figures are given for the proportions of male and female prize winners, jury members, solo exhibitions at art museums, and works in collections. A marked gender imbalance emerges, with a schema of male jury dominance leading to more recognition for males. When it came to solo exhibitions at art museums too, even at museums dealing mainly in contemporary art, male artists accounted for over 75 percent of shows, indicating male domination extending right up to the present. Over this ten-year period the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art staged 13 shows by males and one by a female,<sup>9</sup> meaning that 90 percent of solo exhibitions were dedicated to male artists.

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7 *Mako Idemitsu, What a Woman Made – Aru eizosakka no jiden [Memoirs of a filmmaker]*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2003.

8 See ‘White Paper on Gender Balance 2022’, Hyogen no Genba Chosadan  
<https://www.hyogen-genba.com>

9 The only solo exhibition by a female artist ever staged at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art is 2015’s *Kataoka*



However when it comes to artists in the collection of the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, a result very different to that of other museums was reported. The survey covered seven museums,<sup>10</sup> with males accounting overall for 71.9 percent of artists, and 80.3 percent of works. The remainder are female artists, or collectives. At the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art however, males accounted for 64.8 percent of artists, and 54.9 percent of artworks, with the figures for 2020 a balanced 43.2 and 51.0 percent respectively, indicating a rapid increase in the purchase of works by female artists in the past few years.

The report mentions that the ‘gender equality’ championed by Aichi Triennale 2019 artistic director Daisuke Tsuda (b. 1973) may well have influenced subsequent collecting

Keiko Otake, *Stones of Information*, 1984, paper.  
Photo courtesy of the author.

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*Tamako – The 110th Anniversary of Her Birth.* Nihonga painter Tamako Kataoka (1905–2008) was a senior lecturer at the Aichi University of the Arts from its opening.

10 The survey covered the National Museum of Art, Osaka; National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art; 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa; Tokyo Photographic Art Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo; and Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, extracting data from official websites and museum activity reports.

policy. The trend toward gender equality gained further momentum in 2020 thanks to the ringfencing of 100 million yen of the prefecture's art acquisition fund to support emerging artists (ages 20s to 40s) who had lost opportunities to show their work and earn income due to COVID-19. The result was a concerted effort in the three years up to 2022 to purchase contemporary art works by younger artists, with gender balance becoming an increasingly important consideration.

In addition, annual donations of 15 million yen have been received since 2020 from a private individual residing in Aichi Prefecture, from a sum totalling 150 million yen to be spread over ten years, and in accordance with the donor's wishes, purchase specifically of works by women artists from postwar to the present day has commenced. In 2023 the wife of the founder of a local business also donated 18 works by nine artists, with a total valuation of over 100 million yen. Here too, the museum succeeded in acquiring the output of internationally recognized female artists, and promising younger female artists.

More recently the museum has celebrated yet another item of big news: private donation of the oil painting *Hunting at Ur* (ca 1946) by Leonora Carrington (1917–2011), valued at 500 million yen, from a resident of the prefecture. A local newspaper proclaimed 'Public art museum pays unprecedented 500 million yen for work by female artist.'<sup>11</sup> In the article a pundit points out that this is significant because 'art museums as a whole have tended to dismiss female artists due to the male domination of art through history, with acquisitions being confined mainly to smaller pieces of lower value'.

## 5. 'Woman Made' in Aichi

Since 2020 collecting at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art has been sensitive to both internal and external demands for gender balance, with proactive efforts made to rectify imbalances. The flip side is that a previous absence of such awareness meant very little progress was made in surveying and researching female artists.

Chapter 2 of the exhibition, 'Woman Made', was also an opportunity to find out what it was about female artists that the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art was so dismissive of previously, and the kind of value it is now starting to identify in their work. The exhibition also included examples of contemporary ceramic art by female ceramicists from the Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum collection, but of particular note was the presence of female artists who took up the challenge of avant-garde art in the postwar years. This reflected a conscious effort by the curator to take the opportunity afforded by the exhibition to debut works by female artists acquired since 2021, with no bias in artist name recognition, and it was works sourced by conducting solid local research

The first work encountered at *When Two Collections Meet*, displayed at the entrance, was a pile of 'stones' made of paper. *Stones of Information* (1984) by Keiko Otake (b. 1944) was created by taking a pile of the large volume of advertising flyers delivered each day with

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11 From the Ghibli Park website  
<https://ghibli-park.jp>





Nobuko Ueda,  
*Work*, 1981, granite  
Noe Aoki, *Untitled NA96-2*, 1996,  
iron.  
Photo courtesy of the author.

the newspaper, and recycling it as papier mache before moulding into the form of stones. Otake was consistent in her insistence on making expression arise from everyday living, and with this work lobbed a critical 'stone' or three at consumerism and environmental degradation. But acquired by an art museum, arranged in a pile, and enclosed in a force-field-like boundary, her stones take on a certain irony. The vast cache of them dug out of a closet by the artist at the curator's behest here saw the light of day for the first time in forty years. Incidentally Otake graduated with a major in oil painting from Tokyo University of the Arts in

1968, and has expressed her anger at the sexual discrimination she suffered in educational settings of that time, and taken a highly self-aware stance toward women's issues since the 1970s. During the 1980s she took part in several female-only exhibitions, as well as staging numerous exhibitions of her own. It could be said though that because her works were not in circulation, or connected in any way with competitions, she missed out on opportunities for recognition. So what is the point of having them in a museum collection now? One suspects.

This work was always destined to reappear before new public eyes, and observing this development, Otake herself no doubt sees the institutional embrace of her work as clothing it in new information.

One avant-garde art group from Aichi was Zero Jigen (Zero Dimension). Recent research<sup>12</sup> has finally accorded this idiosyncratic cast of characters centred on Shinichi Iwata (1935–2017) and Yoshihiro Kato (1936–2018) that undertook radical performances in the 1960s a place in Aichi art history, with material related to them and their work now also finding its way into museums. A female member of Zero Jigen who took part in their early 'ceremonies' (performances) was Kouko Takahashi (b. 1942). After studying at Aichi Educational University, having been influenced by avant-garde art as a student Takahashi began to explore different directions for her own practice, eventually settling on the study and production of fabric sculpture, and dye work. The works in her Interval series (1981), acquired in 2021 and exhibited for the first time at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, use linen fabric dyed by the artist, and feature pleats that emerge when the material is left to change form of its own accord. Deeming dyeing an endeavour on a par with depicting, Takahashi engaged with fabric's amenability to transformation from two dimensions into three, an honest approach that spurns control of material or technique.

Otake and Takahashi are similar in age, but have nothing else especially in common. Being acquainted with both women, I would say what both do have are a fierce intellect, and a staunch refusal to curry favour with authority. Adding them to the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art collection means archiving their ideas and activities for posterity, hopefully to inspire a new generation of female artists.

## 6. Animus

In Mako Idemitsu's work-on-video *ANIMUS Part 1* (1982), a woman's 'inner male' makes an appearance during a conversation between two women, and that of a married couple. A small figure in a red bodysuit, or a disembodied head covered in black, intrudes on the frame as the figures converse. A concept in Jungian psychology, the 'animus' refers to the masculine aspects of the female unconscious. The video shows the kind of biases and die-hard attitudes found in everyday small talk. *ANIMUS Part 2* (1982) features avant-garde artist Sayako Kishimoto (1939–1988), a friend of Idemitsu. Declaiming in the manner of a character from a *taishu engeki* drama, Kishimoto denounces a society centred on men and elites, and declares she has come to put the world to right. On this performance, 'Hell's Messenger',

Idemitsu superimposes the figure of a man in tights (ie the animus). According to Idemitsu, the animus has both positive and negative aspects, the negative being shown in *ANIMUS Part 1* and the positive being ‘planning ability, critical thinking, verbal expression, courage, and spiritual depth’.<sup>13</sup> Idemitsu says she detected a positive animus in Kishimoto’s fiery tone. Idemitsu is widely known as the fourth daughter of Sazou Idemitsu (1885–1981), founder of oil company Idemitsu Kosan, and in her memoirs and interviews<sup>14</sup> notes that raised in a household almost feudal in its patriarchal nature she was always fearful of her father and his absolute authority. After university she moved to the United States, where she married painter Sam Francis (1923–1994), and with camera in hand made works on the theme of female oppression while juggling housework and childcare. The work here was made the year after her father died, and her divorce from Francis was finalized, the couple by this time already living apart. *ANIMUS* could also be described as an expression of liberation from the shackles of womanhood.

## 7. Being crafty

Of the 21 female artists featured in the ‘Woman Made’ section, the especially striking Keiko Otake and Kouko Takahashi both studied painting and passed their younger years in the 1960s before exploring their own styles of production in the 1970s and ’80s. In 1985, Japan passed the Equal Employment Opportunity Law against the backdrop of the worldwide women’s lib movement of the ’70s that championed greater rights and freedoms for women, and higher expectations in the 1980s around female involvement in the workforce. Although systemic discrimination was now outlawed, women of Otake and Takahashi’s generation would have been confronted by the gap between law and reality, and seen their fair share of absurdities. One could say that both, in their own ways, integrated animus and ego as they built up their creative practices.

Actually the idea that art made by women has a strong handcraft element is a bias of sorts probably arising from a discriminatory sensibility. However as long as it is men doing the appraising, it is not hard to imagine works governed by femininity being given a wide berth. For a thing to be craft-like in nature implies that it is not rational or logical, but emotional and sensual. The commentary for the ‘Woman Made’ chapter included the following:

Viewers will notice that ‘handcraft’, excluded from both fine art and ceramics (kogeï), and not treated as art, has historically been largely the domain of women. This is probably another reason why art museums have so few female artists in their collections.

If we view handcraft as the product of materials and techniques grounded in daily living, the path from Chapter 2 to Chapter 3 ‘Hard rock/Heavy metal’, and the exhibition space, take on a certain symbolism. Both the eerie Buddhist altar dedicated to fetuses of *The Memorial Altarpiece for Embryos* (1973) by Rin Noro (b. 1942), and Shoko Maemoto’s (b. 1957) dress *Silent Explosion – Dashing Across the Night of an Alien Land* (1988) representing the

red flames of passion, and blood, are folk-like in rendering thanks to the use of handcraft techniques and materials. Beyond them the stone ribbon of the sculpture *Work* by Nobuko Ueda (b. 1942) crawls diagonally across the floor, serving as a bridge to Chapter 3. Noe Aoki (b. 1958), creator of *Untitled (NA96-2)* (1996) is a contemporary of Maemoto, however appears not in the 'Woman Made' category, but in Chapter 3, as a sculptor working in hard, heavy iron. Attracting attention early for her status a female iron sculptor, Aoki could be described as a successful artist, tireless in her making and presenting of art, and consistently well-reviewed. *Untitled (NA96-2)* is a large work exhibiting a skilled command of industrial iron materials and welding techniques, the very opposite of 'handcrafts'. Yet Aoki's success lies not in mimicking masculinity, but in the uniqueness of her soft lines and spaces showing vestiges of the artist's handiwork.

The exhibition of items from the collection staged alongside *When Two Collections Meet* featured numerous works by female artists gifted during the 2023 financial year. The commentary for the 'Collection of works by female artists' section stated:

Simply putting distance between ourselves and the male-dominated art history unconsciously perpetuated by previous museums will not change that history. It follows that perhaps what museums can best do now is consciously collect works made by female artists, or being made by them, in environments that disadvantage them compared to male artists, and put these works on display, where possible carefully identifying their intrinsic features. Turning our gaze thus to that hitherto overlooked by the art world; to aspects previously unappreciated, will surely enable the art world to emerge refreshed, as a new, richer domain.

One does wonder if the overlooking of works by female artists and the absence of appreciation for them has really been entirely unconscious. Still, for a museum to make a statement like the above, and actually start to address the issue, was in my view a revolutionary first step in the context of postwar Aichi. Vital to this shift was not only the presence of a new generation of curators, but also the parts played by artists, audiences, raised awareness in education settings, plus historians and critics.

One could say that the museum as local government infrastructure response to industry, had entered the next phase: functioning in a purely cultural manner ■