ON JŌMON POTTERY

(1952)

Okamoto Tarō

THE WILD, RIOTOUS FORMS OF Jōmon pottery will make anyone encountering them unawares catch their breath. The tremendous power of the fully developed middle period pottery leaves one speechless.

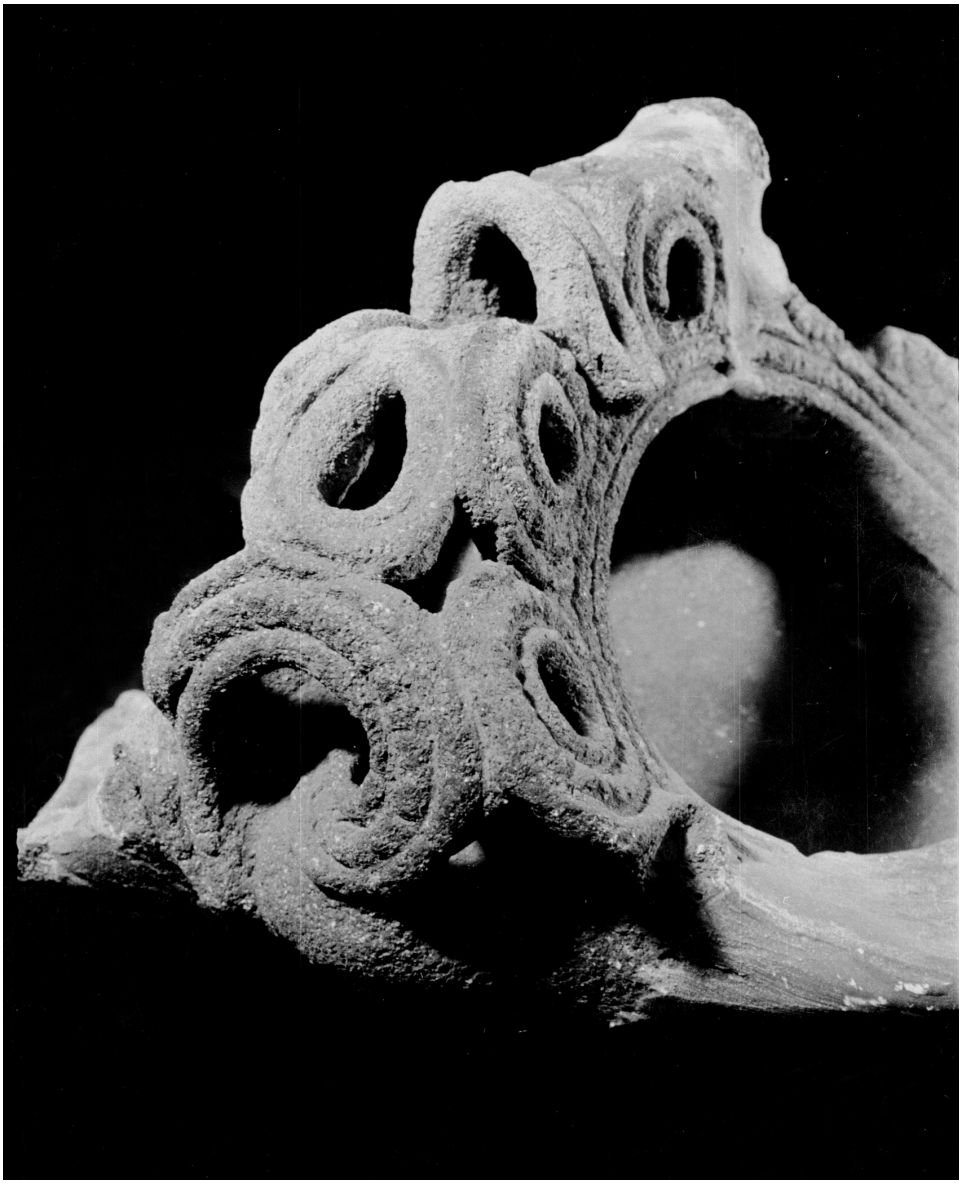
The patterns of ridged lines rise, fall, and swirl, overlapping and intertwining feverishly. A sense of tension presses relentlessly in its abundance, yet there is a keen sensitivity that is pure and lucid. It has an aura that leaves even me—and I am someone already arguing that art's essence is its supernatural intensity—wanting to cry out.

It is the complete opposite of what is ordinarily thought of as the tranquility and elegance of Japanese tradition. It may therefore prove very difficult for hobbyists and aficionados of tradition to accept it with equanimity. It most certainly represents a rupture with that concept of beauty. Is this really something created by our ancestors? One cannot completely dismiss such questions arising. We can easily see Yayoi-style pottery and *haniwa* terracotta figures connecting up with a so-called Japanese sensibility. But general opinion seems to have it that the Jōmon style is something entirely alien that cannot be imagined as having a direct connection to Japanese tradition.

I believe that the aesthetic sense of the Jōmon style, its heaviness, complexity, and almost unseemly vitality, is basically too much for the spirit of contemporary Japanese people to handle. We cannot tolerate it. We shut it out of our spiritual realm and automatically think of it as being beyond the pale of our traditions.

Certainly, from the perspective of cultural history or morphology there is a rupture between the Jōmon style and the culture that came after it. And the subsequent Yayoi style has a lineage connecting it to contemporary Japan. But thinking of tradition as being simply an analogical succession, and that the Jōmon style that breaks with that is therefore unrelated to tradition, is far too mechanistic and naive.

What is tradition in fact? That question will take us through a detour, but until we grasp it clearly all investigation will be for naught no matter



Jōmon Pottery

Excavated in Yamanashi Prefecture

Department of Anthropology, University of Tokyo

Photographed by Okamoto Tarō

how precise it is, and contemporary Japanese people will never be able to apprehend the culture of the Jōmon style with agency. Before getting into the main argument, I would like to briefly consider this point.

What we think of as tradition is not something outside our selves. It is invariably the self multiplied by the past. We always set ourselves as the foundation and look at the past from there. And we certainly never look at things honestly. We make them correspond to our temperament, picking up only the aspects that are convenient to us. Our effort to justify the position where we find ourselves works through the entire endeavor, both consciously and unconsciously. I would not say that is a bad thing. Actually it would not be possible for tradition to be viable outside the self.

Tradition in whatever form it may take is something the self is staked upon, and it is actively made. The self is the most active mover here. The sharper the self becomes, the more it will take on the appearance of rupture, and tradition will be passed down more tumultuously and with a richer dialectic. But the standard traditionalist usually does not risk themselves. They take tradition to be established ideas, which they depend on and thereby lose their self. Then they behave as if there is some authority to this unmoving, unchanging tradition. A big ruse plays out in this. The truth of tradition is in its specific utility, which is at work even among the traditionalists, though they are completely confused about it. They fly the flag of tradition but cunningly use it to fight in reaction against those who are actually pushing tradition forward. It is exactly what we see happening when they champion a world of taste built upon *wabi*, *sabi*, *shibumi* [austere or reserved taste], and other feelings of feudalistic, slavish resignation as valid tradition, while opposing new trends in the arts like philistines.

To restate, tradition is not simply the past, not at all. It is of the present. And it is not unmoving and unchanging. To the contrary, it is always transforming and it is not unified at any one moment. As long as we fail to apprehend it dynamically, we will not be able to bring it to life actively and push it forward.

Jōmon Period Terracotta Figurine

Excavated in Aomori Prefecture

The Archaeological Museum of Meiji University

Photographed by Okamoto Tarō

There is nothing at all that compels us to cling to outmoded understandings of tradition and think of the Jōmon style as alien and unrelated to us. Whether or not it was made by our direct ancestors has no meaning whatsoever. It is complete nonsense to believe that blood relations are a decisive factor simply because feudal thought and customs have sanctified them. Our blood is a complex hybrid, making it impossible to wish for something like a direct ancestor.

We would do better to take up its primitive vitality and directness, which is to say, the basic passion possessed by all human beings—and use it to construct a new tradition that expresses daring and glory. Is that not also precisely the major challenge of Japan's avant-garde?

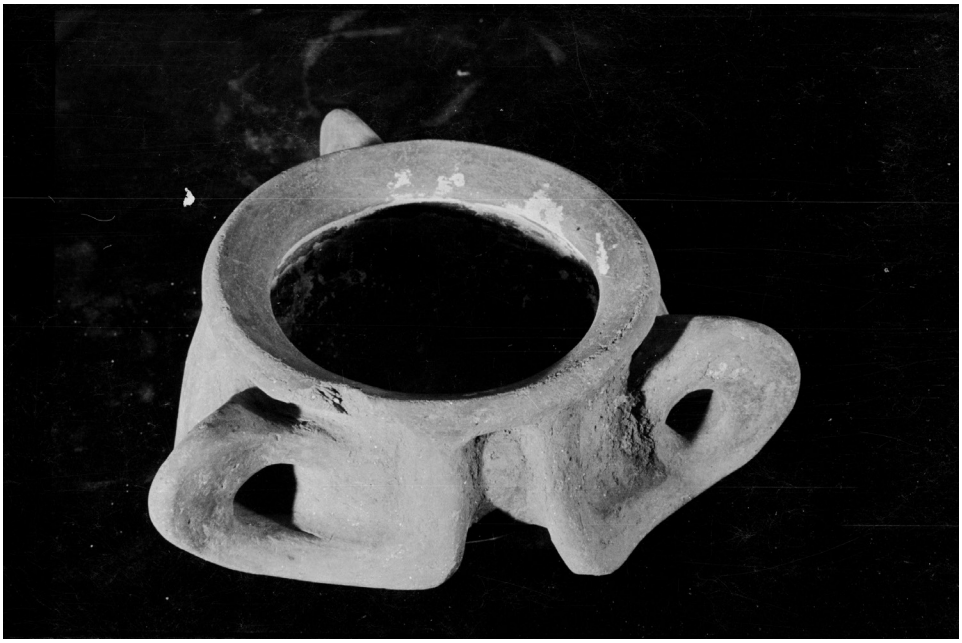
After living for a long time in Europe and getting used to its tough and unsentimental traditions, I could not help but feel dejected at how, after returning home, everything I encountered that bore the label of culture or tradition was so awfully weak and retiring. The monotonous small-minded sentimentalism of early modern Japan is barely worth mentioning. But even the gorgeous and magnificent Buddhist art of the Nara Period that people think of as our country's greatest antiquity was imported directly from the Asian continent and installed, and looking at it, I can sense a bad aftertaste, an air of arrogance in a mature, decadent continental culture that was completely unfitted to the rustic state of Japan at the time. Going back further, there is the indolent over-optimistic island culture of the *haniwa* aesthetic. I despaired at how I could see these fully reflected in the formalism of contemporary Japanese people. I was beset by an unbearable feeling of self-loathing as I pondered the difficult fate left to the country by this pessimistic optimism. But after encountering Jōmon-style pottery I felt strength returning to my system. I realized that our country also had deeply hidden layers of culture that needed to be excavated and with that a new perspective on tradition opened out before me. Not only in relation to a particular ethnicity. I was moved by a fundamental feeling of faith in humanity.

But of course it means nothing to simply be overwhelmed by the hyper-contemporary Japanese aura of Jōmon-style culture. We must make

it our own by actually assessing it and investigating its depths. To be clear, however, I have even less intention of giving an archaeological account. Empirical archeological study of earthenware artifacts in our country is unparalleled the world over for its scrupulousness. But it stops with the compilation of detailed classifications based on form and technique and lacks the wherewithal to tear into its substance from a broad cultural or sociological perspective. They seem to make it an object of odd curiosity like the typical walking-dictionary amateur. We must seek insight into the substance of the pottery itself through direct observation and by confronting it plainly, without getting caught up in academic empirical study.

With that in mind, the first thing one notices is the totally unique hyper-Japanese features of the patterns and forms that I alluded to before. What could it have been that supported this fiercely tough aesthetic sense? Why did its overflowing robust thirst for life suddenly die out, to be replaced by the monotony of what passes as Japanese-style tradition running through the Yayoi and *haniwa* styles that come after it? These questions are precisely the important points we must investigate. Naturally the task I set myself is to compare the contrasting features of Jōmon pottery and the Yayoi style and to consider the basic conditions that governed them. First let us consider the lifestyles of each.

The Jōmon era was a period of hunting while the people of the Yayoi era settled in one place and led an agricultural lifestyle. These modes of production decisively color each worldview. In a hunting society food must be fought for. Tracking, pouncing, and battle are the foundations of its affect. It is extremely fierce and dynamic. Almost all aspects of it are brutal. In hunting one cannot always capture the prey one desires. Failed hunts pose a danger to life while big takes are joyful events, festivals. There is unending mystery and instability. Hunting grounds are not fixed. If not constantly moving in search of prey the tribe will not survive for long. Movement is an exploration into an unknown world that extends without end. The weak die off, only the strong have the right to live. Solitariness and chance form the basis of this worldview.



Jōmon Pottery

Excavated in Chiba Prefecture

Department of Anthropology, University of Tokyo

Photographed by Okamoto Tarō

The attentiveness and equanimity of agricultural people are also naturally governed by their mode of production. They settle. (People in the Yayoi period already farmed rice in paddies; kept dogs, horses, cows, and chickens; maintained granaries; and formed large settlements.) Agricultural life is a repetition of a certain regular order. Struggling against it is pointless. Careful calculation, perseverance, and diligence are the conditions of life. Fall harvests are stored to ensure provision for the next year. Other than crop failure or a natural disaster damaging the crop, there are no existential threats to people's lives. Stability and balance, control and obedience, and a necessarily dependent consciousness underlie this worldview.

That gives us a sketch of the decisive impact that the mode of production has on the motifs of the two different worlds. So now let us survey the forms and patterns of actual pottery. There we can clearly see the symbolic expression of the two characters and worldviews.

The ridge lines that are the most distinctive feature of Jōmon pottery extend vertically and horizontally, fierce and thick, with wild pulsing energy. Tracing the journey of those lines, they tangle then loosen, sink into chaos to suddenly reappear, and pass through every kind of accident. They endlessly return only to break out again. Contrasted to the calm balance that circumscribes the patterns of Yayoi-style pottery, it is clearly the life-adventure of a nomadic people.

Further, a strange shock can be brought on by an asymmetry that seems to make it impossible to have complete trust in the form as a whole. It has a broken meter, a dynamism. Its expression constantly punctures any boundaries. Starting with one asymmetrical face, it dawns on the viewer that they must walk around the entire piece in order to see it properly. But as they change perspective an image that defies the imagination unfolds.

There is a ridge that seems to tower over its surroundings. Following the thick, rounded ridge with one's gaze, it soars up as far as it can sustain before suddenly plunging down in an eddy, curling around snugly two or three times and then dropping further straight down. At

that moment it turns upward again at an unexpected angle, tracing a strange arc as it creeps back up. It digs deeply and lopsidedly into the surface before returning calmly to its course.

Over the course of world art history, has anyone ever seen this kind of meaningless anti-aesthetic, an aesthetic that scoops up the viewer's consciousness from its roots and overturns it?

Having followed it this far I lose the words to describe it. And it is not only that one. Following the horizontal lines that connect to this ridge pattern, one suddenly comes across a wild handle-like decoration that hangs down with a twist in it. Given the size and weight of the vessel as a whole, it is disproportionately small to be a handle. Yet it jumps out with a size that is completely dissonant as a simple decoration. And there appears to be a strange silhouette peeking out from the gaps among the layers. The protuberances springing up along the upper edge overlap in a strange manner making them look like the horns of monsters.

The vessels shake the viewer to their depths with their aura, creating a sympathetic resonance within their bodies. They have a pulsing strength and sturdy balance that a typical aesthetic sensibility could never register. I believe that the unyielding asymmetry and the balance created from bold dissonance are the issues we can learn the most about from Jōmon pottery.

There is an even more astonishing fact that I was able to discover affectively while engaging the objects in a museum.

It is a shame that one cannot get the same sense from photographs, but the way the vessels deal with space is astounding. It is wondrous that in the Stone Age, with such immature knowledge and technology, space is so skillfully, keenly, perfectly apprehended.

In art history, sculpture has always been treated as a mass that takes up a certain space. It is only with the avant-garde of the 20th century, with the magnificent achievements of abstract sculptors, that the

space surrounding the sculpture was finally incorporated and made into a sculptural element. Lipchitz, González, Giacometti, and others organized space spectacularly, and propelled sculpture into new dimensions. Compared to these avant-garde artworks, Jōmon pottery not only holds its own in how it deals with space but is even more extreme.

How are we to make sense of this wondrous truth? After thinking about it, however, I realized that it is actually not accidental.

The sensorium of the hunting era must have been organized spatially. Picking up the signs of prey and apprehending its precise location must have demanded an extremely keen sense of three-dimensional space. And catching prey necessitates throwing oneself body-and-soul into space. In this way it is natural that peoples living in the era of hunting were equipped with a keenness of spatial perception that surpasses our imagination. Without it they would never have been able to comprehend space in such a precise and refined manner.

Considering things this way we are immediately reminded of the world's oldest paintings, the cave paintings of Altamira, painted by the Cro-Magnons of Europe in the Paleolithic Period. We can then understand the compelling three-dimensionality of those paintings, long considered a mystery. The idea that the art of primitive peoples must be plain and simple because they had such limited knowledge and technology is nothing but a completely inaccurate assumption of contemporary people. The way that Gestalt psychologists Köhler and Katz have shown in the theory of "perceptual constancy" that apprehension of space does not develop based on knowledge and experience in the case of newborns and chimpanzees also confirms my idea.

Let us compare the subsequent Yayoi, which was an agricultural culture, on this point. In that period, although far more technologically advanced and controlled in form, the bold handling of space has faded, and their form and patterning becomes extremely geometric, static, and flattened. It is a natural result of their lives, made by settling

Yayoi-style Pottery

Excavated in Mie Prefecture

Tokyo National Museum

Photographed by Okamoto Tarō

down, dividing up flatland, and tending it. While their two-dimensional sensitivity remains, they lose their three-dimensional sensibility. As the Greek roots of *geometry* indicate, the word means “to measure out” (*metry*) “land” (*geo*). In that sense they demonstrate elaborate technical skills, but the sensitivity to three-dimensionality and space decays. (The potter’s wheel was already in use in this period and pottery was being mass-produced as a profession. We must keep these conditions in mind of course, but) the flatness and symmetrical formalism that emerged in Yayoi-style pottery left a decisive mark on Japanese culture as the product of a feudalistic farming society that continues through the later medieval period.

Let us then return to Jōmon pottery.

I have been emphasizing spatial characteristics. But simple aesthetic and sculptural appreciation of them as three-dimensional objects is also a naive contemporary notion. We cannot understand this culture properly unless we attend to this pottery’s peculiar mysticism and push ourselves to consider the fourth-dimensional characteristics that transcend surface-level reality. That is where the true face of Jōmon pottery comes through most vividly.

The fact that in primitive societies everything is religious, magical has been well established by sociologists starting with the Durkheim school. As touched upon earlier, the life of hunters is completely at the mercy of chance. To build conviction in the workings of the supernatural will in the uncivilized mind, everything is imbued with a spirit that controls it. Magic is what calls upon those unseen forces.

In the hunt for instance, the operation of actually capturing the prey is not particularly important. What is much more important, by contrast, is the ceremony preceding it. Incantations cast magic over the prey to lure it into the hunting grounds. If the incantation is not successful, they might not locate the prey or the arrows might miss their mark. Any and all effort amounts to nothing. So when the hunt is unsuccessful they immediately think that it was because someone in the tribe broke the rules of the incantation. Magic is the greatest deciding factor; it is

Jōmon Period Terracotta Figurine

Excavated in Niigata Prefecture

Tokyo National Museum

Photographed by Okamoto Tarō

the hunt itself. Incantations to wrap up the hunt after it has finished are also held. These placate the soul of the animal they killed and prevent revenge. (Although this primitive style of thinking at first seems to ignore laws of cause and effect, it nevertheless persists to this day. Memorial services for eels, or for old needles, or as popped up in the newspaper the other day, a chicken farmer with a new memorial service for chickens.)

Material as well as mental life is sustained entirely upon primitive religion. It is just like how in the contemporary moment beautiful form is entirely governed by the capitalist mode of production, only here it holds religious significance. We must appreciate how a deep and unwavering ideology was borne by everything from the obvious *dogū* earthen figures and clay tablets all the way to the patterns and designs of everyday items like pots. The fact that practical use alone was not their main purpose is clear from their form. Yet at the same time, it is certain that the complex and mysterious patterns of the Jōmon style were not created solely by an aesthetic consciousness like the art for art's sake of the present. It is adorned with a fiercely religious, magical meaning, or to put it differently, it points toward a fourth dimension.

That mystery, however, does not necessarily take the same form as mystery as we think of it today. In primitive societies the seen and unseen worlds are not mystically separated, but are directly connected, as Lévy-Bruhl argues in the "law of participation." It is a pre-rational mode of thought wherein a human being can believe they are at the same time a kangaroo without any sense of contradiction. The bear which is hunted may at the same time be a stone, a *dogū* clay figure, a human being (or even an abstract entity, it doesn't matter). The primitive person has no doubt about such things. If that's the case, then to catch the bear, working an incantation upon a stone or *dogū* might work. In our thinking, the idea of the mysterious must serve as a medium for a bear to be a stone. But they did not have such a view of the mysterious. Things were connected directly, without a mediator. To expand on this worldview, the patterns and such on Jōmon pottery were likely far more concretely and realistically connected to other things than we imagine. What they were concretely connected to and

how is something we have no way to perceive today.

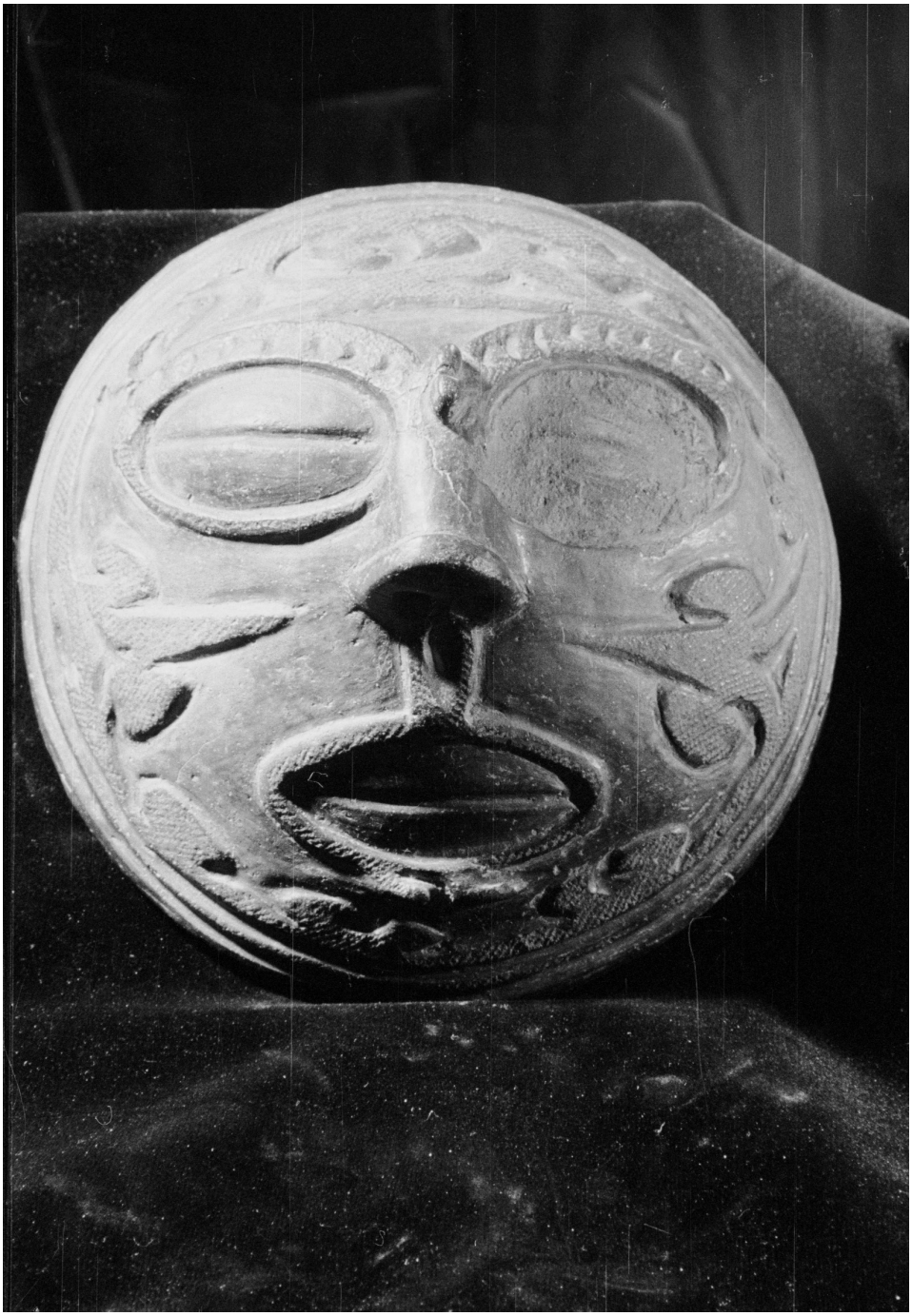
Yet we can clearly pick out the spiritual moment at the root of their fierce, tough, mysterious aesthetic sensibility. It is the ambivalence, the tragic, compound spirit immanent in the way of life of the hunter.

For hunting people, prey is simultaneously a deity with a sacred spirit, but at the same time a rival in a violent struggle, an enemy. Yet it happens to be the sustenance upon which they live. The absence of prey is immediately a threat to their lives. They kill a god that they should not. And precisely because they do so, it assumes divinity. This principle of contradiction is the tragic condition of their existence. As I described above, they do not believe they can hunt without strict religious ritual, but the reason for that is not purely utilitarian. It is a solemn act undertaken to deal with this contradiction.

There is worry and danger. Their robust, primitive vitality overcomes it. I know of no art that so richly displays such a fierce aspect, of people who endured and overcame being torn apart by a burning contradiction.

Putting it this way, one might be reminded of something like the modern human drama. But it is not the same. It is completely different from the tragedy and troubles that we think about. It conformed far more directly to their actual lives and was keyed to things. They went along with things. I repeat myself but the primitive robustness and wealth of spirit was realized through harsh, practical negotiation with a supernatural world. The life balance between nature and humans is dynamic and dialectical. And is buried within the strange, heavy, exceedingly fierce aesthetic. It is indeed a dialogue with the fourth dimension.

We have now examined the form of Jōmon culture along with the worldview that undergirds it. But that is not my final goal. Because what is more pressing for us, what is a more important issue, is what we take away from this artwork and what meaning our relationship with it has. No matter how splendid Jōmon pottery may be, it is a thing of the past.



Jōmon Period Mask

Excavated in Akita Prefecture

Department of Anthropology, University of Tokyo

Photographed by Okamoto Tarō

We live even more fiercely and boldly facing today's reality, meaning this will have no meaning whatsoever unless we set its expression on top of art.

By now we have no dialogue with the fourth dimension. Just as they negotiated with the supernatural world, however, we are also engaged with urgent problems that are invisible but which nonetheless press upon us with extreme practical reality. And these are not simply related to aesthetics. Nuclear bombs explode, two worlds confront each other, strange economic panics occur. And while we assign them to categories of good or bad, they affect our lives with extreme practical reality, just like the spirits did in primitive societies. The misfortune of today's art for art's sake crowd is the way they think of these as basically separate from art and sequester art off. The optimistic aesthetic based on taste and preference alone is the legacy of the age of manufacture when artists were artisans, cut off from actual social reality.

In the inescapable reality of our present, adhering to artistic consciousness falls too far into spiritualism. Almost all artists get by by covering over their powerlessness and earnestly hiding how lost they feel. So long as they do not hurl themselves directly against these invisible but extremely real things and tear themselves open, they remain critically helpless toward reality and in their art. But we must not mystify this negotiation. That would be decadence and corruption.

We must look the unspiritual spirituality of primitive Jōmon art in the eyes—a spirit that was extremely material and corresponded dynamically to reality and that promised no conceptual convenience. We must grasp hold of that purposeless purpose, that meaningless meaning and take it as our method.

Turn your eyes to look out at the wide world. Or have a look at an extremely familiar reality if you like. The material situation around you will have completely changed. The dishonest, delicate, flat sentimentalism and formalism of "Japanese" tradition that is already long gone has no relationship whatsoever with reality. Artists of tomorrow must break through the impasse with the wisdom of a primitive life force and truly grasp the world realistically.

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