

Saeki Yuzo: Emerging from the Urban Landscape

Saturday, January 21, - Sunday, April 2, 2023

Commentary on works

*works are all oil on canvas

Prologue

No.10 Standing Self-Portrait, 1924, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

When arrived in Paris, accompanied by his class mate Satomi Katsuzo, Saeki Yuzo visited the Fauvist painter Maurice de Vlaminck to show his work. There Saeki was angered by the words, "You academic!" This event, which could have been Saeki's first setback, instead became a turning point for him to seek his own artistic style. This work was painted during the period. Even though this is a self-portrait, the face has been scraped off, making it impossible to perceive his facial expression. Not fully satisfied with the piece, a year later, he painted a different work on the back.

Section 1-1 Osaka and Tokyo: BEFORE BECOMING AN ARTIST

No.14 Near the Domicile in Mejiro, 1922, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

After a year married to Ikeda Yoneko, Saeki built an atelier in Shimo-Ochiai (now Shinjuku-ku Saeki Park). This painting is thought to depict the hillside to the south of the atelier; a thicket of trees withered in winter. Warm colors are applied effectively on the ground and the branch tips using thin paints on a soft brush, the sun light and blue sky anticipate the budding of spring. From the calm yet evocative style of painting, the influence of Renoir is clear, as is that of Nakamura Tsune, a painter who Saeki was interested in at that time.

Section 1-2 Osaka and Tokyo: Pillars and Hills—SHIMO-OCHIAI AND MOORED SHIPS

No.21 View of Shimo-Ochiai, 1926ca, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

This is a view looking south and down from the hill top of Ranto-zaka (Nino-saka), which is located at the northern side of Seibu Shinjuku Line's Nakai station. It is a distant view of the city Shinjuku, and the brown building at the middle in the background is the Hotei-ya (now Isetan Shinjuku Store). Bringing vertical presence in the horizontal view are a male figure in kimono, standing in the middle of the street, and a telephone pole (which became the very important motif in Shimo-Ochiai series), depicted symbolically in the middle. The work shows the days of Shimo-Ochiai as a newly developing residential town.

Column INTIMATES

No.38 Portrait of Yachiko, 1923, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

This is a portrait of Saeki's only daughter, Yachiko, who went to France with her parents when she was barely two years old. Yachiko learned to speak French fluently, and was adored by Saeki's friends. Saeki's daughter is always nearby in his photos taken in Paris. At the age of six Yachiko died of tuberculosis, two weeks after Saeki's death from the same infection. This work depicts Yachiko at around one year old. The soft and warm colors seem to express a father's gaze towards his loving child.

Column STILL LIFE

No.47 Paint Box, 1925-26ca, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

In Paris, Saeki loved to sit with his easel in the street, painting the city until the sun went down. On rainy days, still lifes like this work would have been the ideal alternative subject. We can see glimpse of his everyday life as a painter through these randomly placed paints and brushes familiar at his atelier. As with his landscape paintings, here there is heavy texture with carefully applied layers of paint, and lines without hesitation.

Section 2-1 Paris: SEEKING HIS OWN STYLE

No.54 Distant View of Paris, 1924, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

Saeki's move to Paris, with his wife and daughter, was made possible with financial support from Saeki's parents' home, Koutokuji Temple. When they arrived in Paris in January 1924, first they stayed at several hotels, then in an atelier in Clamart, located in the south-western suburbs of Paris, where his overseas learning finally got started. Having the chance to see actual paintings by prominent artists, Saeki was filled with joy and eagerly sought out the works by André Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, Paul Gauguin, and Henri Rousseau. Above all he was especially impressed by Paul Cézanne, whose influence can clearly be seen in this work, especially in the geometrical elements and flat use of color.

Section 2-2 Paris: PARIS WALLS

No.77 Wall, 1925, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

This work, a close-up of a building seen from the front, depicting the letters of the advertisement on the wall carefully, is one of the masterpieces of Saeki's first stay in Paris. It can be said that, in this piece, he has overcome Vlaminck's harsh denial and the influence from Maurice Utrillo. "DEMENAGEMENTS" means "moving," "MAISON ANCIEN FONDE 1861" means "the well-established store since 1861." At the lower left corner there is Saeki's signature and the finished date, which is very uncommon for Saeki, showing how important this work was for him.

No.93 Girder Bridge of Pasteur, 1925, entrusted to The Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura & Hayama

Saeki and his family left Paris on the 14th of January 1926 to return to Japan. This work is one of two handed to the writer Serizawa Koujiro on the day of their departure. Serizawa had travelled to France on the same ship, *Hakusanmaru*, as Saeki's older brother Yusei, which lead to meeting Yuzo and their eventual friendship. It is said that Serizawa asked for the artwork in return for financially supporting Saeki's passage back home. The railway viaduct is depicted in a horizontal line in the center of the image, and beyond that, the bright red and yellow advertisements are captured: "LION NOIR [black lion]" that of the famous shoeshine cream.

Section 2-3 Paris: PARIS LINES

No.94 Café Tabac, 1927, private collection entrusted to Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

The letters "CAFE TABAC / BILLARD DE PRECISION" on the triangular awning indicates a café-billard hall that also sells tabaco. The café is outlined with thick strokes, with the decoration of the windows, stickers, and furniture are vivaciously depicted. The letters, including Saeki's signature, are overflowing with dynamism, giving a vivid sense of how much his artistic style developed during his later series of posters. Saeki's realization that he should return to Paris, a city he loved deeply, is imbued in the signature, his writing the year 1927, and the letters "À PARIS" in the lower left corner. This work has been stored in Paris for a long time, and remains in the condition it was painted, making the work especially valuable.

No.109 Gate with Posters, 1927, entrusted to The Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura & Hayama

The composition of this work is almost the same as the other two *Gate with Posters* (No.89 and No.90). In other two, painted in 1925, the gate and the pillars maintained their three-dimensionality as structures. In this later work, the depth is taken away, but not only for the posters, with the door, wall and the street also flattened into two-dimension and depicted by lines; an approach Saeki developed and reached during his

second stay in Paris. The sky, street and every other element in the image are painted in grayish-brown, with only the posters painted in bright colors such as red, green and yellow.

No.116 Back Street, 1927, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

Rue du Château was the street of Saeki's apartment when he first stayed in Paris in 1925, whilst during his second stay, he lived in Montparnasse. His wife Yoneko referred to this place as giving her "hoity-toity feeling," and indeed Saeki often took trips downtown to find subjects for his work. In this piece, painted in 1927, he depicted the stores on a backstreet using a perspective method instead of facing the front of the building. It is thought to be Saeki's favoured angle, since there are a few works depicting the same composition.

Section 3 Villiers-sur-Morin

No.127 Church in Villiers-sur-Morin, 1928, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

In February 1928, the Saeki family and their painter friends visited a village Villiers-sur-Morin, about 40km east from Paris, for about 20 days. Saeki must have been deeply inspired by the rustic but powerful church building, which stands in the middle of the village, painting 15 works depicting the same building. This image is one of the few surviving from the series. The church of plain white stone without decoration seems simple but still dignified, showing different shapes from every angle. In this work the presence of the church is emphasized by the whole structure depicted with a thick black outline, and the deformation made by powerful brush strokes.

No.135 Landscape in Villiers-sur-Morin, 1928, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

This work depicts houses to the south-east area of the church. There was a very steep slope at the place, and Saeki must have set the easel on an unstable surface when painting this work. Satomi Katsuzo highly praised this piece, saying it was "impeccable and full of edgy sense and powerful liveliness," but remembers Saeki himself being ashamed of the work, treating it roughly and leaving it on the roof. There is also a story that Saeki was fascinated by the method with which Yamaguchi Takeo was experimenting, whilst he was also in the village, of a "landscape painted with only single colored thick lines," depicting the smoke from the chimney by putting the paint tube directly on the canvas.

Epilogue: PEOPLE AND DOORS

No.140 Postman, 1928, Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka

In March 1928, when Saeki spent his days unwell after catching a cold painting outside on a light rainy day, he was inspired to ask the postman at his door to be his model. Saeki painted one work by gouache (burnt and destroyed during the war), *Postman (Bust)* (No.139), and this work within only a single day. The frequent use of straight lines for the composition, such as the tilted body of the postman sitting on a chair, both legs, and the outline of the face, are so powerful that it is hard to believe Saeki was unwell during its composition.