

Full circle

The work of Japanese artist Minoru Onoda highlights the legacy of the Gutai avant-garde

EDWARD M. GOMEZ Contributing writer

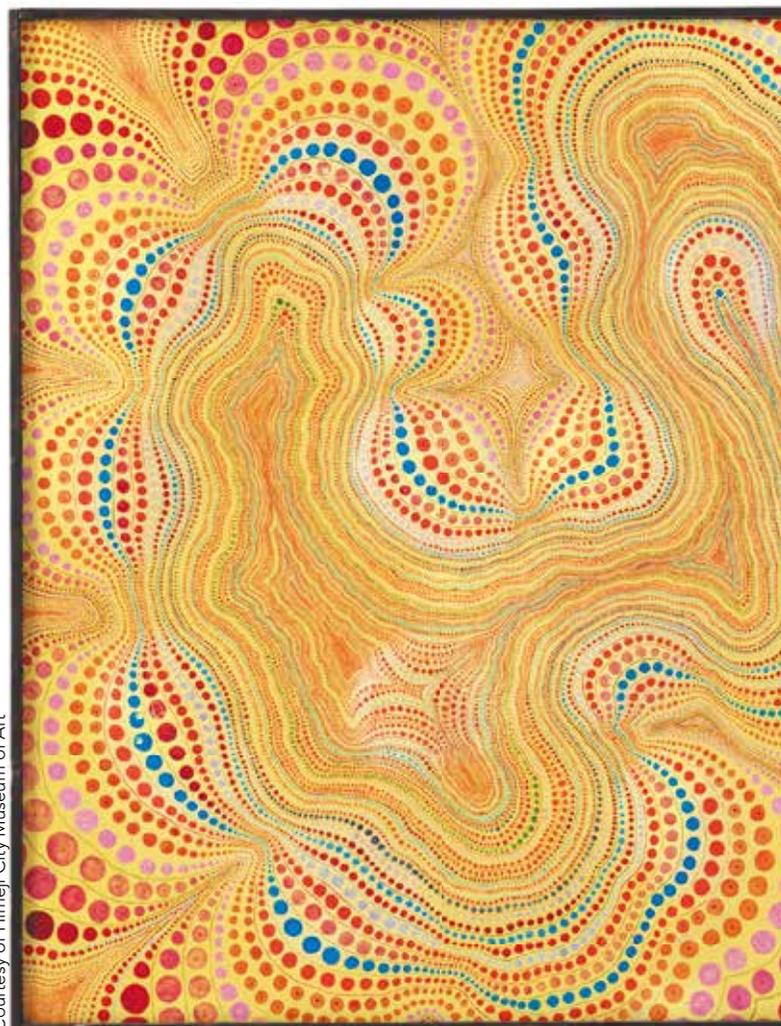
HIMEJI, Japan This coastal city in southwestern Japan, famous for its centuries-old castle, lies just to the west of the big commercial hubs of Kobe and Osaka. Himeji is home to some of Japan's most interesting institutions, such as the Japan Toy Museum and the Himeji City Museum of Literature. Here, too, the Mitsuyama Taisai takes place every 20 years at the Itatehyozu Shrine; this colorful festival, last held in 2013, summons the Shinto religion's entire pantheon of deities in a large-scale purification ritual for the entire nation.

Himeji was also the home of Minoru Onoda (1937-2008), one of the younger members of Japan's post-World War II Gutai group of avant-garde modern artists. Now, through June 20, "Minoru Onoda: My Circles," a career-spanning retrospective of the artist's work in various media, is on view at the Himeji City Museum of Art.

A well-researched presentation, it showcases the stylistic and technical evolution of Onoda's art-making over many years. It also serves as a reminder that, like the legacies of several other, now-deceased Gutai artists whose work has seized the attention of the international art world in recent decades, Onoda's multifaceted oeuvre deserves to be examined -- and appreciated -- on its own merits, beyond the long, art-historical shadow cast by the dynamic movement in which he took part.

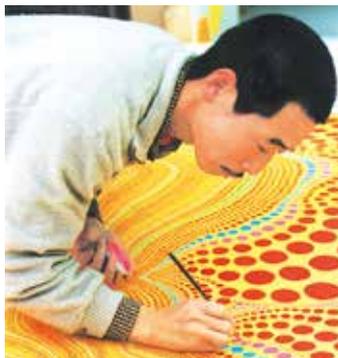
The exhibition is on view at the Himeji museum at a time when it is rearticulating its "mission," noted Misato Fudo, the museum's chief curator and deputy director. She said, "Our goals are to promote the achievements of local and regional artists, and to position them within the broader context of modern art's history. We also want to help bring their stories into the international narrative of modern art's history."

In 1954, in Ashiya, an affluent city situated between Osaka and Kobe, a group of young artists came together to form the Gutai Art



Courtesy of Himeji City Museum of Art

Minoru Onoda makes a kite in his studio in the late 1980s.

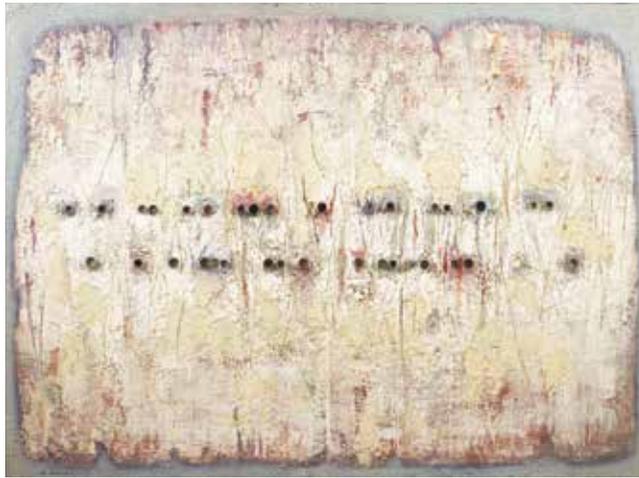
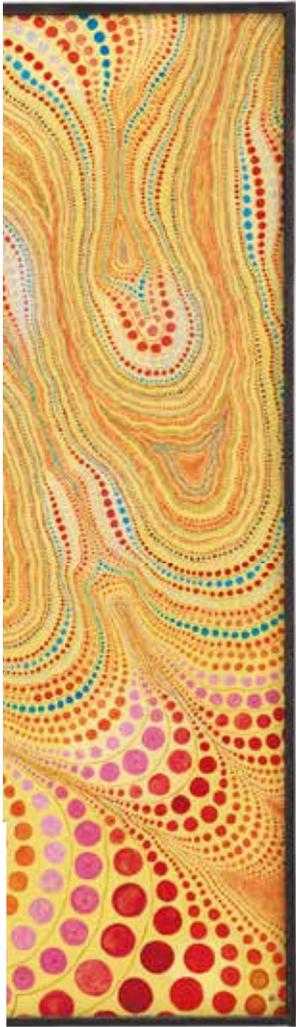


Paul Eubel-Plag, courtesy of the Estate of Minoru Onoda and Himeji City Museum of Art

Association, as it was formally known. Under the leadership of Jiro Yoshihara (1905-1972), the scion of a cooking-oil company, Gutai's participants shook up Japan's modern-art scene with unprecedented experiments in painting, mixed-media sculpture-making, and what are now seen as prototypical performance-art events.

Yoshihara was a self-taught painter whose earlier surrealist works gave way to bold, abstract compositions. Big, doughnutlike circles became his signature motif. "Do what no one has done before," Yoshihara urged his young Gutai charges.

He also encouraged his comrades to honor -- and unleash -- the expressive properties of their materials without manipulating them in contrived ways. They delivered, too, creating some radically original works of art: Atsuko Tanaka made a "dress" of colored electric light tubes; Shozo Shimamoto made "paintings" of newspaper sheets punched through with holes; and Kazuo Shiraga, hanging from a rope, painted on canvas with his feet.



Courtesy of the Estate of Minoru Onoda and Himeji City Museum of Art



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Far left: "Work 63-T," 1963, oil, *gofun* and glue on plywood, 91.9 x 91.6 x 4.6 cm.

Left: "Work 1," 1960, oil, sand, plaster and PVC pipe on burlap, 97.8 x 131 x 7 cm.

Left: Onoda's sleek paintings from the 1970s of targetlike circles made with acrylic paint and an airbrush, on view in the retrospective in Himeji, in southwestern Japan.

Right: Wall-mounted, abstract sculptures made of painted wood echo the shapes and character of the black, brooding paintings Onoda produced during the last phase of his long career.



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Onoda, whose father had worked as a policeman in Japanese-controlled Manchuria, was a young boy when his family moved back to Japan before the end of World War II. The Onodas settled in Himeji, and Minoru, who became interested in the post-impressionist painter Vincent Van Gogh, later studied art in Osaka.

As Onoda's early pictures of a temple, houses and other buildings indicate, by the mid-1950s, with thick, broad brushstrokes, the young artist had capably assimilated Western modernist painting techniques. However, toward the end of the decade, he began making stylized images of flattened, rectangular human figures. That creative turn marked his first big step on the road to making fully abstract art.

Onoda joined the Gutai group in 1965. Buoyed by its ethos, he explored abstract art's expressive power. Some of his most striking early experiments include paintings into whose surfaces he embedded short, sliced lengths of PVC pipe. Slathering them with paint, he produced rich textures.

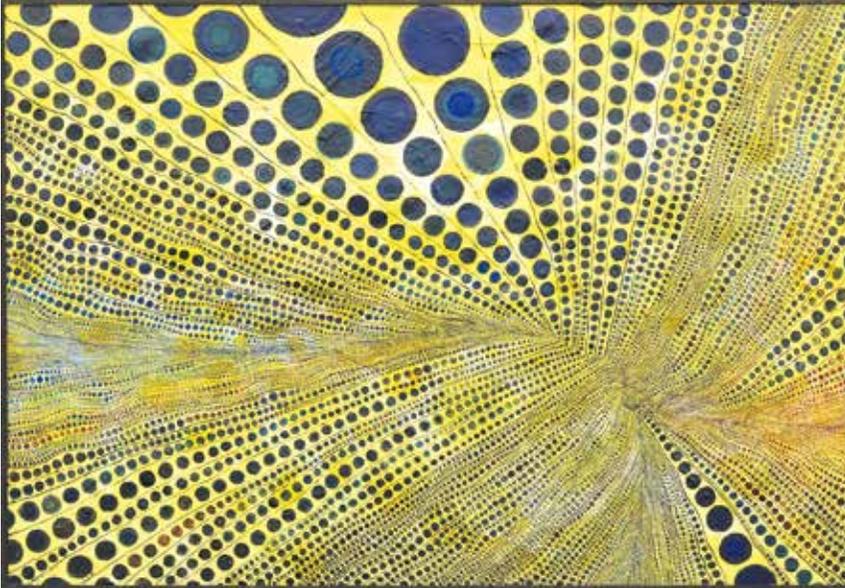
In 1961, a local art magazine published a text by Onoda describing his "propagation painting." In it, he dismissed *art informel*, the postwar European abstract painting that had become influential among certain Japanese modern artists.

For Onoda, it was too "safe" and it had lost "its initial drive for negation and rebellion."

In a postwar era of mass production, Onoda also cited what he called his "obsession" with the idea of the mechanical duplication of objects. He began filling his paintings' pictorial space with endless expanses of "*maru*" -- circles or dots, rendered in basic colors in sprawling, random patterns. This preoccupation with *maru* inspired the Himeji exhibition's title.

In his dizzy compositions of the 1960s, currents of small and large dots flow -- or propagate, as the artist put it -- across the undulating surfaces of his paintings. To make these three-dimensional works on plywood, many of which, in different sizes and formats, are on view in Himeji, Onoda used glue and *gofun*, a moldable Japanese paste made from pulverized oyster and clam shells. These technical experiments, which resulted in what would become some of Onoda's most emblematic works, include "Work 62-H" (1962) and "Work 63-T" (1963), among many other hypnotic images.

Moving into the 1970s, Onoda began using an airbrush to apply acrylic paint to cotton, which he mounted on plywood. By now, his circles had evolved into sleek, perfectly round, targetlike icons, which he produced in individual units or in



Courtesy of the Estate of Minoru Onoda and Himeji City Museum of Art

"Work 61-14," 1961, oil and glue on plywood, 91.8 x 133 cm.



Onoda in his studio in the late 1960s, a few years after joining the Gutai avant-garde artists' group.



Courtesy of the Estate of Minoru Onoda and Himeji City Museum of Art

grid-organized groups.

Vividly demonstrating how Onoda developed his compositions, the exhibition includes examples of the artist's many sketchbooks. Filled with drawings in various media, they offer a cornucopia of wiry blobs; watery, organic forms; and thickets of brushstrokes that served as starting points for larger works.

A highlight of the exhibition is a slideshow that the late artist's son Isa Onoda produced. A Himeji-based graphic designer and art teacher, he said, "It features, page by page, photographs of every drawing in 106 of my father's sketchbooks." A visitor could literally sit for hours savoring the inundation of clever, compelling ideas conveyed by Minoru Onoda's drawings as they flow across a large screen.

Onoda tended to work in series. As the Himeji exhibition shows, his obsession with depicting circles gave way to

explorations of cut and layered, brightly painted sheets of paperboard or plywood. In the 1980s, in abstract, somewhat sculptural works, he examined the physical-spatial relationships between his flat materials' multilayered planes.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Onoda produced abstract works whose thick, black strokes of acrylic paint, modestly accented with whispers of bright blue, marked the final stretch of his prolific career. Inevitably, perhaps, these paintings feel elegiac. They exude an air of self-awareness -- by the artworks of their own enigmatic nature, if such self-consciousness on the part of inanimate objects is even conceivable, and by the artist of a long journey through uncharted precincts of the imagination.

"Minoru Onoda: Watashi no maru" ("Minoru Onoda: My Circles"), published by Seigensha Art Publishing, a bilingual, Japanese-and-English book that accompanies the Himeji exhibition, adds significantly to the growing body of critical analysis that is now focusing on the artist's ideas and achievements.

In it, Fudo notes that Onoda regarded automated mass production "and its direct correspondence to the regimentation of people" as "an overwhelmingly meaningless reality." She writes that, in his art, "using the uniform figure of the circle, he turned the shape into the ultimate symbol."

This impressive exhibition may be seen as a launching pad for a new phase of appreciation for Onoda's art and as a kind of homecoming, too, following the enthusiastic reception it has enjoyed overseas in recent years. With it, the story of Himeji's best-known modern artist has come full circle. **N**

A selection of Onoda's many sketchbooks is on view in the Himeji exhibition. The clever designs and abstract compositions they contain offer insight into the artist's creative process.



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A detail of one of Onoda's paintings from the 1960s crafted using glue and gofun, a paste made from oyster and clam shells.



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Edward M. Gomez is a Tokyo-based art historian, arts journalist and critic specializing in Japan.