

Peripheries of the Art World: Marginality to Mania as seen through Tanaka Isson's Landscapes of Amami Ōshima

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Abstract

This paper presents a case for decentering art history through the life and posthumous recognition of *nihonga* (Japanese-style painting) artist, TANAKA Isson (1908–1977). Isson created enigmatic landscapes of the Amami islands in Southern Japan, far from the mainstream art world and mainland Japan. Initially marginalized due to his lack of formal networks and affiliations, he developed a distinctive visual language inspired by his isolation and the nature of Amami. After his passing, grassroots efforts by island residents and Isson-Kai (Isson Association) spearheaded the promotion of Isson in the absence of attention from the artworld, culminating in his widespread acclaim in Japan. Drawing on anthropological concepts of liminality and marginality, this study additionally illuminates Isson's transition from the peripheral to a celebrated artist. Art histories are not dictated by powerful centers but coexist in multiple histories factoring in worthy contributions from diverse voices on the periphery. Alongside New York and Paris, cities like Kolkata and Yogyakarta that bore witness to modernist art movements in their respective contexts, attest to the plurality of art histories. This paper highlights the importance of grassroots agency, liminality as a framework and invites scholars in art history, anthropology and Japanese studies to reconsider how artistic value and recognition are constructed.

Key words: Amami Ōshima, decentering art history, liminality, marginality, Nihonga, Tanaka Isson

Introduction

“It is clear why I’ve come here—for the finale—to finish the works that define my life as an artist.”¹

Nihonga (Japanese-style painting) artist,² TANAKA Isson (1908–1977) moved from mainland Japan to the southern islands of Amami Ōshima in search of fresh inspiration for his painting.³ He was 50 when he arrived in Amami and eagerly pursued new painting subjects in preparation towards his comeback solo exhibition in Tokyo. Isson’s original plans were to travel to northern Japan after Amami but this did not materialize. He stayed in Amami for the next 19 years, producing enigmatic landscapes of the island but his unexpected passing in 1977 brought this dream to an end. The quote above is dated 1959, the first year when Isson started living in Amami. With a spate of unsuccessful attempts behind him in finding his footing in the art world in Tokyo, one can almost feel a sense of determination and resolve here in Isson’s sentiments. Amami would be where Isson would paint the defining works of his oeuvre.

In the simple, bare-bones dwelling that Isson called home, he left behind numerous paintings, sketches and photographs numbering in the hundreds, all based on the natural landscapes of Amami and its wildlife.⁴ When he passed, he was barely known to the art world but the posthumous exhibition activities bear the hallmarks of a recognized artist. In fact, many islanders who had seen or worked with Isson, did not know the full extent of his story and identity. Isson worked seasonally, in line with his painting plans, at an Ōshima-Tsumugi factory dyeing threads in preparation for weaving.

The TANAKA Isson Memorial Art Museum in Amami was constructed in 2000 on Amami island to house the majority of his artwork collection. Since then, several of Isson’s Amami landscape paintings have travelled to France as part of *Japonismes* (2018), an exhibition that showcased Japanese culture, commemorating 160 years of diplomatic

1 This was taken from a letter Isson had written, dated March 1959. The original text in Japanese reads 「私のえかきとしての生涯の最後を飾る絵をかく為に来て居ることがはっきりしました。」 See YUHARA Kanoko, *E no Naka no Tamashi: Hyōden Tanaka Isson*.

2 The term *nihonga* (“pictures of Japan” in Japanese) was conceived during the Meiji period and used primarily to distinguish between traditional Japanese-style paintings from Western-style paintings (*yōga*). *Nihonga* is based on traditional Japanese techniques and stylised conventions, using *iwaenogu* (mineral pigments) and occasionally ink, together with other organic pigments painted with brush on silk or paper. Whilst its usage only started in the Meiji period, it is actually a continuation of the techniques and conventions seen in decorative folding screens, bird-and-flower hanging scrolls, and monochromatic ink paintings.

3 Isson was born in Tochigi and later relocated with his family to Chiba, prior to moving to Amami. Specifically, in my usage of “mainland Japan”, I am referring to the term *hondō* (本土) which collectively refers to the main islands of Hokkaido, Honshū, Shikoku and Kyushū. The term *hondō* is mentioned in Japanese law which makes a distinction between the mainland and outlying remote islands (referred to as *ritō* 離島) such as the Amami islands. See “離島航路整備法”, e-Gov, 法令検索, <https://laws.e-gov.go.jp/law/327AC1000000226>

4 Isson relocated to Amami alone and lived a largely isolated life without socializing much with anyone. In Isson’s last rented home, although some slight refurbishment was needed for the interior of the home which was rundown, Isson purportedly requested the landlord not to go ahead with it as he has wished to live in very simple conditions. At the time of his passing, he had barely moved into it for 10 days and even the utilities were not fully connected. Perhaps Isson might have been anxious to move into a new abode and continue painting.

relations between Japan and France. The exhibition was co-sponsored by the Japan Foundation and was held over an 8-month period from November 2018 to March 2019.

It was the first recognition of Isson's artworks in representing Japanese art internationally. In 2024, Isson's dream of a solo show in Tokyo albeit posthumously came true when an exhibition titled *Tanaka Isson: Light and Soul* was held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. The exhibition which showcased "the complete picture" of his life and work, received up to 5000 people daily and was voted Bijutsutecho Readers' Choice Exhibition of the Year in 2024 (TOKYO METROPOLITAN ART MUSEUM and BIJUTSUTECHO, 2025).⁵ Isson's posthumous recognition and fame today is nothing short of an "Isson mania" (colloquially, "Isson-boom") but it was a grassroots driven initiative as I shall explain in the subsequent passages.

This paper examines Tanaka Isson's trajectory from a marginalized artist on the periphery of the Japanese art world—doubly displaced through his relocation to the Amami Islands, to posthumous popularity and recognition. My arguments are two-fold: firstly, the application of anthropological concepts of marginality provide critical insights into Isson's shifting status; secondly, grassroots (bottom-up directive) efforts played an integral role in this transformation. This study presents a compelling case for decentering prevailing narratives within Japanese art and would be of interest to scholars of art history, anthropology and Amami-island interdisciplinary fields.

Background of the Art World: Center and Periphery

In the artistic ecosystem, major centres—primarily located in urban, metropolitan cities—wield considerable power, exerting significant influence over the formation and perpetuation of dominant art narratives. Paris, as the center of the western art world in the twentieth century comes to mind, followed by New York in the contemporary landscape.

In Japan, the center of the art world (or as I refer to as, the mainstream art world) has been Tokyo, and to an extent, Kyoto and Osaka but not all centers are noted to wield equal influence nor are they identical in formation or artistic activities.

Tokyo, as the political center since the Meiji Restoration, became the locus of national institutions of art (such as art schools, museums) and resources.⁶ In the modernizing reforms of the Meiji period, Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Tokyo Bijutsu Gakko later became known as Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku or Geidai after a merger) was founded in response to Japan's

5 See Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, "TANAKA Isson: Light and Soul", https://www.tobikan.jp/en/exhibition/2024_issontanaka.html Accessed 13 Nov, 2025 and Bijutsutecho Editorial Team. "読者が選ぶ2024年のベスト展覧会。トップは「田中一村展 奄美の光 魂の絵画」" Bijutsutecho. Accessed October 7, 2025. <https://bijutsutecho.com/magazine/insight/30060>

6 At the time when Isson was newly matriculated into the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Tokyo Bijutsu Gakko), the Tokyo National Museum (Tokyo Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan) was already established at Ueno Park in the same vicinity. Apart from being having the country's political headquarters situated in Tokyo, the city has the congregation of several important institutions of art including National Museum of Modern Art (Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan) and National Museum of Western Art (Kokuritsu Seiyō Bijutsukan), both of which were established in the postwar period.

“lack of a national school of art” (DōSHIN, 2011).⁷ Since its founding in 1887, Geidai has had an integral role in shaping the discourse of art in Japan. Founding faculty members were prominent, leading artists who in turned trained students who consistently achieved success exhibition circuit via the government art exhibitions (*kanten*) or other major public art exhibitions (*kōboten*). In addition to their art school training, Geidai students worked to submit artworks to the *kanten*. Most faculty members themselves too, would have gone through the submission process thus becoming valuable mentors whilst others were also appointed as *kanten* jury members.

The prestige and visibility attached to these exhibitions propelled their careers, and continued success meant securing a place in the Japanese art canon. For instance, artists who exhibited in Tokyo immediately gained the advantage of reaching a wider audience and were able to leverage this alongside the affiliation and networks of Geidai and the *kanten* to further their success.

The existence of such centers produces a dominant, hierarchical model of art history which shapes the formation of the art canon. This dynamic exemplifies the center-periphery debate whereby the former holds considerable power and exerts influence over the latter. Not just in the art world, the center-periphery power dynamics play out in many intellectual fields from political science, economics to history and colonial studies. With this belief, the peripheries of the art world are understood to be dominated by the center, and expected to either adapt to or be assimilated by it.

Isson had a promising early start, having been recognized for his artistic talent at a young age and actively groomed for a career as a *nanga* (Chinese-style) painter.⁸ His prospects appeared bright when he matriculated into the nihonga programme at Geidai; however he withdrew from the school after only a few months, citing personal reasons (LOH-KAZUHARA 2022).⁹ This withdrawal effectively cut him off from the Geidai affiliation and networks which were considered important, if not essential, in art circles at the time. Isson was acutely aware of his disadvantaged position, commenting “those successful in Tokyo had come from wealthy backgrounds and had good connections. By mere artistic ability, it would be tough for one to succeed” (MINAMI NIPPON SHINBUNSHA 1999).¹⁰

7 The Tokyo Bijutsu Gakko was the original name at its founding and in the postwar period, in 1949, changed its name to Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku (Tokyo University of the Arts) as a result of the merger of both the Fine Arts and Music departments.

For more on institutions and politics of art, see Satō Dōshin, *Modern Japanese Art and the Meiji State: The Politics of Beauty*, trans. Hiroshi Nara, “Part 1 The Politics of Modern Art: Institutions, Economics and Art History. Getty Publications, 2011.

8 Nanga painting (or literati painting) translates to “Southern Paintings”. This specifically refers to the influence of Chinese, Southern School style landscape paintings that were introduced to Japan. Japanese painters emulated the expressive and freely executed calligraphic styles of the Chinese literati artists, and absorbed this (in other words, ‘japanized’) practice into nanga. For more information, see Paul Berry and Michiyo Morikoa, *Bunjinga from Late Edo to Early Twentieth Century Japan*. Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2008 and James Cahill, *Scholar Painters of Japan*. Asia Society, 1976.

9 Isson cited “personal reasons” for his withdrawal from Geidai. For further details, see Loh-Kazuhara, Eve, “Tanaka Isson and Post-war Nihonga: Landscapes of Liminality and Isolation” (PhD thesis, National University of Singapore, 2022), 38–41,

10 In a letter to Nakajima Yoshisada, dated March 1959. Minami Nippon Shinbunsha, ed. *Nihon no Gōgyan: Tanaka Isson*, 129

Unable to sustain any success in the exhibition circuit and deciding to bank all on his artistic skill, prompted him to make the decisive move to Amami.

Marginalization and Liminality

Attracted to the islands' vibrant colours and abundant nature, Isson was determined to create new works here which would culminate in a solo exhibition in Tokyo. What was first conceived as a short sojourn turned into nineteen years, resulting in a series of the most prolific paintings of his career.

Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep uses the term, "*marge*" which is French for margin, to describe the middle phase, a liminal phase or liminality seen in rites of passage. This comes from his 1909 study across several indigenous societies ranging from Africa, Oceania, South America and rural American groups (GENNEP 1960).¹¹ According to Gennep, during a rite of passage, an individual goes through an in-between or liminal stage. An example that best illustrates this would be an adolescent going through puberty. During this period, the adolescent experiences an in-between stage known as the liminal stage (refer to Fig. 1). This is a transitional period between two social positions, and individuals must pass through before emerging in their new status. Returning to the analogy, the adolescent ultimately becomes a young adult.

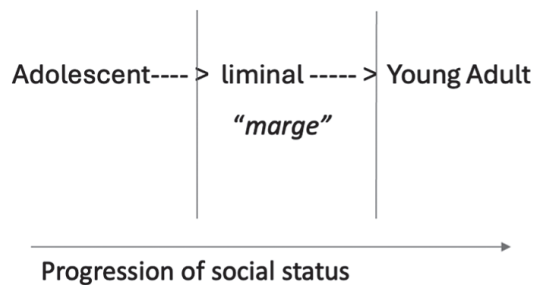


Fig. 1 Diagram of Rites of Passage showing Liminal Phase According to van GENNEP

Van GENNEP explains that the liminal stage is necessary because the gap between the two stages is so great that one cannot pass from one to another without the intermediate, i.e. liminal stage. The liminal stage allows the individual to be changed. Thus, in this case, when the individual (the adolescent) becomes an adult, he or she is then reintegrated back into society. The celebration of *Seijin Shiki* (Coming of Age) in Japan which typically involves an official ceremony at city or municipal halls, is akin to this "reintegration"—a rite, I posit, that welcomes young people into their newly-conferred status as adults.

Further to van Gennep's concept of liminality, anthropologist Victor Turner states that the liminal period is one in which individuals undergoing the rite of passage are found to

¹¹ See Gennep, Arnold van. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.1960

be in a condition of ambiguity or even paradox (TURNER 1969, LESSA and VOGT 1979).¹² In this example, the adolescent is no longer classified as the child they were before and not yet classified as an adult, resulting in a state of confusion. To summarize, liminality applies both to this transitional stage and also the ambiguous state of a person.

Isson's marginalization, as mentioned, was the result of not having found acceptance within the mainstream art world. Thus, his time in Amami can be viewed as the liminal stage, particularly how he transforms both as an artist and with his artistic vision. Prior to Amami, Isson found occasional success working on commissioned nanga paintings for a small but steady group of patrons.

Typical motifs for these paintings include peonies, bamboos, orchids, recalling both popular motifs of literati painting and painting styles done in imitation of great Chinese masters. However, Isson's visual language changed in Amami. He introduced uniquely southern island motifs into his paintings. Cycad palms, alocasia odora, adan to chestnut tiger butterflies, Ryukyu Robins and Lidths Jays filled his compositions. Often these landscapes were bathed in backlighting, a signature style Isson picked up during his time in Amami but one which reflected the many overcast days the island gets. Isson also abandons the copying of styles and instead, focuses on carefully rendering his subjects based on close observation and live sketching.¹³

Isson's paintings of Amami remain the most celebrated and admired work in his oeuvre. The quote at the beginning of this paper gives a hint to how Isson might have anticipated this transformation. His time in Amami is this liminal phase that van GENNEP describes and one which finds Isson in a state of ambiguity, according to Turner. He has left his former painting style behind but he is yet to become the artist he desired to be.

In summary, these anthropological concepts are a useful framework for understanding Isson's artistic trajectory from the periphery to the mainstream. Isson's liminal phase which coincided with his time in Amami, was transformative in his own artistic identity and subsequent, social status within the art world. He departed from the imitative styles seen in his earlier works and developed a distinctive southern island visual language vis-à-vis Amami. The ambiguity of this liminal phase as Turner notes, also gave rise to creative possibilities and this is the passage that Isson had to endure to emerge as the artist he wanted to become.

Grassroots-led Art Activities in Decentering Art History

Isson's transformation from an unknown artist to one celebrated posthumously, was made possible by a group of people who later became known collectively as Isson-Kai (一村会)

12 Turner's study was on the aspects of Ndembu rituals, amongst the Ndembu tribe in central Africa. See Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage", in William A Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion, an Anthropological Approach* 4th Ed., (London: HARPER and ROW 1979), 234–243, and Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969.

13 Isson was fastidious about sketching from observation and part of this rigour can be traced to the new faction of nihonga which placed an importance on this.

or Isson Association, translated into English. Most of the founding members were residents of Amami island, including lifelong locals, temporary residents and those who had returned after some time away.

After Isson's sudden passing in 1977, several residents came together to organize Isson's first posthumous exhibition at Naze city, Amami. This effort was initiated by Miyazaki Tetsutarō who rallied the support of several grassroots leaders, including the then Head of Amami City Education, Miyama Kiyoshi and Nishimura Yasuhiro who was the High School art teacher at Amami city and whom later became the first curator of the Tanaka Isson Memorial Art Museum.¹⁴ Other than Miyazaki, none of the organizing exhibition members knew Isson personally; most had not even heard of him nor seen his work.¹⁵

The inaugural *Tanaka Isson Isaku Ten (Tanaka Isson Posthumous Exhibition)* was held after a round of fund-raising, at a modest rental space at the local city hall for only three days, from 30 November to 2 December 1979. A total of twelve works and fifty preparatory sketches, including some of Isson's letters were exhibited. As none of Isson's paintings were mounted at the time, careful, preparatory work was undertaken to prepare them ready for hanging. At the time, over 3,000 visitors visited the exhibition and this number was considered a phenomenal success. This takes into account that in Kagoshima city itself, the visitorship for an exhibition would average around hundred.¹⁶

The first wave of Isson Mania happened after NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai) aired a short feature on Isson in 1984 to be shown on Kagoshima regional TV. After that broadcast, the television network was flooded with calls by interested viewers wanting to find out more about Isson and more importantly, where they could view his works. A second broadcast was aired again, nation-wide, followed by a long-term touring exhibition in conjunction with the publication of a pictorial book. The exhibition schedule spanned over twelve years, making stops at various department stores and museums in 36 cities across Japan.¹⁷

The early reception of Isson's art showed how recognition came from the general public rather than the artworld stakeholders and arbiters (the hegemony affiliation and networks as mentioned above). The efforts of Isson-Kai should be highlighted for their imperative role in promoting Isson and garnering interest. In the early days, the association was primarily responsible for attracting scholarship and sustaining public interest in Isson.

Officially established in 1988, the association's objectives were to introduce and promote Isson's artworks and his life story, and construct a memorial museum. Isson-Kai's activities mainly revolved around the association's objectives, and included fundraising, organizing exhibitions, supporting production and theatre companies in their

14 In his later years, Isson struck up a friendship with Miyazaki Tetsutarō who owned a pottery shop in the town where he lived. Although Isson kept largely to himself, his connection with Miyazaki profoundly, in hindsight, change the posthumous trajectory of his works. Through his friendship with Isson, Miyazaki came to know about his plans and was instrumental in organizing the inaugural posthumous exhibition.

15 MISAKI Shinkō (Isson Kai's Secretary General and a local Amami artist and resident), personal correspondence, 23 January 2020.

16 Lecture by NISHIMURA Yasuhiro on "Isson hajimari no isakuten no goro" (The time of Isson's Posthumous Exhibition") held at Amami Park, 3 November, 2021.

17 Specifically, the exhibition did not run consecutively for the entire twelve-year period as there were some periods of rest between four installments of the exhibition that ran from 16 January 1985 to 15 June 1997.

projects documenting Isson's life and publishing a quarterly newsletter (*Adan no Tayori*). Other noteworthy activities were efforts to commemorate places of importance (via commemorative plaques) and interest to Isson. This included the campaign to preserve Isson's last residence, a simple hut dwelling which has since been relocated to a new site and is now designated a tourist attraction.

Every year on Isson's death anniversary on 11 September, "Isson-ki" (Isson Anniversary) is held to celebrate his life. During the memorial, association members and guests visit his last residence and gather to celebrate his life with prayers and tributes. The association attracts members from beyond Amami, coming from cities dispersed throughout Japan. Since the construction of the Tanaka Isson Memorial Art Museum which was largely funded by the Kagoshima Prefectural Government, Isson-Kai has reorganized some of its activities but both the association and museum play an integral part in promoting Isson.

Unlike famous nihonga masters like HIGASHIYAMA Kaii (1908–1999) or KAWABATA Ryūshi (1885–1966), Isson had no estate or assets in his will that could facilitate the construction of a memorial museum. The recognition of Isson's work was possible because his sincerity and life story struck a chord with many people. In many separate accounts retold by Amami residents, Isson's paintings were said to have brought pride to the islanders who despite having lived there all their lives, were re-introduced to the beauty of their island through them. For the islanders who moved away and assimilated into the culture and lives of big cities in mainland Japan, Isson's paintings brought back a part of their identity.

In the initial years before Isson-mania reached mainland Japan and received widespread attention, Isson was perceived as a distant, unconventional artist. However, Isson was at the forefront of attention for Amami where he and his works are loved and cherished, evidenced by the grassroots efforts that pushed for the construction of the Tanaka Isson Memorial Art Museum to ensure the safekeeping of his paintings on the island.¹⁸

It was only after the groundswell of public interest in Isson that brought the artworld arbiters — the art historians, curators and critics to take notice of his work. This is in no way a criticism but highlights the isolation that pervades marginalized artists, independent artists or those working or living in peripheral locales (in relation to the center) and their inaccessibility to resources and a broader reception for their work.

In the absence of established artworld arbiters, Isson-Kai stepped in to actively foster scholarly interest and engagement. This contrasts with the conventional top-down recognition typical in the mainstream art world. It is clear here how Isson's legacy was propelled by a bottom-up, grassroots movement as seen through the Amami island residents and the general public; their activities challenged the hegemonic art world and posit a case of how decentering art history is undertaken.

Conclusion

¹⁸ Isson's artworks are spread across Tochigi (Isson's hometown), Chiba and Amami regarding the depository and collection of his works.

Despite not having the affiliations and networks that would have given Isson a decisive advantage in the mainstream art world, he persisted along his own independent sojourn, dedicated to his own style, visual language and timing. Isson's dream may have been prematurely cut short due to his sudden passing; it has even been suggested that his popular posthumous reception yielded was a result of this tragic ending. His adversity may have played a part in drumming up this popular reception but from an art historian's perspective, it is important to return to the tangible evidence, the artworks themselves (our primary research data in this case).

Isson's Amami landscapes are imbued with wonder and reverence for nature. Although no images have been included here, regrettably, they can be easily found through a quick online search. In fact, on arrival at Amami airport, the souvenir shops sell an array of items ranging from calendars, postcards and products prominently featuring image reproductions of Isson's paintings. Isson's works charm, intrigue and invite viewers into a world that is at once intimate and otherworldly, particularly in paintings such as *Alocasia Odora and Sago Palms*, *Fountain Palm Woods* and *Long-eared Owl on Malayan Banyan*. The magnetism of these images is undeniable and their appeal cannot be reduced merely to the allure of Isson's tragic life story; Isson's artworks command recognition on their own merits.

This paper was first presented at the Japanese Studies Association of Australia 2025 conference as part of an interdisciplinary panel of scholars speaking to a diverse audience from different disciplines. Hence a formal stylistic or iconographical analysis of Isson's artworks, typically undertaken in art history discussions, was omitted.

The aim was to show how Isson's life and work offer a compelling case for decentering art history by challenging the entrenched centre-periphery binary that has long shaped art historical discourse. Furthermore, the grassroots movement that propelled Isson from obscurity to widespread recognition exposes the artworld's hierarchical power structure. Isson's journey illustrates how those positioned at the margins or in liminal spaces (that is the periphery in relation to the center) can affect innovation and renewal. To decenter art history is to recognize that multiple art histories coexist, shaped by diverse creative energies and communities.

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