

Eiko Ishioka: Blood, Sweat, and Tears — A Life of Design

Exhibition Guide

Index *Please tap to jump to each chapter.

[1 Timeless: Designing the Times](#) 

[2 Fearless: Designing Encounters](#) 

[3 Borderless: Designing the Future](#) 

1 Timeless: Designing the Times

The early 1960s, when Eiko Ishioka had aspired to pursue a career in graphic design, was a time of great reform in which the importance of design in society had come to receive significant recognition. Ishioka had determined her future path due to being greatly influenced by the internationally active designers she encountered at the 1960 World Design Conference in Tokyo while a student at Tokyo University of the Arts, especially drawing inspiration from their advocacy of “design as a message to society.” Focusing on her projects in Japan, Section 1 introduces the work of Eiko Ishioka, who had attempted to seek out a distinctly personal and timeless core within her practice

while presenting people with new values and ways of living through design.

Ishioka joined Shiseido in 1961, and started her career with the “desire to plant an explosive within the framework of the highly commonplace and generalized expression of cosmetics advertising.” Presenting the image of the independent woman, she attracted much attention for her campaigns that had become a social phenomenon. After establishing her own office in 1970, she expanded the scope of her practice to include working on the poster for EXPO '70, as well as designs for video, textiles, and publications. In the early 1970s however, she encountered Tsuji Masuda who at the time was working to establish PARCO as a fashion building that would serve as a forefront for culture. As a result, she returned to the world of advertising from which she began to depart from, pursuing its potential as a means of communication that encourages people to take action. Ishioka’s campaigns promoted an independent way of life through fashion as a means of self-expression, while also proposing the concept of “beauty” that emerges regardless of race, gender, and wealth. Such works, through their mutual interaction with

the responses of consumers, had essentially come to shape the very nature and character of PARCO.

Ishioka from the time had been “disinterested in creating spaces for the select and elitist minority,” and thus throughout her life pursued design for the masses in areas of advertising and entertainment. In this respect, her work for PARCO and Kadokawa Shoten in the 1970s, which served to open up the realms of fashion and literature to the wider public, had become a major guideline in setting the direction of her practice. In addition, as an art director, Ishioka was responsible for organizing and bringing together various design elements such as photographs and campaign slogans, refining their expression so as to become something that despite being a cooperative effort “ultimately sounded like the voice of a single human being.” These experiences would eventually lead to her subsequent projects that had ventured on collaborations with others.

Work for Shiseido

At her recruitment interview for Shiseido, Eiko Ishioka had insisted that she “have the same job and receive the

same treatment as her male counterparts.” Upon joining the company’s advertising department, which had comprised mostly of male staff, she spent her days “exercising an active will and engaging in efforts to reverse the position of women from audience to that of creator and transmitter.” In times when color photography began to be formally introduced into graphic design, “Honey Cake” had made a bold move by inserting a knife into the advertised product. It received much acclaim as a remarkable campaign that visibly conveyed the characteristics and sheer presence of the product and its material [1-1~3]. For Shiseido’s summer campaign, which she worked on in 1966 under the direction of Makoto Nakamura, Ishioka appointed model Bibari Maeda who “had the vibrant energy, willful disposition, and healthy body that appeared unflinched under the scorching sun,” serving to shatter the conventional image of the beautiful woman as “gracefully neat and doll-like,” as had been standard in prior advertisements. The campaign caused a great stir that could indeed be described as a social phenomenon, with posters being stolen one after another [1-8].

Symposium: Discovery of Today

In 1965, Ishioka submitted her work to the Japan Advertising Artists Club Exhibition, which had been gateway for young designers at the time, and attracted attention for her receipt of the highest award. For her award-winning work *Symposium: Discovery Today*, Ishioka produced a series of nine posters for a fictional symposium, which according to her own words, introduced “themes that centered on extremely social statements” [1-12~20]. Katsuhiro Yamaguchi, who was a pioneer of media art, had sensed “the eyes of a scientist and hands of a surgeon” in Ishioka’s expressions, and praised its “abstract world” for its great accuracy and perfection. Ishioka thereafter came to approach expressions that incorporated new technology, such as serving as art director for “International Psytech Art Exhibition: ELECTROMAGICA 1969” organized by Sony, as well as being in charge of the editorial work for the special issue of *Bijutsu Techo* magazine that featured this exhibition [1-22, 23]. However, as observed in her subsequent works, creating geometric compositions through use of abstract forms was simply the starting point. Updating this by infusing it with flesh and blood would

become the central theme of her designs, reflecting the very core of her individuality.

POWER NOW

In 1967, Ishioka travelled across nine countries in Europe and America over a period of four months, and found herself greatly influenced by the pop culture and the protest movements against the Vietnam War that she had witnessed. In the following year in 1968, when the power of angry youths was shaking the world, Ishioka produced the poster *POWER NOW* [1-24] for an exhibition on the theme of “anti-war and liberation.” A simple slogan by Kazuko Koike is printed on metallic paper, along with bodies in forms “reminiscent of clenched fists that can be regarded as a symbol of anger” photographed by Noriaki Yokosuka. Ishioka’s strong will to design the body is already evident in her early representative work including the poster for the International Canvas Furniture design Competition organized by Taiyo Kogyo Corporation [1-28]. The artistic decision to cover the dancer in blue fabric clearly illustrates her lifelong design interest in drawing out the body’s eroticism within the context of restrained

expression.

EXPO '70

Ishioka was selected to design the official poster for EXPO '70, having gained recognition for the success of her Shiseido's campaigns, and her receipt of the Japan Advertising Artists Club Award [1-25]. As it was a public project, Ishioka had felt the necessity to clarify both the meaning and content of the image, describing it as "a red circle that represents the nation of Japan and the sun, a sphere that signifies the earth and civilization, and the official flag of the EXPO, overlaid upon one another in the printmaking process." Meanwhile, in a magazine interview she was asked, "what if your poster was to be torn up?" In response to this question, which had been raised in connection to the campaign against the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty that was taking place the same year, she stated, "I won't be mad. I am not fully for the EXPO anyway. So I can understand. I suppose that this is a year in which we must think about things, and express our thoughts through our attitude and behavior." In an edition of *Design* magazine published the previous year, Ishioka

presented an image of a poster entitled “AMPO-1970-EXPO,” through which she referred to the relationship between public authority and graphic design [1-27].

Work for PARCO

Eiko Ishioka’s campaigns for PARCO are a shining milestone within history of 1970s advertising, and had already gathered momentum from the very time when plans were underway to establish Shibuya PARCO as a cultural base. Ishioka’s art direction was targeted towards women of Japan’s baby boomer generation, and worked to create the corporate character of PARCO in collaboration with the client. Her campaigns created a sense of anticipation for the place itself, and evoked a significant response through their strong message that encouraged consumers to take action.

In an interview at the time, Ishioka described fashion as “a tool that enables you to choose freely to live your own way of life.” She thus considered PARCO, which focused not only on clothing, but also diversely engaged in all aspects of culture including publishing and theater, as a place for each person to explore their own way of life.

Its summer 1975 campaign, which received a great deal of attention along with the slogan, “Don’t Stare at the Naked. Be Naked,” was a declaration characteristic of Ishioka who had paradoxically regarded fashion as an independent way of life that goes beyond the mere framework of clothing [1-40, 41].

Commercials for PARCO

PARCO had given Ishioka a short 15-second spot commercial to work with, however she used the opportunity to refine this relatively low-profile media to create a “TV poster” that would leave an unforgettable impression in a sheer moment of its viewing. The pattern that she established there was to appoint a still photographer for the filming, raising the anticipation of viewers through a single-shot footage, and then ending with an impressive copy. In PARCO’s 1979 campaign featuring Fay Dunaway, Ishioka captured the gap between acting and everyday activity by presenting footage of her just eating an egg. In doing so, she questions Japan’s advertising system that simply concerned itself with employing star figures [1-66]. Ishioka recalls that this work, which ends with the copy “This

is Film for Parco,” was a perfect answer to her attempt to depict “the nature and meaning of advertising” through her own methodology.

The Culture of PARCO

Ishioka states, “Japanese women are not truly enjoying the experience of being a woman.” “The character that is able to express what I seek changes depending on the narrative, whether they are Africans, Indians, or an actress from New York.” The African models appointed for PARCO’s 1976 campaign *Nightingale Sings for No One but Herself* [1-43, 44], had prior to that also impressed with their striking individuality in *Issey Miyake and Twelve Black Women* [1-58] held at Seibu Theater. In addition to this staged production, Ishioka would also come to be involved in PARCO’s multifaceted cultural developments including theater and publishing. Tamara de Lempicka’s book of works [1-71], for which Ishioka was responsible for everything from its planning, to research, and editorial, while conveying her strong sympathy towards female artists, had decidedly encouraged the reevaluation of this particular painter in Japan who until then had remained buried

within history.

Work for Kadokawa Shoten

Eiko Ishioka's work for Kadokawa Shoten coincides with the time when the company, under the direction of Haruki Kadokawa, had engaged in dispersing cultural content to the masses, through strategies that included media franchising centered on cinema. Ishioka, who was appointed for an advertising campaign to renew the product image of paperback books, aimed to "fossilize the intelligence that had been generated by the typical highbrow and academically cultivated sphere." She visualized a new image of reading that was accompanied by action, such as reading while moving outdoors instead of being sat in a study, and casually discarding the book once one had finished with it. The covers of these paperbacks were not the same, with each being printed in a different design in full-color, replacing former ones with vividly eye-catching creations complete with a belly-band featuring a campaign copy. Ishioka's design employing color photographs had removed the antiqueness associated with the genre of litera-

ture, creating a strong and impressionable image of paperback books as a fashionable medium for young people.

Yasei Jidai (Wild Age)

In 1974, Ishioka was appointed to work on *Yasei Jidai* (*Wild Age*), which was a new kind of literary magazine published by Kadokawa Shoten [1-84]. As was true for the paperback campaign, it had been unusual at the time to include an art director as a visual expert in the world of literature, which originally was a means of communication that relied solely on printed text. Ishioka was involved in various aspects related to developing the magazine's character, from cover direction, logotype design, layout, and format design to the planning and production of its special features. The title *Yasei Jidai* (*Wild Age*) frankly reflects the magazine's stance of referring to the diverse problems confronted by urbanites. Ishioka's criticism that harbored both a sense of humor and sarcastic wit is thoroughly demonstrated in the series "The Human Catalog," which was planned and directed by her, and classified famous figures from history while depicting them in a caricatured manner.

Yukiyukite Kasanete Yukiyuku (On, On, Ever On and On)

Ishioka, who had been asked to express her “own image of fashion” in a special feature page of a fashion magazine, used this opportunity to put into practice an idea she had for a long time. That is, to pursue the desire to convey her very own visual world through employing children as subjects [1-99]. Inspired by Chinese paper cutting that drew motifs from a Peking opera performance, Ishioka, in collaboration with photographer Bishin Jumonji, had worked on everything from selecting the models, to conducting a historical investigation of the costumes, and preparing the props. Critic and painter Chizuru Miyasako had at the time used the phrase “yellow sensitivity” in reference to the “design perspective” of youths who rediscovered the traditional culture of Japan and Asia as a foreign nation while living in the context of Americanized postwar urban culture. Ishioka’s world of expression introduces to the present the image of an era that had been filled with what could be described as a sense of self-exoticism.

Design Work for Publications

In the 1970s, Ishioka was involved in designing numerous books. Even when she had been responsible for only the cover design, her innovative work enabled books as a product to capture people's attention. Haruki Kadokawa recalls that Ishioka's design had contributed significantly to the exceptional hit of Osamu Kitayama's 1971 book, *Lullaby of Wanderer* [1-79]. Such as for Mitsuharu Inoue's collection of poems [1-109] and Takashi Tsutsui's collected essays [1-114], in some cases Ishioka was involved in selecting the very format, paper, and font of the publication. Meanwhile, as was true for publications created as a result of activities at PARCO, as well as the book made in memory of Toshi Sugiyama, a commercial director who was a close friend of Ishioka during her time at Shiseido [1-120], there were many publications in which Ishioka was involved not only in terms of design, but in all aspects including planning, editing, directing, and writing.

Package Design

Ishioka also engaged in designing the packaging of numerous products. One of her representative works is her art direction for the package design of Yamamoto Nori in correspondence to its renewal in the early 1980s [1-101]. The project is Ishioka's sole collaboration between her and members of her family. Her father Tomio Ishioka, renowned as a pioneering Japanese graphic designer, was responsible for writing the calligraphy for the product name against the wave motifs depicted by painter Ogata Korin, while Ryoko Ishioka, her younger sister who had been working in the same industry, was in charge of the graphic design along with long-time staff member Motoko Naruse.

When overseeing the art direction for AGF's premium coffee line Maxium, Ishioka had appointed Shiro Kuramata for its bottle design. She had also produced a highly original package that incorporated the aluminum material of the can into the design as it is [1-102].

I AM VERY WOMAN

A major characteristic of Ishioka's advertising work is her

selection of models that have a uniquely unrivaled presence, and are thus suitable subjects for delivering messages to society. In her Sanyo Shokai campaigns in the 1980s, Ishioka hoped to feature a strong character that could break down existing concepts and frameworks of gender, resulting in her decision to work with Lisa Lyon, who was popular in gravure magazines at that time as one of female bodybuilding's pioneers [1-85]. The copy "I AM VERY WOMAN" which serves to question the nature of femininity, is combined with the self-portrait of Annie Leibovitz, one of the world's most prominent portrait photographers who is also known to be Susan Sontag's partner [1-89].

Graphic Design Works in the 1980s and 1990s

While Ishioka had expanded her practice to three-dimensional areas of design such as costumes and scenography since leaving Japan in the early 1980s, she indeed continued to work on graphics within her new network. One of such works include her art direction for "AID AND COMFORT II," a charity event featuring music and cooking aimed at the eradication of AIDS, which was led by chef

Alice Waters who was a close friend of Ishioka, with the likes of Laurie Anderson and Philip Glass also taking part [1-93].

In 1989, on the occasion of Tokyu Department Store's renewal of the entire Shibuya area including the opening of Bunkamura, Ishioka was appointed to design the company's corporate identity (CI) centering on its corporate philosophy and image. Establishing design guidelines such as "timeless" (not being at the mercy of trends), "ageless" (reflecting perspectives across a wide generation), "genderless" (not limited to a particular gender), and "classless" (encompassing everything from the ultra-luxurious to the masses), she engaged in art direction for its logo, posters, wrapping paper, and so on which featured the letter Q as a central motif [1-103~105].

Hiroshima Appeals

"Hiroshima Appeals" is a project implemented by the Japan Graphic Designers Association (JAGDA), in collaboration with the Hiroshima International Cultural Foundation. One member is selected each year to produce and present a poster aimed to bring the appeal for world peace.

Eiko Ishioka, who was appointed for this project in 1990, designed an illustration drawn by world-famous illustrator Charles E. White III, with whom she had collaborated many times, and presented it along with the short phrase “The Silence of Figure X” [1-96]. According to Ishioka, the Mickey Mouse-inspired Figure X is a symbol of the postwar masses. His gestures reflect the recurrence of a tragedy that makes one want to cover their eyes, while also serving as a warning to those who refuse to directly confront it. This work, which illustrates Ishioka’s challenge in creating a parody, was pointed out by the Walt Disney headquarters in the United States as being a “suspicion of copyright infringement,” and thus JAGDA and Eiko Ishioka, in consultation with the company, agreed to impose limited conditions regarding the method of its exhibit. The project was resumed in 2005 after a temporary suspension, and continues to this day.

Film Poster

In 1978, the late works of director Luchino Visconti, who had passed away two years prior, were released one after another in cinemas, marking the first year of a several-year

boom in Japan [1-92]. Ishioka was in charge of the art direction for the Japanese poster of his last work, *L'INNOCENTE*, which was released in the midst of such times. For this project Ishioka appointed photographer Kazumi Kurigami, who she had collaborated with for the first time in the previous year, when directing the visualization of Hiroyuki Itsuki's ephemeral romance novel as part of a serial in a woman's magazine. Kurigami had managed to beautifully express the image of the entangled relationship between a man and women, which had come to Ishioka's mind when she watched the preview of the film. Ishioka refined the photo to perfection in the printmaking process, by means of her detailed instructions on color and shading. How to express the beauty of the body has always been an important theme for Ishioka. What penetrates this work is her strong will to overcome the limits of nude expression in public space through beauty.

[Back to Index](#)

2 Fearless: Designing Encounters

Having sprinted through the 1970s working on an array of

diverse projects, Eiko Ishioka had found herself on the verge of falling into a rut. In 1980, she left Japan and moved to New York in hopes to “start once again from zero.” During the 15 months spent as a brief hiatus to refresh her mind while immersing in the American culture she had long admired since her childhood, she contemplated her practice and her ability to work on the international scene, and came to develop a strong desire to move to the next step. In 1983, Ishioka organized and edited the book *EIKO by EIKO: Eiko Ishioka, Japan’s Ultimate Designer* [2-1], which presented a comprehensive overview of her work in Japan, publishing it in Japan and the United States. Using this as both a portfolio and a business card, she embarked on establishing new encounters.

Section 2 brings focus to Ishioka’s works from the time when she had expanded the scope of her practice to the world without fear of her limits, and presents a selection of major projects that illustrate the ways by which she further refined her own expression in collaboration with artists of various different fields. Her platform of communication to the masses had shifted from advertising to the entertainment realm of theater and film such as Broadway

and Hollywood. Renowned creators including the likes of Miles Davis and Francis Ford Coppola, in anticipating Ishioka to introduce “something that has never been seen before,” had requested her power and expertise. Ishioka expressed an aversion towards the replication and rehashing of ideas and expressions, instead finding herself more attracted to work that she had never experienced before. As such, it was only natural for her to expand the scope of her work to not only include graphics that formed a major part of her practice in Japan, but also costumes, production design, and scenic design.

Ishioka had referred to design as “a language to convey oneself.” How does one express their individual identity when a group of people who have come together to create a single thing, are working towards “a goal that lies in a place beyond the framework of nation, race, and gender?” With this as a key theme of her design, Ishioka engaged in exploring and refining ways to express her distinct creativity.

Leni Riefenstahl: NUBA/LIFE

In the early 1970's, Ishioka was deeply inspired by a certain book that she encountered at a bookstore in New York. Such was the book *NUBA* [2-2], which featured photographs of the Nuba tribes. The photographs were taken by Leni Riefenstahl, known for her documentary films of the Nazi Party Rally and the Berlin Olympics, upon her travels to Africa when she was over the age of 60. Ishioka, who had been moved by a firm sense of mission to introduce Riefenstahl's present life and work to the Japanese people, personally proposed to serialize an interview in a women's magazine. The significant response of this project led her to engage in the planning and directing of an exhibition at the Seibu Museum of Art.

Riefenstahl and Ishioka's deep correspondence had 11 years later led Ishioka to serve as general producer of the exhibition, "Leni Riefenstahl: LIFE" which presented a cohesive overview of her life and work. While strengthening her sympathy towards Riefenstahl as a fellow female artist who continues to burn her passion for creativity regardless of age, this project became an opportunity for Ishioka to closely engage with Riefenstahl's past through gathering materials regarding the repeated lawsuits that

she had filed in order to restore her honor and reputation against allegations of sympathizing with the Nazis. Ishioka writes, “How dangerous is Leni’s creativity? I believe that if we were to try and find the answer to this question, we ourselves must take a moment to calmly examine the facts rather than simply consigning her to oblivion. We must not fail to learn from her lessons.”

Miles Davis: TUTU

In 1986, Eiko Ishioka was asked by Miles Davis to create the artwork for an important album that would mark his first release after his move to a new record company. Ishioka had worked on the package design for the Japanese limited edition of Davis’ album in the past, yet her opportunity to work with him directly was triggered by his fascination with Ishioka’s collection of works *EIKO by EIKO*. Ishioka’s autobiography *I DESIGN* documents her tense exchange and discussions with the king of jazz who had constantly taken complete control of his self-image. In response to Davis who wanted her to capture a fashionable image, Ishioka from the onset had been confident with her idea of bringing focus solely to his “mask (face)” and

“hands.” In order to realize this minimal image, Ishioka appointed photographer Irving Penn, who she had long admired and respected as “her god.” While presenting multiple proposals, Ishioka eventually managed to lure Davis towards her intended plan through on-going negotiations. This artwork, which Ishioka described as a “hybrid expression” realized by the talents of individuals from three different fields, won the Grammy Award for Best Recording Package.

M. Butterfly

Set in China during the Cultural Revolution, *M. Butterfly* is a play that tells the story of a deceitful love affair between a French diplomat and a Chinese spy dressed as a woman. Ishioka was invited to work on the production design, costumes, and prop design for this production, and thus had come to embark on her first project for Broadway. As a Japanese woman, Ishioka engaged with this story which depicted the illusion of Western men towards the Orient and women, and contemplated means of translating “the illusion that is the source of both joy and danger” into

the stage design. Director John Dexter presented Ishioka with a number of conditions for the stage design, which included: creating something that enabled actors to move back and forth between 3 levels of height, was simple and minimal yet infinitely versatile, and required only low-tech operation. In response to this, Ishioka proposed an innovative design with a slope that extends from the front of the stage towards the back like a Mobius strip. Actors would disappear at the bottom, only to reappear from the top. In the center of this circular strip, a drop curtain and a grid-shaped screen were combined to create a blind spot from the audience. Ishioka had described the source of the illusion as something that is happening out of sight. The costumes made in collaboration with Kiryu's textile craftsmen were also highly evaluated, and Ishioka was thus nominated for a Tony Award in two categories of stage art and costume for this work.

Chushingura

Chushingura was an ambitious attempt by Shigeaki Saegusa to create a Japanese opera that could also be widely

appreciated by European and American audiences. Ishioka's participation served as an opportunity for her having already left Japan, to objectively analyze both the culture and creativity of this country. Werner Herzog, a leading German film director who had worked on numerous operas, was appointed as the director of this production. In this collaboration, Ishioka's guiding principal for both the costume and stage design was to take this story, which has long been treated as a symbol of Japanese spirit, and open it to a global audience through connecting it to the present age. Such is clearly illustrated in the opening where business workers on a driving range – an essential symbol of the modern Japanese – intersect with samurai carrying swords across a grid-like stage that slopes towards the back. Ishioka used costumes based on historical evidence to tell the story while adopting an abstract design for the set, with aims to “inspire and incite the imagination of the audience.” For example, the three pillars that appear on the eve of the raid in the third act are open to various interpretations, and could be regarded as mediators for the audience to interact with the performance including the questions that they may have. In contrast to the minimalist

set, the elaborate costumes that reference Ukiyo-e were realized in collaboration with Japanese dyeing craftsmen.

Apocalypse Now

According to Ishioka, her encounter with Francis Ford Coppola had come about due to his expressing a great fondness for the Japanese poster for *Apocalypse Now*, which Ishioka had designed at the request of the film's Japanese distributor. Using Haruo Takino's powerful and realistic illustrations, Ishioka's aim was to create a sense of passion comparable to Coppola's cinematic experience in the context of the poster's static medium. As if to imply her subsequent success in the world of cinema, these two posters mark the beginning of her book of works *EIKO by EIKO*, which essentially enabled her to introduce herself to a wider international audience.

MISHIMA—A Life in Four Chapters

Eiko Ishioka set foot in the world of cinema for the first time as a production designer for this film, which depicts the life of Yukio Mishima interwoven with dramatizations of his novels. This is a unique work co-produced in Hol-

lywood and Japan, based on a script performed by Japanese actors in their native language, with Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas serving as executive producers. In response to director Paul Schrader's intention to "experiment with Mishima visually," Ishioka took on the difficult task of bringing production design to a play a leading part within the framework of a Hollywood blockbuster in which one was unable to engage in the sole pursuit of artistry. From kitsch sets of the city's squalid outskirts that symbolized Japan's Americanized postwar period, to scene changes using techniques reminiscent of the collapsible stage sets used in Kabuki, she proposed bold ideas that captured various aspects of Japanese culture, and presented them as the world of Mishima's work. The scene that hints at the psychological relationship between the protagonist and Kinkakuji temple as the build splits open in half towards him, had received much attention. Ishioka won the award for "Best Artistic Contribution" for her work on this film at the Cannes Film Festival. While receiving international acclaim, the film's release in Japan was canceled for a variety of reasons, including the wishes

of Mishima's surviving family. Ishioka wrote in her autobiography that her disappointment with Japanese society in the wake of this situation had in part led to her determination to leave her home country altogether.

Bram Stoker's Dracula

Eiko Ishioka, who was asked by Francis Ford Coppola to design the costumes for his latest film depicting the life of Dracula, agreed to take on this unfamiliar project, having been persuaded by Coppola that she would be able to create "things no one has ever seen" as an outsider of Hollywood. Ishioka, who had expressed an aversion to all stereotypes, tried to create a multifaceted, "kaleidoscopic" Dracula character that no one has ever seen, rather than the well-known appearance of a black cloak with fangs. Such include the original red armor that looks as if being adorned in muscle itself, and the golden funeral pall which draws its motif from Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*, and reflects an air of eroticism and decadence. According to Ishioka, the red robe that emphasizes "Dracula's transsexual charm" is embroidered with an emblem that symbolizes his identity, and through it demonstrates her ability as a graphic

designer [2-60]. In addition to this emblem that combines elements of a bird, wolf and dragon, Ishioka introduces motifs of various creatures such as a snake, frill-necked lizard, armadillo, and earthworm in the costume design of each character as a means to open the door to imagination. These costumes, in which various images including Eastern and Western culture intersect, resulted in Ishioka's receipt of an Academy Award.

[Back to Index](#)

3 Borderless: Designing the Future

Although Ishioka had begun to receive a large number of work offers after receiving an Academy Award, she states that there were only a few directors in the world that had the courage to embark on an adventure with a designer like herself who always trying to create something new and unprecedented. However, her encounter with a young film director who was one of such rare individuals would enable her to continue her creative journey until the very last moments of her life. Section 3 introduces works from Eiko Ishioka's career at the height of its maturity, in which she

further evolved and dramatically accelerated her individuality. Various different stages had appeared one after another before her, from film to opera, pop music, circus, and even the Olympics. Nevertheless, Ishioka's interest as a designer had always been to express the infinite expanse of possibilities using the human body as a canvas.

When up-and-coming Indian filmmaker Tarsem Singh mentioned his desire for Ishioka to participate as a costume designer for the production of his first Hollywood film, she had expressed an interest, having found a certain common ground between his previous commercial work for television and the projects she had done in Japan. Later she came to learn that Tarsem had for long referred to *EIKO by EIKO* as a creative bible of sorts since his days as a student. This intense collaboration between Tarsem and Ishioka, as well as producer Nico Soultanakis, Tarsem's close friend who would later become Ishioka's partner in life, had resulted in the creation of four films.

What proved to be a new challenge for Ishioka, who increasingly began to take part in large-scale international projects in particular in the field of costume design, was to figure out a means of communication that would enable

her to convey her ideas to others and realize them. The large size pencil drawings exhibited along with each project in this section, are a communication tool devised by Ishioka in order to schematically present her designs in their completed form to many staff including the acting cast. Using these simple images as a starting point, Ishioka worked together with craftsmen to produce a number of highly remarkable costumes that illustrated elaborate detail.

The Cell

The Cell, which was the first film that Ishioka worked on with Tarsem Singh, consists of traveling back and forth between the real world and the virtual world in the mind of a comatose serial killer. Ishioka, who was in charge of the costumes for the world of the inner mind that would enable her to fully exert her creativity, had faxed a total of 64 idea drawings to Singh in the early planning stage [3-11]. These illustrated multiple ideas regarding each of the main characters, drawn as a result of Ishioka simply spilling out the images within her mind without viewing any

reference material. Thereafter, she gave body and substance to these ideas by adding specific imagery [3-7], presenting them in their completed form as large-format drawings [3-1~6].

Ishioka's distinctly original costumes serve to give shape to the space and set the story in motion. For example, in the scene within the world of the killer's mind when he appears before the protagonist for the first time dressed as a king, the walls of the room transform into a massive purple cloak. Or in another scene, the water in the pool changes, and the killer emerges from beneath in a cloak reminiscent of the skin of an armadillo. Ishioka's ideas to express the immense dignity of the king were brilliantly realized through production design, special effects, visual effects, makeup, and above all, her collaboration with the actor.

The Fall

Although *The Cell* was a great box-office success, Singh found himself confronted with Hollywood's system in which only some directors were granted final editing rights. As a result his next film was largely self-produced

according to his own vision, bringing to life a story that had been 24-years in planning. A stuntman who is at life's rock bottom after suffering an injury whilst filming, tells a fairytale to a young girl he encounters in hospital in hopes to gain her trust and trick her into aiding his suicide.

The highlight of the film is the magnificent vision that unfolds within the mind of the girl as she freely extends her imagination. When Singh asked Ishioka to design the costumes, he explained to her that it was a "film in which the landscapes and costumes play an artistic role." Singh spent 17 years selecting locations for the film in over 24 countries, including many World Heritage Sites. In response to his sheer enthusiasm of spending four years pursuing the visual beauty of the natural scenery without any use of computer graphics, Ishioka too, had created designs for the remarkable heroes that only exist within the girl's imagination. For example, the Black Bandit that the protagonist Roy transforms into has a certain unisex quality while splicing together images of Spanish bullfighters and Japanese samurai [3-12]. Dozen types of colored hairs are woven into the costume of the naturalist Darwin using the same technique as wig making, creating a fantastical coat

of fur with a pattern of a butterfly.

Grace Jones: Hurricane Tour

Grace Jones, who is regarded as a pioneer supermodel and was also a renowned actress and pop singer, had fully demonstrated her liberated character in Ishioka's 1976 campaign for PARCO *Nightingale Sings for No One but Herself*, as well as in the fashion show *Issey Miyake and Twelve Black Women*. Having been active in the music scene in the 1980s, Jones broke her 19 years of silence with the release of her album *Hurricane* in 2009. Ishioka was in charge of the stage concept and costumes for the tour that followed, travelling to over 30 locations. The extensive notes left by Ishioka leaves traces of her thoughts and ideas on the image that should be created in celebrating the renaissance of Jones who was indeed an extraordinary performer. Ishioka suggested changing the costumes for each song in order to show the multifaceted nature of Jones as "one of the few performers who has an understanding of a sophisticated and revolutionary sense of design." Ishioka eventually came up with five themes: masculine, feminine, sensual, humor, and eccentric. The costumes, designed by combining the hidden motifs of fire,

water, wind, clouds, and mountains, brought out Jones' appeal as someone who could wear and embrace the unconventional.

Cirque du Soleil: Varekai

Having mainly participated in dark and controversial projects, Ishioka developed a desire to work in a different direction. It was at this time that she received an offer to work on designing the costumes for Cirque du Soleil, a Montreal-based entertainment company that had achieved worldwide success for transforming the concept of the circus through their cutting-edge acrobatics. A team with no circus experience including Ishioka was gathered to work on Cirque du Soleil's first new production in three years, and without the presence of any script, the members collaborated in creating the outline for *Varekai* (meaning "wherever" in the Roman language). Based on his own experiences on stage, director Dominic Champagne drew connections between the theme of falling, which is regarded as taboo within the circus, and the Greek myth of Icarus who falls from heaven. Resonating with this idea, Ishioka believed the appeal of the circus to be its shock

and excitement, and thus her design goal was to create “dangerous-looking” costumes despite safety for acrobatics being regarded as the most important factor. Technical research had also become an important task, such as using a new material that enabled the transferring of glossy film in order to obtain a metallic effect in place of actual metal that could not be used. The production was also a commercial success, and toured around the world over a period of 12 years.

Björk: Cocoon

One day, Ishioka received an email from none other than Björk herself, who had taken the world by storm with her music and striking visual work. At the time, Ishioka had just seen *Dancer in the Dark* for which Björk received an award for Best Actress at the Cannes Film Festival, and thus developed a strong interest towards her as a performer. Björk, who had also been attracted to Ishioka’s world of expression, asked Ishioka if she could work on at least one of the following that included her album artwork, art direction for her music video, and design work for the costumes and stage sets for her upcoming world tour. While

discussing dreams of eventually creating a musical together, the collaboration between the two was limited to one music video and its artwork due to difficulties in Ishioka's schedule. Björk presented Ishioka with her vision, which included imagery of a cocoon that suggests a sense of unity between her and her lover, as well as threads made of pearl emerging from her nipples (from her mouth in the lyrics). As a result, Ishioka came to confront the theme of the metamorphosis of the human body, which had long remained hidden within her imagination. A world full of metaphors was conceived within a simple footage that was filmed with a fixed camera, reminiscent of her commercials from the PARCO era.

Salt Lake City Olympics

In 2001, Japanese sportswear company Descente asked Ishioka to work with them in designing the uniforms and outerwear for the athletes competing in the Salt Lake City Olympics. As she engaged in this project in parallel to her work for Cirque du Soleil and Björk, she came to consider the current theme of her design as the “elucidation of the BODY in a broad sense including its spirit.” Ishioka

worked on the fusion of cutting-edge technology and design in collaboration with Descente's development team, while referring to the power of the unknown that is born by pushing the limits of the body as the "athletic gene," and making this her design concept.

The skiwear uses technology that provides the body with stability, with its uneven surface serving to control the turbulence of the airflow that occurs behind high-speed movement. The ceremony wear used "Morphotex," a new material made from optical coloring fiber inspired by the wings of Morpho butterflies, which imparts a vivid color without pigmentation [3-51]. What attracted the most attention was the "COCOON." Focusing on the "quiet time" required by athletes before the competition, Ishioka created a concentration wear that provided an acoustic environment with negative ion emissions inside a cocoon form [3-47]. Ishioka states, "isn't innovation itself the very subject of sports?"

Beijing Olympics

One year before the Beijing Olympics, Ishioka received an offer to work as the costume director for its opening

ceremony attraction. A team of directors was organized under the leadership of film director Zhang Yimou, who had been appointed as the chief director of the project. The project's visual director, contemporary artist Cai Guo-Qiang, had recommended Ishioka. There were many obstacles ensued in the work of collaborating to produce costumes for nearly 20,000 performers while compiling proposals from local designers, such as reaching a consensus with not only Zhang Yimou, but also with the International Olympic Committee and the various Chinese organizations involved. While Ishioka reflects on the project stating, "I was unable to express even a mere 20 percent of my ambitions as a creator," she has also left a comment that reflects her satisfaction towards the success of realizing a comprehensive force that managed to transcend the scope of the individual. The costumes, created while pondering between Chinese tradition and global design, brilliantly enlivened Zhang Yimou's artistic direction of boldly connecting the history of the nation's civilization with its present. For example, in the chapter on "paper" that focuses on inventions that remain in Chinese human

history, 3,000 disciples of Confucius are dressed in costumes with a gradation that expresses “Qi,” and are seen unfolding scrolls and reading them out aloud [3-53]. Her designs, which combine a sense of dynamism that is conveyed even in the context of a colossal stadium with meticulous attention to detail, is indeed a reflection of Ishioka’s work at its finest.

The Ring of Nibelung

The costume design for the Dutch National Opera’s production of Richard Wagner’s masterpiece tetralogy, *The Ring of Nibelung*, was an important project that Ishioka had focused on for nearly two years. Director Pierre Audi hoped to introduce Ishioka’s individuality shown in *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* to this experimental production that would bring the mythical world to life within the context of the present day. For Ishioka, costume design was a task that went beyond mere clothing to cohesively create the character including the inner nature and personality of the person. While opera as a symbol of Western high culture was a world unfamiliar to Ishioka, she freely reinterpreted the characters without relying on tradition, and created an

array of original costumes. Her unique ideas can be seen in her costume for Mime that draws its motif from a fly due to his character setting of being a disliked individual [3-61], and among others, the uncharacteristic servants of the Gibichungs based on the dolls that are used for drawing [3-86]. With the image in mind of being adorned in a single piece of fabric, for the graceful gods, costumes that create infinite changes according to their movement in space were proposed in collaboration with actors, the director, and the set designer. This work, which gradually gained support due to its experimental nature, was re-performed and remained popular for over 20 years until its final performance in 2019.

Mirror Mirror

The last film in which Taresem Singh collaborated with Eiko Ishioka was *Mirror Mirror*. While paying homage to the original story by the Brothers Grimm, the well-known tale was reconceived as a story of a growth of a woman who paved the way for herself. Snow White, who joins a band of dwarfs in order to regain the kingdom that has

been seized by her stepmother, has the strength to defeat even the prince with her sword, while also harboring the wisdom to distinguish a poisoned apple. The process of an innocent girl becoming independent is visually represented through Ishioka's costumes, from a romantic floral dress to a sword-wielding fighting costume [3-105] to a unique and vivid blue dress reminiscent of a Disney film [3-97]. Even the designs for the queen's luxurious costumes such as the wedding dress [3-98] adorned with Swarovski crystals serve to reflect her desires and emotions. Ishioka's innovative idea of mixing animal features while paying reference to history in her designs for the 300 costumes including those for its supporting characters, result in creating a world most suitable for a fairy tale. What became Ishioka's final project was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Costume Design. The end credit of the film released after her death is accompanied by the words, "In loving memory of Eiko Ishioka."

Eco's Life Story

This exhibition, which has traced the life and practice of Eiko Ishioka, ends with her "first work." Most of Ishioka's

personal effects are currently housed in the UCLA Library, and in the archives of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Made at the end of her high school years, fragments of this picture book had been kept together with her many scrapbooks containing images of Hollywood stars and cutouts from foreign magazines.

This book, which can be regarded as her first attempt as an artist to raise the question “who am I?” is filled with the various things that have come to shape this girl named “Eco.” It tells the story from her birth to wartime evacuation, her school festival, the movies and the circus that she had been moved by, and her life at an all girls’ school. Here, Ishioka writes, “I’ll go abroad to try many dishes of many countries. Wishing my dreams come true.” She enrolled in Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, encountered many wonderful teachers and fellows, and prayed to God for her eggs to hatch.

This picture book made in English for the people of the world during her girlhood filled with hope, and the story of the free and independent Snow White which she had depicted in her last days in Hollywood, is seamlessly connected within the artist that is Eiko Ishioka. The words she

mentioned in an interview the year before her death are indeed a testimony of this. “To me, it feels more like a long and on-going creative journey rather than work.”

Eiko Ishioka: Blood, Sweat, and Tears — A Life of Design

Exhibition Guide

2020.11.14-2021.02.14

Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo

Written by Tomoko Yabumae

(Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo)

[Back to Index](#)