The Jōmon Imaginary in Postwar Japanese Art

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In the decades following the Second World War, the Jōmon Period emerged as a recurring theme in Japanese visual arts. This trend had its origins in 1952 with the publication of Okamoto Taro's now famous essay, “On Jōmon Pottery,” which praised the ceramics of Japan’s neolithic past as more dynamic and spiritually profound—and indeed, more “modern”—than the austere aesthetic sensibilities which had come to signify Japanese identity, which Okamoto saw as having arisen in the Yayoi Period. Following from this premise, Okamoto produced *Face* in 1952, a large sculpture that is undeniably inspired by the mysterious Dogū figurines of the late Jōmon. Of course, he was not the only postwar artist to experiment with Jōmon aesthetics. Asai Masuo (1942-1966) and Okabe Mineo (1919-1990) also made the neolithic culture central to their practices, with the former organizing a “Jōmon Tribe” and the latter producing numerous “Jōmon vessels.” This essay endeavors to explain the proliferation of Jōmon aesthetics in the postwar by applying Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to the work and history of these three artists. To Okamoto, Asai, and Okabe, the Jōmon Period was a potent Imaginary following the collapse of Japanese society’s long standing Symbolic Order at the end of World War Two. As such, the period was meaningful not for the actual facts of Jōmon history or culture—which cannot be known with any certainty—but because it offered a slate onto which these artists could project their own idiosyncratic values that, while blank, was still essentially Japanese.