

## From Plants to Polka Dots: Yayoi Kusama's Artistic Evolution Reflecting Personal Growth and Social Change

Xiruo Jiang

### Abstract



**Figure 0.** Yayoi Kusama (草間 彌生, Kusama Yayoi, born 22 March 1929)<sup>1</sup>

Yayoi Kusama is a highly acclaimed Japanese artist known for her extensive work encompassing various artistic disciplines, such as painting, sculpture, and installation. Born in Matsumoto, Japan, in 1929, during World War II, Kusama moved to the U.S. in the late 1950s to seek more freedom and returned to Japan in the 1970s during the economic bubble period.

In her early years, Kusama's style was heavily influenced by natural elements, such as plants and fruits, which symbolize a sense of peace and personal growth. Her move to New York, on the other hand, marked a significant evolution in her bold artistic expression, through movements like Pop Art and Minimalism.

This art review analyzes how artworks from different stages of Kusama's life, created under various environments, have shaped her unique style, expressed her views on societal changes, and impacted the global art world. Special attention is given to her critique of consumerism and gender roles, particularly through her works that defy societal expectations and highlight the commodification of women in a consumerist society.

### I. Seeds of Peace: Early Inspirations in Post-War Japan

The symbol of plants has featured extensively and consistently throughout Kusama's artworks, with the pumpkin being one of the most iconic symbols in her vast body of work. Growing up in Japan during WWII, Kusama experienced firsthand the devastating impacts of war. Her artistic practice emerged as a response to these traumatic experiences, often

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<sup>1</sup>Oldenburg, C. (n.d.). Yayoi Kusama. Wikipedia. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yayoi\\_Kusama](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yayoi_Kusama)

conveying messages of peace. In her early years, she frequently depicted plants, flowers, and crops, while in her later years, fruits became the most prominent subject.



**Figure 1.** Yayoi Kusama. *Untitled Childhood Drawing*. 1939. Pencil on paper. Collection of the artist.

For instance, her untitled childhood drawing from 1939, which features flowers in a vase, indicates her early exposure to plants. Growing up in a seed nursery in pre-war Japan, plants likely became symbols of internal peace and growth, as well as external peace and cultural unity for Kusama.

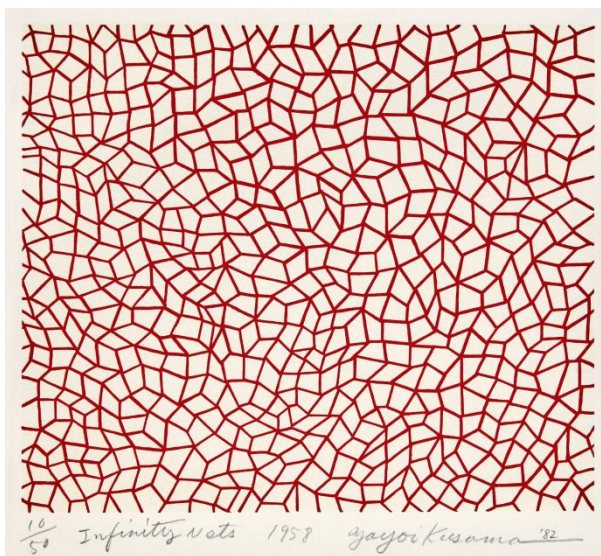


**Figure 2.** Yayoi Kusama. *Harvest*. 1945. Pigment on silk. Collection of the artist.

The painting “Harvest,” created in 1945, marks the beginning of WWII’s long-term impact on Kusama. Her early brushstrokes are distinctly different from her later works, reflecting her practice in traditional Japanese painting due to her mother’s expectations. This can be seen in the soft, blended transitions and subtle gradations in colors, showcasing traditional Japanese techniques. As one of her first surviving pieces, “Harvest” features millet and corn at the center of a carefully designed composition. These crops, along with barley and sweet potatoes, were common substitutes for rice in Japan during the post-war shortages, highlighting the severe food scarcity and quest for sustenance following WWII. Despite these efforts, widespread malnutrition occurred, leading to the starvation of nearly one million Japanese in the immediate aftermath of the war.<sup>2</sup>

## II. Blooming in New York: Radical Shifts and Artistic Freedom

But all of these factors were not enough to push Kusama to leave her beloved home and fly thousands of miles away to New York. At that time, the art scene in Japan was very conservative, with most appraised art styles being traditional Japanese painting and Nihonga, by artists like Kaji Higashiyama and Seison Maeda.<sup>3</sup> Kusama felt stifled by the traditional and male-dominated art world, which did not appreciate or accept her creative style and innovative ideas. She experienced significant gender bias and a lack of opportunities to express her creativity fully. Motivated to seek new horizons, she corresponded with American artist Georgia O’Keeffe, who encouraged her to move to the U.S. in 1957.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 3.** Yayoi Kusama. *Infinity Nets*. 1958.

<sup>2</sup> Dower, John W. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Haruka, Yoko. *The Artists Who Shaped Contemporary Japanese Art*. Kodansha International, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Kusama, Yayoi. *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.



Kusama's Infinity Net series marks the beginning of a radical shift in her work from the singular abstract, biomorphic forms she painted during her youth to the more obsessive, repetitive works that would define her career.<sup>5</sup>

The repetitive webbed lines in Kusama's "Infinity Nets" reveal the stress-induced hallucinations she experienced due to her mother's constant push and disapproval during her childhood. The webs, as a symbol, convey a sense of oppression, yet their intricate and repeating nature can also be perceived as serene by some. Through these repeating brushstrokes, Kusama immerses the audience in a complex and contradictory mood of anxiety, isolation, and meditation, which reflects her own struggles with mental health and how she used art as a coping mechanism.

Along with her series of Infinity Nets, which Kusama expanded until the 1960s, she also explored various forms of different art styles such as sculpture, fashion, and performance art. These mediums were used to express Kusama's strong and fierce personality in conveying themes of obsession, sexuality, and critiques about anti-war, commercialization, and body image, topics that were barely permitted to be discussed in Japanese culture and its traditional expectations of women.



Figure 4. Yayoi Kusama. *Body Painting Performance*. 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

By the 1960s, amid the ongoing Vietnam War, Kusama broke into the sphere of political activism with polka-dot performances and anti-war demonstrations. During the Body Festivals and Anti-War Protests of the 1960s, she collaborated with a group of naked dancers, using the human body as a canvas to depict her iconic polka-dots.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, Katelyn. "Yayoi Kusama Artist Overview and Analysis." Edited by Kimberly Nichols, *The Art Story*, 18 Apr. 2017, [www.theartstory.org/artist/kusama-yayoi/](http://www.theartstory.org/artist/kusama-yayoi/).

<sup>6</sup> Yoshitake, Mika. Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 2017.

In this attention-grabbing manner, Kusama sought to draw public awareness to the atrocities of war and advocate for harmony. Her early experiences—including the war in her childhood, struggles with mental health, and her desire to break into the New York art scene—shaped her bold personality and unconventional art style. The polka dot, which Kusama adopted as her alter ego, logo, franchise, and weapon of incursion into the world<sup>7</sup> is used as a metaphor for the Earth, which she described as “full of hatred and strife amid the peaceful, silent spheres” in her Open Letter to My Hero, Richard M. Nixon. This motif carries Kusama’s longing for global peace. Consequently, the themes of love, peace, and harmony, central to Kusama’s artistic vision, are well reflected in these avant-garde protests.

### III. Roots and Return: Reconnecting with Japanese Culture

As an artist who fully expressed herself in the competitive and vibrant art scene of New York, Yayoi Kusama struggled with severe anxiety and hallucinations, which had plagued her since childhood, along with other personal and financial pressures. She decided to return home, a place she had always longed for. At that time, Japan was experiencing the bubble economy, and the culture had become much more open. People were enthusiastic and willing to explore various controversial topics. The consumerist society in Japan was similar to that of New York, which allowed Kusama to continue producing the work she was passionate about while feeling safer and more supported.

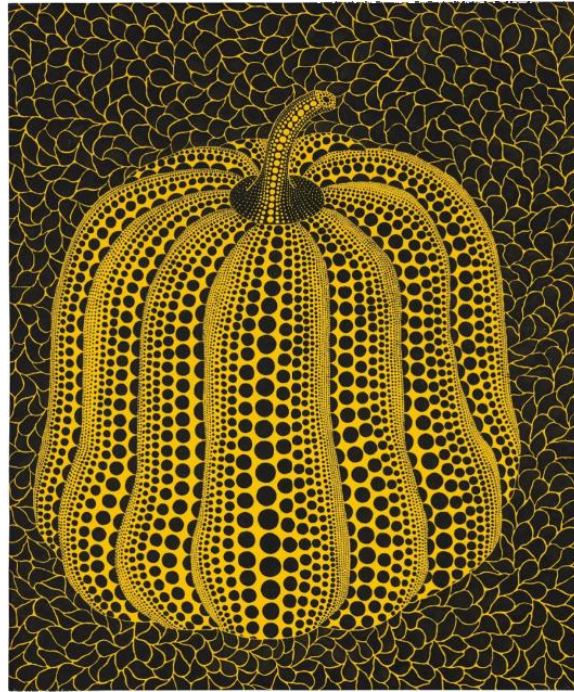
Upon returning to Japan, she voluntarily checked herself into the Seiwa Hospital for the Mentally Ill, where she found a structured environment and medical care that were beneficial for managing her mental health.<sup>8</sup> Since then, Kusama has lived there, working in a nearby studio and continuing to produce art that has had a significant influence on the global art world. This period of reconnection with her homeland and its cultural symbols is vividly expressed through her recurring use of the pumpkin motif, representing comfort, nostalgia, and stability. According to Kusama, “The first time I ever saw a pumpkin was when I was in elementary school.... It seems that pumpkins do not inspire much respect. But I was enchanted by their charming and winsome form ... the pumpkin’s generous unpretentiousness ... and its solid spiritual balance.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Laura Hoptman, ‘Yayoi Kusama: A reckoning’, in Yayoi Kusama, Phaidon Press, London, 2000, p.34.

<sup>8</sup> Yamamura, Midori. Yayoi Kusama: Inventing the Singular. MIT Press, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Kusama, Yayoi. Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama, 2002.



**Figure 3.** Yayoi Kusama. *Pumpkin*. 1998. Acrylic on canvas.

“Pumpkin” (1998) is one of many examples among the hundreds of pumpkin paintings, sculptures, and installations Kusama has created. This painting features a simple yet powerful composition, placing a large, stylized pumpkin centrally within the frame. The surface of the pumpkin is adorned with repeated, symmetrical black dots on a yellow background, creating a mesmerizing visual effect. Thin yellow lines repeat the outlines of petals on a black background. In Kusama’s mind, pumpkins represent a source of radiant energy. Beyond her childhood obsession, Kusama chose pumpkins as a recurring symbol due to their cultural significance. In Japanese culture, pumpkins are often regarded as symbols of good luck and are associated with harvest and sustenance. By utilizing the pumpkin as a symbol, Kusama conveys messages of peace and well-being. The rounded, organic shape of the pumpkin imparts a sense of inclusion and harmony, further complemented by Kusama’s use of dots and the infinity web in the background, conveying reassurance.

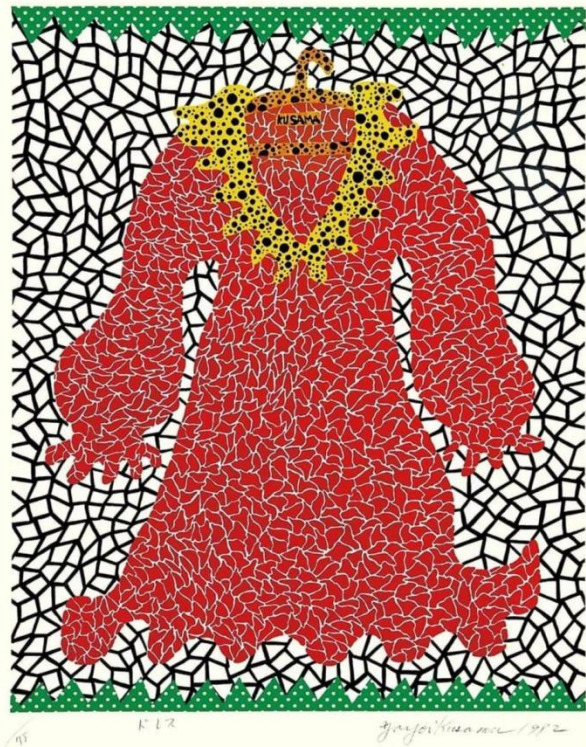
#### IV. Flourishing in the Bubble: Critiquing Consumerism and Gender Roles

Soon after, Japan experienced an economic boom due to industrial shifts and economic restructuring. This worried America because of the growing trade deficit. To address this, the U.S. pushed Japan to sign the Plaza Accord, which made the Japanese yen more valuable. While this act intended to reduce Japan’s export advantages, it also caused a massive surge in asset values. As a result, many people, including regular citizens, started investing in the stock and housing markets, believing they could make easy money. This led to a frenzy where people



became obsessed with wealth and consumption.<sup>10</sup> The culture and media shifted from conservative and modest to embracing Westernized lifestyles focused on luxury and extravagance. This was how consumerism really took off in Japan.

During this period, gender expectations were strongly influenced by consumerist society as well. Women were often targeted as consumers and expected to fulfill specific aesthetic ideals associated with femininity. As a female artist in post-war Japan and someone who knew too well about gender bias, Kusama started creating many artworks about feminism from then.



**Figure 4.** Yayoi Kusama. *Dress, Kusama 7*. 1982. Lithograph.

“Dress, Kusama 7” (1982) visually represents feminism in consumerism. The lines throughout the painting form Kusama’s iconic “infinite web,” with negative and positive spaces differentiated by the density and color of the web. The red dress placed centrally in the frame, adorned with orange and black hangers and tags, indicates its commodification. This suggests how women’s identities were often tied to their consumption choices in society. The dress as a commodity highlights how consumerist society objectifies women, reducing them to their marketable appearances. The hand-like shapes of the cuffs on the sleeves, outlined in red, add tension and suggest the struggles women faced in asserting their individuality within a consumerist society. The zigzag lines at the top and bottom of the painting contrast sharply with the smooth lines of the dress, symbolizing the conflict and pressure women experienced.

<sup>10</sup> Pilling, David. *Bending Adversity: Japan and the Art of Survival*. Penguin Books, 2014.



**Figure 5.** Yanagi Miwa. *Elevator Girl House 1F*. 1997.

In the same period, other female artists also reflected on this context in their work. For instance, Japanese photographer Yanagi Miwa captured large-scale photographs in the 1990s featuring elevator girls, who symbolize consumerist society. These girls, integral to the brand and marketing strategies of corporate capitalism, direct customers towards consumer goods and become objects of visual pleasure. Yanagi's works, such as "Elevator Girl House 1F," emphasize their role as literal displays, consumed by viewers.

## V. Infinite Growth: Kusama's Late Career and Global Impact

In recent years, Kusama has continued her iconic use of polka dots while extending her work beyond 2D paintings. This transition is evident in her immersive installations, which are characterized by vibrant colors, polka dots, and mirrored surfaces. Her work blurs the boundaries between different artistic genres and explores themes such as infinity, obsession, and the interconnectedness of the self with the universe, creating thought-provoking experiences for audiences.





**Figure 6.** Yayoi Kusama. *Aspiring to Pumpkin's Love, the Love in My Heart*. 2023.

The most recent evolution of the dotted pumpkin as a sculptural form is illustrated by works that debuted in Kusama's 2023 solo exhibition at David Zwirner, New York. A monumental sculptural form, *Aspiring to Pumpkin's Love, the Love in My Heart* (2023), is part of a group of large-scale pumpkin works made in bronze. Here, the pumpkin's normally spherical shape is transfigured into an undulating surface, as if topologically morphed or stretched. This morphing shape introduces an element of dynamism to the pumpkins. As audiences move around the sculpture, the pumpkins appear to shift and transform, revealing new perspectives and forms. This dynamic perception evokes a sense of fluidity in the artwork, reinforcing the soothing feeling conveyed by Kusama's use of pumpkins.



**Figure 6.** Yayoi Kusama. *I Spend Each Day Embracing Flowers*. 2023.

In this exhibition, Kusama also applied polka dots to sculptures of other objects, such as flowers. In *I Spend Each Day Embracing Flowers* (2023), Kusama adorned a blooming flower with polka dots and netted lines. This piece reflects her iconic use of vibrant colors and continues the fluidity seen in Kusama's other installations. The flower symbol, like the pumpkin, carries Kusama's message of spiritual healing and strength.

Kusama's extensive artistic influence is also depicted by her impact on fashion. Her signature polka dots and bold patterns have been featured in collaborations with major fashion house Louis Vuitton, leading to the creation of clothing lines, accessories, and special edition

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products. Kusama's influence on fashion can be seen in the playful use of patterns, colors, and motifs that reflect her artistic vision.

## Conclusion

Yayoi Kusama's artistic journey, spanning from post-war Japan to her global recognition today, reflects both her personal growth and the societal changes she experienced. Beginning with plant-inspired works symbolizing peace, Kusama's art evolved through her time in New York, where she embraced bold expressions and social activism. Upon returning to Japan, she reconnected with her roots while critiquing consumerism and gender roles through her iconic polka dots and pumpkin motifs. Kusama's later works, including immersive installations and collaborations with fashion houses, demonstrate her continued innovation and global impact. Throughout her career, Kusama has used her unique artistic vision to explore themes of infinity, mental health, and social critique, creating a body of work that resonates deeply with audiences worldwide and cements her place as a significant figure in contemporary art.

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