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| War Art in Japan |
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| Under Japan’s totalitarian state during the Second World War, most Japanese artists participated in the war effort. Their activities included producing works commissioned by the state, displaying works in state-sponsored exhibitions, donating the proceeds of art to the state, and dedicating works, as symbolic gestures, to religious sites, important battles, seminal state officials, or to those who gave their lives in the war. War artists produced works in diverse media, styles, and subject matter, ranging from painting, photography, woodblock prints, and sculpture to architecture and interior design. However, their works invariably glorified Japan’s military occupation in Asia and war against the West, or they resonated with the wartime state ideology that sought to recreate a traditional Japanese culture uncontaminated by modernity. |
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In the Asia-Pacific arena of the Second World War, Japan’s war is often known as ‘the Fifteen-Year War’ [*jūgonen sensō*] [十五年戦争], which began in 1931 when Japan invaded Manchuria and ended in 1945 with Japan’s unconditional surrender to the Allied nations. Visual artists immediately responded to Japan’s military advance into Manchuria. In 1933, photographer Fuchigami Hakuyō [淵上白陽] (1889-1960) became editor of the magazine *Manshū Graph* [Manchuria Pictorial] [満州グラフ], which was sponsored by the foremost Japanese company in Manchuria, the South Manchuria Railway Company [*Minami Manshū Tetsudō*][南満州鉄道]. Through his photographic images, Fuchigami represented Manchuria to Japanese domestic audiences as a potential future homeland. Another important graphic magazine was *NIPPON*, which was founded in 1934, and was funded both publically and privately. It was written in English and other foreign languages and targeted international audiences. Photographers such as Domon Ken [土門拳] (1909-1990) and Natori Yōnosuke [名取洋之助] (1910-1962) published their works in the magazine, which aimed to defuse the international political tension caused by Japan’s military aggression by presenting images of Japan as a peaceful country.  After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War [*nicchū sensō*] [日中戦争] in 1937, the state imposed unprecedented control over its citizens and began the militarisation of the entire nation. Through a series of laws, such as the 1937 National Spiritual Mobilization Movement [*Kokumin Seishin Sōdōin Hō*] [国民精神総動員法] and the 1938 National Mobilization Law [*Kokka Sōdōin Hō*] [国家総動員法], the State legally justified the mobilisation of industries and civil organisations for the war effort. In 1940, Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro [近衛文麿], in his ‘New Order’ campaign, announced the formation of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association [*Taiseiyokusankai*] [大政翼賛会], which created a totalitarian single party organisation in order to maximise the nation’s efficiency in its battle against China. State surveillance of Marxists and pacifists was intensified through the increasing violence employed by military police [*kempeitai*] [憲兵隊] and the formation of neighbourhood associations [*tonarigumi*] [隣組] in 1940.  In this context, Japanese artists produced works to support the war, an activity known as *saikan hōkoku* [彩管報国] [serving the State through art]. Numerous patriotic associations (*hōkokukai*) [報国会] were founded with the specific goal of supporting the State, and almost everyone in their respective fields became a member of these organisations, which included the Patriotic Association of Japanese-Style Painters [*Nihon Gaka Hōkokukai*] [日本画家報国会] and the Patriotic Association of Japanese Artists [*Nihon Bijutsu Hōkokukai*] [日本美術報国会], which were both established in 1941. Art materials could only be obtained through these state-sanctioned organisations, to ensure that those who did not obey state authorities were not able to access them. Surrealism in particular was considered ideologically dangerous by authorities, and prominent surrealist painter Fukuzawa Ichirō [福沢一郎] (1898-1992) and art critic Takiguchi Shūzo [瀧口修造] (1903-1979) were imprisoned briefly in 1941. Matsumoto Shunsuke [松本竣介] (1912-1948) was one of just a few eminent artists who publicly questioned the State mobilisation of artists. However, unlike in Germany under Nazi rule, there was no organised exile of citizens or artists to other countries, and even Matsumoto left us a painting of soldiers.  Western-style oil painters were unique in the sense that many of them went to the battlefield with the army, an activity that began in 1938. Those who were dispatched to the front, called *jūgun gaka* [従軍画家], included Fujita Tsuguharu [藤田嗣治] (1886-1968), Miyamoto Saburō [宮本三郎] (1905-1974), Mukai Junkichi [向井潤吉] (1901-1995), Koiso Ryōhei [小磯良平] (1903-1988), Tsuruta Gorō [鶴田五郎] (1890-1969), Ihara Usaburō [伊原宇三郎] (1894-1976), and Inokuma Gen’ichirō [猪熊弦一郎] (1902-1993). Examples of paintings highly regarded at the time include Miyamoto Saburō’s *The Meeting of General Yamashita and General Percival* [*Yamashita pāshibaru ryōshireikan kaikenzu*] [山下、パーシバル両司令官会見図] (1942), which depicts Japanese officers’ imposing gestures towards British officials at a meeting on the occasion of British surrender in Singapore; and Fujita Tsuguharu’s *Honorable Death at Attu Island* [*Attsutō gyokusai*] [アッツ島玉砕] (1943), which portrays a fierce, physical fight between Japanese and American forces, and represents Japan’s collective suicide [*gyokusai*] [玉砕]. In recent scholarship, Fujita’s painting has received much attention from art historians, not merely because of the skillful technique of the artist, who was a leading figure at the École de Paris during the 1920s, but also because of its violent content that lead some to interpret the work as anti-war, thereby generating critical debate.  File: Honorable Death on Attu Island.pdf  Fujita Tsuguharu藤田嗣治, *Honorable Death on Attu Island* (*Attsutō gyokusai*アッツ島玉砕), 1943. The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo東京国立近代美術館.  Other forms of wartime art generally reflected Japan’s state ideology, which justified its violence in the war as the nation’s struggle against modernity. This ideological orientation was epitomised by the 1942 symposium on ‘overcoming modernity’ (*kindai no chōkoku*近代の超克) held by leading philosophers and literary figures. In the symposium, the intellectuals repudiated Enlightenment tenets of modernity, such as individualism, liberalism, and democracy, and advocated recreation of Japan’s authentic culture, which they believed had existed before the country embarked on modernisation in the Meiji period (1868-1912). Many of the artworks produced during the war could thus be considered from the perspective of how wartime Japan reacted against modernity.  For example, Japanese-style painters such as Yokoyama Taikan [横山大観] (1868-1958), Yasuda Yukihiko [安田靫彦] (1884-1978), Kobayashi Kokei [小林古径] (1883-1957), and Uemura Shōen [上村松園] (1875-1949) produced works that deal with historical and traditional subjects, such as warriors and religious icons, and allude to Japanese classical art including medieval picture scrolls and Edo-period Japanese woodblock print *ukiyo-e*. ‘Japanese taste’ or *Nihonshumi* [日本趣味] characterises Tange Kenzō’s [丹下健三] (1913-2005) wartime designs, which incorporated elements of traditional Japanese architecture, such as Shinto shrines. Print artists like Hiratsuka Un’ichi [平塚運一] (1895-1997) and Kawase Hasui [川瀬巴水] (1883-1957) advocated revival of woodblock prints, which developed prominently during the Edo Period (1603-1868), as a distinctive and unique ‘Japanese’ art. Yanagi Sōetsu [柳宗悦] (1889-1961) theorised that crafts, or *mingei* [民芸], such as pottery, dolls and embroidery created by anonymous, ordinary Japanese were artistic manifestations of true Japaneseness uncontaminated by modernisation, and were only preserved in undeveloped rural areas, such as Tōhoku in northeastern Japan.  File: Camp at Kisegawa.pdf  Yasuda Yukihiko安田靫彦, *Camp at Kisegawa* (*Kisegawa no jin* 黄瀬川の陣), 1940/1941. The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo東京国立近代美術館.  These examples of artworks, which set out to express distinctively ‘Japanese’ qualities, may appear anti-modern at first, but they were strongly embedded in modern art practices that prevailed in Japanese art communities in the preceding periods. Wartime Japanese-style paintings, for example, were informed by European New Classicism of the late 1920s and 1930s. Yanagi Sōetsu was profoundly familiar with John Ruskin’s (1819-1900) British Arts and Crafts Movement. The seeming incompatibility between Western modern art and ultranationalist wartime Japanese art was resolved when the former, indeed heavily influenced by non-Western art, was understood and explained in the language of Japanese traditional arts and aesthetics.  Critical studies of Japanese war art did not emerge until the 1990s. After the death of Emperor Hirohito, under whose name the war was fought, Japan’s role, especially its aggression toward Asian neighbours, came to be openly discussed in public. Reluctance to investigate war art was also related to the issue of individual artists’ war responsibility [*sensō sekinin*][戦争責任]. It was only after many of the artists had passed away that art historians could start writing critically about their roles and reproduce images of their wartime works in publications. Western-style propaganda paintings in particular had a complicated post-war history, as they were initially confiscated by the United States in 1951 and not returned to Japan until 1970. |
| Further reading:  (Earhart)  (Harootunian)  (Ikeda)  (Shillony)  (Tansman) |