



January 2014

Sign of the times

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Recommended Citation

(2014) "Sign of the times," *SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute*: , 34-37.

Available at: <https://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed/vol10/iss10/34>

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SIGN OF THE TIMES

Japanese poster art deploys a unique arsenal of aesthetics to question the traditions of visual communications. The Japanese Poster Artists – Cherry Blossom and Asceticism exhibition at HKDI immerses viewers in the subtle story of the artform. RIK GLAUERT reports.



OPPOSITE AT THE HOUSE OF M. CIVEÇAWA (1966, REPRINTED IN 1990) BY TADANORI YOKOO
LEFT SHISEIDO (2012) BY KATSUHIKO SHIBUYA

Katsuhiko Shibuya's 2012 poster for Shiseido is an abstract tangle of rigid lines and juxtaposed spaces of harsh black and serene white. The form is radical and minimalist to the point where the brand Shiseido itself is at risk of disappearing within an abstract web. This is Japanese poster design – conventional rules of advertising are shirked in favour of evoking an emotion. The medium becomes the message – subtle, elusive and engaging.

Characteristics of modernism include an appreciation of line and script and a manipulation of blank space. With his Shiseido poster Shibuya is toying with these features as he draws upon his own culture

and reflects the influences that have buffeted Japan in the 21st century. To explore the components of the Japanese poster is to reflect upon the history of modern Japan and to discover why the creators of these posters are both designers and artists.

Japanese advertising is often thought of in terms of the giant billboards at the Shibuya crossing or the neon characters that line the highways of Shinjuku. Poster art is the antithesis of such garish marketing and is king of a far more intimate realm. In Japan, posters are mostly found in indoor space – train stations, department stores, cafes, galleries and museums. In opposition to the brash lights of

Japan's cityscapes they induce quiet reflection, a cultural and artistic sublimity. In modern Japan posters hold a unique position of being functional works of art that are publicly accessible.

In the 1950s Japan regained economic prowess and looked outward for an identity informed by contemporary style. As a nation keen to place itself firmly on the international map, early poster artists and designers in Japan took inspiration from the modernism of the West. Using the rational stripped down style that was in vogue they hoped to position Japan as a progressive nation with a burgeoning contemporary art and

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EVENT

design scene.

Even at this fledgling stage Japan's poster artists were shifted and swayed by Japan's history as they forged the new art scene. Although poster artists such as Hiroshi Ohchi, Yusaku Kamekura and Kenji Itoh were conversing in the language of Western modernism (and even using Latin writing) they stirred in very Japanese elements. A sensitivity to colour and light, whimsical narrative elements and a subtle lyricism are all evident even in these early works.

This was especially evident in the work of Tadanori Yokoo, who is sometimes described as "the Japanese Andy Warhol" but whose influences are more profoundly rooted in Japanese culture, especially the work of

film director Akira Kurosawa and novelist Yukio Mishima, who wrote, "Tadanori Yokoo's works reveal all of the unbearable things which we Japanese have inside ourselves and they make people angry and frightened. He makes explosions with the frightening resemblance which lies between the vulgarity of billboards advertising variety shows during festivals at the shrine devoted to the war dead and the red containers of Coca Cola in American Pop Art, things which are in us but which we do not want to see."

As Japan secured its footing on the world stage, artists began to delve deeper into the country's own rich cache of culture for inspiration – traditions, techniques and philosophies all provided fuel

for their works. Japanese poster art of the sixties and seventies reveals an artistic community searching out a new and unique style. Through the simple method of the woodblock, line and plane became the tools in pictorial composition – both abstract yet expressive. These stylings bear evidence to the international interaction between abstract modernism and the ancient Japanese aesthetics.

The style is personified in Yusaku Kamekura's iconic poster for the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. The piece shows the geometrical vocabulary favoured by early masters of Japanese poster art with the variations of the circle and the formal Latin lettering. The prevalence of this functional simplicity is also evident in Ikko Tanaka's poster for

« IN MODERN JAPAN POSTERS HOLD A UNIQUE POSITION OF BEING PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE FUNCTIONAL WORKS OF ART. »



the 200th anniversary of Sharaku, where he used block-coloured planes and lines to create a traditional visage. The effect is both true to the Japanese style yet tinged with a sharp tang of surrealism.

In a loftier sense, Japanese artists evoked the country's ancient philosophies by filling their creations with elements of Japanese Zen Buddhism. Areas absent of colour create a calm field that allows interpretation from the viewer and encourages a sense of intrigue. The work of Shigeo Fukuda, for example, comfortably and confidently manipulates blank space, which he uses assertively to express his underlying themes. His lacuna encourages meditation and contemplation.


Japan's poster artists spurned photorealistic or illusionist renderings

in favour of a minimalist style (often using only two dimensions), which leaves viewers in charge of the depiction's message. This does not mean posters must be plain however, with motifs and stylistic additions often encrypting layers of messages that intrigue and engage.

The great master of Japanese poster art, Kazumasa Nagai, personifies this concentration on essentials. Nagai began work in the eighties and his figurative mode of design is marked by ornamental animal figures. Nagai deployed later features of the genre by introducing a resplendent use of colour and light. Nagai's careful manipulation adds spiritual interpretation and weight, revealing the depths of what a poster can achieve.

The dichotomies of Nagai's and others' work on display at the

OPPOSITE (FROM LEFT) TOKYO 1964 (1964) BY YUSAKU KAMEKURA; JAPANESE CULTURE - THE FIFTY POSTWAR YEARS 1945-1995 (1995) BY TADANORI YOKOO
ABOVE (FROM LEFT) THE HUMAN RIGHTS ... / IMAGES INTERNATIONALES POUR LES DROITS DE L'HOMME ET DU CITOYEN / ARTS '89 (1989) BY SHIGEO FUKUDA; A POSTER FROM KAZUMASA NAGAI EXHIBITION (1991) BY KAZUMASA NAGAI

Japanese Poster Art exhibition at HKDI redefine the language of visual communication, or at least one of its major dialects. These are posters that are not designed to deliver a hard commercial message – they present a hiatus of reflection and clarity to induce social, political and cultural reflection. As a collection, they give an insight into the development of a subtle to-and-fro of ancient tradition and contemporary influence that has become the hallmark of a very Japanese aesthetic. 

Japanese Poster Artists - Cherry Blossom and Asceticism
Exhibition period: 14 Oct 2014 - 30 Mar 2015
Venue: G/F, d-mart, HKDI

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