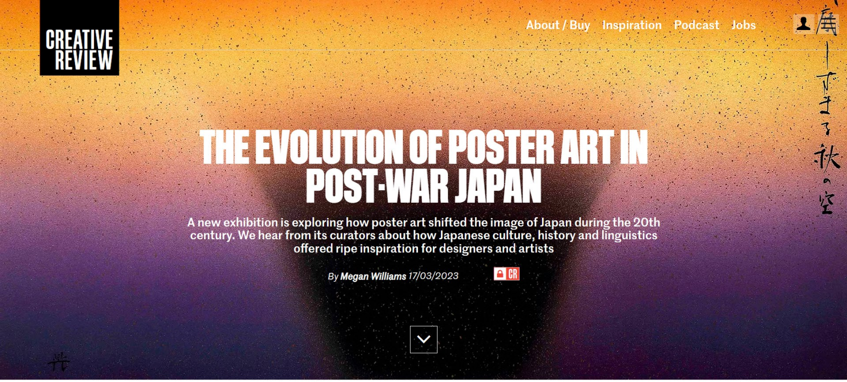
CREATIVE REVIEW



THE EVOLUTION OF POSTER ART IN POST-WAR JAPAN

A new exhibition is exploring how poster art shifted the image of Japan during the 20th century. We hear from its curators about how Japanese culture, history and linguistics offered ripe inspiration for designers and artists

By **Megan Williams** 17/03/2023

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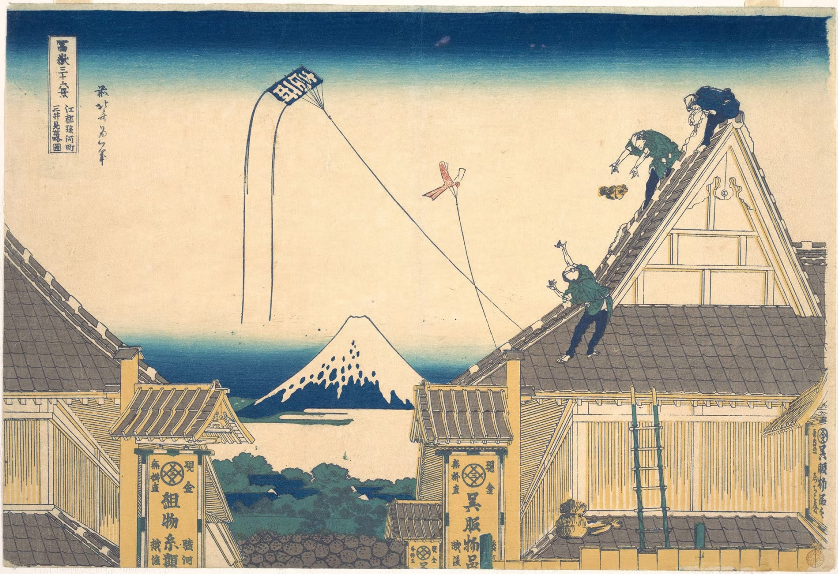
Creative Insight

Poster House in New York is hosting a new exhibition that sheds light on the role of poster art in Japan during the 1900s, illustrating how it echoed society as well as shaped it. The show is called Made in Japan: 20th Century Poster Art, though its really gets going midway through the century. The nation had just been through World War II, overlapping with the Second Sino-Japanese War around the same time. During this period, design – as is often the way with mass conflict anywhere around the world – was seized on for propaganda and other schemes in the nation's interest, like rationing.

If that was the primary role of design in wartime Japan, it had several functions in the aftermath. Design was an asset to the state, which was keen to reconfigure how it appeared to the population and the rest of the world. The museum describes how the nation had an image of "both an aggressor and a victim of war", neither of which would serve Japan's economic and cultural ambitions well. During the seven-year Allied Occupation of Japan following World War II, the US "imposed an agenda of demilitarisation and democratisation", explain the curators, Nozomi Naoi and Erin Schoneveld. "Japanese wartime propaganda was replaced by themes promoting recovery, peace, and prosperity, and commercial poster design played a crucial role in transforming the popular international image of Japan through the lens of cultural exchange."

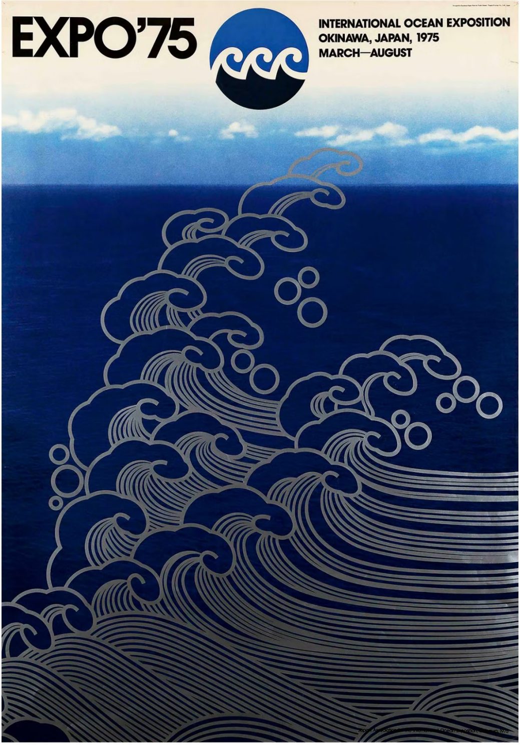
The curators say that designers Tadanori Yokoo and Keiichi Tanaami were among the artists who embodied Japan's changing relationship with the world. Both drew from movements that were born hundreds of years and thousands of miles apart, sampling from a smorgasbord that includes Surrealism, American Pop Art, Dada, and Japan's own ukiyo-e genre of art – a key source of inspiration even for this new future-facing generation of creatives.


富嶽三十六景
江都駿河町三井見世略圖
前北斎為一筆

Top: Five Seasons by Kōichi Satō, 1988. Courtesy Merrill C Berman Collection; Above: The Mitsui Store at Suruga-cho in Edo, from the series 36 Views of Mt Fuji by Hokusai Katsushika, 1832. Courtesy The Ronin Gallery

"In terms of traditional Japanese art, Japanese posters are very much rooted in the ukiyo-e tradition of woodblock printing," Naoi and Schoneveld say. The ukiyo-e prints created during the Edo period, beginning in 1603, were themselves a form of advertisement. The term ukiyo-e is often translated as 'pictures of the floating world' – a 'floating world' filled with licensed brothels, kabuki theatres, and other kinds of popular entertainment, which were portrayed in the prints. Ukiyo-e had a long-lasting influence on visual artists, particularly in its "emphasis on line and pure colour", and many 20th century posters directly referenced and remixed famous Edo-era figures, namely Hokusai.

But there was room for 20th century artists to modernise when it came to execution. The curators explain how "advancements in modern printing technologies such as the rotary press, offset printing, and photographic reproduction [led] to a proliferation of printed materials in colour. The publishing industry that had previously relied upon woodblock printing began to incorporate these new printing techniques, helping to establish the style of the modern Japanese poster."

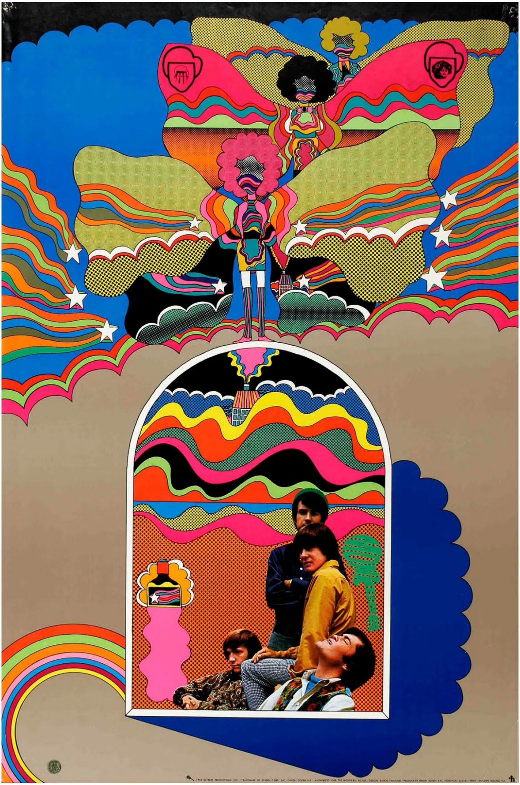


Expo '75 by Kazumasa Nagai, 1975. Image courtesy Merrill C Berman Collection

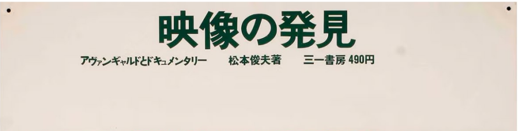
Artists and designers used these disparate influences to formulate a new visual language, which was often introduced to the wider public through the lens of commercial projects. “Both Yokoo and Tanaami began their careers in advertising working as commercial art directors and graphic designers, however exposure to avant-garde groups of the 1960s inspired them to integrate the graphic and the painterly as well as fuse motifs taken from advertising, avant-garde art, and everyday objects.” Yokoo's vibrant posters earned him commercial work with clients such as Toshiba. Meanwhile Tanaami, who according to the curators was key in introducing Pop Art and psychedelic culture to Japan, was sought after by American bands including The Monkees. “Needless to say, in the post-war era modern design was a fluid space in which artists were inspired by and responding to one another on a global scale.”

The interplay between domestic and foreign creative influences was perhaps an inevitability, particularly for those artists who came up in the shadow of the war. “Both [Yokoo and Tanaami] began their careers in Japan's post-war era which was partially defined by the ‘Americanisation’ of modern life,” spurred by the US presence in Japan. “Even after the end of the occupation, there continued to be a sustained influx of

American commercial products and fads, in addition to a rising awareness of the political and social protests of the counter-culture movement," Naoi and Schoneveld explain.

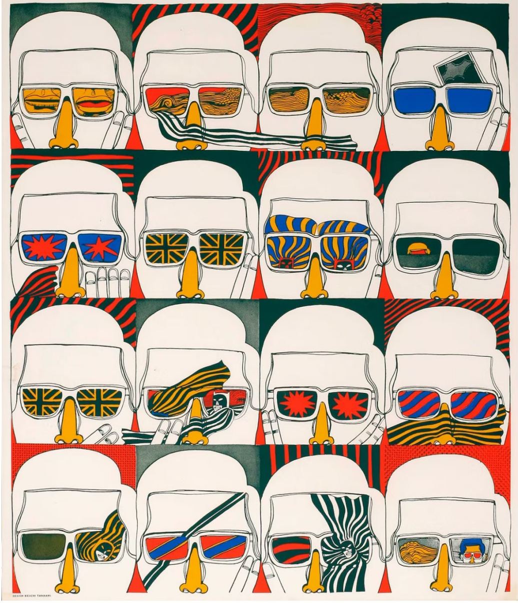

1968 RAYBERT PRODUCTIONS, INC. /TRADEMARK OF SCREEN GEMS, INC. /NIHON SOKEN K.K. AUTHORIZED USER THE MONKEES·VICTOR /DESIGN·KEIICHI TANAAMI /PRODUCE BY NIHON SOKEN K.K. NOBUYUKI SUZUKI /PRINT·SHASHIN INSATSU K.K.

The Monkees by Keiichi Tanaami, 1968. Courtesy Merrill C Berman Collection



映像の発見

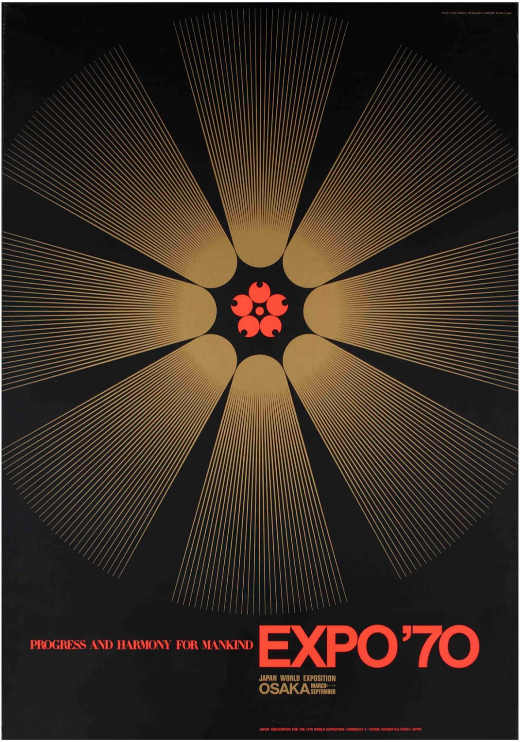
アヴァンギャルドとドキュメンタリー　松本俊夫著　三一書房 490円



Discovery of the Image by Keiichi Tanaami, 1966. Courtesy Merrill C Berman Collection

"Within this atmosphere of change, Japanese artists began to rethink hierarchies within the art world, questioning definitions of art-making and exhibition practices by blurring the boundaries between commercial and fine art," they tell us. Avant-garde collectives such as Gutai Art Association, founded in 1954, and Jikken Kōbō (Experimental Workshop), which ran from 1951-57, were instrumental in redefining fine art by looking to different media and new technologies. "These activities anticipated the anti-art, conceptual art, and Pop Art movements of the 1960s and 70s that not only sought to reconceive the relationship between art and society, but also represented a response to the political turmoil of the post-war era."

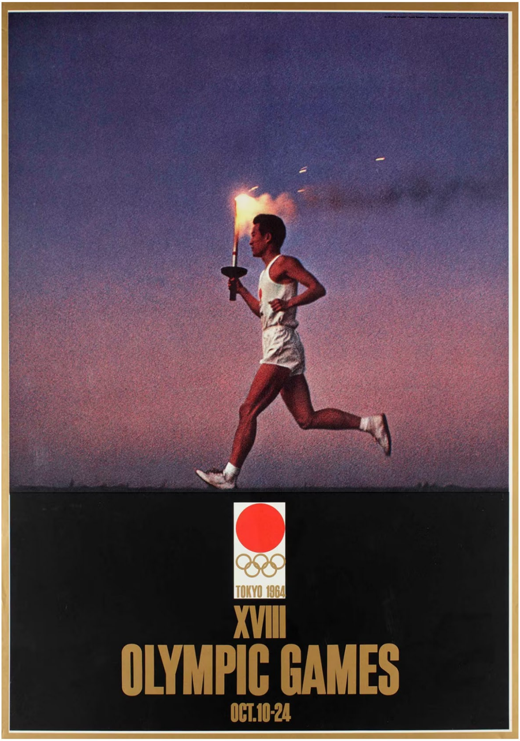
By this time, Japan had opened its doors to the world. Exponential industrial and economic growth coincided with global cultural events that "celebrated national progress and symbolised a successful return to the global arena", the curators say. There is, of course, the 1964 Olympic Games held in Tokyo, followed by the Osaka Expo in 1970, which were both "important milestones for the country as they were held in Asia for the first time".


PROGRESS AND HARMONY FOR MANKIND
EXPO'70
JAPAN WORLD EXPOSITION
OSAKA MARCH↔SEPTEMBER
JAPAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE 1970 WORLD EXPOSITION/HOMMACHI 4-CHOME, HIGASHI-KU OSAKA, JAPAN

Expo '70 by Yūsaku Kamekura, 1967. Courtesy Merrill C Berman Collection

The heralded designer Yūsaku Kamekura was behind the visuals for both landmark occasions. His work on the Olympics brought about more firsts: it was the first time photography was used to promote the Games, and it was the first time he incorporated photography into his designs, too.

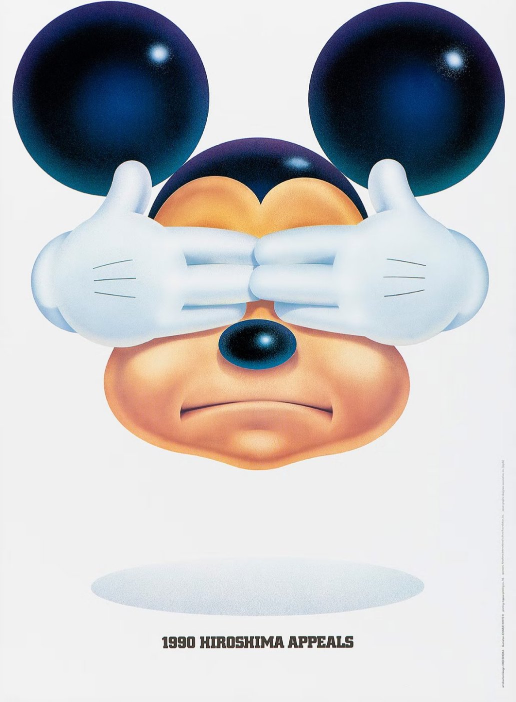
One of the promotional posters depicts Yoshinori Sakai, who was born in Hiroshima on the day it was bombed by the US. Sakai became the official Olympic torchbearer and "a symbol of this post-war identity", the curators explain, making him an ideal figure to spotlight for the Olympics. (The Seoul 1988 posters appear to have been heavily inspired by Kamekura's design.) Kamekura also designed the much-admired 1964 Olympics logo – a bold modernist composition incorporating the 'rising sun' motif of the national flag – which "became synonymous with the innovative Japanese graphic design of the period".



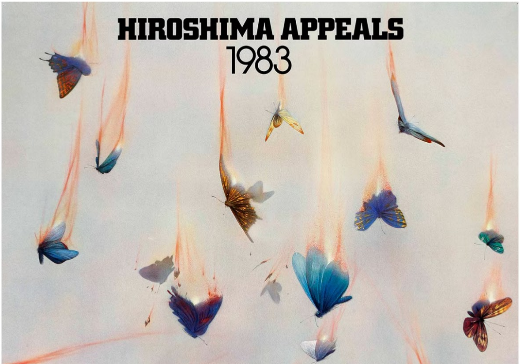
XVIII Olympic Games by Yūsaku Kamekura, 1964. Image courtesy Merrill C Berman Collection

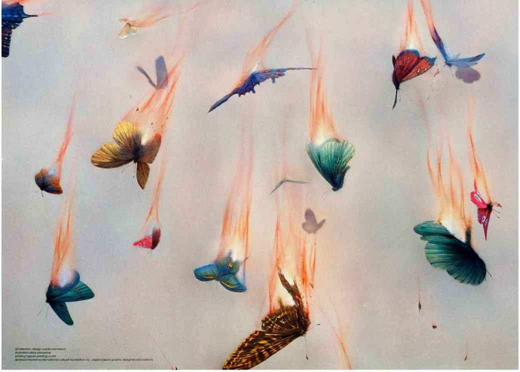
The legacy of Hiroshima is felt elsewhere in the exhibition. It includes posters created for Hiroshima Appeals, a long-running initiative intended to preserve the memory of the world's first atomic bombing and to promote world peace. On display is a particularly evocative image of flame-licked butterflies falling from above, which was designed by Kamekura. The show features another Hiroshima Appeals poster by the art director and designer Ishioka Eiko – a charged image showing the cartoon character Mickey Mouse covering his eyes.

Eiko carries the weight of being the only woman designer in the exhibition. "She is perhaps the most famous Japanese female designer of the 20th century, coming to prominence in the 1960s while working at Shiseido cosmetics," the curators explain. She went on to lead the art direction at Japanese department store Parco and was behind its famous ad starring Faye Dunaway eating a hard-boiled egg.



Hiroshima Appeals by Eiko Ishioka, 1990. Courtesy Poster House/Collection Peter Kahane

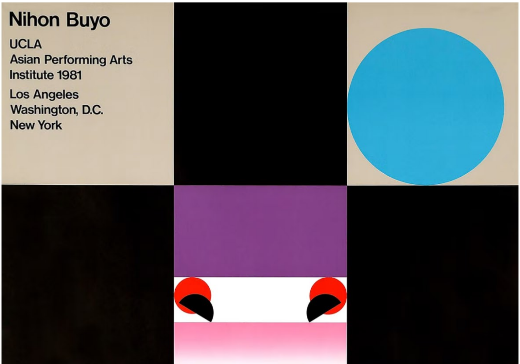


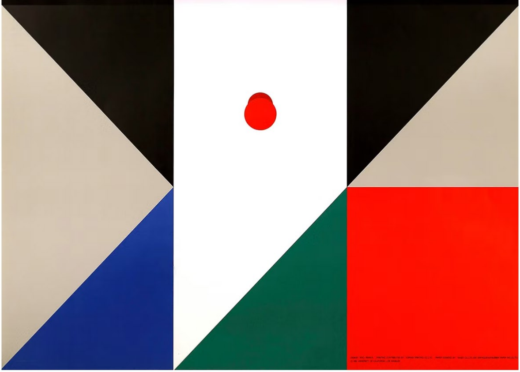

art direction, design yusaku kamekura
illustration akira yokoyama
printing toppan printing co.,ltd
sponsors hiroshima international cultural foundation, inc., jagda (japan graphic designers association)

Hiroshima Appeals by Yūsaku Kamekura, 1983. Courtesy Merrill C Berman Collection

Eiko had a multifaceted career that stretched from advertising to theatre to costume design, and her name is attached to projects that reverberated around the world. She designed the striking cover for Miles Davis' album Tutu, and won an Oscar in 1992 with her costume design for Bram Stoker's Dracula, directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

She is one of many creatives in the show who had links to textiles. Kazumasa Nagai worked in the advertising department at a textile company, while Ikkō Tanaka studied textile design in Kyoto. Tanaka was the first artistic director of one of Japan's most famous design-led exports, Muji, and in 1960, he and Nagai established Nippon Design Center, which had a critical role in bolstering the nation's creative pipeline.



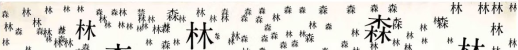


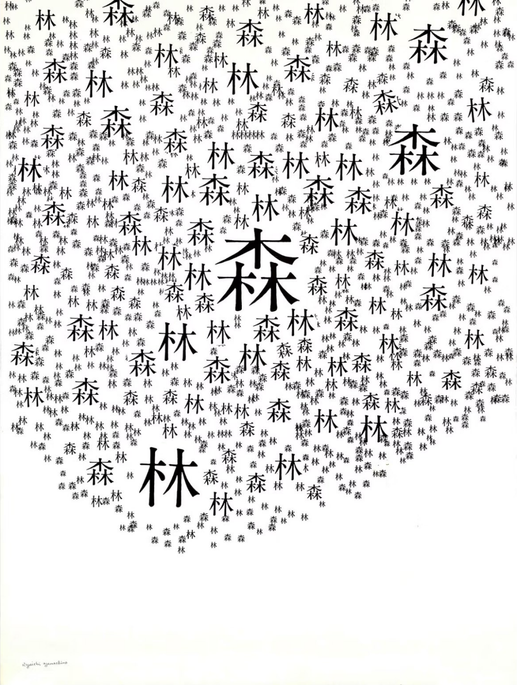
Nihon Buyo by Ikkō Tanaka, 1981. Image courtesy Merrill C Berman Collection

Tanaka created the design that appears on the Poster House exhibition poster, which is based on his artwork, Nihon Buyō. Created in 1981 for the Asian Performing Arts Institute at UCLA, the poster reimagined the image of a female Japanese dancer in geometric forms. “Tanaka developed a commercial style that combined traditional Japanese artistic forms with modernist principles of simplicity, clarity, and minimalism,” Naoi and Schoneveld explain. “He reinvented traditional motifs through this kind of bold colour blocking and abstraction in an effort to package Japanese culture for an international audience.”

Creatives also found inspiration in other corners of Japan’s cultural tapestry, including its “multivalent” writing systems. “For example, Japanese designers utilise three different types of writing systems including kanji, which are Chinese characters, and hiragana and katakana, which are phonetic scripts,” the curators explain.

They highlight designer Ryuichi Yamashiro’s poster Trees, which was created in 1955 as part of many reforestation initiatives following the war when there was a shortage of lumber. The image is, they say, a “masterpiece” of Japanese graphic design. “The typography plays on the pictographic origins of Chinese characters, incorporating the character for ‘tree’ (木), which, when repeated twice, becomes the character for ‘woods’ (林), and, with the addition of a third character, comes to signify ‘forest’ (森). Yamashiro dispersed these characters throughout the composition, suggesting a typographic woodland, and varied the font to create an impression of trees of different sizes.”

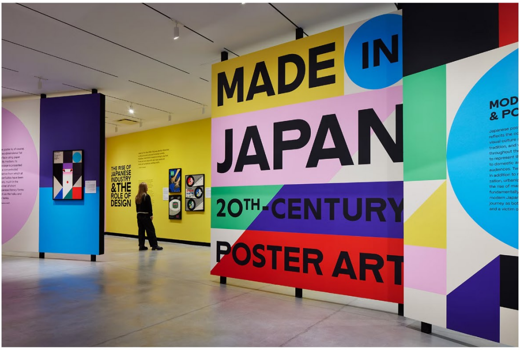




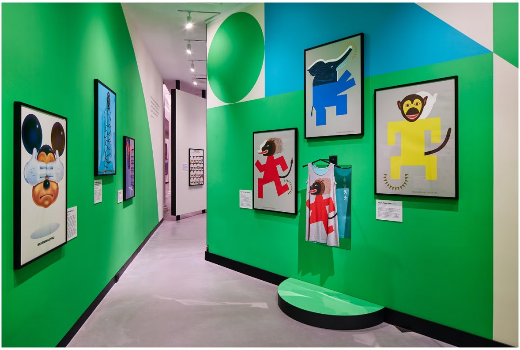
Trees by Ryūichi Yamashiro, 1955. Image courtesy Merrill C Berman Collection

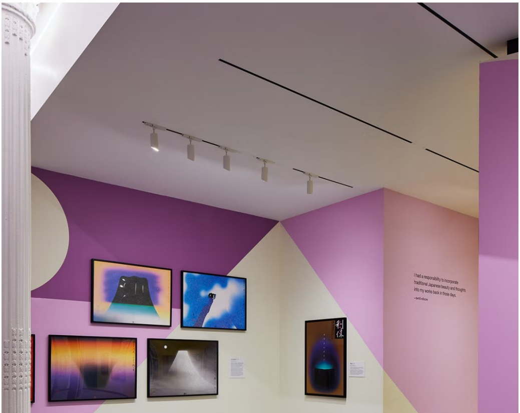
In the 20th century, design was a vehicle for both the state and brands to reshape how they were seen on the world's stage. Yet the exhibition shows how it became an avenue for artists and designers to reckon with a period of cultural transformation and identify themselves within it. The exhibition's themes chime on a personal level with Naoi, who is familiar with the push and pull between cultural influences. "I grew up in Japan, but through an international school system and was brought up in a bilingual and bicultural environment," the curator tells us. These experiences have stayed with her through her career, and she has dedicated much of it to researching the relationship between "a modern Japanese identity and the influx of Western influences in Japan at the time".

"These issues have been important to me as a kind of search for my own identity as a Japanese scholar within an international and global context," she says. "I think many people of various backgrounds can relate to these feelings, and I hope they will find ways to reflect upon their own identity and meaning as they enjoy the exhibition."



Installation view of Made in Japan: 20th Century Poster Art. All installation images: Samuel Morgan Photography




I had a responsibility to incorporate traditional Japanese beauty and thoughts into my works back in those days.

Made in Japan: 20th Century Poster Art runs at Poster House, New York until September 10; posterhouse.org

Creative Insight
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Art
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Illustration