

Togo Seiji and Futurism

By Iseki Masaaki

Following the introduction of French Impressionism into Japan, Europe, in the post-Impressionist days, quickly went through a series of revolutionary art movements. Naturally, these movements soon made

their way into Japan's art circles which were constantly mimicking things European.

Among others, Italian Futurism came on the scene around the same time as Cubism. This importation took place in

May 1909, just three months after Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, a Futurist leader, issued his *Manifeste de Futurisme*. Few Japanese, though, paid any attention to this import. Given that most Japanese artists still had yet to fully digest Impressionism, it was only natural that they showed little interest in the sudden, acute changes in other artistic thoughts.

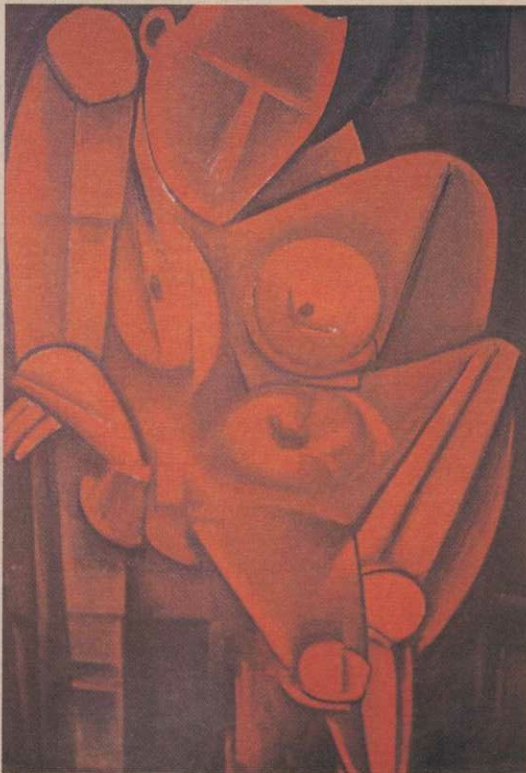
It took three years for Futurism to finally catch the attention of the Japanese. For a while there were voices of opposition and discussions about its pros and cons. Only a handful of painters, notably Yorozu Tetsugoro and Saito Yori, produced works under the influence of this school. Until about 1915, Futurism, along with Cubism and Fauvism, had been introduced mainly in written form. Since it was the theories of these schools rather than the actual works that were first brought to the nation, many Japanese painters, who believed there was little beyond Impressionism, stopped there despite their belief that they must always follow the latest European trends.

Among Japanese painters, a few artists moved relatively early toward the non-naturalistic modeling. These painters were Yorozu Tetsugoro, Togo Seiji (1897 to 1978) and Onchi Koshiro. Of these three, Togo in particular deserves special mention as a person who, in the early stages of his career, was directly related to the Futurists of Italy. A pioneer artist, Togo's association with Futurism came as a result of a meeting with musician Yamada Kosaku. Inspired by knowledge about new European trends brought back by Yamada, Togo became totally engrossed in trying his hand at this new style of painting.

In 1913 Togo made these works public in a one-man show. Although they were not well received by the general public, they did catch the eye of Arishima Ikuma who spoke Italian and had long been interested in Futurist activities. He had been corresponding with Marinetti and in October 1921 arranged a meeting between Togo and Marinetti in Turin. Marinetti, surprised to be told that a young Japanese painter who believed ardently in Futurism



Togo Seiji (back row, far right) by the side of T. Marinetti, ca. 1921



Motarete tatsu hito (Woman Leaning on an Armrest), Yorozu Tetsugoro, 1917



Parasoru saseru onna (Woman With a Parasol), Togo Seiji, 1916

was coming, was elated, believing Togo could be very useful in publicizing Futurism.

In a month's time, Togo toured Milan, Florence and Rome with Marinetti and did take part in public relations work for the Futurists. However, by that time prominent Futurist figures, such as the painter Umberto Boccioni and the architect Antonio Sant'Elia, had died and the Futurists had lost much of their pioneering spirit. Togo soon noticed that the publicity work of the Futurist was nothing more than hubbub and noise. He became

disillusioned and his relationship with Marinetti cooled. After returning to Japan, Togo reverted to conventional, sweet, mellow type of paintings. Still, he has left behind some very fine Futurist works from his time in Italy, such as *The Man in a Hat (Boshi o kamutta otoko 1921)*.

In Japan, Futurism is often confused with Cubism. One main reason for this was the repetition of the styles without clearly understanding the social and cultural backgrounds that gave rise to these Italian and French schools. Because most people take Futurism literally, as an art of

the future, they have a strong tendency to see nearly all new styles of work as Futuristic.

In the 1930s pioneer artists were suppressed by Japanese militarism. In this sense, Togo can be seen as a painter who anticipated the somewhat tragic path that was followed by some of the pre-World War II Japanese painters.

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