

Posters in Modern Japan

By Iseki Masaaki

Modern Japanese graphic design, as symbolized by the poster, can be said to be an art form closely related to our daily lives. Unlike crafts, the poster is not for pure enjoyment or a commodity for practical use around the home. It is used as a means for communication of daily information in our society. In other words, posters can serve a dual purpose: They are a direct reflection of a country's economic well-being on the one hand, and can be seen as a barometer of the cultural standard of that country on the other.

True, it is television commercials and the like that are stealing the show as the main communication tool in our modern society. Still, as we all know, we cannot expect much in terms of artistic expression from television commercials. Because poster designs don't disappear into time and space the way pictures on television screens do, they have

the potential for use in more advanced expressions to enrich our daily lives.

As for the history of Japanese posters before World War II, they were used mostly as propaganda for commercial products and events. Although in this sense their service as the everyday communication tool was no different from that of other countries, in those days the numbers were quite limited and there were very few of the type of large, wall-sized posters found in Western countries. It would also be fairly safe to say that graphic designers were a rare breed. From what I can remember, posters served more in the field of national propaganda. That is, for the publicizing of Japan's militarism before WW II.

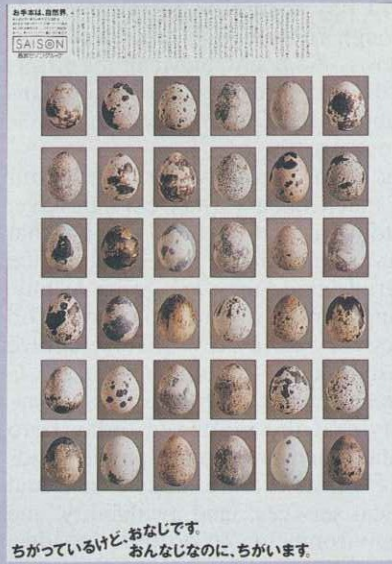
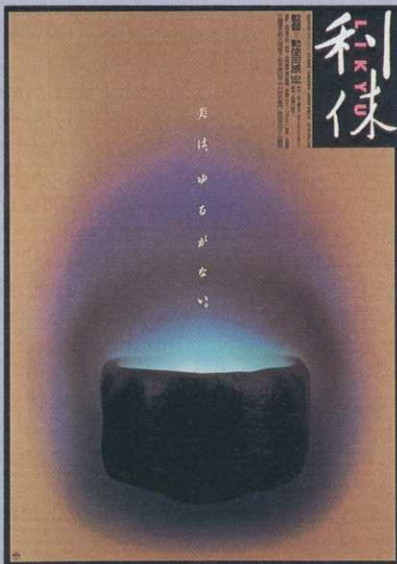
It was not until the postwar period of the '50s and '60s that Japanese graphic design, particularly posters, began to draw the attention of the world. This was also the time when many talented designers came out, winning numerous

prizes at international contests and Japanese posters quickly became world recognized. To name a few designers who were responsible for the development of poster design since WW II: Kamekura Yusaku, Nagai Kazumasa, Tanaka Ikko and Fukuda Shigeo, all of whom belonged to the first postwar generation designers. Among them Kamekura was quite active before the war, but all repeatedly won prizes at Cracow's international poster competition in Poland.

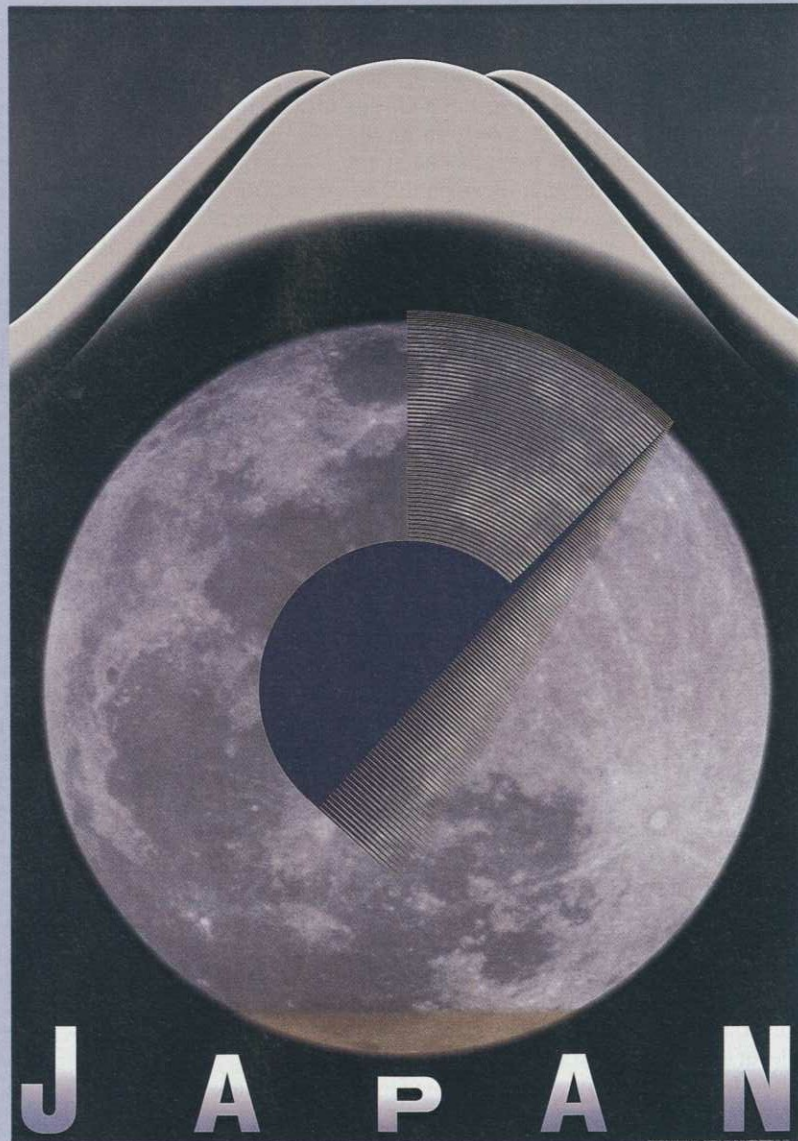
Without being perplexed by the new European and American influences seen in painting circles, these designers all had their own individual character and, surrounded by the democratic climate of the postwar days, created their own unique modern Japanese graphic designs. Under their guidance, Japanese traditional culture went beyond exoticism, and reached world standard in artistic expressions. The quality of their creations is so high that they can be fully appreciated as modern art.

Because the poster is so closely related to our everyday lives, it is only natural that it is directly connected to our society and economy. As Japan gradually reached the phase of rapid economic growth, numerous very talented poster designers were produced. This created the correlation between great poster design and an advancing economy. Above everything, with printing technology so advanced, Japan's printing techniques are said to be among the world's top. Today, technicians can fully answer the needs of designers and can produce any combination of complicated composition and color.

Perhaps it is fair to say that advancement of printing technology has been stimulated in part by the creation of superb graphic designs. Presently, the so-called second- and third-generation Japanese graphic designers are competing on the same front with the first generation designers. The sensibility, concept and technology which they com-



Rikyu, Sato Koichi (left): Chigatteiru keredo onaji desu. Onnaji nanoni chigaimasu. (Different, but the same. Even though the same, different.), Asaba Katsumi, both from "Modern Japanese Posters '89"



Japan by Nagai Kazumasa, from "Modern Japanese Posters '89"

mand are said to be at the top level of the world now.

But not everything is fine and dandy. As seen in other Japanese art forms, Japanese posters take after the delicateness and cleverness original to the Japanese. This tendency, however, threatens the power communicating to

the audience which, of course, is the original mission of the medium. In other words, the poster runs the risk of weakening its ability of persuasion. When a poster is too beautiful or too refined, beauty and refinement become an end in themselves and will result in canceling out the original purpose.

Recognition of the importance of concept will thus remain a major issue for Japan's future graphic designers. ■

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