

Review Essay

**Beauty and Violence, Art and War: Some Reflections on the Visual Cultures of Imperial Japan**

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Philip Hu, Rhiannon Paget, Sebastian Dobson, Maki Kaneko, Sonja Hotwagner, and Andreas Marks. *Conflicts of Interest: Art and War in Modern Japan*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016. 288 pp.

Miya Elise Mizuta Lippit. *Aesthetic Life: Beauty and Art in Modern Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. 332 pp.

Asato Ikeda. *The Politics of Painting: Fascism and Japanese Art during the Second World War*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 144 pp.

"Beauty and Violence" was an admirably descriptive name for an early-1990s exhibition of strikingly dichotomous pictures by the Japanese woodblock print artist Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), who came to prominence in what was, by any measure, an age of extremes. His source material was rich—the bloody civil war that ended the Tokugawa shogunate, followed by the new regime of the Meiji Emperor (1852–1912) with its program of modernization. Rocked by ongoing political and social upheaval, the Japanese populace voraciously devoured Yoshitoshi's seemingly innumerable and infinitely varied images of their world in flux. To those of us living through the upheavals of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it may seem that our own present-day world of images is saturated with violence, and ever increasingly and gratuitously so (*Game of Thrones*, anyone?). But the graphic intensity of these nineteenth-century Japanese pictures of war and warriors was something I had never seen, at least back in 1992.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps more unsettling yet was the exhibition's casual juxtaposition of Yoshitoshi's images of war with his pictures of beautiful women—he had the audacity,

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<sup>1</sup> "Beauty and Violence: Japanese Prints by Yoshitoshi, 1839–1892" traveled to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the Kunstmuseum in Dusseldorf, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where it opened in the print galleries in December 1992 (see the exhibition catalogue by Eric van den Ing and Robert Schaap [1992]). The Philadelphia Museum of Art rehung a number of these works, drawn from its collection, in the 2019 exhibition "Yoshitoshi: Spirit and Spectacle."

for example, to create a series of female “beauties” (*bijin*) that took the new emperor’s comely concubines as its subject. How could these roughly contemporaneous yet dramatically different kinds of images be consumed by the same media-hungry public, and what does the counterintuitive coexistence of these two apparent extremes of subject (and taste) say about the society from which they emerged? Was there, in fact, something beautiful in violence, and violent in beauty, in the world that was modern, imperial Japan?

A host of recent publications on Japanese modern art and aesthetics, and visual and material culture, brings these questions into sharp focus. What follows are some thoughts inspired by my reading of three of those works: *Conflicts of Interest: Art and War in Modern Japan*, a multi-authored exhibition catalogue edited by curator Philip Hu that accompanied the show of the same name at the Saint Louis Art Museum; *Aesthetic Life: Beauty and Art in Modern Japan*, by Miya Elise Mizuta Lippit; and *The Politics of Painting: Fascism and Japanese Art during the Second World War*, by Asato Ikeda. From multiple perspectives, these books look at imperial Japan through its diverse visual, material, and literary cultures from the mid-nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries. Taken together, these publications put into productive dialogue an array of media, modes, and genres that were radically transformed via Japan’s ongoing contact with Europe and America and its transformation into a modernized nation-state. In postcards as in paintings, in prints as in photographs, in political cartoons as in poetry, we see Japan’s rude entry into a global order dominated by Western imperialism and its struggle to fashion a national identity at home while communicating a national image abroad. As it turns out, beauty and violence, like art and war, were inseparable: they lay at the heart of what it meant to be modern, along with the *mélange* of modes and technologies of representation through which images and meanings were created and circulated.

*Conflicts of Interest: Art and War in Modern Japan*, with its six single-authored chapters and extensive catalogue entries for 146 objects, stands as a model of museum- and collection-based scholarship. Meticulously and laboriously researched throughout, with an exhaustive bibliography, the catalogue’s object entries in particular will delight readers with their color reproductions, transcriptions of Japanese titles and other text, and entry-specific references (which were primarily written by Philip Hu and Rhiannon Paget, with some contributions by Sonja Hotwagner). The objects—mainly works on paper, such as prints, drawings, and photographs, with the addition of a small number of paintings and textiles—are drawn from, but represent only a small fraction of, a much larger collection featuring the popular visual culture of Japan’s modern wars that was assembled by American collectors Charles and Rosalyn Lowenhaupt and recently gifted to the Saint Louis Art Museum. Hu’s opening chapter of *Conflicts of Interest* provides an introduction to the Lowenhaupt collection, which he situates within the larger history of the collecting of Meiji-period war prints (*sensō-e*) by individuals and institutions in Japan, Europe, and the United States from the time of their creation to the present day.

The topic of the collecting and display of war pictures naturally raises critical issues of reception, history, and memory, all the more so given ongoing geopolitical tensions and sensitivities related to Japan's imperial past. Such issues, regrettably, are generally not touched upon in *Conflicts of Interest*. It briefly mentions Yasukuni Shrine, which enshrines Japan's war dead, as a site for the display of war prints today (20)—though this has by no means been diplomatically unproblematic during the seventy-five years since the end of the Second World War. A heavy-handed woodblock triptych of 1894 helps explain why. *Booty of Chinese Implements of War Displayed on the Grounds of the Yasukuni Shrine in Kudan and Various Kinds of Unused Artillery* (cat. 26) not only provided the (Japanese) viewer with privileged visual access to such captured war booty as Qing battle flags and Korean women's tunics on public display at Yasukuni Shrine, it also showcases three bound Chinese prostrating themselves in defeat to a group of gloating Japanese army officers. Similar sentiments of cultural superiority in satirical prints designed by Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847–1915) in partnership with satirist Nishimori Takeki (1862–1913) are discussed in Hotwagner's chapter on war and satire.

The preponderance of objects in *Conflicts of Interest* were produced and consumed in response to the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), though they are supplemented by items created earlier and later in order to situate them within a larger narrative arc of Japan's imperial project, which stretched from the late 1860s to 1945. An initial grouping of prints, mostly color woodblock triptychs but also lithographs, that were made between 1866 and the start of the Sino-Japanese War nearly thirty years later, conveys the energy and momentum of nascent Japanese nationalism. Images of the 1868–1869 Boshin War (disguised as a sixteenth-century battle due to the Tokugawa ban on depicting contemporary events), the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion (including one work by Yoshitoshi), and the 1882 Korean Incident are chockablock with signs and symbols of Japan's growing military prowess and sense of national pride: great warships, firing cannons, valiant officers in their military finest, and, almost ubiquitously, the national flag (the only distinctively Japanese motif, though it was as Euro-American in origin as the others). Ogata Gekkō's (1859–1920) *suguroku* board game *Warlike Spirit* (1893, cat. 19), which asked its young (male) players to make their way to glory in an imagined military career—aiming, in life, to become a decorated general or, in death, a deified soul at Yasukuni Shrine—really brings this point home. The modern iconography and associated meanings of nation and war, and of valor and sacrifice, were already codified and naturalized, even before the first shot in the Sino-Japanese War was fired.<sup>2</sup>

Prints were a commercial product to be sold in large numbers and at a profit, as Andreas Marks confirms in his essay on Meiji war prints and their publishers. And, for a Japanese public heady with jingoistic fervor, the more dramatic and sensational the

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<sup>2</sup> Yasukuni Shrine is represented visually in Gekkō's *Warlike Spirit* (cat. 19) by the famous statue of Ōmura Masujirō (1824–1869), who founded the Imperial Japanese Army. The first modern Japanese bronze statue, it was erected in 1893 (the same year the print was produced) and remains in situ today.

image, the better. Accordingly, print artists who took the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars as their subject pushed the compositional and thematic boundaries of the war-picture genre. Perhaps most obviously, they enfolded the fight between good (“righteous”) and evil, between “us” and “them,” in a stark pictorial drama of light and dark. Searchlights beam across contiguous sheets, leading the eye up, down, and around epic nighttime battle scenes punctuated by fiery explosions; gunfire traverses darkened battlefields like rays of light; blazing plumes of fire and smoke command vast swaths of space and sky. An enlargement of scale further monumentalized the dangers and glories of battle. Hexptychs, even enneptychs—woodblock prints whose designs stretch continuously over six or nine printed sheets—seem to embrace the vast seas and lands over which battles were fought and won using the modern machinery of war under the command of the divine “Japanese spirit.” These panoramic scenes envelop the viewer in an imaginative “theater” of war—from a safe, vicarious distance and with a predetermined favorable outcome. It mattered not whether such an outcome had been fabricated. Despite their purported reportorial purpose, war prints strayed from the truth—often quite far—in order to feed the patriotic zeal of their consuming audience. Imperial censors also endeavored to keep things positive, and the kind of gory, blood-filled images that Yoshitoshi had designed some decades earlier was no longer condoned. An illustrated firsthand account of the war (cat. 75), for example, was prohibited from distribution when it was deemed too accurate in its representation of the actual violence of war.

One of the more interesting sociopolitical aspects of Meiji-period (1868–1912) war prints, which inculcated a shared sense of national pride and identity among the populace, is that they emerged from a market-driven, commercial context rather than top down from the government. The state had much to gain, of course—a ready supply of soldiers, for example—from the media’s mobilization of the home front in support of the wars, and we have seen that it exercised its authority when necessary to ensure control over the media’s messaging. New and increasingly accessible mechanical reproduction technologies made such messaging increasingly effective. In a richly textured account of new media and their consumption, Sebastian Dobson discusses the sometimes “cozy” relationship between commercial and governmental (and military) spheres as they found mutual benefits in creating and bringing images of war to the public. Focusing in his chapter on lithography and photomechanical reproduction, Dobson introduces the new mass-media formats they begot—such as illustrated magazines, commemorative photographic albums, and picture postcards—and describes the large audiences they enjoyed. The picture postcard, for example, had become such a pervasive feature of modern life that, as a printed children’s cotton kimono fabric attests (cat. 128.1), during the Russo-Japanese War it was possible to dress one’s child in a patriotic kimono with riotous designs of postcards featuring wartime imagery. In a nuanced essay that cites Louise Young’s scholarship on the popular reception of the Manchurian Incident of 1931, Maki Kaneko’s chapter draws our attention to the “reciprocal collaboration” between the media and the state at this later

point in time, when the mass media functioned as a source of “unofficial propaganda” (72, citing Young 1998, 78). Kaneko demonstrates how the creation of heroic war narratives was the “product of popular media and public imagination rather than the result of top-down control or manipulation” (74). Focusing on a new type of hero, the humble martyr epitomized by the “Three Brave Bombers” (*Bakudan sanyūshi*), Kaneko shows how the government, thanks to the media’s creation of this new, faceless heroic type, was able to smooth over existing social fissures and successfully mobilize the working class into patriotic soldiers.

The deeply layered, intermedial nature of modern war imagery encapsulated by the abovementioned children’s kimono fabric is brought alive by the juxtaposition of objects in various media in the *Conflicts of Art* catalogue. A fireman’s quilted jacket from the time of the Sino-Japanese War (cat. 22) is resist-dyed to recreate a naval victory; replete with auspicious, heavenly clouds that connect the sea with the sky in an apotheosis of Japanese gunfire, the design rearticulates the stock motifs of war prints in a garment that, as Hu points out, “wrap[s] the fireman in divine protection” (110). Two painted images commemorating the same war by Kubota Beisen (1852–1906), a war artist and newspaper correspondent, reprise modern war imagery in monumental and time-honored painting formats using luxury materials, adding gravitas and aesthetic integrity to themes and motifs largely derived from popular culture. The first, a triptych of hanging scrolls painted on silk titled *Victory in the Sino-Japanese War* (cat. 73), features army and navy scenes on either side of a central image of a hawk hovering in a sky tinged red by the rising sun, a metaphor for Japan’s dominance on both sea and land. The second of Beisen’s paintings, a pair of silver-leafed, six-panel folding screens titled *The Bravery of Captain Matsuzaki Nao’omi at Anseong Crossing in Korea during the Sino-Japanese War* (cat. 23), depicts the fearless captain and his men in the eerie stillness of a nighttime landscape moments before a military operation that will end in the captain’s death by Chinese gunfire; the captain is shown leaning forward, heroically embracing the fate that lies ahead of him.

There is beauty, indeed, in these spectacular war pictures. The sublimity of nature—in the form of the mighty sea, the perilous Manchurian winter, and the red rising sun—only enhances the dramatic agency and bravado of the images’ Japanese heroes, who cut through the ocean on their formidable battleships, render the night sky ablaze with the fire of armaments, and, upon death, are immortalized for eternity as war gods (*gunshin*). The violence of war is tamed and aestheticized; the real subjects of war pictures are Japan’s “beautiful” military virtues and righteous “Japanese spirit” (*Nihon damashii*).

Conspicuously, almost no women are represented in the nearly 150 war pictures in *Conflicts of Interest*. What we see, selectively, is a man’s world, populated by famous male generals and heroes, and anonymous, though brave and valiant, soldiers on the battlefield.<sup>3</sup> But images of war coexisted with—indeed, existed in some nature of

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<sup>3</sup> Those few women who do appear in *Conflicts of Interest* are, by and large, anonymous spectators (at Yasukuni Shrine) or volunteer nurses. This latter group includes imperial

symbiotic relationship with—images of women, including *bijin*, or beauties. War pictures and “pictures of beauties” (*bijinga*) were two of the most popular and innovative visual arts genres of the 1890s. Mizuno Toshikata (1866–1908), a woodblock print artist who designed some of the most aesthetically memorable images of Japanese heroes and battles of the Sino-Japanese War, was at the same time a prolific producer of images of Japanese female beauties. That the two genres were conjoined in the cultural consciousness can hardly be doubted. Suzuki Kason’s (1860–1919) frontispiece (*kuchi-e*) for a fictionalized war story (*kasō senki*) published in 1895, for example, combines an inset image of a beautiful woman with a picture of her lover, a naval officer away at sea who finds himself in a perilous predicament (cat. 71). Even more revealing is a double-sided color woodblock printed *uchiwa* fan (cat. 133). On one side, soldiers are pictured under the light of the moon at a Manchurian fortification. On the reverse is a scene of fireworks over Tokyo’s Sumida River, the electric lights of the cityscape visible on the horizon; inset within the scene is an image of a beautiful woman. Back and front, battlefield and home front, male and female, violence and beauty: each is part and parcel of the other.

*Conflicts of Interest* presents the male side of this equation. To see the female side, one must turn to Miya Elise Mizuta Lippit’s *Aesthetic Life: Beauty and Art in Modern Japan*, which in seven chapters (plus an introduction and a coda) offers a multilayered, multidisciplinary account of “beauty” (*bi*) in the Meiji period. As Lippit tells us, beauty, as an aesthetic ideal, was gendered female in modern Japan and embodied by the figure of the *bijin*. It was also closely tied to modern formulations of art (*bijutsu*), aesthetics (*bigaku*), and national identity. Lippit places these fields and their conceptualization in a geopolitical context, revealing in remarkable depth and breadth how the *bijin*—in the flesh or in textual or visual representation—was exploited to navigate a modern, competitive world of nations operating under supposedly universal but decidedly Euro-American standards and ideals.

Reading nineteenth-century European texts on Japan, Lippit establishes the Japanese woman as the conduit through which Euro-American perceptions of Japan the nation were formed during the heyday of *japonisme*. Initially based, for the most part, on visual representations of Japanese women in Edo-period prints and paintings, Euro-America’s gendered fantasies of Japan served as the ground through or against which Japan was forced to advance its own national interests. Charming, dainty, and exotic, the *bijin* (or “geisha,” as she was known outside Japan) was seen as an art object in and of herself. To European eyes, Lippit argues, the Japanese woman fit “neither the profile of the Western colonial nor that of the non-Western colonized feminine subject” (31), just as Japan eluded easy categorization into the binary of Western colonizer and Eastern colonized. The *bijin*, Lippit explains, was “projected as part of the hybrid

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princesses; in one print we see Empress Haruko (1849–1914) on a hospital visit. Also pictured are a weeping war widow (on one of a deck of poetry-matching cards) and, in a color lithograph, Japanese female guests at a garden party hosted by Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō (1838–1934) in 1908 to celebrate the arrival of the American Great White Fleet.

countenance that Japan, as a ‘nation of artists,’ presented to the world from a space between the polarities of East and West, the face of a civilized nation outside Asia and the face of a ‘civilizing’ agent inside Asia” (67).

“Fair Japan,” the evocative title of the Empire of Japan’s pavilion at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 in St. Louis, Missouri, encapsulates the nation’s strategy of self-representation to the world while it was in the throes of fighting its Russian enemy. As at earlier world’s fairs, art and beauty played an outsized role in galvanizing Japan’s image as a cultured and civilized people. In this capacity they also garnered support for Japan’s cause against Russia, one of the Western empires. And as Lippit reminds us, it was during the Russo-Japanese War and on the occasion of the 1904 fair that Japanese intellectual Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913) made the connection between art and war explicit in a lecture titled “Modern Problems in Painting” that he delivered to the exposition’s Congress of Arts and Science. For Okakura, Lippit writes, art was “a form of warfare, its distribution a method of cultural defense” (20).

To be sure, the Japanese art objects on display in St. Louis were decidedly *not* those contemporaneous images of war featured in *Conflicts of Interest*—theatrical battles and heroic deeds—of which the Japanese public was so enamored at this very point in time. Rather, in the Japanese galleries of the exposition’s fine arts palace, a gentler, more sophisticated, and subtly feminine impression prevailed. Landscapes and pictures of birds and flowers predominated, along with genre scenes (mostly featuring women) and a good number of *bijinga*, in two painting sections designated as the Japanese School and the European School. In a striking reversal of what we have seen in the case of war pictures, where women were absent, here almost no men were portrayed. In the sculpture section, where their number was largest, one could see many examples of young boys and elderly men but almost no males of fighting age. Of the 107 exhibits, only two hinted at Japan’s martial character, which was given a historical cast: a painting of Yoritomo, the first shogun, and a sculpture of a medieval warrior.<sup>4</sup>

Lippit does not discuss these fine art displays in her treatment of the fair; their inclusion would have further strengthened her assertion that Japan “strategically played into the desire of the West—as aesthetic Japan, Japan as an artistic representation—by performing its aesthetic self-production, in part, through the *bijin*, a facade that the imperialist nation hid behind as it advanced militarily into other parts of Asia” (24). Certainly, for fairgoers, the 350 Japanese “geisha girls” that the imperial commission recruited as a type of living doll (a popular exhibit in their own right) must have resonated with the many painted (and several sculpted) *bijinga* on display in the fine arts palace. The inclusion of a number of painted beauties was likely intended to counteract less favorable images of Japan’s military deeds that circulated in the global news media at this time (Paget studies such images in a chapter of *Conflicts of Interest*). Consider, for example, such images of contemporary beauties as Kanamori Nanko’s (1880–1935) *Young Lady of the Present Period* in the “Japanese” section and Wada

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<sup>4</sup> See Yamashita (1904). On Japan’s self-representations at later world’s fairs in the United States, including their gendered nature, see Volk (2016).

Eisaku's (1874–1959) *Portrait of a Young Lady* in the “European” section (where the heightened Japaneseness of the female subject worked to mitigate the supposed “foreignness” of the painting’s materials), as well as more-historically minded representations such as the trio of Edo-period *bijin* by Uemura Shōen (1875–1949).

Meanwhile, as Lippit shows, a crucial counterpart to Japan’s “geisha girls” was its living anthropological display of the paradoxically “white” yet “primitive” Ainu, one of Japan’s marginalized racial minorities. The display was part of the fair’s larger “racial landscape” (69) of empire and further worked to secure Japan’s acceptance as an up-and-coming world power. It seems the displays had their intended effect, if the following words from *Louisiana and the Fair* (1904), quoted by Lippit, are any measure:

No people are more skillful, artistic.... They deserve...the designation of Greeks of the east for their militant prowess and their artistic instincts, which are not exceeded by any people of the world.... With an army ten times less numerous than that of her titanic adversary, Japan is giving the world proof of her prowess, and is establishing her position as one of the great nations of the earth, whose friendship is worth cultivating.  
(71)

In a fascinating counterpoint to these views from the outside, Lippit takes a deep look at evidence of contemporary Japanese subjectivity. For example, from *The Inebriated Beauty* (Suibijin, 1905), a novel by Nagai Kafū (1879–1959) set at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, Lippit gleans how a painted “mixed breed” beauty by an American artist exhibited at the fair “facilitate[d] Kafū’s reevaluation of his position as a Japanese author and viewer” (20) in the larger world beyond Japan. In the end, the story’s Japanese narrator, “a viewing subject caught between East and West,” is able to locate only an “uncertain, unstable, and unassignable” (74) position for himself as a racialized non-Western subject. Lippit finds a similar conjunction between male Japanese identity and the female *bijin* in Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892–1927)’s *Literary, All Too Literary* (Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na, 1927), a part of which takes a painting of women—in this case, the Tahitian female nudes of Paul Gauguin (1848–1903)—as its vehicle. The author’s “desire,” she writes, “is dictated by being trapped...in the peculiar position between colonizer and colonized; his view is constructed from the standpoint of a country that resists Western imperialism, while acting as an imperialist power” (37).

The disruption of stable identities enacted by female figures in the examples above also appears elsewhere in Lippit’s book. It is rather exhilarating to learn how the figure of the beautiful Japanese woman implicitly destabilized—and relativized—the accepted (Euro-American) standards for aesthetic judgment and appraisal, for Japanese as well as Westerners. According to Lippit, the *bijin*, with her artful “artifice” (face painting, teeth blackening, eyebrow plucking)—so different from the Euro-American ideal of “natural” beauty—became a means of reassessing the aesthetic notion of “truth.” In the process,

the *bijin* offered an “alternative aesthetic standard” that “posed a challenge to Western aesthetic ideals” (20). And, in a very satisfying reading of two works by Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916), *The Three-Cornered World* (Kusamakura, 1906) and *Sanshirō* (1908), we are shown how Sōseki uses the *bijin* to plumb the “aesthetic and historical instabilities” of Meiji Japan (22).

To understand the evolving notion of the *bijin* in Japanese society at large, Lippit turns to new mass-media forms such as the illustrated magazine, with its mechanically reproduced photographs, to trace the influence of photography on perceptions of beauty and beautiful women; she notes, too, that during 1904 and 1905 (at the height of the war with Russia) photographs of *bijin* “appeared en masse on postcards” (108). She also studies the relationship between text and image in literary representations of the *bijin*, arguing that as the ratio of images to text decreased, writing took on an increasingly descriptive role, whereas illustrations (*sashi-e*) evolved into the independent genre of *bijinga*. Finally, in what I find to be the least persuasive part of *Aesthetic Life*, Lippit analyzes the painted-*bijinga* genre. Although she concedes that *bijinga* “manifests as an indeterminate term and...as an indeterminable genre, a genre that resists classification” (195), she nevertheless attempts to circumscribe it, with a broad brush, both territorially and temporally. Conflating pictorial style (realism or naturalism) with medium and mode (oils and Western-style painting) and using what she calls the “failure” of Takahashi Yuichi’s oil painting *Bijin (Portrait of a courtesan)* (1872) to make her case, Lippit argues unconvincingly that “there are no *yōga* [Western-style] *bijin* or *bijinga* per se because the *bijin* as a feminine ideal emerges in relation to artificial, idealistic beauty rather than natural, realistic, or ‘true’ beauty” (208). And, despite evidence to the contrary, she dates the “birth” of the genre to the opening of the government-sponsored Buntan salon exhibition in 1907 and its decline to the restructuring of the salon in 1918, with the confusing caveat that “many works outside this time frame belong to the genre...but are not part of the phenomenon proper, which is specific to the era of the Buntan.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet, we see in Asato Ikeda’s *The Politics of Painting: Fascism and Japanese Art during the Second World War*, for example, that the *bijinga* genre remained a potent force in Japanese art and enjoyed considerable social impact during the Second World War, when art was mobilized in the service of the state. It is in Ikeda’s study of paintings made during Japan’s last modern war (1931–1945) that we may observe depictions (albeit historical ones) of warriors and beautiful women—those subjects so prevalent during earlier wars—alongside Mount Fuji and the festivals and customs of the rural countryside. Ikeda widens the conventional scope of war paintings beyond those images depicting contemporary battles and soldiers, which in recent decades have been the subject of increased study, while also limiting the scope of her book to the subcategory of war paintings that are not explicitly martial. The latter, she points out, have garnered less scrutiny and have sometimes been seen, quite wrongly, as “apolitical.” These she

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<sup>5</sup> In this, Lippit follows Yamatane Museum of Art curator Hamanaka Shinji (1997).

analyzes in relation to “Japanese fascism,” named so as to distinguish the ideology in its Japanese form from its manifestations in other totalitarian regimes; in Japan this ideology sought to restore a supposedly authentic community that, though once united under the emperor by a shared “Japanese spirit,” had recently been destroyed by modernization and Westernization. Over five chapters, Ikeda demonstrates that works of art by acclaimed painters Uemura Shōen, Yokoyama Taikan (1868–1958), Yasuda Yukihiko (1884–1978), and Fujita Tsuguharu (1886–1968) were “artistic manifestations of Japanese fascism” and how in that capacity they helped provide a “justification for violence against other countries” (2).

*The Politics of Painting* provides a welcome historical context for the geopolitically sensitive topic of the Second World War as well as a historiography of critical scholarship on wartime art, which only really became possible following the death of Emperor Hirohito (1901–1989) and the official passing into history of the Shōwa era (1926–1989). Building on the work of several generations of scholars before her, in a series of tightly conceived case studies Ikeda closely examines a selected group of paintings, which she places in the context of the state’s control and mobilization of art in accordance with all-out war. Throughout, she draws on a range of textual and visual sources to illuminate how these “visual icons” were produced, displayed, and received “as representing the country’s unique culture” (23).

A single work by Taikan receives a detailed and concentrated analysis. *Japan, Where the Sun Rises* (1940), in the Museum of the Imperial Collection, features the majestic peak of Mount Fuji dominating a cloud-filled sky, which it shares with a red rising sun. Although, as we have seen, the rising sun motif was frequently used to denote the majesty and righteousness of imperial Japan in Meiji-period war pictures, it was only in this later war that Fuji, associated both with the spiritual and with the nation, became a commonplace symbol signifying the country’s “fighting spirit” (9). Ikeda shows how Fuji’s painted representation—which he reprised a whopping 524 times between 1937 and 1945—functioned for Taikan (and, presumably, his audience) as an embodiment of “the collective, national body mediated by the emperor” (*kokutai*) (37) and as emblematic of the unique Japanese spirit that characterizes it. In a 1942 essay titled “The Spirit of Fuji,” the artist drew a direct correlation between this spirit and the violence enacted in the war. As quoted in Ikeda, “The sublime spirit that Mount Fuji emits is the very spirit that promoted the attack on Pearl Harbor and the occupation of Singapore” (40). Analyzing Taikan’s Fuji picture in the context of historical iterations of the theme, Ikeda also proposes that the new visual language Taikan created for his favorite motif, and his pairing of it with the rising sun, were derived from contemporaneous photographs and photomontage. This is another example of the highly intermedial nature of Japanese war imagery.

In a pair of painted folding screens titled *Camp at Kisegawa* (1941), artist Yukihiko used the vehicle of a legendary subject dating back to the twelfth-century Genpei War—the meeting between Minamoto Yoshitsune (1159–1189) and his elder brother Yoritomo (1147–1199), later the first shogun—to offer a model of conduct for men

conscripted to the current war. The Confucian ideal of hierarchical social relationships, whereby a junior is subordinate to and serves his superior, was celebrated as a unique characteristic of the authentic Japanese community in *Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan* (Kokutai no hongī, 1937), a textbook of state fascism. Ikeda convincingly argues that by evoking the hierarchical relationship between the Minamoto brothers, Yasuda's painting "invite[d] identification, asking its wartime viewers to *be like* Yoshitsune and practice in real life these virtues of loyalty, willingness to die, and acceptance of an unfortunate ending in defense of Japanese culture" (53).

If Yukihiro provided an ideal model for Japanese men through the figure of Yoshitsune, then Shōen, a female painter, offered images of the ideal woman as a form of moral instruction for Japanese women on the home front. *Lady Kusunoki* (1944), for example, portrays Kusunoki Hisako (1304–1364), an exemplary wife and mother who gladly offered to the emperor not only the life of her warrior husband (Kusunoki Masashige, 1294–1336) but also that of her son. Meanwhile, Shōen's *Dance Performed in a Noh Play* (1936), with its sense of emotional restraint, is shown to articulate the *yūgen* aesthetic that is closely identified with classical Noh theater. Ikeda cites current writing on the Noh and *yūgen*, including by Shōen, in passages that hint at the seductiveness of fascist aesthetics (and, it seems to me, potentially at a way of recuperating the communicative power of war pictures by Shōen and others). For example, the critic Ōnishi Yoshinori (1888–1959) identified *yūgen* as a uniquely Japanese version of the sublime, through which "object and subject merge into one" (71) whereas Shōen described the Noh as "a world of illusion...we are pulled into the intoxicating world and we cannot tell if it is a dream or a reality" (70).

In a similarly escapist vein, Fujita's monumental mural *Events in Akita* (1937) reads as an immersive touristic experience into the seasonal festivals and other local delights of rural Akita in the far north of the country. The painting's theme derives from Fujita's involvement with the film *Picturesque Nippon*, which he directed for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1935; the project, which took him to Akita, was expected to result in a moving picture that would communicate a "correct image of Japan" (90) to a Western audience. Through Ikeda's expert contextualization of the painting's subject matter, we learn that metropolitan intellectuals across disciplines romanticized the remote Tōhoku region as a living crucible of an authentic Japan unsullied by modernization. This casting of a primitivist gaze within mimics both the gaze the empire cast upon its colonies without (*gaichi*) and the gaze of the West toward Japan, and is indicative of the complicated predicament of modern Japanese identity. As Ikeda shows, Fujita's packaging of local culture as national culture, having "replicated a Western Orientalist attitude toward Japan" (98), was not without its problems: the state rejected his film as an inappropriate piece of propaganda. This telling episode, which reveals Fujita's failure to translate the government's vision for the nation's self-representation, suggests a tension between competing visions of "Japanese fascism" and opens up questions of multivalence that might profitably have been explored.

Unlike the other paintings Ikeda introduces, which, as examples of the so-called *nihonga* (“Japanese painting”) mode, are executed in materials considered to be indigenously Japanese, *Events in Akita* is a work in oils. Fujita, the most infamous of Japan’s war painters using any medium, is known for his epic and sometimes gruesome battle tableaux à la European history painting, and the reader may be disappointed not to find one included in Ikeda’s discussion of Japanese fascist art. To my mind, her study would have been far more conclusive had she broached the question of how fascism may have operated in paintings portraying battles and the like, or considered how these “war-record paintings” (*sensō kirokuga*) conform to or challenge the framework she has established for identifying “Japanese fascism” in non-battle war pictures. And given that most of the explicitly militaristic war pictures were painted in oils whereas most of the non-battle pictures were painted in media understood to be indigenously Japanese, one wonders if there may have been something inherently more inclined toward fascism in works of either subject type or medium. Or if, by dint of different visual languages and modes of appeal, or dissimilar modes of display and consumption, the two interdependent categories of *nihonga* and *yōga* produced or engendered in their viewers divergent sorts of fascist experience.

In images like the ones featured in *The Politics of Painting* the link between beauty and violence is perhaps most cunning in its disguise: these images conjure sublime visions of beautiful nature, beautiful conduct, beautiful women, or beautiful communities while masking the violence of the wartime state, which was inflicted (if unevenly) upon the citizen-subject, the colonized, and the enemy alike. In their deceit, such seductive images parallel, but are infinitely subtler than, the explicitly propagandistic materials the state produced for distribution overseas; those materials branded, for example, the various kinds of labor that the state forced on its colonized peoples (and even on Japanese women on the home front) as the “beautiful cooperation” of “the one billion people of Greater East Asia...unshakably united, fighting a joint war for common aims” (Asahi Shinbun 1943).<sup>6</sup>

Although of a different nature, the relationship between beauty and violence in Meiji-period war pictures and pictures of beauties is no less problematic. Beauty may have served to represent Japan in the abstract, but more prosaically, it also played a role in the gendered forms of violence that the modern state enacted on its citizens. In the patriarchal and strictly gendered society that was Meiji Japan, men were sent to war, where they might meet an honorable death, but women, as erotic objects of male desire or as “good wives and good mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo*), were denied many of the rights enjoyed by men, including the right to participate in politics. Did the *bijin*, as an ideal form of femininity, serve as a disciplining force or reactionary form of social control in response to feminist efforts to expand the rights of women?

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<sup>6</sup> The Asahi Shinbun Publishing Company provides an example of the collaboration between the state and media during wartime; the newspaper *Asahi shinbun* also served as a major sponsor of exhibitions of wartime art in support of the war effort.

Common to both beauty and violence is the specter of death. Implicit in the *bijin's* beauty, no matter how idealized, is its eventual loss—to the passage of time, the aging of the body. By creating eternal images, war pictures work against the inexorable death that is the passing of time into history. They reveal in concrete material form the will to record the contemporary feats of Japanese martyrs for posterity, or to recreate for contemporary audiences the timeless nature of Japan through such enduring symbols as Mount Fuji and the red rising sun. To today's viewer, from the safe distance of time (and, in my case, geography), these pictures of war and beauty may hold a certain pathos as windows into the hopes and fears of a people long gone and as monuments to the building of an empire that no longer exists. But to viewers of their own time and place, the intoxicating aestheticization or beautification of violence they enacted was anything but benign. As anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney observes concerning the cherry blossom, a motif associated with both women and warriors, “Beauty...has the power to subvert, or deceive people into believing its sublimity, which may be made into a weapon of oppression and war. It was hard for the people to realize that the warrior's way indeed meant killing themselves, since the act had been elevated to an aesthetic level” (Ohnuki-Tierney 2015, 33).

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