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'Yoshi's Choice

Imagine being a Japanese painter in the Ogunquit Art Colony, learning Pearl Harbor's been attacked.

BY TOM WOLF

"Waitresses from the Sparhawk is an early work by Yasuo Kuniyoshi, painted just two years after his first solo gallery show in New York. Set in a popular resort in Ogunquit, Maine, where the artist spent his summers for many years, the work presents a seemingly delightful vignette about female friendship—except for that brooding sky and the slightly sinister tone of the surroundings.

"This odd but intriguing combination of stylized figures, abstracted landscape forms, and narrative references reflects the distinctive synthetic approach taken by Kuniyoshi and many American artists during this period following World War I." —Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas



FROM TOP: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/PETER A. JULEY & SON; THE BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN; WAITRESS FROM THE SPARHAWK, 1924-25



THE ARTS

In his article “Japan against Japan: U.S. Propaganda and Yasuo Kuniyoshi’s Identity Crisis,” ShiPu Wang uncovers a *New Yorker* story (28 March 1942) detailing Kuniyoshi’s personal nightmare: “At least one Japanese we’ve heard of is doing his damndest to help us win the war.” Noting the *New Yorker’s* opinion that Kuniyoshi was “one of this country’s best artists,” Wang recounts Kuniyoshi’s penning “radio scripts...broadcast via shortwave radio to Japan in February and March 1942, [seeking] to persuade Japanese artists and intelligentsia to renounce their militaristic leaders.”

Soon afterward, per Wang, *Time* magazine jumped in to print a photo where “Kuniyoshi and two other immigrant artists had created giant caricatures of Axis leaders for the Art Students League’s United Nations Ball in Manhattan.” Kuniyoshi is pictured below his unflattering caricature of Emperor Hirohito.



After the Bath, 1923



The Swimmer, 1924

The summers Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1893-1953) spent in Ogunquit in the late 1910s and '20s were crucial to his rise to success, as he became one of the most celebrated artists in the United States between the two World Wars.

Kuniyoshi’s artistic career was an improbable one, as he came to the United States from Japan alone in 1906, barely 17-years old. He had no intention of becoming an artist, but a high school teacher encouraged him to travel to the East Coast to study painting in the 1910s. In 1917 he showed his art for the first time, entering two paintings in the huge, open exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists.

At this show he met Hamilton Easter Field, critic, artist, publisher, and patron of the arts, who founded Ogunquit’s Thurnscoe School of Art in 1911 after many visits to the site starting in 1902. Field, who’d learned to appreciate Japanese art in Paris in the late 19th century, was quick to invite the promising Kuniyoshi and his lady friend, fellow art student Katherine Schmidt, to live and work in the fishermen’s shacks in Perkins Cove that he turned over to artists during summers. The arrangement worked in many ways: Kuniyoshi and Schmidt were married in Ogunquit in 1919, with Field presiding over the ceremony.

The period in Ogunquit coincided with Kuniyoshi’s transition from student to star, as he solidified his mature style in paintings like *MAINE*

FAMILY. The peculiar, up-tilted space in this painting is found in much of the work that made him famous, as is his palette of warm, earth colors. The simplified treatment of the buildings as flat-color rectangles reflects Cubist modernism while also inspired by the block-like architecture of the buildings at Perkins Cove.

The crawling baby at the left, gravely looking toward his toy horse on the other side of the painting, exemplifies Kuniyoshi's concerns with infants in many of his works of this period, where the theme of family is a recurrent one—perhaps a reflection that he'd left his own family back in Japan. (He would return to see them only once, in 1931.)

The relaxed, productive environment around Perkins Cove provided Kuniyoshi with another sort of family: artist friends such as Robert Laurent and wife Mimi, and Niles Spencer and his wife Betty. Kuniyoshi also enjoyed the company of the fishermen. His tribute *AL PERKINS DRYING FISH* unfortunately is lost, as are several of Kuniyoshi's important works from the '20s, but studies of the work survive.

THE SWIMMER exemplifies the style for which he became celebrated: quirky, fanciful, and slightly suggestive. Ogunquit's environment gave him the image of the lighthouse, erect above the prone swimmer, whose lumpy proportions and diminutive hands and feet (perhaps derived from women in Japanese prints) make her both slightly humorous and sexy.

The complex mix of naiveté and sophistication, humor, and eroticism in *THE SWIMMER* typifies Kuniyoshi's work from the 1920s. In the '30s his style evolved into greater realism and enhanced sensuality, and then became increasingly anguished as his adopted country went to war against Japan. During the war he worked for the Office of War Information, making pro-democratic propaganda against Japanese militarism. At that point Ogunquit was far away, except for occasional visits to his friends there. From the late-1920s and on his summer residence was at the art colony of Woodstock, New York. But his formative years as an artist were spent summering in Maine, and the people, landscape, and atmosphere of Ogunquit were the inspiration for his breakthrough early paintings. ■

Tom Wolf is an art history professor at Bard College, an active curator, and has written extensively on Yasuo Kuniyoshi.



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