

Avant-garde in Graphic Design

The Relationship between the Development of the Modern City and Communication Design during the 1920s and 1930s

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Abstract: In this paper, by focusing on the mutual relationships between communication design, the formation of modern city and the avant-garde movement, we shall analyze the genesis and development of Japanese graphic design in the early 20th century and individuate its most unique features.

The first forms of original expression in this field were introduced during the first decades of the century by a new generation of Japanese artists who applied themselves to creating works which were unprecedented not only in the field of the fine arts, but also in that of communication design. In the course of the process of establishment of the modern city, the early works of graphic design reached the status of „city art”, aimed at an urban consumption society, which was eager to make contact with the latest avant-garde styles and methods imported from Europe.

Key words: *Graphic design, Communication design, Avant-garde, Modernism, History,*

1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that, in Japan, „modern design” came to be publicly recognized as a fully established and distinct artistic entity only as late as the 1950s. The atmosphere in the Japanese artistic circles from the 1900’s and all the way into the 1950’s can be said to have been defined by sustained efforts to redefine the notion of fine art by introducing several plastic conceptions peculiar to the machine age, such as „mass production”, „functionality” and „anonymity”. It is also during this time that the first attempts at seeking functional beauty in such things as household utensils were made under the influence of the „Lifestyle improvement movement”, which in turn was promoted as a part of the so-called “Taisho Democracy”, the Democratic movement that reached its high point during the Taisho Era. While at this stage it was still too early for this new industrial design to establish itself among the general public, new forms of expression could already be seen to emerge in certain areas of commercial design, such as was the case with the art of the poster. Although the word „design” had yet to appear in the Japanese vocabulary, communication design such as posters and fliers came to play an important role in society. The first interactions between the fields of so-called fine art (mostly avant-garde) and applied art had begun to occur from around this time as well.

This paper traces the evolution of Japanese graphic design from the 1920s to the 1930s, a period during which the first masterpieces of what could be called „modern city art” were produced and while also investigating the interactions between avant-garde art and communication design. Lastly, we shall inspect each field’s idiosyncrasies, in an attempt to individuate the most original and specific aspects of the Japanese Style in design – a current that is still alive and active to this day.

2. The Birth of Modern Commercial Design and the Establishment of the Graphic Designer’s Position

2.1 Page Size from Pictorial Naturalism to Modernism

At the beginning of the 20th century, a period that corresponds to the dawn of the modern design movement, the nature of posters used in Japanese department stores (or kimono merchants, which were the originators of department stores) was dominated by the Japanese ‚pictorial naturalist’ style, that is to say *bijin-ga* (literally meaning portraits of Japanese beauties)[1]. Nonetheless, this advertising method suffered from the fact that it was too indirect and thus failed to convey any strong or appealing messages. It can be said therefore that there was still a lot of new ground left to be covered in Japanese communication design. Nonetheless, quite a few artists came to acknowledge the need to innovate in the field of poster design, in order to keep pace with the latest developments seen in the West.

The first artist to have turned away from the tradition of *bijin-ga* and channel some of the trends in European late avant-garde styles was Hisui Sugiura. Seiki Kuroda, who was an authority on Western painting at the time, encouraged Hisui to study the methods of contemporary European art movements. As a result of these inquiries, Hisui introduced the newest trend in European decorative arts – the Art Nouveau style– in Japan. By merging Art Nouveau elements into the traditional Japanese style, he created that which came to be called the „Hisui style” of design.

This epoch-making work was followed by sustained efforts to create new and less conventional forms of design, based on the increasingly critical attitudes towards the no longer appealing style of the *bijin-ga* posters. It was towards the middle of the 1920’s that this new movement in Japanese communication design first came to bear fruit. The “*Nananin-sha* (Seven Artists’ Association)” [2] and “*Shogyobijutsuka-kyokai* (Commercial Artists’ Association)” [3] were formed as a result of those efforts. By actively investigating the theme of the „creative poster” and advocating an interdisciplinary approach to the development of art”, they strived to elevate communication design to the same rank as that held by the fine arts and crafts. Their efforts were meant to further the understanding of the mission of designers as messengers who communicate to their audience not only information related to the advertised products, but also novel design concepts, which would be relevant for an age characterized by dramatic changes.

The *Mitsukoshi Corporation* organized an “Advertisement Art Competition” in 1911. This poster competition played an important role in materializing this social enlightenment aspect of graphic design. Especially during the 1920s, poster competitions, sponsored not only by production companies, but also by art galleries and newspapers, became socially recognized as events that attracted the attention of the public, as well as serving as launching pads for young designers’ careers. The results of these poster competitions are very significant in the sense that they provide the scholar with accurate landmarks for mapping out the evolution of early twentieth century Japanese graphic art.

An eloquent example of such a landmark achievement is the poster that placed third in the international poster competition that the *Calpis Food Industry Company* sponsored in 1924. The piece was centered on the motif of an African drinking the company's eponymous soft drink with a straw, which, with its simplified and elegant design, succeeded in distilling splendidly the best features of the contemporary Art Deco style. This fact seems to prove that, although design itself had yet to attain widespread recognition in the public eye as an independent discipline of the arts and crafts, the Japanese design community was nonetheless mature enough already to assimilate the art deco style.

Such a trend was also significantly influenced by several Commercial art magazines, notably *Kokokukai* ("The Advertisement Circle"), published since 1925, which specialized in advertisement and graphic design. This particular publication played a pivotal role in the development of Japanese communication design, by opening the doors to information regarding the latest trends in design overseas and by discovering young and talented local designers. The first pages of each issue were printed in full color and showcased new designs or provided design guidelines or templates as a study aid for young people dreaming of becoming designers themselves. The publication of *Kokokukai* was halted in December of 1941, but during its entire run it contributed immensely towards transforming Japanese communication design from mere repetition of simple, naturalistic patterns into a higher concept type of design, which reflected vividly the rapidly evolving tastes and needs in society.

2.2 The Showa Ideal and Mass Consumption Society

By now, posters had been in the spotlight long enough for communication design as a whole to become associated to the art of the poster. Consequently, communication design became increasingly popular and was enthusiastically accepted by the general public. We must single out the fact that the process of establishing graphic design as a discipline in its own right was deeply linked to the growth of the modern city, as can be clearly seen in the large number of advertisements for items targeted at the urban consumer and for amusement facilities. On the other hand, a strong argument can be made for the fact that posters contributed a lot to the evolution of large social conglomerates, such as Tokyo or Osaka, into proper modern cities.

As a consequence of this, the poster, which had traditionally been deemed inferior to fine art, came to be seen from a novel point of view in the context of city life. This is to say that graphic design, as a new genre of art, had managed to develop from the realm of the simply decorative and utilitarian into a form of artistic expression with its own vocabulary and, more importantly, closely linked to the dramatic transformations taking effect in the modern city. Graphic design had thus finally managed to gain acceptance, alongside other relatively new disciplines, such as photography and film, into the ranks of the fine arts.

During this period, moreover, graphic design became a widely recognized profession. For example, commercial firms realized that by having one designer oversee the design of all of a company's image-defining assets –from the architecture of its headquarters to the shape of its stationery –the company could generate public awareness of its own identity in powerful new ways that had never been possible before. This is significant because it sheds light on the fact that the recognition of graphic design as a form of art, although it had begun with the poster, was eventually attained through several different channels and approaches, including newspaper advertisements, company-related goods etc.

A good example of this are the graphic designs commissioned by *Shiseido Company*, a company which swiftly recognized the important role that design should play in advertisement and consequently set up a department

dedicated to planning their corporate image. They employed many talented designers [4], who subsequently created its instantly recognizable trade marks, such as the iconic camellia arabesque pattern, which conformed to the latest trends in the design of the epoch.

During the first years of the Showa Era, Ayao Yamana came up with the stylized image of a woman, symbolizing the sense of romanticism associated with the company, thus establishing an original style, with a hint of exoticism. As mass media became increasingly more influential in shaping popular culture, Yamana's design, which embodied the nation's admiration for the Western lifestyle, came to become representative of a whole new generation, that of the "moga(modern girls)" and "mobo(modern boys)". We can see from this example that, with just one piece of design, Yamana transcended the scope of his assignment of simply defining a company's image into creating a visual identity for a whole epoch in Japanese history.

Furthermore, Yamana's graphic design played a direct role in the widespread transmission of Western artistic styles in Japan. Yamana himself was said to have been influenced by the Parisian fashion magazine he had come into contact with while working in the Advertising Department of *Shiseido: the Gazette du Bon Ton*. This was a journal published from 1912 to 1925, which played an important role in the formation and propagation of the Art Deco style in Europe [5].

By publicly showcasing Western culture –which symbolized a rich and luxurious city life worth aspiring to and, furthermore, now within reach more than ever before– this new style not only served as a way to imagine the dawn of a new age, but also expressed the aesthetic and psychological sensibilities of the early Showa era. Moreover, because of its open and social leanings, the evolution of graphic design in the wider context of communication design during this period accurately mirrors the process of formation of Japanese modern society itself.

3. The Interrelationship between Communication Design and the Avant-garde

3.1 Avant-garde Artists' Activities in the Field of Communication Design

When researching the early evolution of Japanese graphic design from the 1920's to the 1930's, one cannot afford to neglect the innovations introduced as a result of the influence of the activity of avant-garde art groups founded in succession during the 1920s[6], such as the Futurist Art Association, Action, Mavo and Sanka. The fact remains that, in the communication design of the 1930s, we can find traces of an emerging artistic sensibility that directly reflected the European late avant-garde styles and was inspired by movements such as Bauhaus, Constructivism, Surrealism and the abstract arts.

In the Japanese artistic milieu of the time, a great majority of artists belonging to the major artistic associations, such as *Teiten*[7] or *Nikaten*[8] were skeptical towards avant-garde art and more or less looked down on communication design, which they saw as being inferior to the fine arts. Nonetheless, there were a significant number of artists who felt unsatisfied with the conventional circle and, as a result, introduced avant-garde-inspired elements into their work. Several of these also tried their hand at creating communication design.

Following the example of European avant-garde groups such as the Futurists, Expressionisms, Dadaists and Constructivists, Japanese artists attempted not to restrict themselves to simply exhibit their works in salons, but to bring their art work out on the street and into everyone's daily life[9]. By liberating art from its narrow constraints, they tried to seek new possibilities of expression in many diverse fields and subsequently took great interest in communication design as a part of their active experiments to create unprecedented forms of

expression which transcended all conventional frameworks of reference. These activities were deemed to conform to the socialist notion of advocating „art for the people” and consequently to be linked to the Proletarian art movement. From this point of view, it is no wonder that there were quite a few graphic designers who originated in the avant-garde movement. They also created catalogues and posters for their own exhibitions. Like the works of constructivism, elaborate visual devices were employed in their layouts and typography, in order to provide their publications with dynamic and captivating images which fitted well with the urban culture at the time.

What is of particular interest in these works is the fact that they took on a far deeper meaning than the average commercial advertisement. These designs were not solely concerned with pictorial effect alone, but were intended to represent visual manifestos or work as actual aesthetic propaganda. It can be argued that this was an attempt to cultivate in the audience a finer sense of appreciation for composition and for the various graphic elements involved. We could say, therefore, that the 1920s was the period during which more specific ideas and concepts about the aesthetics of design came to be achieved.

3.2 The Realist Facet of Japanese Surrealism

In addition to the artistic currents mentioned above, we should also mention the surrealist works of design which emerged into the limelight during the 1930s.

Surrealism is said to have been introduced in Japan around 1925-1926, when writers such as Katsue Kitazono and Junzaburo Nishiwaki returned to Japan and published Surrealist poems that ended up influencing Shuzo Takiguchi[10].

Surrealism in painting made its debut in Japan in the late 1920s. We can mention here as “Surrealist” artists, Ichiro Fukuzawa, with his critical and intellectual approach to the Surrealist ethos, Harue Koga, who established a instinctive and poetic style, associated with the works of his friend Yasunari Kawabata, and, finally, Noboru Kitawaki, who created a colorful fantasy world using a naturalistic painting method. Their works were considered “Surrealist” because they created fantastic images from fragments of real life urban scenes. These images are particularly striking today because they symbolically convey the emerging sense of anxiety caused by the threat of rampant militarism at the epoch and a desire to somehow escape from it.

However, we should not overlook the fact that their paintings did not limit themselves to simply showing enigmatic objects or combinations of them, but also concealed at times deep narrative and anecdotic content. That is to say, their works were in fact deeply rooted in the realities of the epoch and thus established Japanese Surrealism’s most unique feature rather than attempting to depict those facets of the real World that are hidden to the conscious mind, its artists were aiming to create an entirely alternate reality founded on the a nation’s recently found new prosperity and its hopes for the future. This sets it apart from post-World War I European Surrealism, which was a means for artists to probe into the world of the unconscious and was emblematic of a skeptic attitude towards the prevailing rationalism of the epoch. Japan, on the other hand, was recovering from the shock of the Kanto Great Earthquake of 1923. During this period, as opposed to the Western world, belief in science, automation and rationalism became prevalent in the Japanese psyche, as a means of fuelling the recovery effort. Because of this, „Surrealism” was understood as a method of transcending reality and describing an ideal world according to a method based on scientific principles. Therefore, the fantastic and

lyrical atmosphere of these works encouraged the perception of Surrealism as the expression of an aspiration towards a utopian, yet quite attainable, new world. We could therefore conclude that Surrealism, rather than an ideology intended to liberate the spirit, was rather motivated by the realities of Japanese society. Surrealism provided artists with a great way to continue a whole series of diverse plastic experiments while at the same time incorporating into their works a whole society's dream of improving its lifestyle

The application of Surrealism in communication design should be seen in the same light. In order to investigate this relationship more closely, in the next section we shall focus on the work of a designer from the city of Osaka, Shichiro Imatake.

3.3 Lyrical Imagery and Rational Ideology in Shichiro Imatake's Works

Shichiro Imatake started his career working for department stores such as Daimaru of Kobe and Takashimaya of Osaka. He became actively engaged in communication design groups, such as the Kobe Commercial Arts Research Society or the Commercial Arts Federation of Osaka and made his name as one of the pioneers in the field of graphic design, while also working as a painter.

It is important, however, to keep in mind that Imatake's early works had their roots in the lyrical images of women created by Yumeji Takehisa, one of the most popular painters of the Taisho and early Showa eras. The relationship between Imatake's graphic works and Taisho Romanticism is also apparent in his early output for Takashimaya. At this point in his career he was still just dressing up pictorial naturalism in the colors of Modernism. Imatake's shift towards Modernism was not influenced only by the Japanese art press, but also by overseas magazines such as *Gebrausgrafik*, *Art et métier*, *Art et décoration*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*[11]. He also published numerous essays concerning communication design in *Kokokukai*. In the article „Why did Commercial Art Become Surrealist“, he gives a remarkably clear explanation of this phenomenon:

There are two clear reasons for commercial art to employ Surrealism. Firstly, because its plastic novelty satisfies perfectly the need of commercial art to perpetually seek out new and fresh means of expression; secondly, because Surrealism's functional approach to composition agrees very well with the nature of commercial art[12].

By “Surrealism's functional approach to composition“, Imatake means the artistic technique of the collage. He was acutely aware of the „poetic function“ of combinations of apparently unrelated images in reinforcing the communication ability of communication design.

However, because the poster cannot escape from its mission to communicate a message in concrete terms, it cannot be a purely abstract design. As Imatake was well conscious of this, he also took a great interest in the plastic theories of Bauhaus, which aimed at totally reinventing the notion of design. Imatake avowed to having learned his visual and plastic grammar by separately analyzing such elements as the “point, line, plane, form, color, quality” –which also happened to be the building blocks of Bauhaus aesthetics.

Imatake also produced commercial works advertising other products, aside from those of his main employer, Takashimaya. Among them is a series of advertisements for the “Ranran” line of cosmetics which was featured in newspapers from 1936 to 1945, which is probably the best example of a practical application of his theories on communication design. Imatake, who was granted complete freedom when designing this advertisement, had decided to maximize its effect by using a Malevich square and by also adapting different techniques such as

surrealism and abstract art to create the illustrations. *Ranran* was a one of a kind effort to create advertisement design which could transcend its basic function of communicating a commercial message and, by taking advantage of various contemporary artistic techniques, including Surrealism, become significant in the evolution of the fine arts as a whole. In Imatake's pre-WWII work, as can be seen, for instance, in his geometric composition featuring "Ranran" cosmetics inscribed in a circular mirror, he assimilated into his own expression diverse styles of art and design first seen in the West, but leaving aside their original significance.

If so-called fine art made it its mission to constantly seek out and create new forms, colors, materials and techniques, communication design –or, as it aptly came to be called, applied art –is destined to consist of sensitive and useful ideas about the practical application and adaptation of those traditional elements of the plastic vocabulary in works usually intended for mass consumption. Therefore, it is beyond any doubt that, because Imatake worked both as a painter and a designer, he was able to create unique works in which he applied in communication design a sophisticated plastic language comparable to that of such a highly formalistic art movement as Bauhaus. By scrutinizing the transition in style and technique in his work over the years, his commitment towards enlightening his audience about the latest artistic trends becomes very apparent.

Imatake's output and his evolution as an artist allows us a precious insight into how the confluence between the avant-garde and communication design was facilitated not only by assimilating the rational concepts of Bauhaus, but also by building upon the lyrical heritage of such painters as Yumeji Takehisa. It is certain that lyricism and rationalism may be seen as being incompatible with each other, but in reality both of them share a common emphasis on the harmony between life and art [13], a relationship that has traditionally been very dear to the Japanese spirit. This process paralleled that through which the peculiar amalgam of surrealism and plastic ideology took form in the avant-garde circle.

The explicit application of that plastic language to communication design implied as well a process of vulgarization. On the one hand, a work of art must strive to attain an increasingly greater degree of purity in its expression, but, in the case of communication design and graphic design, must also take extensive care not to cut itself off from reality. The works of graphic design of such artists as Imatake from the 1920s to the 1930s, which were targeted to the general public, who would come into contact with them on a daily basis, can be considered to have been a successful attempt to reconcile these two apparently contradictory aspects of art.

4. Conclusions

In order to understand the different ways in which each of the artistic trends we have mentioned provided inspiration for graphic design, we have investigated the process of maturation of the civil society and the subsequent rise of the so-called mass consumption society, which in its turn laid the groundwork for a wider acceptance of the newly created discipline of graphic design, and the artistic activities crossing over the borderline between the communication designs and avant-garde art, which have been largely ignored by scholars so far.

Through this research, we have managed to individuate the unique aspects of the Japanese style in graphic design, which has been established as the result of sustained efforts to find balance between several apparently contradictory concepts, such as pictorial naturalism and modernism, lyrical imagery and rational ideology, fine art and applied art.

However, the short length of this paper does not allow us to investigate in full detail the rather complicated circumstances that gave birth to Japan's unique brand of design. It is therefore necessary to continue to deepen this research by crossing over to other fields as well. One should, in principle, be able not only to reveal the many different mentalities behind the plastic experiments which lead to the establishment of the so-called modern Japanese style, but also to understand the fundamental Japanese perception of visual design and, subsequently, the unique role it plays in society today.

Nonetheless, we hope to have succeeded in clarifying the crucial role played by graphic design and communication designworks in the transmission of artistic styles during the early twentieth century and showing how several forms of expression peculiar to graphic design permeated and influenced other fields of the Japanese arts of the epoch.

5. Notes

[1] This painterly current was an heir of the tradition of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints which evolved during the Edo Era. The wide spread of *bijin-ga* posters largely depended upon a unique production system, called „shiire poster” (stock poster). These posters were prepared in advance by printing companies and presented to potential buyers, who would then choose a design and subsequently have their companies' and product names added to it for distribution.

[2] Nananinsha was a group founded in 1925 by seven artists, including Hisui Sugiura, whose works had already gained great reputation and six others who gathered around him as their master. Their desire to study and absorb the modern style of Western posters was made clear in their own magazine, „Affiche”, the frontispieces of which always featured British or French posters.

[3] Shogyobijutsuka-kyokai was an association organized in 1926 by both independent and employed designers (called „zuanka” at that time) like Masuji Hamada, Hokuu Tada and Tatsuo Fujisawa. „Shogyo bijutsu (Commercial art)”, a general term used to describe designs for advertisement between the 1920s and 1930s, was originally coined by this association.

[4] These included the likes of Sue Yabe, Reika Sawa, Mitsugu Maeda and painters such as Settai Komura or Riichiro Kawashima.

[5] Among those who contributed illustrations for this magazine was also the artist Raoul Dufy. Dufy also designed fabrics for the fashion designer Paul Poiret, one of the chief supporters of Art Deco.

[6] The 1920's also corresponded to the peak of the activity of those groups of Japanese artists who had experienced directly the Western European artistic milieu, as well as having had contact with visiting avant-garde artists, such as the Russian futurist painters David Burliuk and Victor Palmov.

[7] This association was the spiritual successor to the Government-sponsored Salons of earlier years and, therefore, it was the most influential of all the publicly open Salon exhibitions. Nonetheless, there were not few those who criticized it for its conservatory slant.

[8] “Nikaten”, founded in 1914, was an independent association formed by artists returning from abroad and was originally a splinter organization of the officially sponsored “Bunten”, which had been created in order to develop new directions in art.

[9] It is well known, for instance, that the artistic group Mavo, headed by Tomoyoshi Murayama, who had been influenced by the Dadaist and Constructivist groups during his stay in Berlin, produced a large number of posters, show windows for stores, book designs, stage decorations and architectural design. Moreover, the “Takahara” association, formed around Zenosuke Tamamura –the only Japanese traditional painter who was also engaged in the foundation of the avant-garde artistic society called “Sanka” – organized in its turn large-scale poster exhibitions and published collections of posters.

[10] Takiguchi was a poet and a critic, who, throughout his career, stuck firmly to the principles of orthodox Surrealism and had a great influence on the formation of the aesthetics that marked the first half of the 20th century.

[11] Shichiro Imatake „Collage”, *Press-art*, no.80, November 1937, p. 2.

[12] Shichiro Imatake, „Why did Commercial Art Become Surrealist”, *Kokokukai*, 09 September 1939.

[13] It is worth mentioning that Yumeji also produced designs for envelopes and curtains, alongside the posters for his own exhibitions.

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