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Yasuo Kuniyoshi: Anxiety and Americanness

By Eugenia Guilfoyle

This paper examines the work of Japanese-American artist Yasuo Kuniyoshi as he expressively navigates his dual identity. Working within Modernist and Folk styles, his work blends Japanese idioms with American folk art influences as well as that of European modernism, engaging with global art practices. This conglomeration of influences, in addition to his public fame as an artist, came under scrutiny during World War II as Kuniyoshi's position as an American was threatened. This artist's work in propaganda against Japan further complicated his modes of expression through his art as he was challenged to refine his representational codes in order to protect himself. Kuniyoshi's oeuvre nuances the role of the artist in relation to nationalism, challenges conceptions of Modernist appropriative styles, and questions what it means to be an American.

Yasuo Kuniyoshi, a Japanese-American modern artist, was at the peak of his career during the first half of the twentieth century in New York, whose oeuvre is full of contradictions as he confronted a ruptured identity during World War II. His early work combined expressions of American culture and memories of Japan within an autobiographical, personal system of symbols, showcasing a duality linked both to his persona and his artistic identity. Later, while working for the U.S. government making anti-Japanese propaganda designs, he combined nuanced symbolism with anonymity to play an even more powerful role: his style served to highlight universal themes of humanity rather than pinpoint a racial image of the enemy. This anonymity reflected Kuniyoshi's personal life, as ambiguity was essential to his survival in the United States; despite his personal affirmation of his American identity and recognition as an American artist, he was categorized by the U.S. government as an "enemy alien." His biography and the evolution of his artwork are therefore intimately connected, as his personal iconography "allows objects and things to be interpreted in autobiographical terms."¹

Born in Okayama, Japan in 1889, Kuniyoshi emigrated to the United States at the age of sixteen, later settling in New York in 1910. He studied art after encouragement from an American high school teacher, and by the early 1920s, he had gained critical acclaim.² His successful debut at the Daniel Gallery in New York in 1922 was followed five years later by his inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art's "Nineteen Living Americans" exhibition, the museum's first major show.³ His works were in demand even during the Depression, and he won a number of prestigious awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1935 and the second prize at the Carnegie Institute's annual exhibition in 1939.⁴ Near the end of his career, in 1948, the Whitney Museum of Art featured his work in a one-man retrospective, the first ever at the museum for a living artist.⁵ This show, in addition to the MoMa exhibition, positioned him among a select group of contemporary American artists, despite the fact that he never became an American citizen due to exclusionary laws. Joann Moser, curator of the American Art Museum's "The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi" exhibition explained the paradox between his respect and esteem within the American art world, particularly in New York, and his public image as an enemy during World War II, "Within artist circles, he functioned very well; he had many friends. But outside the artist circles, he remained a 'Jap.'"⁶

Kuniyoshi's early work reflected an autobiographical expression of his hybrid, Japanese-American identity as he created his own personal iconography out of modernist traditions and folk art references. Folk art from the states and abroad were aesthetic inspirations not uniquely adopted by Kuniyoshi; contemporary modernist painters in Europe and the U.S. were greatly influenced by East Asian, particularly Japanese, aesthetics, in addition to local folk traditions, thus positioning him as an artist within the contemporary modernist movement. Kuniyoshi, in his early work, drew on this modernist fusion, appropriating for himself his own *personal* reflection of Japanese art, stating that his goal in his art was "to combine the rich traditions of the East with [his] accumulative experience and viewpoint of the West."⁷ As Alexandra Munroe elaborates, "he painted his personal reality, which he saw as a paradox."⁸ Critics of his time, however, felt inclined to associate his work with their own notions of traditional Japanese aesthetics. Kuniyoshi's Japanese identity "echoed modernist appropriations of the 'foreign' and the 'primitive' in ways that seemed to be 'natural' in the eyes of white critics and curators."⁹ The paradox, then, transitions from being about a perceived tear between his Japanese and American identity (which he continuously

1 Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, "Breakfast at Kuniyoshi's: Photography, Forgetting, and Racial Form," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 22, no. 2 (2019): 252.

2 Jeon, "Breakfast at Kuniyoshi's," 11.

3 ShiPu Wang, "Japan against Japan: U.S. Propaganda and Yasuo Kuniyoshi's Identity Crisis," *American Art* 22, no. 1 (2007): 31.

4 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 31.

5 Gail Levin, "Between Two Worlds: Folk Culture, Identity, and the American Art of Yasuo Kuniyoshi," *Archives of American Art Journal* 43, no. ¾ (2003): 11.

6 Moser, as cited in Susan Stamberg, "The Anxious Art Of Japanese Painter (And 'Enemy Alien') Yasuo Kuniyoshi," Morning Edition, National Public Radio, NPR, August 13, 2015.

7 Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, 14.

8 Munroe, as cited in Levin, "Between Two Worlds," 2.

9 Amy Lyford, "Modernism, Essentialism, and 'Racial Art' in America," Review of *Making Race: Modernism and "Racial Art"* by Jacqueline Francis and *Becoming American: The Art and Identity Crisis of Yasuo Kuniyoshi* by ShiPu Wang, *Art Journal* 72, no. 3 (2013): 86.

establishes as American) to a complex negotiation of his artistic identity. He was working as an American artist, using American mediums and traditions, yet painting, as he stated “almost entirely from imagination and memories of [his] past” in Japan and remaining to the public eye, due to his racial appearance, Japanese.¹⁰ As his contemporary William Murell puts it, “All that is Japanese in his work is therefore innate and authentic; and that which is American comes less from the art schools than from the life about him.”¹¹ His conflicting selfhood is exacerbated in his art as he becomes a public figure and these personal iconographies are revealed under scrutiny as his identity is questioned within a highly nationalistic America.

His 1927 *Self Portrait as a Golf Player*, one of only a handful of self-portraits, portrays a subtle assertion of a dual identity (fig. 1). Kuniyoshi was known for works like these; oil paintings with “flattened spaces, squat figures and diminishing of single point perspective” and imagery that was, according to Moser, “flavored with his sly humor, idiosyncratic imagination, personal experience, and subtle references to his Japanese heritage.”¹² His treatment of his appearance is similar across other self-portraits, depicting an exaggerated face shape with high cheekbones, slanted eyes, and yellow-toned skin, an image of himself which is not naturalistic, and verges on a stereotyped image of a Japanese figure.¹³ This allusion connects him to his Japanese identity, yet portrays his idiosyncratic, self-referential sarcasm, slyly pointing to the delicate politics of his identity. Furthermore, the figure’s stance recalls Japanese artistic depictions of samurai, drawing inspiration from the East rather than emulating the standing pose from European tradition.¹⁴ By wearing contemporary fashionable American clothing, however, he advocates for his assimilation and his status as a social figure in the United States. Asserting his American identity most prominently is his choice to depict himself playing golf, pointed out by the title. He positions himself not actively engaging in the sport, but as a golf *player*, contending for an identification with longevity. Golf, however, was a sport invented in Scotland and passed through Europe to arrive in the U.S., so Kuniyoshi again is subtly alluding to hybrid influences in American cultural practices, one which he advocated for in the visual arts.

10 Kuniyoshi, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, 22.

11 William Murrell, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Younger Artist Series (Woodstock, New York: W.M. Fisher, 1922), 714.

12 Moser, as cited in Roger Catlin, “Meet the Iconic Japanese-American Artist Whose Work Hasn’t Been Exhibited in Decades,” Smithsonian Magazine (2015).

13 Tom Wolf, “Reflections on the Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi with Tom Wolf,” April 10, 2015, Smithsonian Museum, Youtube Live Stream.

14 Wolf, “Reflections on the Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi with Tom Wolf.”



Figure 1. Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Self Portrait as a Golf Player* (1927). Oil on canvas.

Blending Japanese idioms with American folk art, further influenced by European modernism, Kuniyoshi's oeuvre "exemplifies cultural hybridity and cross-fertilization."¹⁵ His early still lifes, composite images of objects like signs in language, act as intimate portraits of personal history through iconographic references. Collecting American folk art was a way for Kuniyoshi to forge a relationship to American "roots."¹⁶ Reciprocally, his early oeuvre seems to portray a "parallel bond to his native land through its folk art and folklore" through Japanese folk objects featured in his still lifes.¹⁷ Furthermore, the context of growing interest in America for folk culture in the 1920s was related to a rise in racial nativism and increased xenophobia and intolerance. Kuniyoshi's art style, as it straddled modernism and regionalism, permitted him to become popular as an American artist, a glass ceiling otherwise very unlikely to be broken by a Japanese émigré.

His 1932 still life, *Japanese Toy Tiger and Odd Objects*, presents an amalgamation of Japanese and American customs marking the birth of a son (fig. 2). Painted soon after learning his father had died on his return from his short and only visit to Japan, this image highlights a nostalgia for his family, exploring connections to a nation and community he had long departed from. The central object, in the leftmost third of the composition, whose visage faces the viewer, is a Japanese toy tiger known as a *kurashiki hariko*.¹⁸ Originating from Kurashiki, not far from Kuniyoshi's birthplace, this craft object was intended to celebrate the birth of the maker's first son,

15 Levin, "Between Two Worlds," 2.

16 Levin, "Between Two Worlds," 4.

17 Levin, "Between Two Worlds," 4.

18 Levin, "Between Two Worlds," 6.

in this case, in the year of the tiger. The tiger is additionally a symbol of strength associated with the May Boys' Day festival in Japan. Scattered along the foregrounded section of the table are a handful of cigars, alluding to the American tradition of a father handing out cigars upon the birth of a son.¹⁹ Using folk objects connected to parallel traditions in both Japan and the United States, Kuniyoshi creates a personal iconography to express himself. Combining cultural symbols and imbuing them with meaning from his own experience, Kuniyoshi situated himself as straddling American and Japanese identities through artistic representation.



Figure 2. Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Japanese Toy Tiger and Odd Objects* (1932). Oil on canvas.

Another example of this amalgamation is his 1921 drawing *Baby and Toy Cow* (fig. 3). The small, toy drum which the baby reaches for is a *den den taiko*, a common souvenir from Japanese festivals, associated with a nursery rhyme about a “good boy.”²⁰ Again, Kuniyoshi is reflecting on his childhood and standing as a good son, considering his father’s financial sacrifice in order for him to emigrate to America. The cow is another common symbol of Kuniyoshi’s early iconography, explaining that he felt very near to the cow, his fate somewhat guided by it, as he was born in the year of the cow according to the Japanese lunar calendar.²¹ These repeated symbols, connected to his memories of the past and larger Japanese traditions, coincide with his adopted Americanness. Unlike *Japanese Toy Tiger and Odd Objects*, this work is an ink drawing; despite working mainly in oil paint, Kuniyoshi produced a number of images using this technique. While this medium is originally non-Western, it had been appropriated by Western modernist artists. Therefore, Kuniyoshi, ethnically Japanese but recognized as an American artist, complicates the notion of his authenticity as he paints within a medium “native” to his Japanese identity, yet, as a Western modern artist, appropriates his own birth culture.

19 Levin, “Between Two Worlds,” 6.

20 Levin, “Between Two Worlds,” 8.

21 Levin, “Between Two Worlds,” 8.



Figure 3. Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Baby and Toy Cow* (1921). Ink on paper.

Despite his recognition as an American artist, Yasuo Kuniyoshi remained excluded from American citizenship, a position exacerbated after Roosevelt declared war on Japan following the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941.²² Exclusionary laws made all Asian immigrants ineligible for naturalization, and Kuniyoshi's status changed from "resident alien" to "enemy alien."²³ In a letter to fellow artist and friend, George Biddle, Kuniyoshi reflected on his public image and self-perception: "A few short days has [sic] changed my status in this country, although I myself have not changed at all."²⁴ His identity as an American artist could no longer legitimize his Americanness as the political climate of World War II positioned him as the face of the enemy. He had to confront a ruptured identity during this period, as "his Japanese origin had come to the forefront and threatened to obliterate the American credentials he had earned through his artistic achievements."²⁵ An identity which was once an exploration of the amalgamated self now posed a threat to Kuniyoshi's freedoms, a tenuous shift reflected in his body of work.

To assert his loyalty to the U.S. government during the war period, Kuniyoshi sought letters of affirmation from his prominent friends in New York and participated willingly in the war effort against Japan.²⁶ Most notably, he accepted an enlistment into the Office of War Information as a propaganda artist, drafting over a dozen anti-Japan poster designs. His OWI assignment was to depict the "Japanese enemy," a category which Kuniyoshi himself was implicated into by the U.S. government.²⁷ By that point, Kuniyoshi had lived in the United States for roughly thirty-five years and considered himself assimilated. The OWI, however, had no interest in his "self-proclaimed lack of knowledge of contemporary Japan," attributing his abilities to his race.²⁸ Kuniyoshi experiences

22 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 31.

23 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 31.

24 Kuniyoshi, as cited in Wang, "Japan against Japan," 30.

25 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 30.

26 Daniel Harkett, "Citizenship Papers," *Archives of American Art Journal* 56, no. 1 (2017).

27 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 34.

28 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 35.

a kind of reversal in his identity as an artist. His work with the OWI, which categorized him as a Japanese artist, contradicted his established place as an American artist. He could no longer use his prominence in the art world, nor his cultural assimilation and beliefs, to legitimize his American identity. This government assignment, along with other legal denials of citizenship, labelled him still as an artist, but distinctly Japanese. The crossing between his artistry and political identity therefore became more distinct and less fluid, as breaking these boundaries would threaten his personal freedoms.

Due to his tentative position, Kuniyoshi's poster designs "offered pictorial representations different from those in other contemporary anti-Japan graphics that ridiculed and demonized everything Japanese."²⁹ His strategy was to appeal to "universal themes, such as humanity in peril and victimhood under militarism and oppression," expressing both antipathy towards Japan's militarism and defending his own Americanness.³⁰ This permitted him to continue to balance his dual identity without too much danger, as he created anti-Japanese propaganda without implicating himself and other Japanese-Americans. Using "swift and vigorous lines" to depict human peril, Kuniyoshi moved towards more explicitly imagery in his designs after early drafts, such as *Destroy this Menace*, were rejected by the office for not having "journalistic impact" through realism (fig. 4).³¹ Still, even after he was told to refrain from obscure anti-Japanese symbolism that was assumed unintelligible to Americans, his posters show a reluctance to assign identities to victims and aggressors. He actively obscured identities to depersonalize figures, "foregrounding the suffering of human beings regardless of race."³² In *Untitled (Bayonets and Baby)*, Kuniyoshi consciously removes the explicit depiction of a Japanese soldier, opting instead to use the Japanese flag to identify the bayonets and the actor of the horrific violence portrayed (fig. 5). In *Torture*, he sketches an anonymous victim with their back turned to the viewer, with no explicit identifiers of race or nationality (fig. 6). Here particularly, his design points "not only to Japan's destructive forces overseas but also to the kind of attacks he had witnessed, if not personally experienced, against others in the forms of xenophobia (racist imagery), incarceration (FBI arrests), and internment in the United States."³³ Avoiding explicit signs, Kuniyoshi reflected the ambiguity and reciprocal violence occurring in America and abroad during the war.



Figure 4. Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Destroy this Menace*, OWI Poster Design.



Figure 5. Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Untitled (Bayonets and Baby)*, OWI Poster Design.

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- 29 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 30.
 30 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 30.
 31 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 37.
 32 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 42.
 33 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 43.

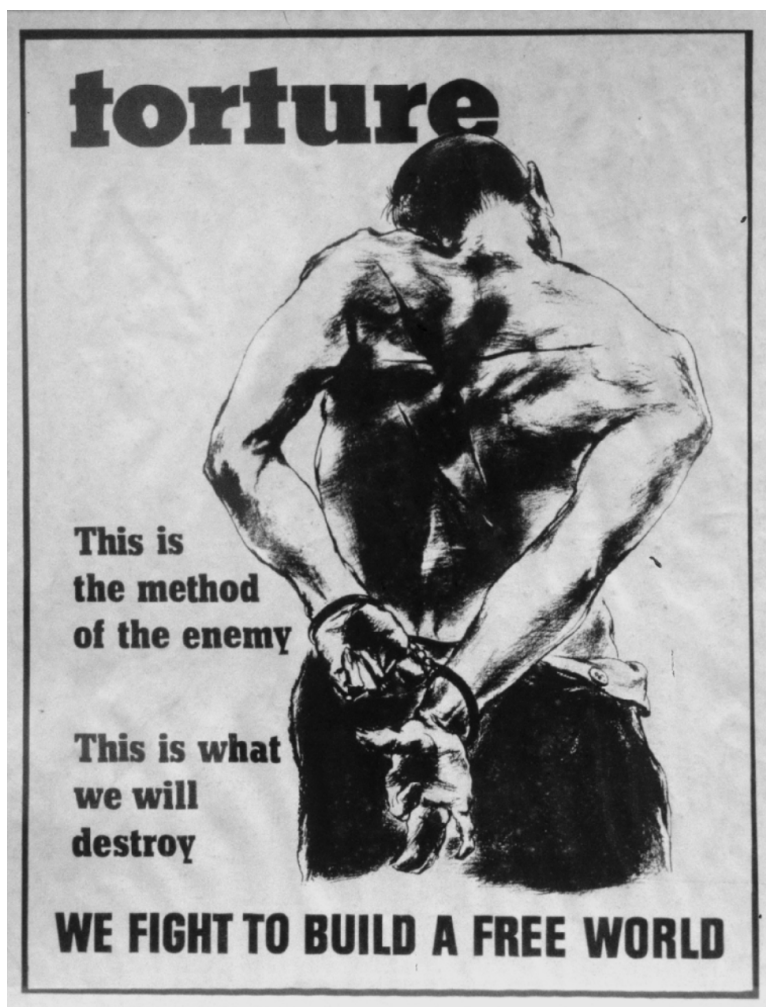


Figure 6. Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Torture*, OWI Poster Design.

Despite these ambivalent and nuanced poster designs, his large-scale caricature of Hirohito, the Emperor of Japan, for the Art Students' League United Nations Ball presents a conflicting representation. This image is more explicitly racialized, using physiognomy as an identifier of the enemy rather than the generalized imagery used in his posters (fig. 7). Here, Kuniyoshi draws attention to a Japanese "otherness" through stereotyped, exaggerated physical features, something he consciously avoided in his less commercial OWI designs. This caricature, however, unlike the OWI propaganda, depicts a specific figure. Creating a racial stereotype of this single subject does not implicate all Japanese Americans (including Kuniyoshi himself) as the enemy, but rather projects a propagandic mockery of Hirohito himself. Kuniyoshi was thus able to fulfill this assignment, however contradictory to his own attitudes as a Japanese American and as a fine artist.



Figure 7. Art Students League faculty Harry Sternberg, standing at left, Jon Corbino, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and George Grosz with caricatures created for the Art Student's League Ball in New York City. Photographic print.

Kuniyoshi's postwar image, *Headless Horse Who Wants to Jump* (1945) meditates on the conditions of the war and his contributions to it, and comments on his relationship to his own images (fig. 8).³⁴ Maintaining his practice of using personal iconography, this painting functioned to collect images which "might subtly reflect personal and political histories."³⁵ Personal meaning "quietly materializes" in this image through reflexive references and symbolic objects, suggesting his identity and social position like a historical self-portrait.³⁶ Composed of a yellow and brown color palette, the background landscape does not reflect the colors of Woodstock, New York, where he worked and from which he drew much inspiration for earlier landscape paintings. The tone of the painting rather reflects the U.S. West landscape, the site of internment, referencing a fate he avoided due to his prominence as an artist, though which many other Asian Americans fell victim to.³⁷ The explicit violence and horror of the central image, a beheaded horse, depict an "overt emotional urgency" not common in his earlier works, which acted more as playful interrogations of identity.³⁸ Here, Kuniyoshi produces a self-reflexive comment on his wartime efforts with the OWI, including in this image a torn and obscured duplicate of his poster design, *Torture*. This image is wrought with echoed figures; the obscured face of the prisoner in *Torture* parallels the headlessness of the horse as both are turned away from the viewer, the sash-like fabric which hangs off the back of the horse and divides the poster reflects the slashes and scars on the prisoner's back, and the grapes and gloves, referring to Kuniyoshi's autobiographical experiences in both California and Japan as a fruit picker, are placed on the back of the horse, echoing the position of the bound hands in *Torture*.³⁹ The latter reflection is prominent, as it highlights what was nuanced in the original design but only then, after the war, was free to be received: this figure has no racial identifier, so despite being U.S. propaganda, it showcases the experiences of Japanese-Americans, including Kuniyoshi himself, as victims of war. Therefore, this painting is quietly rebellious, confronting the contradictions in Kuniyoshi's political and artistic identity, marked by the poster's cropped, reappropriated slogan, "we fight."⁴⁰

34 Jeon, "Breakfast at Kuniyoshi's," 251.

35 Jeon, "Breakfast at Kuniyoshi's," 247.

36 Jeon, "Breakfast at Kuniyoshi's," 249; 254.

37 Jeon, "Breakfast at Kuniyoshi's," 250.

38 Wang, "Japan against Japan," 33.

39 Jeon, "Breakfast at Kuniyoshi's," 251.

40 Jeon, "Breakfast at Kuniyoshi's," 251.



Figure 8. Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Headless Horse Who Wants to Jump* (1945). Oil on canvas.

The complexities and contradictions in Yasuo Kuniyoshi's oeuvre poses many questions about who has cultural authority over what defines "American Art;" his personal identity and artist status in America nuance his position as a cultural leader. In a speech at the MoMA in 1940 titled, "What is American Art?" Kuniyoshi argues against the nationalist tide in the United States. He asserts that "cultural assimilation does take place," alluding to his own sense of allegiance to the U.S. after having lived there for almost all of his life, and defines American art as "the product of a conglomeration of customs and traditions of many peoples ... a culmination not only of native but [also of] foreign forces."⁴¹ Here, he positions his personal identity as an American, yet permits himself to be categorized as a foreign part of the cumulative process through which American art is created. His solidified authority as an American artist permitted him to make such a claim; letters of endorsement from Kuniyoshi's prominent friends called him a "leader of American creative expression... thoroughly loyal American in thought and in feeling... and all his associations are with the American art world."⁴² Developing a personal iconography in his early work, his mode of self-expression easily adapted and proved essential to expressing ambiguity in his propaganda. His political and artistic identities had always been intertwined, yet with the advent of World War II further embroiled as he was publicly perceived as both the face of the enemy and of American modernist art. Kuniyoshi's artwork thereby provided him with a public way to prove his loyalty during the war and remain safe in a nationalistic America, while also providing a personal space in which he could explore a hybrid identity, full of tension and conflict.

41 Kuniyoshi, as cited in Levin, "Between Two Worlds," 15.

42 Harkett, "Citizenship Papers," 71.

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