***Red Circle: Designing Japan in Contemporary Posters***

At the 1960 World Design Conference in Tokyo, the renowned former Bauhaus artist Herbert Bayer urged that “Design must be conscious of social responsibility, critical view, and national identity.” This call for social engagement through a rigorous art practice embracing one’s origins inspired many Japanese graphic designers. At the time Japan had made an almost miraculous recovery from the devastation of World War II and was set to host a series of high-profile international events, including two Olympics (1964 and 1972) and a World Expo (1970). In the coming decades, graphic design was to play a significant role in the national project of remaking Japan’s global image.

The eye-catching posters in this exhibition were created by Ikko Tanaka (1930–2002), Shigeo Fukuda (1939–2009), and Kazumasa Nagai (b. 1929), all of whom began their professional careers in the 1960s and were strongly committed to the kind of social engagement urged by Bayer. Most are from the 1980s and early 1990s, when Japan’s strong currency and trade surplus were causing anti-Japanese sentiment overseas. Countering this negative image became a serious concern for these artists, who used posters designed for government-sponsored trade fairs, cultural festivals, and sporting events, and self-initiated projects and exhibitions, to promote a deeper understanding of Japan and its long cultural history.

These three artists took similar approaches to “designing” Japan, using a powerful language based on motifs from its rich visual tradition. The red circle of the national flag, perhaps the most recognizable symbol of Japan, features prominently in their designs. Archetypal animals, human figures, and landscapes from folklore and visual culture were distilled into forms of similar iconographic clarity that could powerfully signify “Japan” for international audiences, even those who did not know the language. Visual twists and nuanced humor were used to stir the viewer’s curiosity, while strong colors based on a historic palette increased the posters’ visual impact. Thus they succeeded brilliantly in both communicating a message and expressing an innovative artistic vision. Together they offer a glimpse into a fascinating chapter in the history Japan’s efforts to shape its identity in the post-World War II era.

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Curator of Asian Art

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(group #1)

**Ikko Tanaka**

Japan, 1930–2002

*The Winter Olympic Games in Sapporo ‘72*

1968

Screenprint

Gift of DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 2017/2.15

**Shigeo Fukuda**

Japan, 1939–2009

*Shigeo Fukuda and His Playful Trick Pavilion*

1992

Offset print

Gift of DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 2017/2.100

**Kazumasa Nagai**

Japan, born 1929

*Ueno Zoo*

1993

Silkscreen

Gift of DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 2017/2.71

(label for group #1)

The designer Bruno Munari (1907–1998) said that the Japanese flag is especially compelling because the eye cannot tear itself away from the dark circle isolated against a white background. The red circle of Japan’s national flag served as the base of many posters by Ikko Tanaka, Shigeo Fukuda, and Kazumasa Nagai whose posters seen here exploit both the red circle’s symbolism, and its effectiveness as a design.

In his poster promoting the 1972 Winter Olympics, Ikko Tanaka positioned the red circle against an abstract image of a snow-capped mountain range. Despite its small size, the bright red circle in Tanaka’s poster stands out vividly against the monochromatic background.

Shigeo Fukuda anthropomorphized the red circle by adding crossed arms that suggest perhaps that the nation itself is deep in thought. This poster was designed for an exhibition of Fukuda’s “trick art” (*torikku āto*)—ambiguous images that play with visual perceptions—at the *First Japan Exposition* held in Toyama in 1992. This event promoted the industry and culture of Toyama prefecture, known for its rich agricultural resources.

Kazumasa Nagai’s poster promoting the Ueno Zoo, the oldest and most popular in Japan, combines a red circle and an image of a lion, the king of animals. The fusion of the radiating sun and the lion’s mane communicates the prestige of this zoo, which attracts national and international visitors.

(group #2)

**Shigeo Fukuda**

Japan, 1939–2009

*Kyogen*

1981

Offset print

Gift of DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 2017/2.88

**Ikko Tanaka**

Japan, 1930–2002

*Nihon Buyo* (Japanese traditional dance)

1981

Offset print

Gift of DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 2017/2.25

**Ikko Tanaka**

Japan, 1930–2002

*Sharaku Ōkubi-e Prints Composed from Nine Circles*

1995

Offset print

Gift of DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 2017/2.46

In the postwar era, performing and visual arts have played an important role in Japan’s international diplomacy, often being used to cement its image as a multifaceted, cultured nation. In promotional posters for such events, Shigeo Fukuda and Ikko Tanaka employed abstraction and simplification to translate historic art forms into modern idioms that would appeal to contemporary, international audiences.

For a Japanese performing arts series at University of California, Los Angeles, Fukuda focused on the movement of legs and feet in *kyōgen*, a centuries-old form of theater characterized by humorous narratives and exaggerated gestures. Kyōgen protagonists are often put into situations they do not know how to escape; the harder they try, the worse the situation becomes. Fukuda expresses this conundrum through a question mark comprised of entangled legs and feet. He was a master of creating such simple and humorous visual puns with multiple layers of meanings.

For the same UCLA performing art series, Tanaka portrayed the face of an *onnagata* (a male actor who specialized in female roles)—a unique Japanese performance tradition—as a collection of squares, triangles, and circles The abstract composition nevertheless expresses the onnagata’s sensuality. In a poster for an exhibition commemorating the 200th anniversary of the birth of the renowned woodblock print artist Tōshūsai Sharaku (active 1794–1795), Tanaka reinterprets Sharaku’s style in a design based on nine circular forms. Though the idiom is rigidly geometric, the design succeeds in preserving the essential characteristics of Sharaku’s work, such as the subdued color scheme, the almond-shaped eyes, and the jumping eyebrows.

(group #3)

**Shigeo Fukuda**

Japan, 1939–2009

*Think Japan*

1987

Silkscreen

Gift of DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 2017/2.95

**Ikko Tanaka**

Japan, 1930–2002

*Japan*

1986

Screenprint

Gift of DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 2017/2.31

**Kazumasa Nagai**

Japan, born 1929

*Japan*

1988

Screenprint

Gift of DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 2017/2.61

**Kazumasa Nagai**

Japan, born 1929

*Japan*

1988

Screenprint

Gift of DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion, 2017/2.62

The posters in this section use a single main motif that has been simplified, twisted, recomposed, and recolored to maximize its visual impact. All were created in the late 1980s as part of a project on the broad theme of “Japan” initiated by graphic designers. At the time, Japan’s booming economy was stirring anti-Japanese sentiments overseas. Through these posters they hoped to foster, both nationally and internationally, an understanding of Japan that went beyond its image as an economic powerhouse

The designs for these posters frequently mine Japan’s long visual tradition. In two posters designed for the annual exhibition of the Japan Graphic Designers Association (JAGDA) in 1988, Kazumasa Nagai used a turtle (a common symbol for longevity) and a frog (a popular character from a historic novel). Conventional ornamental patterns and motifs, such as flowers, clouds and waves, and concentric rings, are collaged on the animals and the background. The abundant use of gold and silver is reminiscent of a kind of sprinkled gold lacquerware popular in the Edo period (1615–1868).

Ikko Tanaka’s poster for 1986 JAGDA exhibition is based on a deer motif from a famous painting by Tawaraya Sōtatsu (ca. 1507–ca. 1640), an artist of the Rimpa school. Tanaka often used motifs from the Rimpa school, which was known for the decorative quality of its depictions of nature and an ostentatious use of silver and gold. Here, the already iconic image is refined, flattened, and presented as a modern icon.

Shigeo Fukuda’s motif is a *torii*, the ubiquitous gate to a Shinto (Japan’s indigenous religion) shrine. While it is clear that the structure is a torii, it is difficult to tell where it stands in space—Fukuda is renowned for such intriguing visual “tricks.” The frog leaning on the gate is copied from the famous Kamakura period (1185–1333) painting *Scrolls of Frolicking Animals*. The placement of the series title, “thinkjapan,” appears intended to hide the famous frog’s identity. By showing him in this way, Fukuda seems to urge the viewer to look beyond conventions to rethink Japan.