Graphics

In recent years the world has begun, rather suddenly, to sit up and take notice of graphic design produced in Japan. The phenomenon appears to be tied to the rise in Japan's economic fortunes, and is only natural since design is in essence symbolic of corporate cultural development.

The history of Japanese graphic design in the postwar era has already been documented with great detail and precision by such internationally known critics as Richard S. Thornton[1] and Alain Weill,[2] but the overviews presented by these experts and others differ considerably depending on the perspective of each writer. Their evaluations of course vary widely as well, according to their individual tastes and preferences.

To understand the achievements of Japanese graphic design in the postwar period, it is necessary to keep in mind the dramatic progress made during the prewar era. A number of commentators have offered great praise for Japan's prewar design (fig. 1), but such views are clearly tinged to a great extent by the romantic predilection toward nostalgia, which is so prevalent nowadays. In my opinion, Japanese design of the prewar period was by no means of high quality. In those days, design was seen merely as a sideline that was undertaken by artists; it enjoyed neither a high social position nor the support of a true artistic conscience.

When World War II ended in 1945, Japan's crushing defeat brought millions of its citizens to the brink of starvation as the food rationing system of the war years atrophied. The situation grew progressively worse the following year and reached its nadir in 1947. According to historical records of the period, the daily rationing of rice in those days was a mere 297 grams per person—barely enough to fill a medium-size cup. When rice was unavailable, rations of potato, sorghum, soybeans, or the like would be offered in its place. Daily vegetable rations were 75 grams, the equivalent of about half a carrot. The fish ration was one sardine every four days—when available, that is. Japan, of course, was not alone in its suffering, for the entire world was racked by soaring inflation and labor unrest.

Fig. 1 Poster for Shiseido, designed by Takeo Yamamoto, 1937. Photogravure (Courtesy of Toppan Printing Co.)

The reason I bring up this dismal state of postwar Japan here is because it holds the key to understanding the success that Japanese design has achieved in recent years. Japan in those days was quite backward in matters of design; unlike the United States and Europe, the nation had no history of modern design whatsoever. This is not to say that Japan was lacking in modal beauty in the realm of its traditional arts; on the contrary, a fine legacy of decorative excellence was well established in such fields as painting, sculpture, architecture, and theatrical arts (Kabuki, Noh). From a Western perspective, Japan no doubt could have been adequately served simply by carrying on this native design legacy. And while I find no argument with this way of thinking, at the time we Japanese believed firmly that the only way to extricate ourselves from the devastation brought by our defeat and thereby rebuild our nation was to introduce the modern social structures of the West. We believed that unless we pursued a path toward democracy and modern capitalism, we would remain no more than a feudal and backward nation at the edge of the "Far" East. And so we pursued an aggressive and fast-paced course toward Western-style modernization.

It was in this context that Japanese corporations came to understand that they could move forward only if they broke away from the yoke of their old ways, spurring them to adopt the latest American management methods. But trends of this kind were not confined to the corporate sphere; they touched all aspects of the nation's framework. To borrow a phrase, this was an era during which Japan went through a veritable "cultural revolution." Naturally, design was no exception. Those of us in

graphic design longed to catch up to the artistic level that we recognized in American design. We knew, however, that to accomplish this would require a total revolution in the thinking of all Japanese designers. To begin, we would have to undertake constructive initiatives aimed at elevating our position in society. We would have to band together in order to work toward our common goals.

Thus, in 1950, just five years after the end of the war, full-fledged preparations got under way toward the founding of a nationwide alliance of graphic designers, marking the true start of modern design history in Japan. One year later the first national organization of designers, the Japan Advertising Artists Club (JAAC), was inaugurated. The organization ultimately played a major role in the emergence and advancement of Japanese graphic design. In September 1951 the JAAC held its first joint exhibition, in Tokyo's Ginza district. Members showed original posters, each conceived freely and with no inherent restraints upon the artist. Starting with the third in what became an ongoing series of shows, nonmember designers were also invited to participate. The shift not only enabled the discovery of outstanding new talents, but also garnered wide social support for the burgeoning design movement. Newspapers and art magazines, which had consistently ignored graphic design, also began to devote substantial space to introductions and critical evaluations of new works. Designers, in turn, were inspired by this broad social response, and they took to honing their skills and artistic inventiveness with increasingly competitive drive. The result was an explosion of both talent and energy.

It has been said that in the first twenty-five years after the war, Japan carried out democratic, economic, and cultural reforms that normally have taken other countries an entire century. The same remark holds true in the realm of design. Earlier I noted why graphic designers in Japan chose to cut their ties with traditional arts and rushed headlong toward Western styles. Over the course of time, however, as the new culture reached a level of high achievement, the result was in fact a natural modernization of traditional Japanese aesthetics. During the 1950s and 1960s Japanese designers abandoned themselves to the pursuit of Western forms, but by the end of this period new designers began to appear who possessed sufficient talent, skill, and vision to develop a new Japanese style (fig. 2). One might mention here that this new Japanese style has evolved more recently into the introduction of computer graphics.

In 1952, one year after the establishment of the JAAC, the Tokyo Art Directors Club (ADC) was inaugurated. This organization was in essence a copy of its well-established American counterpart. At the time, however, art direction did not exist as a profession in Japan and the term "art director" itself was poorly understood. The system was adopted simply because it appeared to be a fashionable new way of creating advertising. Art directors in those days were not creative artists but merely personnel involved in the creation of advertisements. The Tokyo ADC was thus in reality nothing more than a collection of staff from corporate advertising departments. These dubious beginnings notwithstanding, the Tokyo ADC quickly succeeded in building up sufficient capabilities to influence the course of Japanese design.

In 1957 the organization instituted the production of an annual publication, which won increasingly high critical acclaim worldwide (fig. 3). These accolades were a genuine response to attractive and effective works that came to be produced in Japan as the art-direction system came to assume a solid position in the advertising business. Gradually an ever-larger number of innovative and creative individuals of superior talent and skill appeared within the ranks of the Tokyo ADC, enabling it to surpass the JAAC in several ways. In this manner the two organizations began to exert influences on each other, causing them to become increasingly outspoken. Today Japanese advertising design boasts both expressive uniqueness and superior quality. In my opinion, Japanese art directors today also continue to possess the driving creative spirit that has generally been lost in recent years among American art directors (fig. 4).

Over time the JAAC exhibitions, started in 1951, gradually fell into a predictable pattern. As the annual event approached the end of its second decade, critics began to castigate the designers' dependency on the exhibition format, saying they were acting precisely as if they were painters. They simultaneously began to suggest that designers should address issues that had greater social relevance. These criticisms were indeed on target. The
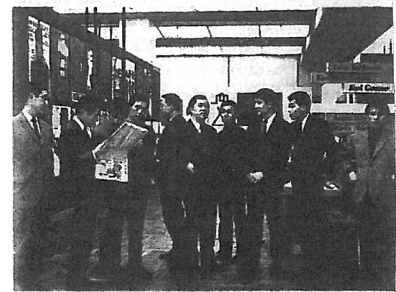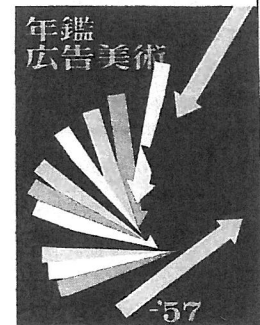

Fig. 2 Ten graphic designers who participated in the "Persona" exhibition in Tokyo in 1965 (left to right): SHIGEO FUKUDA, Akira Uno, TADANORI YOKOO, Tsunehisa Kimura, MITSUO KATSUI, IKKO TANAKA, KIYOSHI AWAZU, KAZUMASA NAGAI, Makoto Wada, and GAN HOSOYA.
Fig. 3 Cover of the first annual of the Tokyo Art Directors Club, 1957
Fig. 4 Tokyo Art Directors Club Trophy

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1 Richard S. Thornton, *The Graphic Spirit of Japan* (New York, 1991)
2 Alain Weill, *The Poster: A Worldwide Survey and History* (Boston, 1985).

JAAC by this time had become a mecca for the nation's designers, and it wielded enormous power over them. In fact, in many quarters, this power was viewed as a kind of authoritarianism. This was around 1967, a time when the student activist movement in the United States began to spread to Japan. The movement affected both private and national universities alike, with student demonstrations resulting in widespread suspension of classes and harsh criticism of professorial staff. I can still recall quite vividly how, on August 2, 1969, dozens of helmeted students wearing masks over their faces to conceal their identities stormed into the JAAC committee meeting where judging was under way to select works by nonmembers for exhibition. The intruders represented a left-wing group intent on crushing the JAAC and its activities. Ongoing debates followed between the JAAC and the students, but no mutually satisfactory outcome was reached. Confusion reigned even within the ranks of the JAAC, and some members began to suggest that the organization would have to give in to prevailing trends. And so, on June 30, 1970, the JAAC ultimately yielded to the pressures of the times and disbanded. One newspaper likened the event to the toppling of a grand old tree.

At the time some lamented what they saw to be the end of graphic design in Japan; others, however, hailed the arrival of a new age of expressive freedom in which skill would be the only determining factor for success. What is certain, however, was that designers had lost their enthusiasm for group action. This void then continued for some eight years, until once again there arose a call for a professional organization of graphic designers. During the interim designers had come to realize that as individuals their powers were limited, and that the only way to make a social statement was through group action. In Japan there has always been a clear distinction between artistic and professional organizations; apparently, the division is unique to Japan, for it does not appear in the West. Artistic organizations bring together fellow artists of excelling quality; professional organizations are gathering points for specialists who make their living through a common profession. Since anyone engaged in the pertinent profession can join the latter, professional organizations tend to be held in low esteem. It was precisely under this demeaning gaze that JAGDA—the Japan Graphic Designers Association—was created in 1978 as a professional organization of the nation's graphic designers. Initial membership was approximately seven hundred. In its first three years, JAGDA dealt primarily with the issue of defining what a professional organization of graphic designers should be and do. Any time an event was planned, it was opposed on the grounds that such activities should be performed by artistic organizations. Any time a lecture was suggested, the undertaking came to an impasse amid charges of promoting individual "stars." As a result, complaints were frequently registered by members who saw no merit in JAGDA membership and insisted that their dues were a waste of money. JAGDA then took decisive action: it disbanded its founding committee altogether and undertook elections of directors based on free elections by all members nationwide.

Under its new leadership JAGDA succeeded in reinvigorating the organization. It then shifted its focus to enhancing the quality of design production through Japan. This led, in 1981, to publication of the first JAGDA annual, *Graphic Design in Japan*. It was, and continues to be, a magnificent work of a large scale and in beautiful full color. Since all works included in the volume are by JAGDA members, gradually the organization attracted a growing body of ever-more talented members. Today JAGDA embraces nearly two thousand designers.

Through the well-balanced program of activities conducted under the auspices of both the Tokyo ADC and JAGDA, Japan continues to improve the quality of its design work. As a result Japan is giving birth to a succession of young and innovative graphic designers, and this is one of the most appealing elements of its graphic design today. Perhaps the greatest appeal of contemporary Japanese graphic design, however, is its cross-generational diversity. Each generation is blessed with designers of supreme talent whose competitive spirit serves as a constant energizing force, which in turn, I would suggest, is why the world has recently begun to focus attention on Japanese graphic design.

Graphic design in Japan does not fall into any one uniform style. Designers follow their separate paths and stubbornly refrain from imitating others, a trend that I find extremely stimulating. At the same time, the several generations understand and have friendly feelings toward each other. They engage in competition based on recognition of each other's talents. This mutual respect, perhaps more than anything else, defines the "style" of contemporary Japanese graphic design.

J A P A N E S E

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