

The Artistic Journey Of Yasuo Kuniyoshi At Smithsonian American Art Museum



Previous Page: Kuniyoshi used a Japanese subject, festive kites flown on annual celebrations in his native land, in "Fish Kite," 1950, but incorporated a date of American significance, "July 4," which appears upper right. Fukutake Collection, Okayama, Japan.

By Stephen May

WASHINGTON, D.C. — It is hard to believe that there has not been a comprehensive exhibition in the United States of the art of Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1889–1953) in nearly 70 years. The Japanese-born artist was one of the most respected Modernists in this country between the

Starting in the early 1920s, Kuniyoshi spent summers at an artists' colony in Ogunquit. He said of Maine's terrain, "That severe landscape and simple New England buildings were my God." "Maine Family," circa 1922–23. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.





During summers in Ogunquit, Maine, Kuniyoshi became fascinated with American folk art, collecting it and incorporating aspects into works like "Boy Stealing Fruit," 1923. Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio.

two world wars, admired for his compelling and often challenging paintings and works on paper. A painter, printmaker and

photographer, Kuniyoshi combined elements from his Japanese heritage with the realistic tradition of American painting to create a

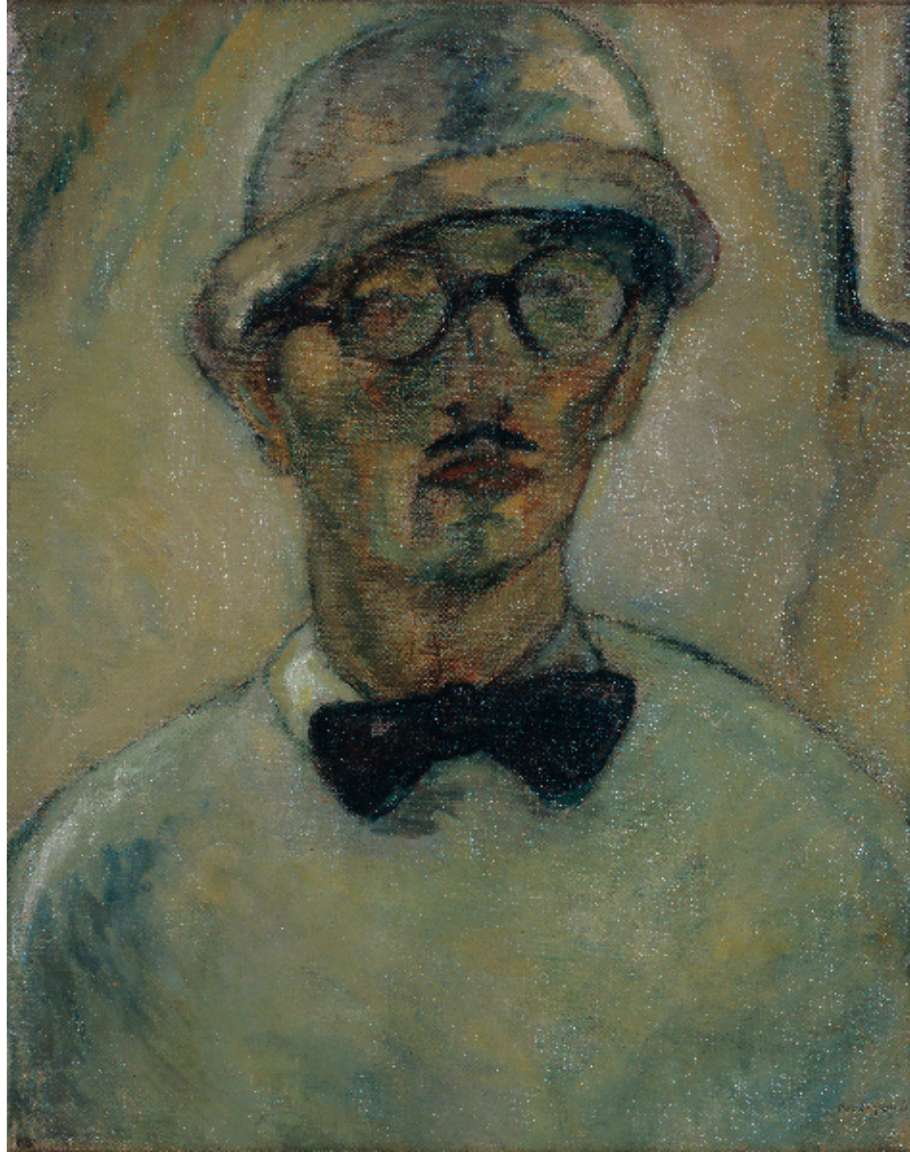


distinctly individual oeuvre. The lack of attention to his work may be due to this unique blending of Eastern and Western styles that makes categorization difficult. This background makes particularly welcome “The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi,” on view at Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), its only venue, through August 30. Co-curated by SAAM’s

Kuniyoshi’s fierce rejection of Japanese military aggression led him to create numerous drawings condemning Japanese atrocities. “Torture,” 1943, a pencil on paper drawing intended for a poster, is black and white except for the red welts on the shackled Allied POW’s back. Collection of John Cassara.

deputy chief curator Joann Moser and Bard College professor of art history Tom Wolf, the exhibition contains 66 of Kuniyoshi's paintings and drawings. SAAM director Elizabeth Broun observes that "Kuniyoshi remains one of our country's most important and innovative Modern artists, yet his work has not been widely

In his "Self-Portrait," 1918, painted when he was 25, Kuniyoshi presented himself as an assimilated immigrant from Japan. The next year, he married artist Catherine Schmidt, whose family disowned the couple. Fukutake Collection, Okayama, Japan.



exhibited for decades.” She expressed pride that SAAM “will enable a new generation of viewers to encounter Kuniyoshi and his powerful, enriching

paintings.” Born in Okayama, Japan, Kuniyoshi emigrated to the United States in 1906. Poor and unable to speak English, he worked at menial



*Kuniyoshi filled
"Adam and Eve (The
Fall of Man)," 1922,
with idiosyncratic
symbols.
The enigmatic,
20-by-30-inch oil
painting is in a
private collection.*



◀ Kuniyoshi's "Circus Girl Resting," 1925, was included in a State Department exhibition during the Cold War that was to tour Europe and Latin America. In some quarters, both immigrant artists and abstract art were viewed with suspicion, leading to the show's cancellation after a few venues. Critics derided this painting as immoral and politically subversive. Julie Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art, Auburn University.

Two years after the end of the war, Kuniyoshi continued dealing with ► the subject in a vigorous fashion in "Festivities Ended," 1947. Asked about this painting, he said, "The world is chaotic today, but we must go on." Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan.



▲ For a time in the mid-1920s, Kuniyoshi supported himself and his wife by carrying out commissions from other members of the New York art world to photograph their studios and artwork. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



jobs on the West Coast before enrolling for three years at the Los Angeles School of Art and Design. To further enhance his skills, he studied with Robert Henri in New York and then under Kenneth Hayes Miller at the Art Students League, where he later taught.

Kuniyoshi's career began at a time of

widespread American hostility to immigrants, which caused "Yas" constant anxiety, reflected in his art. Broun cites six paintings from the early 1920s that are "about fear." Starting in the early 1920s, at the invitation of a wealthy patron...
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