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The Art of Two Easts: the Great Sphinx on the Woodblock Prints of Hiroshi Yoshida

ABSTRACT

Hiroshi Yoshida (1876-1950), a Japanese painter and woodcutter, was known for his excellent landscape compositions, creating paintings using the European oil technique. He traveled the world and also experimented with traditional woodcut printing. His woodprints depicted non-Japanese landscapes and architectural objects, such as ones found in the United States, India, the Swiss Alps, etc. He cultivated the tradition of the *ukiyo-e* convention, restored in the twentieth century as *shin-hanga*. The article concerns one of these extraordinary works: the night and day views of the Great Egyptian Sphinx. The woodcut is very precise, and a few of its details allow us to determine the date of the creation of the prototype, as it depicts an important stage in the conservation works carried out on the famous statue. The article also digresses into interesting Japanese-Egyptian themes in the nineteenth century and the works of contemporary Japanese Egyptologists.

KEYWORDS: Yoshida Hiroshi, Japanese woodcut, Sphinx, Egypt, Orientalism

STRESZCZENIE

Sztuka dwóch Wschodów: Wielki Sfinks na drzeworytach Hiroshi Yoshidy

Hiroshi Yoshida (1876-1950), japoński malarz i drzeworytnik, znany był szczególnie ze swoich doskonałych kompozycji krajobrazowych. Tworzący w europejskiej technice malarstwa olejnego artysta podróżował po świecie i eksperymentował także z wykonanymi w tradycyjnym stylu drzeworytami, przedstawiającymi nie-japońskie pejzaże i obiekty architektoniczne (m.in. Stany Zjednoczone, Indie, Alpy szwajcarskie itd.). Kultywował tradycję klasycznej konwencji *ukiyo-e*, w XX wieku odnowionej jako *shin-hanga*. Artykuł przypomina jedno z tych niezwykłych dzieł: nocny i dzienny widok Wielkiego Sfinksa egipskiego. Drzeworyt jest bardzo precyzyjny, a dzięki kilku detalom można określić datę powstania prototypu, ponieważ odwzorowuje ważny etap prac konserwatorskich prowadzonych przy sławnym posągu. Dygresją artykułu są także uwagi o interesujących wątkach japońsko-egipskich w XIX wieku oraz współczesnych pracach japońskich egiptologów.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Yoshida Hiroshi, japońskie drzeworyty, sfinks, Egipt, orientalizm

The majority of us perhaps imagine that such a meeting could not have happened. It would be too bizarre. Looking at the elaborate details and perfectly refined woodcuttings of the *ukiyo-e* masters, we immerse ourselves in the world of ancient Japanese traditions, fascinating landscapes and buildings which are exotic to us, intriguing, constructing an artistic experience that is so different from our Western vision and perception. The perception of the world thus expressed stylistically and aesthetically, is inextricably linked to our image of the Far East, a distinctive feature of Nippon's art.

But Mr. Yoshida had a very precise plan which challenged the canons of both East and West. A romantic and a perfect realist at the same time (or "romantic realist"), he stubbornly believed and proved that art is one, regardless of what heritage it carries, or in which tradition one grows up and matures aesthetically.

Hiroshi Yoshida[1] was born on September 19, 1876 (as Hiroshi Ueda; at the age of 15 he was adopted by Kasaburo Yoshida and accepted his

1 Contrary to Japanese rules, but according to Western tradition, I will henceforth use the convention of name and then surname.

surname) in the city of Kurume (Fukuoka Prefecture, Kyūshū).[2] His adoptive father, an art teacher, discovered early that Hiroshi had artistic talent. In 1893, as a young man, Hiroshi was sent to Kyoto, to study under the supervision of Shoryu Tamura, a well-known painting teacher, boldly introducing elements of Western art into the education and practice both in terms of aesthetics and techniques. For the next three years, Yoshida was the student of Shōtarō Koyama in Tōkyō, joining a prestigious group of "modern" artists: the Meiji Fine Arts Society. He was initially fascinated by watercolor (especially the subtlety of the 19th-century English watercolor painters) and oil painting, a technique practically unknown previously in Japan. It did not gain much interest outside a small group of enthusiasts, and was treated rather as an oddity, a form of artistic expression foreign to Japanese culture. Adopting Western techniques and styles facilitated studying abroad and exhibiting his art across America and Europe. The first of Yoshida's many artistic expeditions took him over the ocean in the years 1899-1901. An exhibition of his works presented at the Detroit Museum of Art (now the Detroit Institute of Art) was received with interest. Then, he went to Boston, Washington D.C. and Providence.[3] On his way back, he briefly visited Europe for the first time.

Back in Tōkyō, he reorganized the Meiji Fine Arts Society with great enthusiasm, transforming it in 1902 into Taiheiyō Gakai (the Pacific Painting Association), intended to promote a new aesthetics and painting techniques among artists and recipients of art. Maintaining his respect for Japanese artistic traditions, Yoshida wanted to pour the spirit of cosmopolitanism into them, believing that the result would be extraordinary, universal and fascinating.

In 1903, he left for the United States again. At his next exhibition in Detroit he won an award, and the financial aspect of this allowed him to significantly extend the route of his artistic journey across Europe and northern Africa; this journey lasted for four years. He eagerly visited museums and galleries, contemplated the works of the old Spanish, English, Italian and French masters, taking detailed notes and making numerous sketches. He also presented his own works at exhibitions in Paris, London, Italy and Germany. The trip to Switzerland was of special importance: he fell in love with the Alps, got a taste for mountain climbing, and discovered the beauty of those monumental mountains.

The most important period in Yoshida's life and creativity, however, began at the beginning of the 1920's. He became more interested

2 I cite biographical themes here and below after: Blair 1951; Statler 1956, pp. 167-72; Yoshida 1987, pp. 178-193; Merritt 1990, pp. 75-80, 94-5. See also Allen 2002.

3 Cf. Skibbe 1993.

in traditional ukiyo-e woodcutting.[4] In its classical form and content, it seemed already epigonic, but at the same time, it was experiencing a renaissance in its modernized varieties of *shin-hanga* and *sōsaku-hanga*.[5] The most important moment in this respect was the meeting with Shōzaburō Watanabe (1885-1962). This well-known publisher of classic woodcuts made Yoshida truly fascinated with this old technique. An interesting solution that Yoshida also used in his later works, was to use the same blocks to create versions of a drawing in different color variants – for example as a day or night view or during different weather.[6] In the years 1921 and 1922, Watanabe issued the first prints of Yoshida's work, but in the following year, due to the tragic Great Kantō earthquake, the factory ceased to exist, while the woodcut plates and ready prints were burnt or buried under the debris.

Yoshida, however, returned to work with great enthusiasm. In the years 1923-1925, he made his next trip to America, Europe and Africa. In 1925, he founded his own art studio, employing professional engravers and printers. He thoroughly supervised the whole work, comparing himself to a composer and conductor at the same time, whose distinct individuality determined every aspect of the final effect. He analyzed the smallest print errors, rejecting all that were not, in his opinion, perfect. On those absolutely perfectly ones, he stamped a *jizuri* and signed them (somewhat atypical of the old masters) in pencil on the margins of the print, sometimes also in English.

He spent the years 1929-1936 on subsequent trips. He stayed in India and Southeast Asia for several months[7] (in 1931, he issued a series of views depicting scenes from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Singapore); he returned to the USA (where he co-organized and participated in Toledo Exhibitions in 1930 and 1936, exhibiting 113 of his works at the first exhibition and 66 at the second); he visited Canada, Europe, Egypt, and in 1936 he visited China, Manchuria and Korea. He went to China several times during WWII, which prevented him from traveling elsewhere, especially to America.

He signed his last woodcut in 1946 but this did not mark an end to his artistic activities; he experimented not only with prints on various kinds and paper formats, engraving in blocks of various tree species (and even on zinc plates) and using different pigments. He even tried his hand at

4 Cf. Michener 1959; Newland 2005.

5 Cf. Statler 1956; Merritt 1990; Smith 1994; Meritt, Yamada 1995; Bennett 1996; Brown, Goodall 1996; Vollmer 2012, p. 5.

6 Cf. MacLean, Blair 1929.

7 Cf. Pollard, Landrus, Lahiri 2015.

sculpture, mosaic and stained glass. He traveled mainly in Japan, still – as it was in the case of his previous trips – planning this in such a way as to be prepared to see selected places and objects (usually before his travels, he carefully studied guides, almanacs, albums, if possible choosing a particular time of the year or even likely weather). He made many sketches over the course of his life and also planned the publication of the greatest work of his life – a cycle called *One Hundred Views of the World*. At the end of 1949, while traveling to Nagaoka, he became seriously ill. He returned to Tōkyō and, despite receiving treatment for several months, his health was never restored. He died in his home, on April 5th of the following year.

Hiroshi Yoshida left a priceless artistic legacy: 259 woodblock prints (some prints were also made posthumously), several dozen oil paintings and watercolors (many are in private American collections), designs and sketches.[8] Amazed by the versatility of his repertoire of depictions – landscapes, a huge variety of images of nature, mountains, sea, rivers, parks and gardens with elaborate representations of their flora; cities and street scenes with a striking accuracy of architectural details of buildings on all continents.

Although the *One Hundred Views of the World* cycle was not created in the assumed form that Yoshida undoubtedly thought-out, while reviewing his artistic legacy, one must involuntarily put it together on their own. The masterpiece of woodcutting from Yoshida's studio unfolds before our eyes, so varied and at the same time – with a sort of unique, nostalgic lightness, capturing with unique precision the lines of the Japanese woodcut. They show the amazing diversity and unity of the world we live in: His mountains are the Japanese Fuji, but also the beloved, haughty Matterhorn (day and night views), the snow capped peaks of Canada, the Grand Canyon in Arizona and Kangchenjunga (a genius triptych – the mountain in the morning light, at noon and in the evening). The architectural wonders include the ruins of the Acropolis in Athens, the Taj Mahal, the Amritsar Hindu temple, Canal Grande in Venice or the Himeji castle which was so close to his heart.

Among the views of the world that he captured, one may amaze us in a special way. Assigned to the *Europe* series (sic!), the *Sphinx* diptych is dated 1925. Two views were created by the same plates; the head of the famous, monumental Egyptian statue, accompanying the pyramids for millennia and bathed in the glare of the blinding sun (*Sphinx – Day*) and

8 Cf. Robison, Yasunaga 1991; Ogura 1996; Yoshida 1987. It is worth adding here that several members of his family also devoted themselves to art; especially his sons Tōshi and Hodaka who were to equal the artistic fame of their father, however, they followed the path of other creative pursuits; cf. Allen 2002.

immersed in the gloom of a starry night (*Sphinx – Night*). Next to the "eternal guardian of mystery", a camel caravan is following a desert trail. The sight is actually well known, but this one is presented in a completely unexpected convention of an Old Japanese xylograph.

From the end of antiquity, the Great Sphinx of Giza[9] was most likely continuously buried in desert sand. Travelers arriving in those parts consistently used, for example, the phrase "sphinx head" and this is also confirmed in ancient iconography. Perhaps an attempt to (partially) unbury the monument was made by the participants of Napoleon Bonaparte's military expedition (in 1798-1801). In the second decade of the 19th century, the Sphinx was excavated by Captain Giovanni Battista Caviglia; later it was done in 1853, 1886 and in 1925.[10] A thorough uncovering of the body and the consistent maintenance of this state was finally taken up from 1936.[11] With the conservation works at the Great Sphinx there is one very important stage involved: after the renovation carried out in 1920, the shape of the characteristic scarf covering the head of the statue (Egyp.: *nemes*) changed significantly. Serious erosion of the body rock (below the Sphinx's neck) threatened the stability of the statue's head. Thus, the neck of the monument was covered with a cement layer, a kind of a "collar", at the same time supporting the mentioned head covering, which had previously formed a kind of triangular "overhangs", clearly visible on older images: engravings, photographs, or postcards. In Yoshida's *Sphinx*, this reinforcement is also not yet seen. Undoubtedly, the standard sketch of the woodcut had to be made before 1920, probably during his first trip around 1906.[12]

The "Egyptian" artistic visions of Yoshida, however, were not the first images of the country on the Nile, which were the work of a Japanese artist.[13] The Tōkyō publisher and bookseller Takejirō Hasegawa

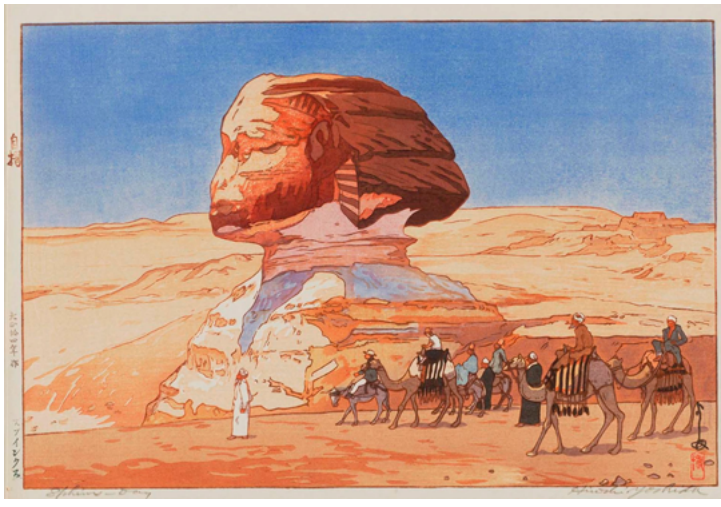
9 Cf. Hassan 1949; Zivie-Coche 1984; Zivie-Coche 2002.

10 Cf. Hawass 1992; Easton 1992; Hawass 1998.

11 Since 1990, continuous monitoring of wind, dust, air humidity (and the particularly dangerous condensation), seismic contamination and pollution has been conducted. On this topic cf. Hassan 1949, pp. 6-27 and 34-42, and newer: Easton 1992, pp. 20-21; Hawass 1992; Gnaedinger 2006. The data collected so far indicate that the greatest threat to the Sphinx is the erosive northwest wind and the reaction of the limestone with saline and acidic pollution. See also: Lal Gauri, Holdren 1981; Lal Gauri 1984; Wahby 2005.

12 In 1907 Yoshida published a brochure – *Africa, Europe and the United States: a Sketch the Journey* – in Japanese, unfortunately known to me only from a bibliographic description.

13 It must be added here that yet another oil painting by Yoshida, *The Great Temple in Egypt*, was painted by the artist around 1930. It depicted the evening view of the temple columns in Luxor; see Nichido Gallery, Tōkyō, Cat. ID A0235. The history of Japanese art notes a lesser known woodcutter: Kuninaga Utagawa (died ca. 1830?), who released a curious series of imitations of the Seven Wonders of the World(sic!), among them are the image of the Egyptian pyramids;



Picture: Hiroshi Yoshida *Sphinx – Day* (スフィンクス) 1925
source: https://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc206955

(1853-1938)[14] added a few illustrations to the memoires of the British travelers, Charles and Susan Bowles, *A Nile Voyage of Recovery* (1897) published in Tōkyō (in English). This luxurious edition, on high quality silk paper, contained small, colorful pictures, which, although stylistically a reflection of similar European prints, they clearly showed the characteristic subtlety of Japanese woodcut masterpieces.

It is also worth recalling another, intriguing document of the earliest meetings of Japan and Egypt; an unusual photograph taken by Antonio Beato in 1864,[15] which depicts... a group of samurai in full regalia, standing under the monument of the Great Sphinx of Giza. They were the participants of a diplomatic mission sent by the Shōgun Tokugawa to Europe in 1863 (the Ikeda Mission) to negotiate the Yokohama harbor

Shinpan Oranda uki-e: Ejipuchun senkei kodai (*Newly Published Dutch Perspective Picture: Egyptian Pyramids* [Lit.: *the tall, pointed plinths*], circa 1829. It is, however, a copy of fantastic European imagery, probably taken from prints of the Dutch painter Maarten van Heemskerck (his *Seven Wonders* was first published in 1572) or its later processing by Maarten de Vos. Cf. Stewart 1979, p. 357; Keyes 1984, p. 94; see also British Museum Collection inv. 1951,0714,0.16.

14 Cf. Sharf 1994.

15 Antonio (Antoine) Beato (1832-1906), an Italian photographer (sometimes also noted as British), and his older brother Felice (1832-1909) were very famous artists, most of whose work were landscapes and Mediterranean monuments – especially those of Egypt. The collection of their photographs is currently housed in the Brooklyn Museum Libraries and Archives. See: Zannier 1986; Osman 1990, pp. 101-110; Bennett 1996, pp. 126, 143, pl. 118.

status regulations. The mission headed by Nagaoki Ikeda and Sukekuni Kawazu, the guards of Iemochi Tokugawa, ended in a fiasco from the Shōgun's perspective but their travel route, which led through North Africa, was immortalized by this most unusual photographic image...

Nowadays in Egypt, the sight of visitors from Japan is far from surprising or peculiar. In addition to the huge number of tourists arriving each year from the Land of the Rising Sun to Egypt, Japanese archaeological missions have also been working there with considerable success. The research was initiated by specialists from the Waseda University (Tōkyō) in 1966 and Japanese teams are known for using cutting edge electronic technology to support their work. The Japanese are present at many archaeological sites in Egypt,[16] achieving scientifically important results. Particularly spectacular Egyptian-Japanese cooperation in the field of Egyptology is taking place in the shadow of the famous pyramids and the Great Sphinx. Japan International Cooperation and Higashi Nippon International University, under the guidance of Professor Kanan Yoshimura, are maintaining one of the most important objects discovered in the 20th century: the 4,500 years old boat of the Pharaoh Khufu (Kheops).[17] These activities are part of another, much larger enterprise – the launch of the Great Egyptian Museum, where over 100,000 ancient artifacts will be shown, and which the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the government of Japan will also participate in, both scientifically and financially.

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16 http://www.sca-egypt.org/eng/fmr_current_missions_mp.htm

17 http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/20223.aspx

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