

Denial of modernism in post-war japan

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



The fall of the Empire of Japan in 1947 and the American occupation that occurred after Japan's surrender in World War 2 had resulted in the creative youths of Japan denying the modernization that it brought in traditional Japan. "Koshimaki Osen Bokyaku-hen" was a print (refer to appendix A) designed for Jokyo Gekijo (Situation Theatre), one of the many angura (underground) theatre that rose to prominence during the 1960s, in rejection of the current modern and contemporary theatres movements of that era (Ikeuchi). The print may seem similar to the vibrant, psychedelic aesthetics of western 1960s pop-art, however the mash of motifs and collages may in fact lead from simple aesthetics to a unique expression of the designer. In this essay, the history and design of the Koshimaki Osen print will be explored, the designer of the print himself looked into and the reason why the print was created and what Japan was like in the 1960s, to understand how the context of Post-war Japan had affected the print's design.

Designed and made by graphic designer and artist Tadanori Yokoo in 1966, the print has clear pop-art and western influences, featuring the use of silkscreen printing, loud, brash colours and photomontages, yet still distinctively Japanese in design. Yokoo was born in Nishiwaki, Hyogo Prefecture of Japan in 1936. In his adolescence, he was exposed to traditional Japanese art and design when he was adopted into the Yokoo family. His adoptive father was a kimono-fabric wholesaler, whom Yokoo credits as one of his early experiences with designs that blended Japanese and Western motifs, which he describes in current context as "kitsch". Having lived through both old Japan and the rapid changes that the American occupation of Japan after World War 2 brought, Yokoo's works

strongly reflected his experiences. He was highly fascinated with popular art and comic books in the mid-1960s, reflecting in his works of that period. Collaging photographs and transposing traditional Japanese elements and aesthetics with pop art, Yokoo's recurring use of the Japanese rising sun motif, considered traditional and old-fashioned, combined with modern western elements and the use of silkscreen printing sets him apart from the current modernist movement, which was prevalent during the time. Yokoo was described to be an individualist, who separates art from design, where design was something generic and easily reproduced while art was a "unique expression of the individual". However, although modernist designs were common, art and design movements in 1960s Japan was influenced by the American occupation.

Japan in the sixties, due to the American Occupation, was a time of rapid changes: extraordinary economic expansion, unfamiliar constitutions and civil laws, and rapid urbanization. However, a large number of the Japanese population were unable to adjust with such numerous changes in such a short time and many art movements, including theatre, found refuge in the world of fantasy and folklore. Arts, literature music, photography and dance blossomed during this period. It was from here when angura theatres took root and grew in the 1960s. Angura theatres rebelled against their more traditional counterparts, such as the Kabuki and Noh theatres, and incorporated traditional Japanese aesthetics and practices with new western avant-garde influences. Angura theatres also have the practice of having male roles played by female performers. While in traditional practice there was a gender hierarchy where male and female roles were set by the

theatre's management, angura theatres has allowed performers to transcend above their conventional gender roles. Female performers playing male roles would cut their hair short and wear male outfits. However, they did not intend to look like real men. Female performers playing such roles would still wear make-up, such as lipstick and face paint (Anan). This practice was reflected in the print designed by Yokoo, whom, alike angura theatres, incorporated western influences into traditional Japanese design. The first eye-catching element has to be the two men seemingly arguing, printed using silkscreen printing techniques. While silkscreen printing originated from China, the technique, although adapted by Japan, was popularized in the 1960s by American Pop-artists such as Peter Blake and Andy Warhol. One of the man also had his lips painted by Yokoo, in reference to female performers playing the role of a male character, while the other was dressed in a western suit, complete with a bowler hat, an allusion to the westerners occupying Japan. While both performers were Japanese, the man in the western suit has his back turned, hiding his features from the audience, creating the illusion of a Japanese arguing with a westerner. Another eye-catching element has to be the title, made to resemble an American comic book's title. However, Yokoo also used visuals that are icons of Japanese culture. A representation of the Great Wave off Kanagawa, one of the most iconic Japanese ukiyo-e prints, hugs the borders of the bottom half of the print. The rising sun, another recurring motif frequently used by Yokoo, forms the background of the print, reminiscing the Imperial symbol of pre-war Japan and the Botan (peony) flower above one of the two men made to resemble the style of hanafuda playing cards. Yokoo's use of separate,

traditional, Japanese elements to symbolize his thoughts as an artist and designer has a profound effect on the design of the print.

The “ Koshimako Osen” print was steeped heavily in symbolism. The naked, flying women in garish pink pays homage to angura theatre’s frequent use of grotesque embodiments and abstractions of women, where authors of angura theatres were fond of shattering the taboos of traditional theatre and crossing boundaries between reality and fantasy. It was also reference to his past works, what Yokoo called the “ Pink girls” series (refer to appendix 1B and 2B), where he explained in an interview that it was his curiosity and interest in provocative and domineering women that led him to paint the series. The yellow trail emanating from the women’s privates, representing stench or urine, alludes once again to the use of erotic grotesque imagery and abstractions of angura theatres. The mouth with the tongue sticking out at the bottom left of the poster references the Japanese gesture of mocking someone. Yokoo could be using that to mock the authorities who frequently shut down angura theatres and their grotesque plays. The Shinkansen Train, another recurring motif in Yokoo’s works, represented Japan’s modernizing future. Launched in 1964, the Shinkansen train service signaled Japan’s return from the loss of World War 2, allowing rapid urbanization and connecting Tokyo to the rest of Japan. The symbolism of the Peach goes back into the Japanese folklore of Momotaro, a boy born from a peach who grew up to fight demons. Momotaro was adopted as an icon by the Empire of Japan during the Second World War, a propaganda tool to inspire their soldiers to fight the allied forces the way Momotaro fought demons. Yokoo’s use of the peach, representing the tragedy and loss of the imperial army in

post-war Japan, sits in direct contrast with Japan's symbol of modernization in front of it. Yokoo's use of such contrast clearly hints of his reaction towards the modernization that the American occupation of Japan brought, and this was also reflected in his design of the print. While the occupation has brought about technological advancements, economic growth and political restructuring, the population of Japan were suspicious of the Americans and the changes they brought. Many political and educational reformations were practically forced down onto the Japanese government and their people (Goodman), and the people rebelled. An example was the Zengakuran, a far-left student activist group being formed against the educational reforms the American occupation of Japan brought. Yet, Yokoo's work also showed his way of opposing nativism. In an interview with the Japan Times, Yokoo explained that Yukio Mishima, an author and friend of Yokoo, once told him one of the things they had in common was that they both sought to deny nativism, albeit in different ways. Yokoo opposed nativism through embracing it all, the use of art that are truly Japanese in design, juxtaposed against American pop-art like design, making it his own, and moving away from modernist design that were popular during the time.

Post-war Japan had a profound effect on the Koshimaki Osen print, as well as the avant-garde theatre of the 1960s. Yokoo had designed the print for the Jokyo Gekijo theatre as an advertisement, and had included references to the angura theatre's use of sexual content, western imagery and traditional Japanese motifs. Although it may seem as if post-war Japan and the American occupation had a direct influence on the design, Yokoo himself had input his own expressions, experiences and interpretations of symbolisms

when designing the print, taking into consideration his beliefs when incorporating objects and images from his childhood, references from Pre-war Japan, westernized objects of Post-war Japan, appropriating visuals both old and new. And in rejection of the current modernist trend that was prevalent during 1960s Japan, he created something new altogether.