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Munakata Shiko () (Biographical details)

Munakata Shiko () (printmaker; Japanese; Male; 1903 - 1975)

Also known as

Munakata Shiko

Biography

Print artist. The dominant figure in Japanese twentieth-century prints, and much the most celebrated internationally, Munakata is also the most thoroughly documented, both in his own extensive writings and in numerous studies, exhibitions, biographies and collections. Nevertheless, information on his early years up to 1933 (when he began to write regularly) is surprisingly patchy. This account is of necessity very selective but is drawn mainly from Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art (1985, chronology by Tsuchiya Etsuro) and 'Munakata Shiko hanga zenshu', XII, (1978-9, an eighty-page chronology). Munakata was also very active as a poet, writer on art, painter in both Western and Japanese techniques, calligrapher and book designer, but it is for his vast output of prints that he is at present most remembered.

Munakata was born in Aomori in northern Honshu, the sixth of fifteen children of a forger of steel blades. Leaving school at thirteen, he joined the family business, and moved to a lawyer's office in the Aomori District Court at seventeen, which gave him time to sketch. In 1921 he first saw reproductions of Van Gogh's works, which remained arguably his greatest inspiration throughout his life, and began to teach himself oil-painting. He moved to Tokyo in 1924, and lived by various means including drawing educational charts while continuing to paint and unsuccessfully to submit oil to the Teiten (Imperial Exhibition) until 1928 when he was first selected. He became inspired by woodblock prints after seeing Kawakami Sumio's 'Wind in Early Summer' at the Creative Print Association Exhibition, and by 1927 was experimenting with woodblocks. The following year he had his first prints accepted at the same exhibition and was introduced to Hiratsuka Un'ichi (q.v.) who gave him instruction and

encouragement. In 1930 he married for love Akajiro Chiya, a local girl in Aomori, but they had to live apart for some years until he could afford suitable accommodation in Tokyo. In 1931 he had his first one-man show of prints in Tokyo.

Munakata began to write in 'Han geijutsu' magazine in 1932, which brought him into contact with Maekawa Senpan and the folk style. The next year he had a whole number of the magazine to himself. About this time he came to know writers and poets such as Yasuda Yojuro and to design books for them. His first really characteristic black and white prints, 'Nohi' ('Moorland Fires', 1935), were rapidly followed by 'Kojiki' and 'Bandafu'. His meeting in 1936 with the Folk Art Movement 'guru' Yanagi Soetsu and his great potters Hamada Shoji and Kawai Kanjiro confirmed his confidence, and on a long visit to Kawai's house that year he developed a Buddhist dimension to add to his already strong folk and Shinto interests and subject-matter. 'Kegonpu' (1937) was the first of his Buddhist series. In 1939 he had the first of many exhibitions at the Mingeikan (Folk Art Museum) in Tokyo, which has a major collection of his works, and at Yanagi's suggestion began to experiment with colouring from the back of the paper. From 1943 he began to use the term 'board picture', rather than the more usual 'printed picture' (both romanised as 'hanga').

Munakata worked throughout the Pacific War, apparently little affected by censorship or shortages. He evacuated to Toyama Prefecture early in 1945. His house in Tokyo and almost all his blocks were destroyed in May, and he stayed on in Toyama until 1951. After the war he continued to work with enormous energy, beginning with 'In Praise of the Valley of the Bell' (1980, 1227, 01; December 1945). This he exhibited in São Paulo in 1951, which marks the beginning of his subsequent international career. In 1952 he joined in establishing the Nihon Hanga-in, often called Banga-in (Japanese Print Institute), which included Azechi Umetaro (1987, 0316, 0381; 1986, 0321, 094; 1986, 0321, 095) and Sasajima Kihei (1986, 0321, 0661). In 1952 he won a prize at Lugano, in 1955 the first prize for prints at the São Paulo Biennale, and in 1956 at the Venice Biennale. These made his reputation not only internationally but also at home, where he now became a celebrity and was subsequently heaped with honours culminating with the 'Kunsho' (Order of Merit) in 1970. In 1961 he received the old Buddhist title of 'Hokkyo' (Bridge of the Law) and in 1962 of 'Hogan' ('Eye of the Law'). Meanwhile, his visits to the USA and Europe in 1959 to lecture and attend his exhibitions marked the beginning of his late international period, and were followed by many more. The prints of these years were colourful and joyous and no less prolific than in earlier years, triggered especially by his commission in 1963 to produce a 'Tokaido' series (1981, 0730, 012). In 1972 he visited India; in 1974 he was taken ill on his last trip to the USA and Canada and died the following year. The Munakata Memorial Museum in Aomori opened the day after his funeral. There is also a museum devoted to his prints in Kamakura, while large collections of his works are in the Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art, the Folk Art Museum, Tokyo, and the Ohara Museum Complex in Kurashiki.

Munakata had no formal pupils, but his influence on style was considerable, especially on Azechi, Sasajima, Kanamori (1987, 0316, 0100) and on the younger generation artist Akiyama Iwao (b.1921), Kida Yasuhiko (1989, 0203, 07) and Matsubara Naoko (1980, 1224, 01). His pioneering of large-scale and multi-sheet compositions influenced even Mori (1986, 0321, 0494; 1986, 0321, 0485; 1987, 0316, 0179; 1987, 0316, 0428) and Watanabe (1987, 0316, 0346; 1987, 0316, 0453).

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