

Representing Hirohito in Wartime: The Art of Arthur Szyk

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By Tony McNicol

Sodei Rinjiro interviewed by Tony McNicol.

When Professor Sodei Rinjiro submitted his book on caricaturist and illustrator Arthur Szyk to his Hosei University publishers, he received an apologetic but unequivocal rejection: “It is well written, nothing wrong with the content, but we can’t print the pictures.” The problem was several war-time caricatures of the late Emperor Hirohito that Sodei had provided from his personal collection. “I am sure they were afraid of right-wingers.”

Illustrator and caricaturist Szyk, a Polish Jew born in 1894, fled Nazism for America in 1940. There he applied his considerable talent to war propaganda – so successfully that the American press often described him as a “one man army” against fascism.

A 2002 exhibition of Szyk’s work at the United

States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington sparked a revival of interest in the artist in the US and Europe, but until a recent Foreign Correspondent Club exhibition, Szyk was virtually unknown in Japan. Many of the cartoons from Sodei’s personal collection were displayed at the FCCJ in Tokyo throughout July and August. The images accompanying this article are courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Museum.

Some of Szyk’s cartoons show the Emperor or military figures wearing Nazi insignia, standing shoulder to shoulder with Hitler and Mussolini. His hate-filled, sometimes monkey-like, caricatures of the Japanese enemy ruthlessly employ the racist imagery of the time. Nevertheless, Sodei believes that it is important for Japanese people, particularly young people, to learn how they were seen during the Second World War. He describes the cartoons as “strong medicine”; an antidote to historical amnesia.

Why do you want Japanese people to see Szyk’s cartoons?

First of all it is great art. That’s one thing. If it was

mediocre, I wouldn't care. That painting of Hitler is a masterpiece. Anyone who sees that picture feels that Hitler was a demon. Szyk started as a miniaturist, the detail is very very good; superb art, not only a cartoon.

"Anti-Christ" 1942
(<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/szyk/wartime/93866.htm>)

I thought that since Japanese people have never seen cartoons of the Emperor or of military leaders, why not show them to my own people? Here is the ugly side of our leaders and the Emperor. Of course it is a war-time caricature, but I think that the Japanese people should see that. Then they will understand how Japan was viewed by others.

Colliers Cover 1942
(<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/szyk/wartime/93825.htm>)

Many people have asked me why a Japanese person is interested in Szyk. But I believe that Japanese should see this. Japanese people, particularly young people, don't know about the war. It was a war of aggression, which Japan as a whole should be sorry for. This is exactly what the Chinese saw when they were attacked by Japanese soldiers. Maybe just showing these pictures will give some strong medicine to the Japanese people.

How did you first encounter Szyk's cartoons?

My original encounter with Szyk was in 1975 in New York. That was the year the late Emperor made his first and only visit to the United States. I was shown a rather small painting of Emperor Hirohito, a first rate caricature.

Whenever I went to America, I always picked up one or two of Szyk's works. I could afford them then, now I can't.

What did you feel when you saw that first caricature of the Emperor?

I wished a Japanese artist had done it, but it would have been impossible during the war – the artist would have been executed. It taught me to look at the war from another angle. I had never seen the Emperor ridiculed before.

During and before the war the Emperor was a god; you were not supposed to ridicule or to caricature him. So I had never seen anything like it. After the war, MacArthur didn't like caricatures of the Emperor. He wanted to keep him for his use . . . to occupy Japan. So again, we were not allowed to see such cartoons.

"The Son of Heaven" 1945
(<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/szyk/wartime/93865.htm>)

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Szyk drew more cartoons of the Emperor than Tojo. Is that surprising in light of US government policy of not attacking Hirohito?

Even during the war, the American government's policy was to retain the Emperor as a symbolic figure. But I don't think ordinary Americans bought the idea. They thought that the Emperor was behind the military operation, and they were right. Szyk drew the Emperor, but that was not necessarily the government line. He just sensed that the public was against the Emperor.

I only have one picture of Tojo by Szyk – it doesn't look like Tojo. He wasn't particularly interested. Tojo wasn't as strong or as colorful a figure as Hitler or Mussolini. The Emperor was different, he was rather interesting.

What happened to the Japanese cartoonists after the war?

The war cartoonists were well-established artists because the army selected the best artists. After the war GHQ didn't punish any cartoonists. All of them switched to working for democracy; the same as journalists, magazine editors and film-makers.

The occupation was one of the best times for

them – they could criticize anyone. As long as they didn't criticize GHQ they had a great time. They never admitted having drawn war propaganda leaflets. The leaflets were anonymous and people could only make guesses from the style. One notorious example is Matsushita Ichio. After the war he became an ordinary cartoonist. His erotic Samurai manga was very popular.

Now political cartoons in Japan are rather weak. Pressure from the government was strong before and during the war, and the occupation authorities also suppressed satirical cartoons about themselves. After the war, political cartoons became an empty art.

Even now, satire is very weak in Japan. They are just funny pictures about politicians. There is not much sense of satire, no strong sense of attack or ridicule. They always play it safe. The editors are afraid of complaints from the government. Actually the aim of political cartoons should be to raise hell.

Two months ago, I introduced Arthur Szyk's cartoons for the first time in this country at a meeting of the Japan Cartoonists' Association. They were shocked. "This is real manga," they said.

How close is your book on Szyk to being published?

It took 20 years to write the book. When I finished it last year, my publisher refused it, saying "it is well written, nothing wrong with the content, but we can't print the pictures." Right-wingers will come and harass the publisher.

My publisher is Hosei University Press. They are an academic publisher, so I thought that they would have enough guts . . . but I am sure they are afraid of right-wingers.

Are you disturbed by the racism and hatred so evident in Szyk's cartoons of Japanese?

I think Szyk had enough reason for hate, because his mother was burnt alive in the death camps. Many of his people were killed. He had enough reason to be hateful toward Nazis and their

allies, the Japanese.

That's why I say it is strong medicine. It might anger, might agitate, younger people. But then dialogue can start.

"He Who Rules by the Sword" 1943
(<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/szyk/intro/hitler.htm#93705>)

Sodei Rinjiro, Professor Emeritus at Hosei University, is the author of "Two Thousands Days of MacArthur" and "Dear General MacArthur, Letters from the Japanese During the American Occupation." Freelance journalist Tony McNicol recently wrote about Japanese political cartoons for the Japan Media Review. This article was written for Japan Focus and published on November 3, 2005.