

Cartoons for Peace: The Global Art of Satire

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War is tragedy. Bigtime.

Destruction of lives, livelihoods, families, homes, hopes, dreams.

All the things that peace nurtures.

War is so extreme — so irrevocable, so unthinkable — that the very seriousness of militarism invites its exaggeration into pure farce. Satirists and cartoonists are our public disbelievers, anarchic enough to wrestle war’s horror into absurdity, allowing us to confront our worst fears with a dash of wry disbelief, an edgy insistence that another reality is possible, that we have a choice.

Peace has been characterized as a global language, a world apart from the vernacular martial lexicon of bombs, bullets, barbed wire, guided missiles and murderous explosions. Humor too is universal; can be communicated even without words.

Last year, Prof. Yoshitomi Yasuo, head of Japan’s only Department of Cartoon Art (at Kyoto Seika University), invited cartoonists around the world

to “Draw for Peace” as the theme of the 7th bi-annual Kyoto International Cartoon Exhibition. More than 400 responded, sending over a thousand submissions from countries in Europe (especially the former Eastern Bloc), North and South America, Asia, the Middle East. Their challenge: to transcend tired clichés, to make fresh, creatively subversive statements. No text, just images. Dreamed up, hand-drawn; mailed to Kyoto.

The show was held in September 2006, at Kyoto’s Municipal Museum of Art Annex, a vast, well-lit gallery in a trendy, bustling quarter close by the glitzy Museum of Modern Art. But how does a cutting-edge collection of world-class lampoonery — evolved mostly among cultures with a formidable heritage of anti-authoritarian satire — come to be assembled in Japan, currently world-renowned for its poignantly vacant-eyed commercial *manga* characters, and its ubiquitous and overwhelmingly saccharine-cute cartoon-graphic celebrities like Hello Kitty? Well, that’s a long story, which can perhaps be outlined briefly as follows:

Yoshitomi Yasuo was born in 1938. In his high-school years, during the hard times immediately

following the “Pacific War,” he spent three years in bed, battling TB. His ambition had been to become an orchestra conductor, but during his illness he read widely — including manga — and discovered a new direction for his life. On entering Kyoto City University of Arts he asked to join the cartoon department. The professors laughed at him; there was no such course. Cartoons, they said, were not art. “But Picasso is a cartoonist,” he protested. “Joan Miro is a cartoonist, Francisco Goya is a cartoonist!” His professors jeered again, made him study design. He vowed he would create a place where cartoons were treated, well, *seriously*

In the fabled ‘60s, Japanese students joined the Revolution, rejected the career-track production-line model of education, hit the streets, shut down the national universities. (Many were inspired by manga). Some set about creating their own idealized institution, based on academic and intellectual freedom, autonomy, internationalism: Kyoto Seika University opened in 1968. (Seika may be translated as something like “quintessence”). Yoshitomi signed on. In 1972, after a grueling series of faculty meetings, he finally gained approval (Seika emphasized democratic debate) for setting up a Cartoon Department. Every day of the next academic year, he invited mass media in, to build the department’s profile and challenge his students’ motivation.

Today, Seika’s Cartoon Art Department is part of

a unique Faculty of Manga, which in 2006 produced the world’s first Doctor of Cartoon Art, Chung In Kyung. Needless to say, Yoshitomi-sensei himself is a superb cartoonist, and he has gathered a very talented crew of teaching colleagues. Students also benefit from working with a guest professor — currently British cartoonist Martin Honeysett, formerly a regular contributor to *Punch* and *Private Eye* (see interview by Kathy Sokol, online (<http://www.kyotojournal.org/interviews/honeysett.html>)).

The Kyoto International Cartoon Exhibition, which Yoshitomi-sensei founded (or commenced conducting) in 1996, exposes Seika students every two years to role models from all over the world, and gives them a wider perspective on the role of cartooning (the 2000 show debuted in the UN headquarters in New York). It creates a priceless accumulation of teaching material, since all submissions remain in the department. And it educates the Japanese general public, revealing that cartoons thrive worldwide as a vital form of expression (serving to “ridicule, inform, and entertain”), and demonstrating beyond all doubt that cartooning is indeed a fine art.

Essentially, Japan needs more cartoonists. For the past 34 years, Yoshitomi Yasuo has been working on that, too.



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In November 2006, in a joint project with Kyoto City, Kyoto Seika University opened the Kyoto International Manga Museum, occupying the former Tatsuike Elementary School building, in central downtown Kyoto. As both a museum and a research library, it displays and archives a vast historical collection of approximately 200,000 volumes, dating from the very first Meiji period manga magazine, Eshinbun Nipponchi, published in 1874, to the present day. By 2008, the archive is planned to expand to 300,000 items. It includes of course cartoons; among them, works from previous Kyoto International Cartoon Exhibitions (<http://www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/kyotomm/>)

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