

THE
WOODBLOCK
AND THE
ARTIST



The Life and Work of Shiko Munakata

Edited by SORI YANAGI

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KODANSHA INTERNATIONAL
Tokyo • New York • London

This volume has been published in a soft-cover edition to coincide with the exhibition *Shikō Munakata: Master of the Wood-block* held at the Hayward Gallery, London as part of the UK Japan Festival 1991.

The Divine Printmaker by Sōri Yanagi, *Shikō Munakata* by Sōetsu Yanagi, *Learning from Munakata* by Shōji Hamada, and *Munakata and his Work* by Kanjirō Kawai were translated from the Japanese by John Bester.

NOTE: For design purposes Shikō Munakata appears without a macron on the jacket and title page only.

Frontispiece is *December: Two Tombstones and the Chinese Symbols of the Four Directions*.

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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Japanese ukiyo-e prints, and artists such as Hokusai, Hiroshige, and Utamaro, have been known to a wide international audience since the nineteenth century, and examples of these colourful works can be found in numerous public and private collections in the West. For many people, in fact, ukiyo-e would seem to be virtually all that Japanese art has to offer. But Japanese printmaking did not end with the deaths of the ukiyo-e artists. Shikō Munakata, for instance, is an outstanding example of a modern artist whose work, while differing radically from these earlier prints, is rooted firmly in the woodblock tradition. Yet, though he was awarded every major international prize in his lifetime and traveled extensively abroad in connection with his work, no anthology of his prints has appeared in English for well over thirty years.

Munakata, the son of a poor blacksmith, was born in 1903 in Aomori, Japan's snow country. After finishing elementary school, he worked briefly at his father's forge before taking up employment as a magistrate's clerk. Filled with a passion for art since his childhood, he went to Tokyo in 1928 after deciding to become a professional oil painter. There, however, he had only a limited success with his painting, and he soon began producing woodblock prints under the guidance of the creative print artist Un'ichi Hiratsuka. Through his prints, he met Sōetsu Yanagi, founder of the Japan Folk Crafts Museum (Nippon Mingeikan) in 1936. The folk crafts (*Mingei*) movement had a tremendous influence on his career both economically — for Yanagi purchased most of Munakata's output during the pre-war years — and aesthetically.

After the war, his reputation spread rapidly both at home and abroad, where he took major prizes at international exhibitions in Lugano (1952), São Paulo (1955), and Venice (1956). Americans, in particular, liked Munakata's work, and he was invited on a number of occasions by organizations like the Rockefeller Foundation, the Smithsonian Institution, and the New York branch of the Japan Society to give lectures and hold exhibitions in the United States. During his visits he also made appearances on American network television, supervised the opening of a Munakata Gallery in New

York (1959), and fascinated the American public with his work. It is a credit to Munakata as an artist that in 1969 CBS commissioned him to paint three sets of ink moons to be presented to the three Apollo 2 astronauts with prayers for a safe journey to the moon and back.

In Japan, Munakata continued to produce prints at a prolific rate while struggling with illness and blindness in his left eye. Aomori Prefecture made him its first 'Honorary Citizen', and the Japanese government awarded him the Order of Cultural Merit in 1970. In September 1975, Munakata died at the age of seventy-two of liver cancer.

Munakata's prints show a wide range of influences, both Japanese and Western. In Japanese art, he loved the screen paintings of the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1568–1600), the Zen sculpture of Enkū, the ink paintings, of Ike no Taiga, and of course, the work of his fellow artists in the *Mingei* movement. In Western art, he admired Van Gogh above all, but also Toulouse-Lautrec, Matisse, and the German expressionists. Often, his inspiration came from poetry, religion, or music. Munakata was, in his own unconventional way, a deeply religious man. The Shintō rituals and festivals with which he grew up fascinated him throughout his life. Later, through his friend Kawai, he came under the strong influence of Zen Buddhism and also embraced the aesthetic theories of Sōetsu, whose *Mingei* ideas suited both his temperament and his style.

This publication brings together a number of essays on Munakata which until now have been unavailable in English. The essay by Sōetsu Yanagi was written in 1936, the year he first saw Munakata's prints, and there are two pieces by his fellow *Mingei* artists Shōji Hamada and Kanjiro Kawai. These writings about the woodblock and the artist all prepare the reader for Munakata's own comments about his personal philosophy as an artist. They have been rendered into English by the eminent translator, John Bester. We have also included an essay by Oliver Statler, renowned as an authority on Japanese prints, which has long been unavailable. Pat Gilmour has contributed a helpful note on Munakata as a printmaker, besides compiling the entries that accompany the illustrations.

This book is being published to coincide with a Munakata Exhibition held at the Hayward Gallery, London. Many of the prints included here were selected by Ms Joanna Drew, director of the same gallery.

I am also grateful to Mrs Machiko Moriyasu, Mr Paul Hulbert, and their colleagues at Kodansha International for all their editorial support.

I would also like to thank Mrs Teiko Utsumi and Mr Junichi Sasaki for their help and encouragement, without which this project would never have been possible.

I hope that this book will reinforce the continuing enthusiasm in the West for the artistic genius of Shikō Munakata.

Sōri Yanagi

Director, Japan Folk Crafts Museum

THE DIVINE PRINTMAKER

Sōri Yanagi

Suddenly, the tranquil atmosphere seemed to quiver with distant reverberations. Listening carefully, I heard what sounded like the bellowing of a wild beast. But as the cries approached and the volume increased, they revealed themselves as a human voice, a voice charged with extraordinary excitement and emotion.

It was in 1936 that Shikō Munakata thus visited us for the first time. He was then just over 33, twelve years older than myself. All kinds of people came calling on my father, Sōetsu Yanagi, in those days, but the man who had descended on us that day was different: utterly different, though I couldn't have said how. My father and his friends would refer to him as 'the bear cub'; in my own mind, I labelled him 'the ball of energy.'

He was extremely unsophisticated, in some ways more like a newborn babe. Just as a baby goes red-faced when it cries, so Munakata's face was always red with an excess of excitement or emotion; it was as though he had retained into adulthood the innocence of infancy. He would often embrace others, men and women alike, in an outburst of emotion, but there was nothing stagey about the gesture — nor, of course, anything in the least offensive. If anything, the effect was of a pleasing spontaneity.

Born though he was into the midst of modern civilization, he had something of the pure, untamed quality of primitive man. His acquaintance included many intellectuals, but whoever he was dealing with he maintained the same unpolished exterior, expressing what he felt with utter frankness.

My father was one of those who recognized his ability and gave him steady encouragement at a time when he still laboured under lack of general recognition and extreme poverty. Sōetsu's basic philosophy — "beauty can only be born where concepts of beauty and ugliness do not exist; only by transcending nagging intellectual awareness can one create true beauty" — provided, in fact, an ideal intellectual backing for the creative process in Munakata.

A story is told how once, at an exhibition, Munakata halted in front of one of his own works and exclaimed admiringly, in a loud voice, "Terrific! Terrific!" When a bystander reminded him that he himself was the artist, he

retorted, “No — this was made by God; I disclaim all responsibility!” In talking of God here, he was almost certainly referring to the Buddha to whom, in my father’s philosophy, the artist should submit himself unquestioningly — in short, that state of intellectual unawareness, that absence of any intrusive self, that represents a supreme ideal in Buddhism.

Munakata was fearsomely shortsighted. In carving a block for a print, he would bring his face almost into contact with the wood and keep it there until, in one uninterrupted burst of activity, he had finished the job. There was no question, thus, of taking leisurely account of the composition as a whole as he worked. Even in cases where he made a preliminary sketch, in practice it might never have existed, for he seemed to ignore it almost completely, letting the movements of the knife lead him on as he worked. The impression on the casual observer was slapdash in the extreme; yet the very desperation with which he threw himself into carving the wood created an astonishingly robust sense of energy. So myopic that he could see nothing but the section of a picture that he was working on, he flung himself body and soul into filling with carving, at a frantic speed, the space that presented itself. As a result, he tends to run out of room, and at times has to foreshorten heads, or bend arms and legs, in order to get everything in. He sweeps on, moreover, with the force of an angry tide, so that one feels he is thrusting space aside as he goes, a fact which enhances the interest and creates a formidable sense of power.

Shikō Munakata was utterly indifferent to the fashions and ‘isms’ of the modern age in which he lived. Possessing as he did a feeling for the most basic forms of beauty, akin to that of primitive art, his work can, paradoxically, strike the present as innovative, though one can also see his prints as possessing a beauty that transcends such questions of old or new.

I remember calling one day at his home. Hailing me in a loud voice from within, he came out into the entrance hall. He had probably been doing a preliminary drawing for a print, for he appeared with a brush still dripping Chinese ink held between his teeth. He had jet black ink all around his mouth. His kimono was smudged with black where he had apparently wiped his hands on it. His face, on the other hand, was bright red with excitement, so that he had the forbidding presence of some wrathful Buddhist guardian god. The impression, though, was only momentary; the next instant, the angry god had turned into the familiar smiling Buddha. It is the Munakata of that day who rises to mind every time I see one of his pictures.

(Tokyo, March 25, 1991)

SHIKŌ MUNAKATA

Oliver Statler

“I advise the layman to spread India ink on an uncarved board, lay paper on top of it, and print it. He will get a black print, but the result is not the blackness of ink, it is the blackness of prints.

“Now the object is to give this print greater life and greater power by carving its surface. Whatever I carve I compare with an uncarved print and ask myself, ‘Which has more beauty, more strength, more depth, more magnitude, more movement, and more tranquillity?’

“If there is anything here that is inferior to an uncarved block, then I have not created my print. I have lost to the board.”

This is Shikō Munakata speaking, in his book called *On Woodblock Prints*. Here the man regarded by most Japanese as their greatest contemporary print artist sets down his ideas on the technique and philosophy of prints, and urges the reader to try his own hand. “The beginner can start with children’s tools,” he says, “a very inexpensive set of four or five chisels. But, of course, these are not for the professional.” The fact is that Munakata always used children’s tools himself. “It’s true,” he admits. “I like them better. I’d probably cut myself with professional tools, but children’s tools break first. Professional tools have to be sharpened after you buy them, but cheap ones come already sharpened. I can use them until they’re dull, and then throw them away like chopsticks. Anyway, they’re appropriate for me: I never went beyond elementary school.”

It was in the city of Aomori, on the northern tip of Japan’s main island of Honshū, that Munakata received his limited formal education. He was born there in 1903, the third son of a blacksmith, an old-fashioned man who sired an old-fashioned brood, six boys and six girls.

The family belonged to the Zen sect of Buddhism, but it was dominated by the spirit of Shintō. The elder Munakata was a craftsman in the old tradition, and he kindled his forge with a sense of ancient ritual. Hundreds of years before, it had been quite clear that the natural processes were controlled by the nature gods. A man who possessed the mysteries of a craft — whether building a house, brewing saké, or making a sword — was nothing less than a priest with power over those gods. When the primeval smith

invoked the spirits of the forge, his Shintō rituals embodied the one right way to make a sword. Now we have dispensed with the gods and call it science, but for centuries, in Langdon Warner's words, the right way was the religious way.

The old forms die out, and Munakata's father was not called priest, but he felt toward his forge as priest to altar. Ritualistic cleanliness was observed there: only on rare occasions were women allowed in his shop, and no farmer ever set foot there with shoes that might have been soiled by manure.

The day that Munakata finished elementary school he went to work with his father. "I was not bad at hammering," he remembers, "but at anything more demanding I was a failure, and much of the time I was used to run errands." When his father retired, Munakata and an older brother took over, but the older son was increasingly fascinated by the new vehicles that were making their appearance in Aomori, and, like many blacksmith shops all over the world, theirs evolved into a garage. It was quite evident that Munakata would never make a mechanic, and at eighteen, through a lawyer friend of his father's, he became a clerk in the local court.

His pay there was six yen a month, or three dollars at the rate of exchange of that time, and all of it went into the family coffers. However, he discovered that out-of-town lawyers would tip him for serving tea, and this money he kept to buy painting materials. For by then he was determined to be an artist.

"I think perhaps it's in my blood," he says. "There was another artist in the family four generations ago. As a youngster I loved to draw, and I spent hours watching the kite-makers, for on every kite they painted a thrilling picture of a samurai warrior. There were also the movie posters; every time the show changed I went around to study the new advertisements. Those were my influences, and my painting showed it: Kabuki-style warriors and photographic likenesses of movie actors in samurai roles. I never could draw a city fellow with slicked-down hair."

By the time he was a courthouse attendant, his tastes were more sophisticated. A friend recalls that he always carried a little case containing *sumi* (India ink) and brush, the versatile team which the Japanese use for both writing and painting. For a sketchbook, he economized with the kind of fat account pad made for saké stores. "When he spotted an attractive girl," this friend continues, "he would follow her down the street, peering at her near-sightedly, and making quick sketches. There were no models in Aomori then, and I don't suppose Munakata could have afforded one if there had been."

Munakata also liked to go on more orthodox sketching trips with a friend of his own age named Manshi Matsuki. Today both are artists of note, but then one of their major problems was how to get enough pigments to paint with. Their adviser was Kihachirō Shimosawa, slightly older and with enormous prestige derived from the fact that he had already made the break to Tokyo (he only came home occasionally to get money). "He was considered a promising young painter," says Munakata, "and I was very envious of him. With a broad-brimmed hat and a long topcoat, he looked an artist, and he had easel and colours to prove it. Matsuki and I used to wonder how long