

**NEW DESIGN**

series editor: **Edward M. Gomez**

# TOKYO

**THE EDGE OF GRAPHIC DESIGN**

ROCKPORT

ROCKPORT  
PUBLISHERS

# NEW DESIGN: TOKYO

series editor: **Edward M. Gomez**  
associate editor: **Setsuko Noguchi**

GLoucester MASSACHUSETTS

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I also thank my literary agent, Lew Grimes, for his energy and vision, and, at Rockport Publishers, editors Alexandra Bahl and Shawna Mullen, and art director Lynne Havighurst, for their keen attention and important contributions to the assembling of this volume and the development of the entire *New Design* series.

Most of all, on behalf of everyone involved in the production of *New Design: Tokyo*, I thank the many cooperative, thoughtful, and enthusiastic graphic designers who kindly have shared their work and their ideas with us, and who have allowed us to reproduce them in these pages.

—Edward M. Gomez

## A note about names

In Japan, a person's surname is written before his or her given name. However, for easier understanding, in this book Japanese names are written in the Western manner, with each designer's first name followed by his or her family name.





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Rolling with the punches despite a late-1990s downturn, the unexpected antithesis of the previous decade's economic boom, Tokyo is still one of the richest financial centers on the planet, the hyperactive media capital of Japan, and, incomparably, one of the most fascinating cities in the world. It is towards this irresistible energy center that specialists in all areas of visual communications have gravitated. And it is from Tokyo that some of the most original and compelling posters, packaging, logotypes and advertising imagery anywhere have emerged to make their way into local—and international—markets and to make their marks in the global village's ever more complex visual culture.

More than a century ago, European artists' eyes were opened to the uniqueness of the Japanese visual language when the likes of the Impressionists and, later, of the painter and poster artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec discovered the then odd-looking perspectives and refined technical qualities of Japanese woodblock prints by Hiroshige, Hokusai, and other *ukiyo-e* masters. They skillfully adapted

aspects of this art into their own. Among their borrowings: bold outlines, flat expanses of bright color, and the vertical placement of words. (In the original prints, these were calligraphic or typeset *kanji*, the adopted Chinese ideographs with which the Japanese language, in part, is written).

So flourished the modern Western artist-designer's ongoing love affair with the Eastern aesthetic, and especially with the strong and distinctive Japanese design sensibility that can be seen in everything from exquisitely crafted, fifteenth-century tea bowls to the innovative comic-book layouts of Astro Boy creator Osamu Tezuka and the sleek lines of that miniaturized marvel, the Sony Walkman.

In the 1980s, from the West, the Apple Macintosh personal computer came to Japan. Eventually, as the Mac became the most common creative-productive instrument in



Natural Sonic 2 CD

ART DIRECTOR/DESIGNERS: Junichi Tsunoda



Mami Yamase CD Booklet

ART DIRECTOR: Yasutaka Kato

PHOTOGRAPHY: Koh Hosokawa

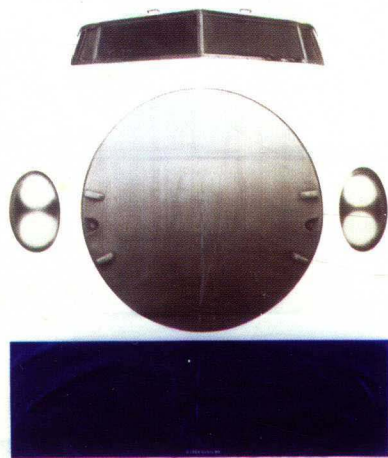


the publishing and visual-communications fields, and abundant foreign-language software and a Japanese-based operating system became available, Japan's graphic designers embraced this powerful new tool. Still, although graphic design's technology today may have become more or less standardized, what Japanese designers do with it and bring to it may differ considerably, aesthetically speaking, from their Western counterparts' handling of the same resources.

Therein lies one of the most interesting and, for some observers, confounding aspects of Japanese graphic design. As the French structuralist critic Roland Barthes wrote in his classic collection of essays, *Empire of Signs* (1970), based on his experiences in Japan, in much of what a foreign visitor encounters there in the daunting visual clutter of advertising, neon signs, costumes, and packaging, not to mention in everyday gestures and social customs, looks can be deceiving. Barthes and

Turbine-brand bag

CREATIVE DIRECTOR: Gabi Ito



*Laforet poster*

ART DIRECTOR/DESIGNER: Katsunori Aoki  
 CREATIVE DIRECTORS: Katsunori  
 Aoki, Ichiro Tanida  
 COMPUTER GRAPHICS: Ichiro Tanida



*Laforet poster*

ART DIRECTOR: Katsunori Aoki  
 CREATIVE DIRECTORS: Katsunori Aoki,  
 Ichiro Tanida, Yasuhiko Sakura  
 DESIGNERS: Katsunori Aoki,  
 Seiji Kubo  
 COMPUTER GRAPHICS: Ichiro Tanida

other postmodernist semioticians who have had a field day examining Japan have noted that many a poster, slogan, or product that a Western viewer believes he “understands” may actually mean something completely different to its intended Japanese audience.

With this in mind, the ubiquitous presence of European or American models in everything from bank-loan brochures to TV commercials for cars, fashion, and skiing vacations, may have less to do with “imitating” the look of Western advertising than with Japan’s on-going debate in which what comes from the West is perceived as modern or progressive. (More precisely, too, Western cultural imports, from punk hairdos to Bruce Springsteen records, Levi’s, and even mass-produced, New England-style clapboard houses, offer, on a symbolic level, means of escape from group-oriented Japanese society’s conformity-minded pressures.)

Still, there are times when buxom, futuristic robot girls like those in designer Katsunori Aoki’s posters, who wield the space guns they’ll use to hunt down bargains at Tokyo’s Laforet fashion emporium, really are about



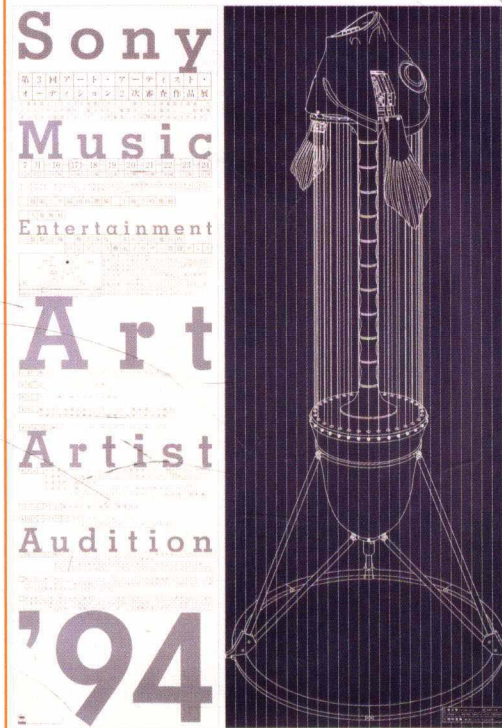
Poster for CBS/Sony-sponsored  
art exhibition  
DESIGNER: Norio Nakamura

wacky, exuberant, sexy fun and not about a winking, self-conscious sense of irony masquerading as amusing irreverence. Likewise, some foreign observers may never fully grasp or appreciate the Japanese penchant for the *kawaii* (cute), which pops up all the time in stuffed animals—dangling from keychains, decorating store windows, sitting on bank-teller counters—and in corporate character logos and in beloved *manga* (comic book) heroes of all kinds. What a Western visitor may regard as super-kitsch, the Japanese, on a sub-conscious level, may respond to as symbols of sweet, adolescent freedom.

In modern societies, though, artists have been the odd men—or women—out. Thus, many of Tokyo's most interesting graphic designers, by the very nature of their activity, to some degree avoid becoming trapped by Japanese society's restrictive norms. Ichiro Higashiizumi, Hitoshi Nagasawa, Norio Nakamura, and many others featured in this volume, for example, operate one-person or similarly small studios, and through their work for clients in the music, fashion, and magazine-publishing industries, where an expansive

sense of creativity and individuality prevails, have been able to maintain and project an independent image. Others may work in larger design firms or in the in-house design departments of publishing or record companies, but on the strength of their work become known for a singular style or artistic vision. Yasutaka Kato, now of Ghost Ranch Studio, started out this way years ago at Sony Records.

Most of Tokyo's young designers are well-versed in the particular vernacular of Japanese pop, the visual expression, in commercials, posters, merchandising, and art, of the nation's voracious popular culture. This is a force that devours and assimilates a constant influx of source material that is as astounding in its



scope as it is in its output; it takes in and grinds up, for example, everything from Kentucky Fried Chicken and up-to-the-minute computer jargon to traditional Japanese ballads and wildly colored Hawaiian shirts. (Typically, someone like Higashiizumi, noting what had gone into some of his work, once wrote: "Grained textures. Walls. Daily life. Fantasies. Spring. A ringing in my ears.... The substance of so-called purity. Science. I have discharged what had been bothering me these days...")

In graphic-design form, Japanese pop coughs up a melange of psychedelic swirls, sixties pop-art colors, space-age retro curves and bubbles, goofy-cute cartoon characters, and, as in Hideyuki Tanaka's work for Frame Graphics Co., Ltd., some funny, funky type treatments, too. (Remarkably, Tokyo graphic designers work not only with two phonetic alphabets, *hiragana* and *katakana*, but also with *kanji* to write in Japanese; they must also routinely handle Roman letters to spell out headlines and text in English and other Western languages.)



DESIGNER/ILLUSTRATOR: Hideyuki Tanaka





Other designers, like the venerable Seiju Toda, go their own way in crafting their designs, giving new meaning and resonance to such standard media as the advertising poster, an enduring form of communication to which generations of Japanese artists have contributed so much. Toda began his career in the in-house advertising section of Takashimaya, the national department-store chain; his poster compositions, many of which employ photos of abstract, sculptural forms, can appear quite mysterious. Sometimes offering a stunning sense of the fantastic and the futuristic, as do his posters for a store called Vivre 21, they conjure up a mood more than they deliver a hard sell. Similarly, young Madoka Iwabuchi's magazine layouts, which display an intelligent absorption of the late-1990s, post-David Carson era's fondness for a distressed look in a deconstructionist mode,



*Vivre 21 poster*  
DESIGNER: Seiju Toda