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STYLE

Tradition blends with modern art

By Hunter Drohojowska

The presence and influence of Japanese art in Los Angeles is often discussed in abstract terms — we see its impact in the design of food, fashion and architecture. But what about the statistics? Is there really much input from the Japanese aesthetic? According to sources at the Japanese American Cultural Community Center, 200,000 Japanese or people of Japanese descent live in L.A. and Orange counties.

And a look at the newspaper listings of last weekend revealed a surprising number of contemporary art galleries showing work by Japanese artists or by those of Japanese descent.

An exhibit of Shoichi Ida's works on paper titled "Surface Is the Between," from 1976 to 1986, continues at the Herbert Palmer Gallery; a show of Minoru Nizuma's stone carved sculpture just closed at the Mekler Gallery; Minoru Ohira's recent works in sculpture and assemblage are being exhibited at L.A. Artcore; the Long Beach Museum of Art has an exhibition titled "Japan/America" with works by Japanese-born artists living in America, including Kyoko Asano, Mineko Grimmer, Keiko Kasai, Hirokazu Kosaka, Masayuki Oda, Mayumi Oda, Minoru Ohira and Masami Teraoka, as well as photographs of L.A. architecture by Richard Yutaka Fukuhara; the Japanese American Cultural Community Center just closed an exhibition of ceramics by artists of Japanese descent and others whose work was influenced by Japan. Indeed, Isamu Noguchi, one of the best-known Japanese-American artists, was born in L.A. and designed the sculpture plaza at the entrance to the JACCC.

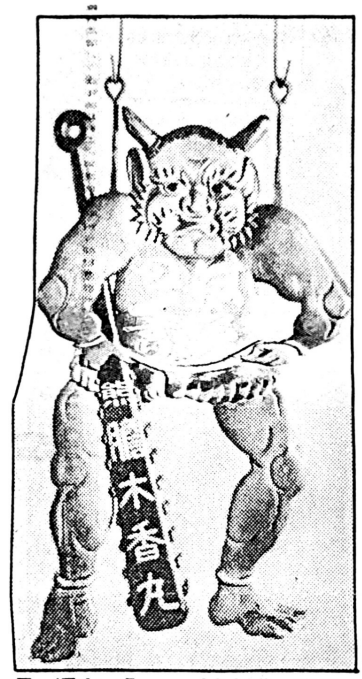
In addition, there are galleries that regularly show contemporary Japanese art, such as the April Sgro-Riddle, Jessica Darraby, Space and Shinno galleries, as well as countless vendors of traditional Japanese art. The art of old Japan can be seen on a regular basis at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, where the

Art

Continued from page E-1

Harari collection is now on view, or at the L.A. County Museum of Art, where an already sizable collection was enlarged recently by the gift from Joe Price of hundreds of Edo period paintings. Other museums in the area regularly host exhibitions of Japanese art, such as "Tokyo: Form and Spirit," which opens Sept. 1 at the L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art.

Obviously, there is an audience for Japanese art whether it bears the marks of ancient traditions or represents history as interpreted by a young artist living in Los Angeles today. There is something about the spare, uncluttered vision of Japanese artists that appeals to our sensibility. More than 50,000 visitors came to a preview of Price's Edo



The "Tokyo: Form and Spirit" exhibition includes this Edo-period pharmacy sign.

paintings at LACMA last spring, and the same number attended the museum's show of 15th- to 18th-century Japanese ink painting in 1985. Yet some 220,000 attended "The Shogun Age," the 1984 exhibition that combined artifacts of the Tokugawa family's elaborate style, such as armor, swords, kimonos and tea utensils, with works of art.

The greater popularity of that show no doubt reflects a growing fascination with the Japanese way of life as reflected in samurai movies and such best-selling novels as James Clavell's "Shogun." The Japanese government does nothing to discourage West Coast enthusiasm for things Japanese. Considering that the good residents of this city were rounding up innocent Japanese, some of them American citizens, just 45 years ago, confiscating their property and interning them at work camps, the Japanese have been pretty good sports. Their industries regularly underwrite expensive goodwill exhibitions that travel to the U.S. In fact, rare objects often come here that have not been exhibited to the public in Japan. That island nation is nothing if not conscious of the value of good public relations.

It also seems true that the Western appreciation for Japanese art has influenced the way the Japanese see themselves. In the mid-19th century, prominent American scholars encouraged the Japanese to keep their traditional arts when the Westernization of the Meiji era began.

Today, a Japanese may feel as estranged as a foreigner when surrounded by the old ways. Nonetheless, reverence is maintained.

Art dealer Sgro-Riddle represents both contemporary Japanese artists and Westerners who work in a Japanese style. "The focus of the gallery is cultural pollination, an East-West synthesis of a brand new aesthetic, an art movement all by itself. L.A. will be the focus because we have the connection with the Far East, while the European art is based in New York."

Artist Daniel Kelly does Zen-influenced abstraction and commutes between New York and Kyoto; Sarah Brayer lives in Kyoto and makes prints of genre scenes in the style of the Impressionists. Curtis Nishiyama works from the images of computer graphics, and Shingo Honda makes pastel abstractions.

"I think it's really a twofold thing, the East and West as opposites are attracted. Each is searching for something missing in their own culture," says Sgro-Riddle. "The spiritual roots, the oneness with nature, is attractive to complicated, hectic Western artists. For the Japanese, wanting to maintain the industrial wealth they've acquired since the war, they look to us as an example, they want to acquire a sense of the aesthetic that we have here.

"We're now seeing another wave of internationalism coming out of Japan. Many are losing their overt traditional symbolism. They are integrating the Americanization of Japan into their art, though their spiritual and social foundations are intact."

The list of artists who have been influenced by Japan since the 19th-century discoveries of James Abbott McNeill Whistler — his use of space owes a debt to the *ukiyo-e* or woodblock prints — would be the size of a book. They'd include most of the French Impressionists; many of the early American painters, like Georgia O'Keeffe and Arthur Dove; abstract expressionists, such as Sam Francis and Franz Kline; and contemporary artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

In L.A. alone, it seems that the influence is incalculable. Tom Marioni, who is not Japanese, demonstrates the country's influence on his work with a series of Tokonomas — miniature installations in the style of traditional Japanese home display areas — now at the Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery.

Art dealer Darraby represents contemporary Japanese ceramic sculptors Hideyuki Hiyashi, Kosho Ito and Satoru Hoshino, and printmakers Kansuke Morioka, Atsuko Musashi and Junji Amano. She has been able to sell the work to private and corporate collectors, as well as to museums, and she has been open for less than two years. She explains that the popularity of Japanese art is simply because it is "unlike what is being done by Western printmakers or ceramic sculptors."

"The aesthetic is focused on process, which is true of all things Japanese," Darraby adds. "So there is a very high level of quality control. These successful contemporary artists are bridging the gap between what we think of as traditonal Japanese art, like *ukiyo-e* prints, with a Japan that is in transition, flavored with the old but covered with neon.

"Instead of Judeo-Christian iconography, the Japanese artist refers to Shintoism and Buddhism, which

affect the focus on nature, on internal values. In view of the acceptance of the American public of mind-expanding philosophies, maybe such art is appealing to them."

Maybe. Whether it's the interest in Eastern religion, the delight in Japan's exotic ambiance, a love of their history and tradition, or a disgust with the more literal strains of contemporary Western art, there is no doubt about it. Japanese art is here to stay.

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.