

The Rediscovery of Ernst Hacker

In the immediate post-war period an extraordinary relationship was forged between Ernst Hacker, an American printmaker, and his Japanese counterparts. Their story is told in an exhibition of occupation art donated to the British Museum. **Lawrence Smith.**



The years 1939 to 1952 were grim for the people of Japan. In 1939, Japan was already engaged in a major aggressive war in China; the start of the Pacific War in December 1941 put the country on a total war-footing, and all artists, writers, musicians and entertainers were required to contribute to the totalitarian state's propaganda machine. The defeat in August 1945 saw urban Japan devastated and starving. The subsequent peace was no doubt a relief to many ordinary Japanese, but nearly seven years of military occupation by the USA and its allies was hard indeed for a nation which had only a few years earlier dominated much of Asia and the Pacific.

One of the few men able to express this feeling, in subtle defiance of American censorship, was the great print-artist Onchi Koshiro (1891–1955). In the portfolio calendar for 1949 for the Fujisawa Pharmaceutical Company, Onchi contributed three woodblock prints, all previously issued in 1947 as single sheets. All now had Japanese-language texts which reflect with melancholy on Japan's present and recent situations. One – 'Dusk in Ginza' (*Ginza no Tasogare*) – shows the heads of two women with conspicuously large noses and red 'permanently-waved' hair below the neon-lit façade of the Tokyo PX, the postal centre and general store for the allied occupiers, situated in a commandeered department store in central Tokyo. Native Japanese were not allowed to enter, even though, ironically enough,

Left and right (detail): Onchi Koshiro, 'Dusk in Ginza' (*Ginza no tasogare-doki*), from the *Fujisawa mokuhan karenda* (Fujisawa Woodblock Print Calendar for 1949), 1947.



many Japanese goods were sold there, including woodblock prints and porcelain. Onchi's text concludes thus:

'Probably everybody would like to wash away their hateful memories with speed. The narrow pavements make our shoulders rub together. Through this congestion tall Americans stride. Already there is something like magnificence here, but the truth is that Japan is occupied. There is no need for us to wait for dusk, for people have lost sight of themselves already.'

Onchi had, since 1939, been the acknowledged leader of the most important group of independent print-artists. Born into the family of a tutor to the Imperial household, he began early to live the life of a Western-style Bohemian artist, but with the crucial difference that he was from an early age able to make a handsome living from book-designing. His relative wealth, large Westernised house in the Tokyo suburb of Suginami-ku and cosmopolitan attitudes all led to his hosting the monthly gatherings of print-artists called The First Thursday Society. They began with just Onchi, his fellow woodblock print-artist Yamaguchi Gen (1896–1976) and the younger intaglio artist Sekino Jun'ichiro (1914–88). All three were to become major players in the runaway success of Japanese contemporary prints later in the post-Occupation era. Sekino adopted woodblock printing under the influence of the older men, and his portrait of Onchi done in 1943 is a most memorable image of the master. During the bleak wartime years, the number of artists at these meetings grew to around fifteen. They were oases of sanity in a fast-collapsing



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city, and they continued to be so after the defeat. In 1944 Sekino proposed that the Society should produce a portfolio for private distribution among the members; in spite of the deteriorating war situation, the scarcity of resources and the bombing of Tokyo, this came out in September 1944. Thirteen members each contributed a woodblock print, including the above-mentioned portrait of Onchi by Sekino, and a vivid but nostalgic semi-abstract design by Onchi called 'Window Open to the Sea'. Under the draconian censorship of Japanese militarism, the artists learned to be oblique, as in this example. The subsequent Occupation censorship was arguably milder, but it did prohibit subjects which must have been uppermost in many minds, namely the Occupation itself and ways of expressing Japanese national identity. Hence, when five more portfolios (called First Thursday Collections) were produced in the years 1946–50, they too were all dominated by an obliqueness which now seems to characterise the art of the period.

The Tokyo collector and scholar Robert Vergez first arrived in Japan in late 1946. In the 1970s and '80s he made an extensive collection of the prints and designer-books of Onchi, then being re-evaluated, and these were all purchased by the British Museum in the years 1987–9. Vergez had been particularly interested in the First Thursday Society, including in his holdings a number of separated sheets from the portfolios. Thus it was that the present author came to know, through the limited literature on the subject, the names of three Americans who had contributed to the second First Thursday Collection issued in May 1946, only eight months after Japan's defeat. They were Ernst Hacker, Alonzo Freeman and John Sheppard, all of whom seemed to have disappeared subsequently from history. It was therefore a matter of some excitement when in Spring 1994 the dealer Izzy Goldman approached the British Museum's Department of Japanese Antiquities with the news that Ernst Hacker's widow, Lucia Vernarelli, had



Opposite page: Sekino Jun'ichiro, 'Portrait of Onchi Koshiro' (*Onchi Koshiro zu*), from the first First Thursday Collection, 1944.

Clockwise from left: Munakata Shiko, 'Over the Mountain' (*Yamagoe*), from the series 'Print Volume of the Horn-billed Puffin' (*Uto hanga-kan*), 1938; Onchi Koshiro, 'After the Bath (Tokyo)' from the portfolio 'Woman's Customs in Japan' (*Nihon jozoku-sen*), 1946. Onchi Koshiro, 'Window Open to the Sea' (*Umi no mieru mado*), from the first First Thursday Collection, 1944.



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some prints by, among others, Onchi and Munakata Shiko (1903–75) which she was considering offering to the British Museum. The material was readily accepted, and given in December 1994. It included most of Hacker's own set of the 1946 'First Thursday Collection', many prints by Onchi, and six by Munakata, later to be acclaimed as one of Japan's greatest 20th-century artists, which are particularly rare because virtually all the artist's stock of carved blocks had been destroyed in an air-raid on Tokyo in April 1945. Further photographs and correspondence with the Onchi family found in Hacker's Florence apartment made it possible for the first time since 1946 to reconstruct the story which is the main subject of the current exhibition.

It is clear that in the uncertainty of December 1945 Onchi and the Japanese Print Association of which he was chairman, had no idea how to proceed. Yet by March 1946 there is every indication of a revival of confidence and ambition among the artists in Onchi's circle. There is much evidence from the Hacker archive that some, perhaps much, of this can be attributed to the impact of Hacker himself after he arrived in Tokyo in the early Spring of that year.

Ernst Hacker (1917–87) was born of Jewish parents in Vienna. He trained as an engineer and as an artist and designer, and some of his early wood engravings vividly depict the atrocities he saw when the Nazis took over in Austria. He fled in 1938 to New York, where he was later drafted into the army. He was posted to Tokyo where he was attached to a design office servicing the main newsreel for the occupying forces. His work gave him a freedom to fraternise with native Japanese forbidden to ordinary servicemen. In a short time he was in touch with Onchi and was visiting his house together with two artistic colleagues, Freeman and Sheppard. A remarkable photograph shows Hacker as guest of honour at an exhibition of

'Japanese Prints during the Allied Occupation, 1945–52', is in rooms 92–94 from 4 September to 1 December 2002. The accompanying catalogue by Lawrence Smith, published by BMP, is £35.

contemporary art, with many prints now in the British Museum collection visible on the walls. Among them is Onchi's vibrant 'After the Bath', of which he gave a superb trial-proof to Hacker.

These seemingly innocuous events were, in fact, momentous for Onchi, his family and colleagues. Amid such dire uncertainties, the visits of friendly American artists must have been an unexpected salvation, and there was an immediate rapport between Onchi and Hacker. Onchi's son Kunio taught the three Americans the techniques of Japanese woodblock printing and they were able to exhibit at the first postwar show of the Japanese Print Association – an important public statement of artistic cooperation. At that show, Onchi exhibited his 'Impressionist Portrait of E.H.', which shows characteristic insight into Hacker's troubled psyche.

It is clear from Hacker's photographs and from his correspondence that he was an important factor in the surge in confidence of Japanese print-makers which developed in the Spring of 1946. The appreciation of American connoisseurs was perhaps the most significant element in that process, and it continued and grew unabated up to and beyond the publication of Oliver Statler's hugely influential 1956 book *Modern Japanese Prints – An Art Reborn*. Statler first saw contemporary Japanese woodblock prints in Yokohama in 1947. The emergence of the Hacker archive has shown that it was Hacker himself who set that process in motion.

Lawrence Smith, former Keeper of the Department of Japanese Antiquities

Above left: Ernst Hacker as guest of honour at a print exhibition at the Tanrokudo Gallery, Yurakucho Tokyo, 1946. Unknown photographer.

Below: Onchi Koshiro, 'Impressionist Portrait of E. H.' (Ernst Hacker) (*E. H. insho zu*), 1946.

