

The world of the Japanese Woodblock Print

Week 7 Paul Jacoulet The woodblock artist

U3A 25 August 2025 Michael Harrington

Week 7 outline

Week 6 review

Travels across the Japanese empire: Korea,
China and Manchuria

Travels in Japan

Becoming a woodblock artist

Establishing a studio

Butterflies in Jacoulet's art



Cactus. Mer du Sud (Cactus. South Seas) 1941



Les Papillons "Tropiques". (Butterflies of the Tropics) 1939



Sketches Celebes 1935

Review 1921-1928

- Takes job in French Embassy as secretary and interpreter after father's death.
- Busy social life and interest in Japanese arts, esp kabuki, gidayuu, *uki-yo-e*
- Mother is away in France for 7 years, returning from France married to a young Japanese doctor. The couple moves to Korea and provides Jacoulet with financial support until her death in 1940.
- 1923 Tokyo Earthquake is life-changing event.

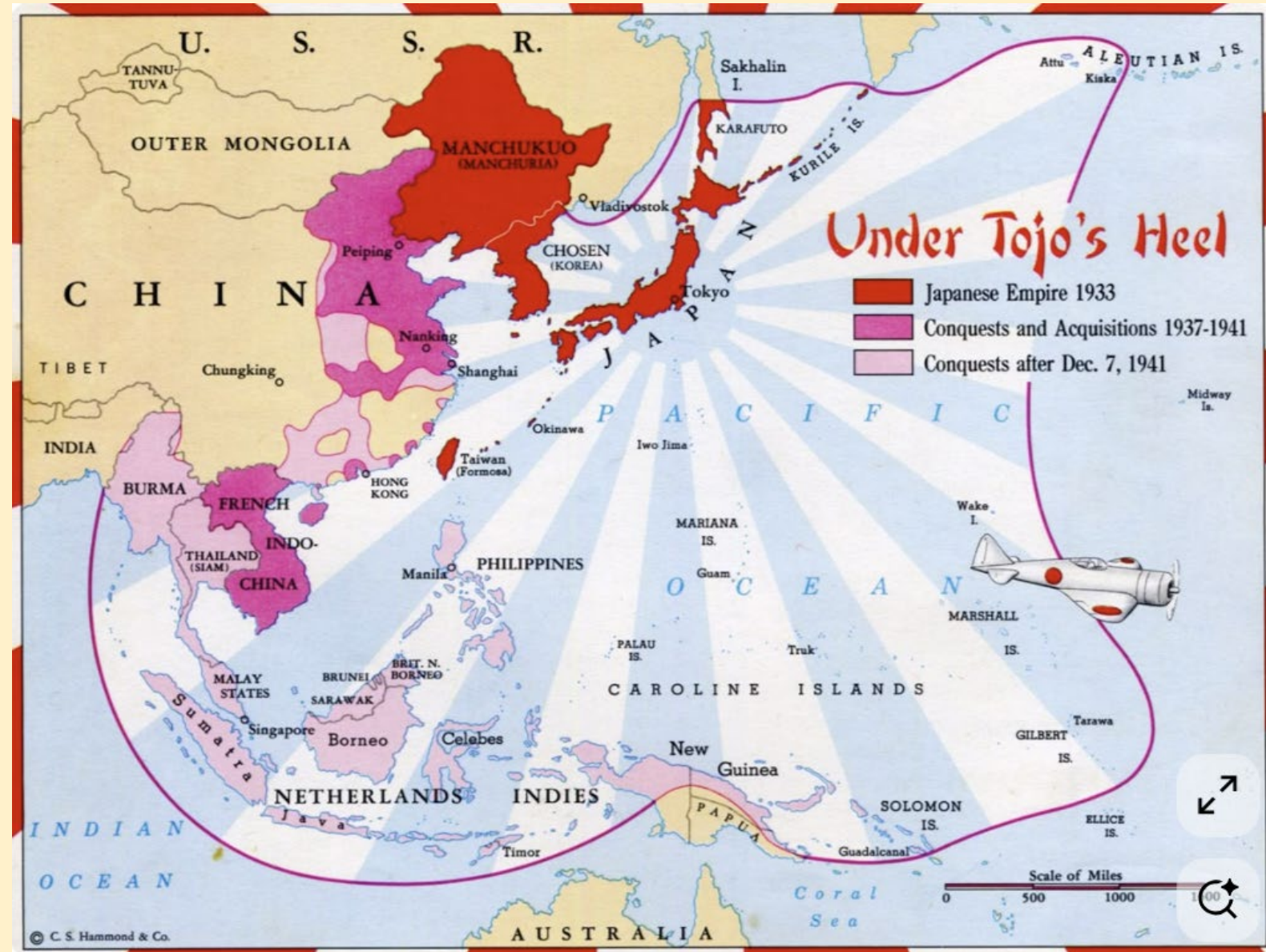
Review South Sea travels (1929-1935)

- Travelled around Micronesia from 1929-1932
- One of the few Westerners to visit Micronesia. Produced a record of peoples, customs and cultural, most lost.
- Meets Louis Rah, who along with his brother Jean-Baptise becomes lifelong assistants to Jacoulet in Japan. Late in life Jacoulet adopts a daughter of Jean-Baptise, Therese Inagaki currently living in Tokyo.

Jacoulet's 1930s Travels beyond the South Seas

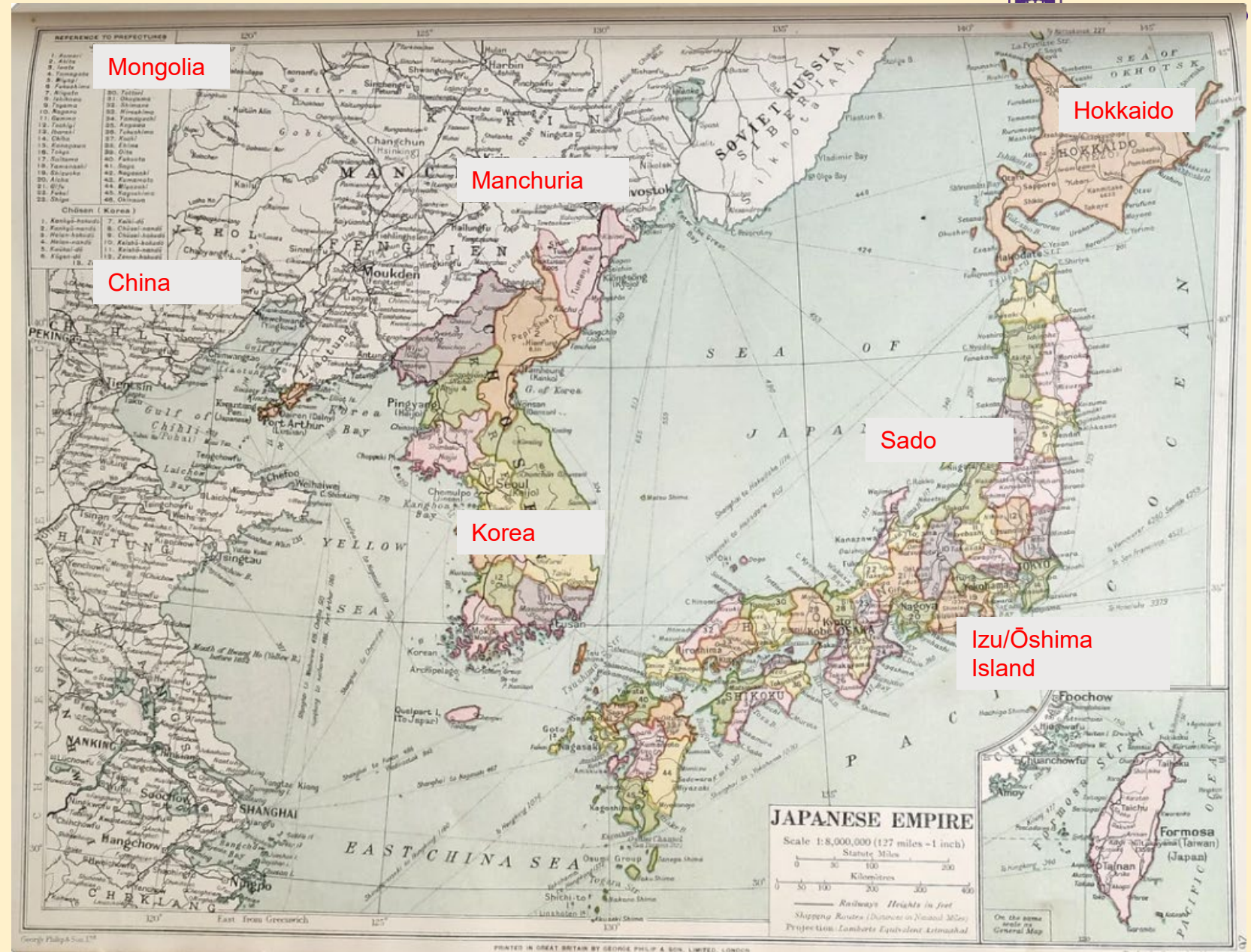
In addition to the South Sea islands, Jacoulet visited Korea, Manchukuo (Manchuria), and China/Mongolia - then under Japanese control (1930s) - as well as parts of Japan.

Japanese Empire (1933-1944)



<https://au.pinterest.com/pin/3096293487456121/>

Jacoulet's travels in the 1930s Japanese empire.



https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/1l4nqla/the_japanese_empire_in_the_early_1930s/

Korea

Frequent visits after 1929; Korean subjects recur across late-1930s–1940 prints



Jo-hoku-ri, Corée 1939

melon).



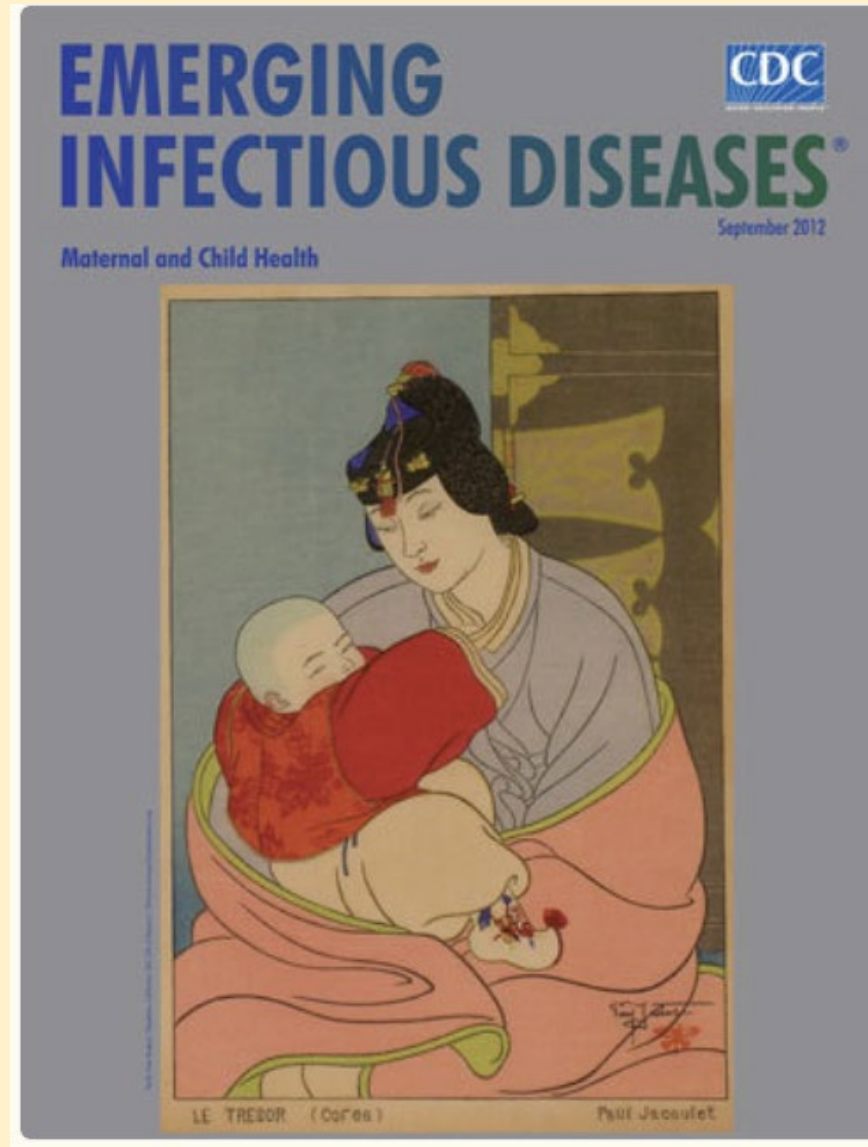
"La Lettre du fils demande d'argent (The son's letter, or request for money)." Seoul, Corée" 1938



"The Treasure. Korea (Le Trésor.)." Corée 1940



<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3437699/>





Paul Jacoulet (1902–1960) *Le Trésor (Corée)* Japan, 20th century Ink and paper (overall 23.5 cm × 30.2 cm; image 14.6 cm × 9.8 cm; card 14.6 cm × 9.8 cm) Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California, USA, Gift of Eleanor L. Gilmore www.pacificasiamuseum.org

Riddle in Nine Syllables

Polyxeni Potter

“An elephant, a ponderous house / A melon strolling on two tendrils” is how Sylvia Plath described herself in “Metaphors.” In addressing her physical condition, the poet was acknowledging the psychological toll of changes to the female body during pregnancy, which she termed “a riddle in nine syllables.” The immensity of these changes has long preoccupied artists too, while the public health implications were left to physicians and others concerned with maternal and child health.

It was along these lines that artist Paul Jacoulet addressed the theme of maternity in *Le Trésor (Corée)* (The Treasure [Korea]), on this month’s cover: maternity as a stage of life. Like Japanese master printer and painter of women Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806), a formative influence, Jacoulet was interested in mother and child as a special population, depicting them in their daily activities as persons with individuality and character.

Author affiliation: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/14752875-1809-AC1809>

Jacoulet was born in Paris, a frail child, “like a damaged little worm,” ill with chronic bronchial problems. His family moved to Japan when he was very young. He grew up in Tokyo firmly grounded in Japanese culture, multilingual, with early training in music, dance, drama, and calligraphy. But art prevailed. “Almost before I spoke, I was glad to have a pencil in my hand.” He started to paint at age 11 under artist Seiki Kuroda (1883–1924), who taught Western art theories to the Japanese. Jacoulet grew up next door to *ukiyo-e* authority Yone Noguchi, father of sculptor Isamu Noguchi. Isamu’s mother, American writer Léonie Gilmour, taught Jacoulet English.

An avid student of *ukiyo-e*, the woodblock print genre, Jacoulet quickly mastered and abandoned it for a style, uniquely his own, which combined exacting technique and Japanese brushwork with Western influences (Paul Gauguin, Édouard Manet, Henri Matisse) from his frequent trips to Paris and from a personal approach to line drawing and color use. Jacoulet was an innovator. He introduced embossing for added texture and enriched his prints with colored micas, crushed pearls, lacquers, and silver, gold,

and bronze metallic pigments for a shimmering sensuous effect.

“The woodcut colorprint is like music,” Jacoulet believed, “Without harmony among painter, engraver, and printer, it is impossible to produce a fine picture.” He engaged only distinguished carvers and printers and stamped their names on the margins of prints. He established the Jacoulet Institute of Prints and published nearly all his work himself, resisting massive production of copies. He brought only the best watermarked paper and boasted using as many as 300 blocks for one print. He produced thousands of drawings and water colors, many now lost; 166 color woodblock prints survive.

Instead of the usual young and beautiful theater performers and courtesans of traditional *ukiyo-e*, Jacoulet’s work featured the aging and weak whose faces he observed and recorded in sketches and photographs during his many travels, widely throughout Japan, China, Mongolia, and the South Pacific Islands. Of special interest were the indigenous people of these areas and the Western residents of Japan, where he lived and worked most of his life. A confirmed naturalist, he collected specimens and painted disappearing wildlife and small villages overrun by modern civilization, becoming at times the only chronicler of island populations now extinct. In this way, his work was imbued effortlessly with the exoticism so sought after on the Western art scene.

“I am the greatest artist,” Jacoulet wrote to collectors in the 1950s, seeking acceptance and recognition. His unconventional approach to painting and printing and unusual choices of subject matter did not make him popular. “I am anxious and rather down, very discouraged,” he wrote to friends who tried to expose his work to a broader audience. By then, the once described “best looking young man in Tokyo,” took to appearing in public with his face powdered and lips tinted with rouge, perhaps to correct a sallow complexion brought on by illness.

Le Trésor is from a series on Korean subjects. Jacoulet visited Korea frequently after the death of his father during War World II, when his mother moved there to live with her new husband, a Japanese physician. In addition to all manner of local characters, from scholars and the wealthy to common workers and beggars, he covered in this series of prints mothers with their children, a subject common in European as well as Japanese art. *Le Trésor* sold more than 300 copies.

The mother’s face is common but clearly focused, the tassel on her headpiece undone, exaggerating her downward look and leading the viewer to the center of the picture. Her body envelops the child, fluid circular lines making a nest for the red bundle. This tender, private moment is sparingly drawn, accented only with the bold vest and decorated

footwear of the child, whose little hand is reaching inside the mother’s neckline.

Mother and child, one of the oldest and most frequent subjects in the history of art, draws on the universality of the complex psychological experience of having and being a mother. By the 19th century, religious and romanticized images of maternity gave way to a more down to earth approach, though the notion of mother as vessel without much control persisted. Like many artists of his generation, Jacoulet explored the uniqueness of the experience by capturing facets of maternity in the floating world, just as, in her own way, looking inward, Sylvia Plath examined changes in the context of a riddle.

Maternal and child health, its own riddle intertwined with pregnancy, features also in disease emergence because special populations, pregnant women among them, and their response to emergence are key to successful disease prevention and control. Jacoulet did not know and Sylvia Plath could only sense the physical hazards involved in being a vessel. The genetically foreign fetus challenges a woman’s core defense against disease, the immune system, which has to make changes if the pregnancy is to succeed. These changes, not well understood, may alter susceptibility to and severity of certain infectious diseases (toxoplasmosis, listeriosis, malaria, measles) and could increase death rates from others, such as influenza and varicella. Hepatitis E virus infections continue to cause a disproportionate number of deaths among pregnant women in developing countries, despite the availability of vaccines. These and other still unknown health threats add meaning to the poet’s lament. “I’m a mean, a stage, a cow in calf. / I’ve eaten a bag of green apples, / Boarded the train there’s no getting off.”

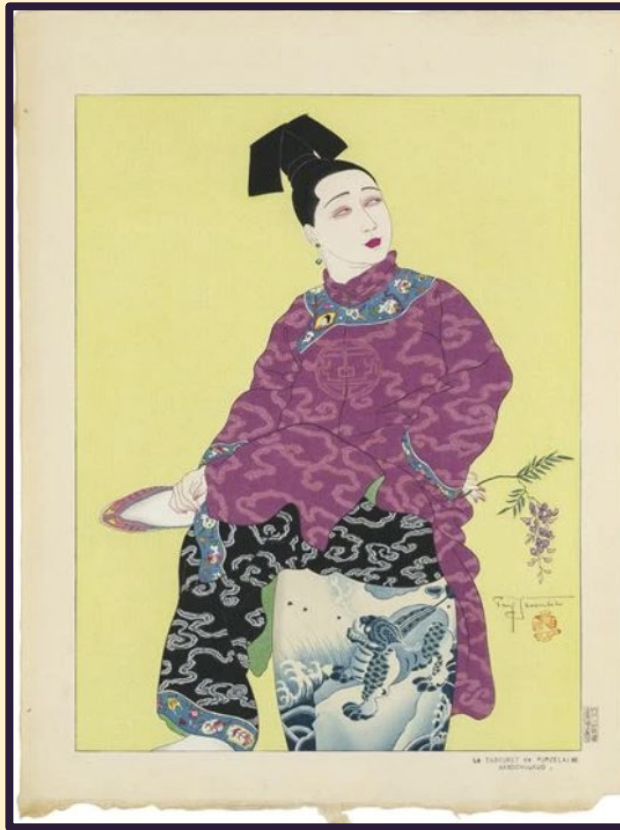
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2. Labrique AB, Sikder SS, Krain LJ, West KP Jr, Christian P, Rashid M, et al. Hepatitis E, a vaccine-preventable cause of maternal deaths. *Emerg Infect Dis.* 2012;18:1401–4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid1809.120241>
3. Metaphors [cited 2012 Jun 6]. <http://www.poemhunter.com/best-poems/sylvia-plath/metaphors/>
4. Miles R. The prints of Paul Jacoulet. Pasadena (CA): Pacific Asia Museum; 1982.
5. Paul Jacoulet’s vision of Micronesia [cited 2012 Jun 9]. <http://www.uog.edu/dynamicdata/CLASSIsiaCenterJacouletVision.aspx?siteid=1&p=545>
6. Souvenirs of modern Asia [cited 2012 Jun 30]. <http://exhibits.uffib.uff.edu/jacoulet/letter4.html>

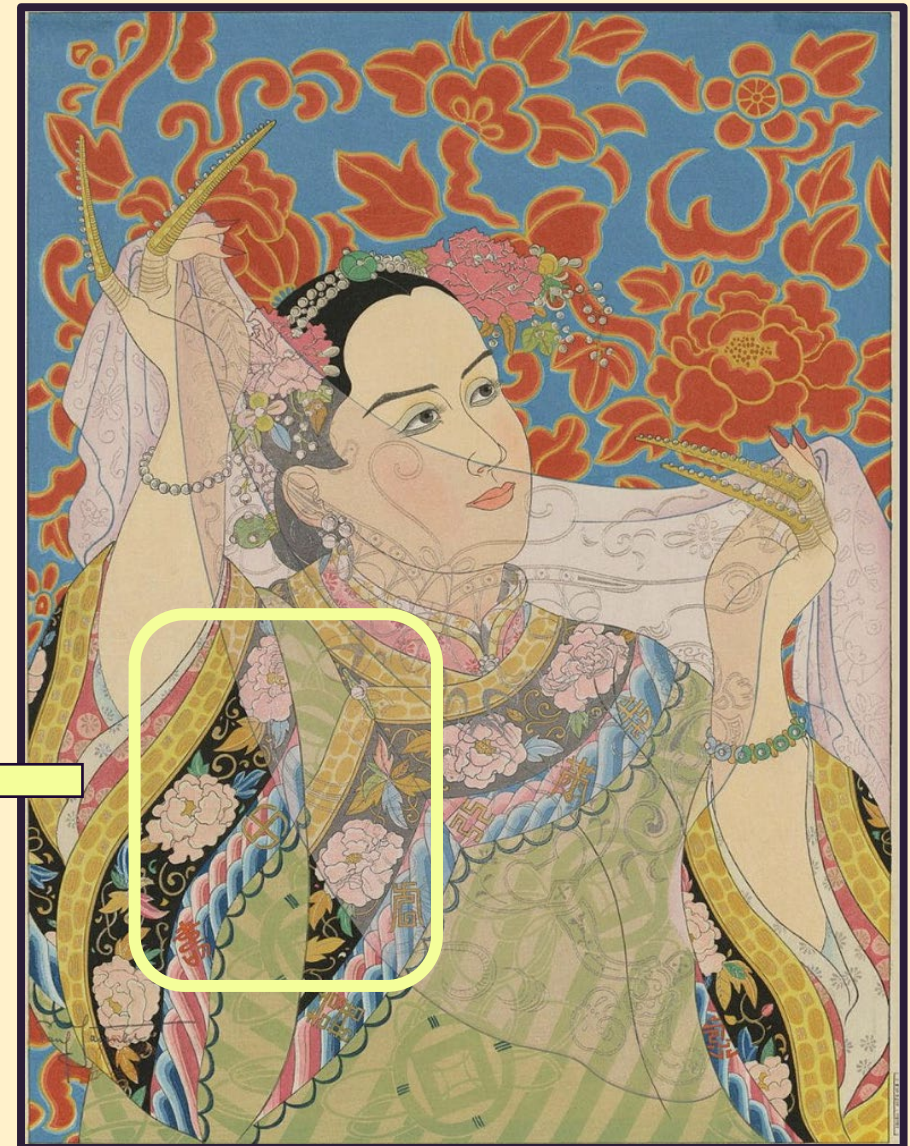
Address for correspondence: Polyxeni Potter, EID Journal, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1600 Clifton Rd NE, Mailstop D61, Atlanta, GA 30333, USA; email: pmp1@cdc.gov

Manchukuo / Manchuria

Court costume and luxury finishes
used to project dignity and status



“Le tabouret de porcelaine, Mandchoukuo
(The Porcelain Garden Seat),” 1936



“Les Perles, Mandchoukuo
(The Pearls),” 1940

China & Mongolia

Prints evoke imperial splendor and everyday life.



“Le Chant de Fileuses. Mongolie (The Song of the Seamstresses. Mongolia)”



L'Etoile de Gobi, Mongole
(The star of Gobi, Mongolia) 1951



“Les Joueurs. Chinois (The Gamblers. Chinese)” 1941

Across Japan: Izu, Kyoto, Sado and Hokkaidō

Ainu Portraits, Hokkaidō

**Series of Ainu portraits
reflect field visits and close
study of textiles**

High ethnographic value



'Old Ainu Man, Chikabumi,
Hokkaido' (1950)



'Old Ainu Lady, Chikabumi,
Hokkaido' (1950)

Izu & Ōshima Island

Domestic scenes complement ethnographic portraits beyond Hokkaidō



Fleurs d'Hiver - Oshima, Japon
(Winter Flowers - Oshima, Japan)



Le phare de Mikomoto (Mikimoto
Lighthouse) Shimoda, Izu (1954)



Les deux frères (The two brothers).
Izu. Japon (1936)

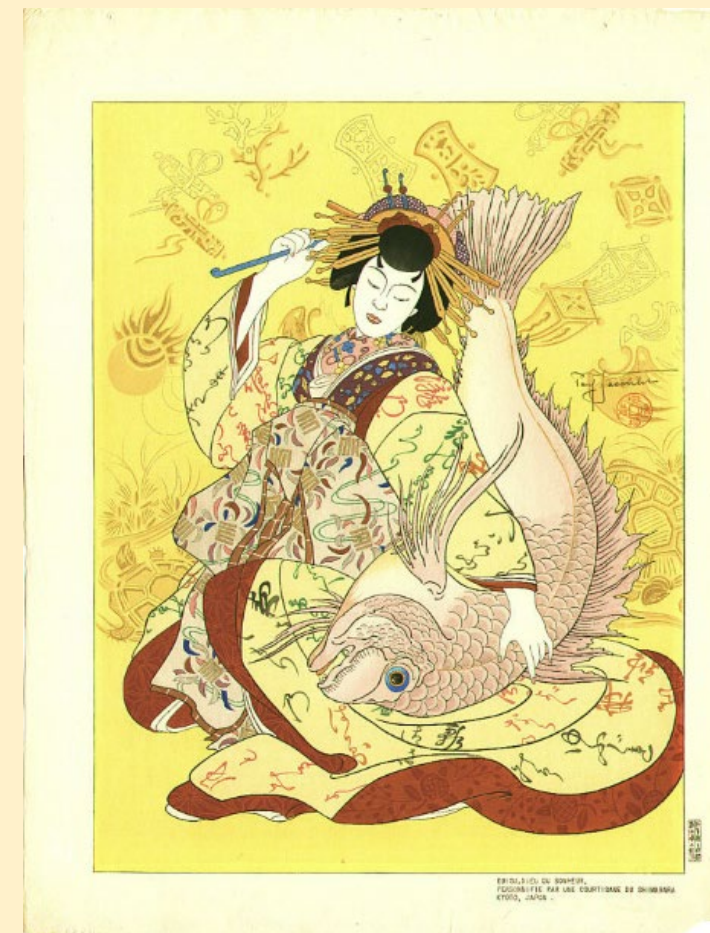
Others



Le Dieu Vivant (The Living God), Nagano Japan 1952*



Danses D'Okesa (Dance of Okesa), Sado, Japon Date: 1952



"Ebisu, Dieu du Bonheur Personnifié par une Courtisane du Shimabara. Kyoto, Japon"
(Ebisu, the God of Good Luck, Personified by a courtesan of Shimabara. Kyoto, Japan)
1952



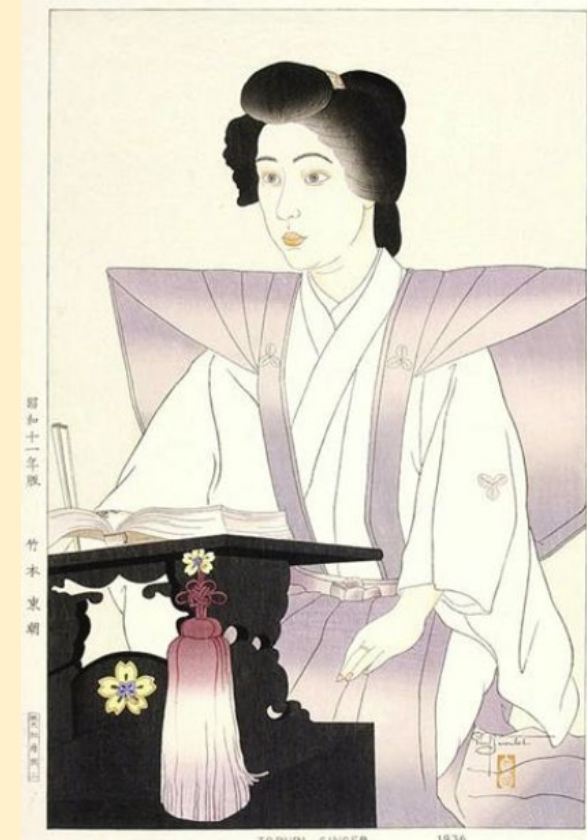
A nod to bijinga



La Geisha Kiyoka 1935



The portrait of Okoi 1935



The joruri singer 1936

Emergence of the woodblock artist (1935 – 1940)

- Kazuo Yamagishi, master woodblock carver, and Fujikake Shizuya urge Jacoulet to make woodblock prints of watercolours
- Sets up Tokyo woodblock studio with Rah brothers and Japanese carvers
- Part of shin hanga/neo-ukiyo-e movement at odds with the more dominant sosaku ("creative print") hanga movement



Tokyo, 1934 38 yrs old

Why Woodblock, and Why Then?

By 1934, woodblock offered refined reproduction and wider reach

Suited his love of line, color, and controlled surface effects

Enabled a subscription model to fund ambitious experimentation

Built on his strong drawing practice and portrait studies



“Rejuvenating” ukiyo-e

Sought to revitalise ukiyo-e with change in subject matter:

“The all-too-visible contrasts between the aristocracy and ordinary people provide the answer about a possible renaissance for twentieth century uki-yo-e. Could realistic portraiture give the exhausted tradition a new significance?”
Miles, 1982

“I think that classical female beauty is not the only suitable subject for ukiyo-e, and that contemporary men and women, young and old, are also worthy of attention. So, I seek to depict beauty based on actual people, and by doing so hopefully reach a wider audience. “

Jacoulet, in Miles, 1982

浮世絵の近代化



"Five Shades of Ink in the
Licensed Quarter"
c. 1794–95, Kitagawa Utamaro

"北国五色墨" 喜多川歌麿



The Old Carp Seller, Ibaraki,
Japan"
1934, Paul Jacoulet

鯉売を売る老婆、茨城県水郷
ポール・ジャクレイ



However, it wasn't an original idea...

Emile Orlik 1870 -1932



1902



1900



1900

Bertha Lum 1869 -1954



1918



1908



1922

Elizabeth Keith 1887 -1956



1902



1900



1900



Paul Jacoulet,
The Bride, 1948



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

Elizabeth Keith
Korean Bride, 1938

Choosing Shin Hanga over Sōsaku Hanga

Shin hanga: collaboration among designer, carver, and printer

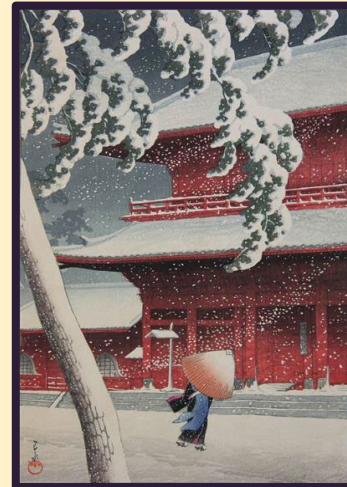
Sōsaku hanga: single-artist carving/printing for expressive roughness

Jacoulet prized polish, consistency, and technical extremes

He openly credited carvers/printers in margins and documentation



or



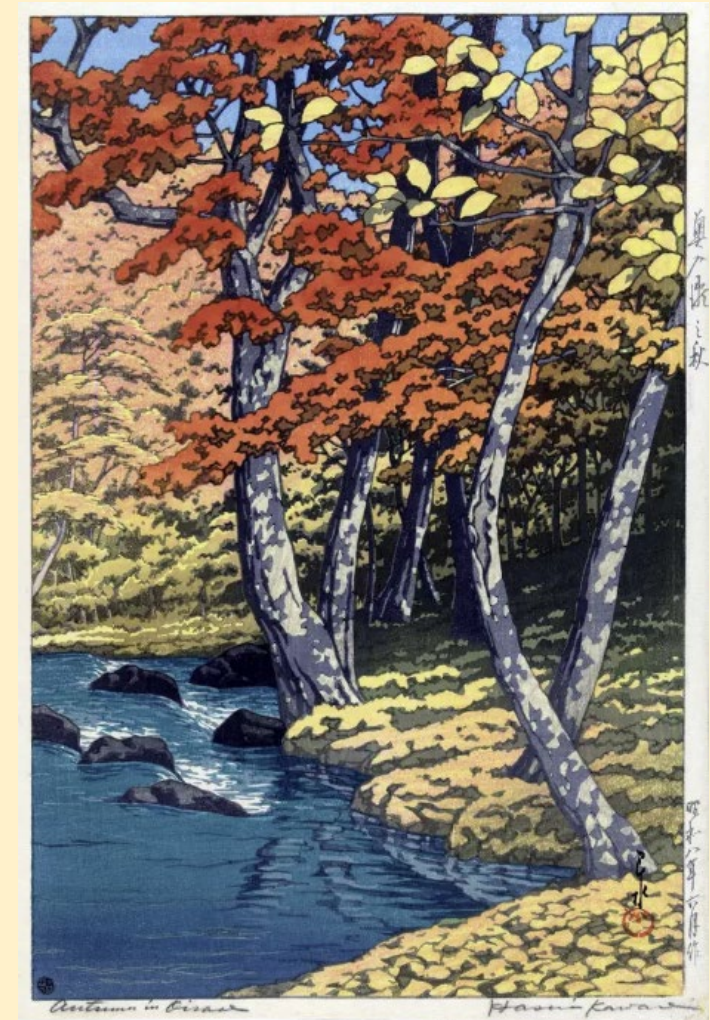


Sōsaku Hanga artist Onchi Koshiro
Bird, from "Signs of Seasons"
1935

Supporters of the Sōsaku Hanga ('Creative prints') movement attacked Shin Hanga for being bound to "the claptrap of academic accretions" like the "meticulous craftsmanship, the virtuosity of line, the hair-raisingly painstaking printing from twenty or thirty separate blocks, the finicky precision in overlapping the colors, and in recent times, the overwhelming cleverness in naturalistic representation." *Nippon Times*, 1936 cited in Miles 1982, p27

But Jacoulet believed otherwise,

"The woodcut colorprint is like music. Without harmony among painter, engraver, and printer, it is impossible to produce a fine picture."

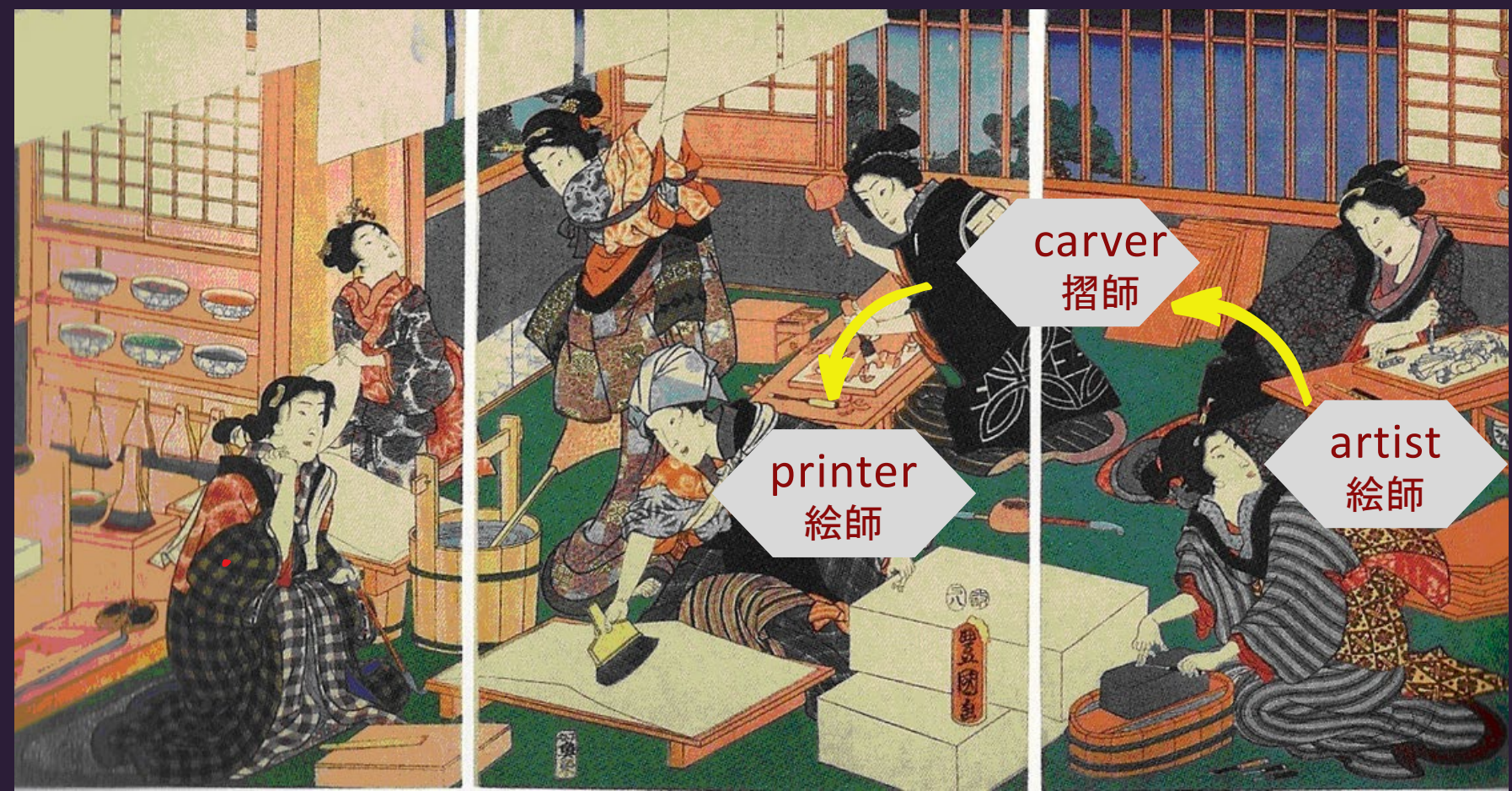


Shin Hanga artist Kawase Hasui
Autumn in Oirase
1933



The three arrows of the ukiyo-e
woodblock:
the artist, the carver, and the printer

浮世絵の三本矢: 絵師, 彫師, 摺師





Establishing the Jacoulet Woodblock Print Research Center 1933

ジャクレーー木版画研究所設立

Encouraged by art scholar Fujikake Shizuya (1881-1958), Yamagishi Kazue (1891-1984) and others.



First carver: Yamagishi Kazue
(1891-1984)
山岸主計



Jeune Fille De Saipan Et Fleurs D'Hibiscus.
Marianes 1934



Une Parisienne 1934

Yamagishi Kazue

Cut roughly the first ~20 designs; occasional later contributions

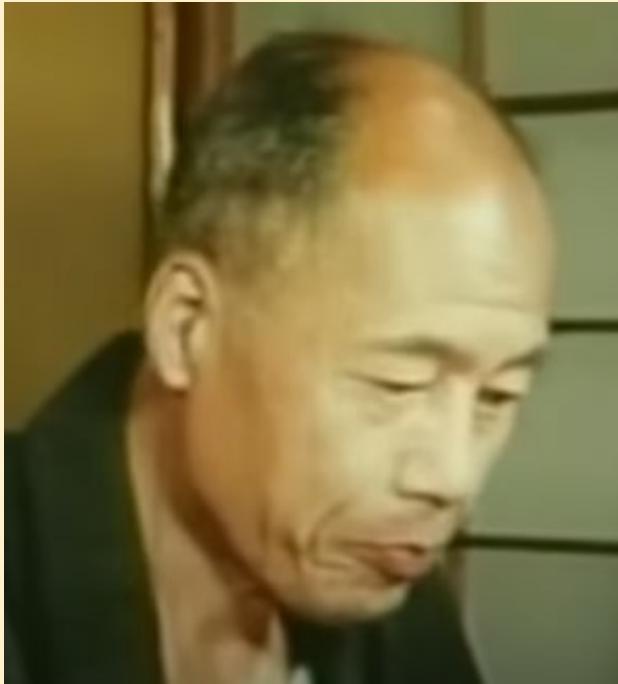
Translated watercolor line into precise, delicate key blocks

Established the early “look” of Jacoulet’s portraits

Paired with printers like Urushibara on 1934 titles

Said that Jacoulet's style was so expressive that the character of the Japanese peasants in his portraits could be understood in a single glance.

Refs: VMFA record (1934: Yamagishi carver; Urushibara printer)



Second carver: Kentaro Maeda

(1891-1987)

前田謙太郎



Lady in Red, 1935



Les Jades. "Chinoise" (Jade Lady, Chinese) , 1940



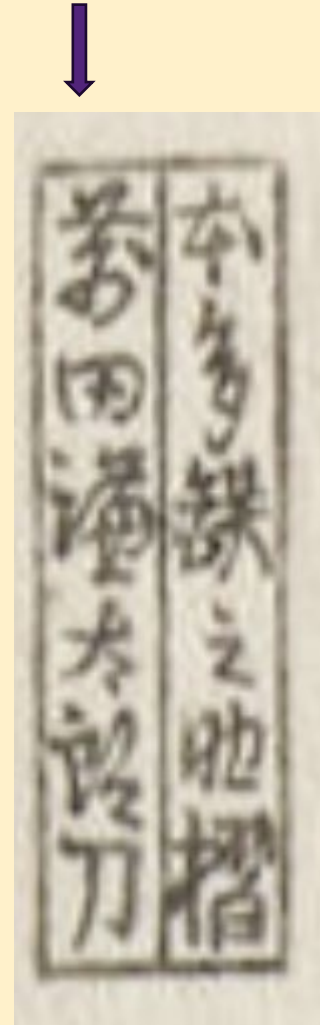
Maeda Kentarō

Succeeded Yamagishi after 'Lady in Red' (Miles 20, June 1935)

Handled increasingly complex modeling and hairline detail

Mainstay carver during peak studio output

His seals help date and attribute later editions



Carved by Maeda Kentaro, printed by Honda Tetsunosuke

The Printers' Bench

Early printers included Urushibara, Honda Tetsunosuke, and Uchikawa

Later work often credited to Fujii Shūnosuke and others

Mastery of registration and layering of transparent pigments

Embossing (karazuri) for textiles and skin highlights

Mica backgrounds for theatrical shimmer and depth

Metallic pigments and crushed-shell whites for luminosity

Custom papers and careful moisture control



Jacoulet's seals

SEALS



Fan (1934-1935)



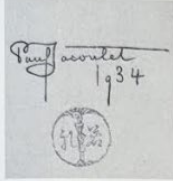
Tea Jar (1937-1939)



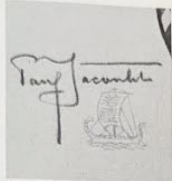
Owl (1948-1952)



Coin (1952)



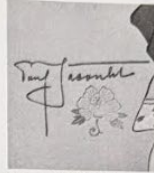
Baren (1934)



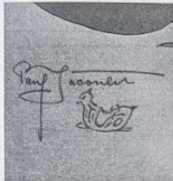
Boat (1939-1940)



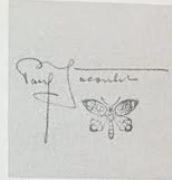
Peach (1948-1951)



Peony (1953-1960)



Mandarin Duck (1935-1936)



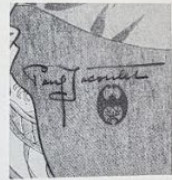
Butterfly (1940-1941)



Ivy (1948-1952)



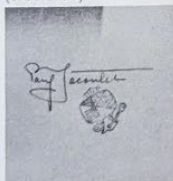
Double Gourd (1935-1936)



Bat (1942)



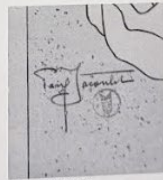
Mitsu-Tomoe (1948)



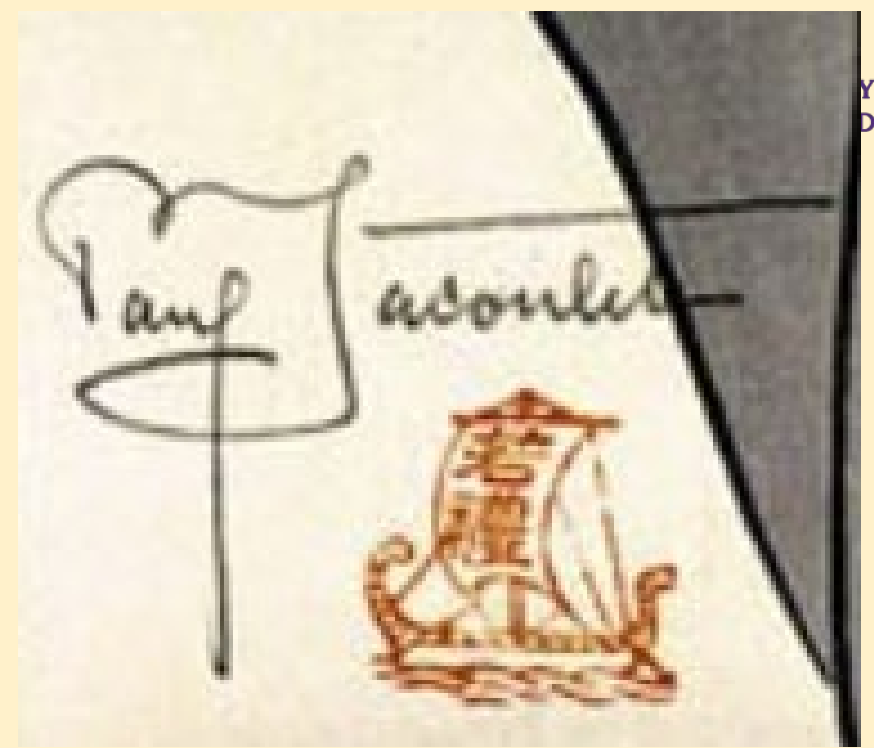
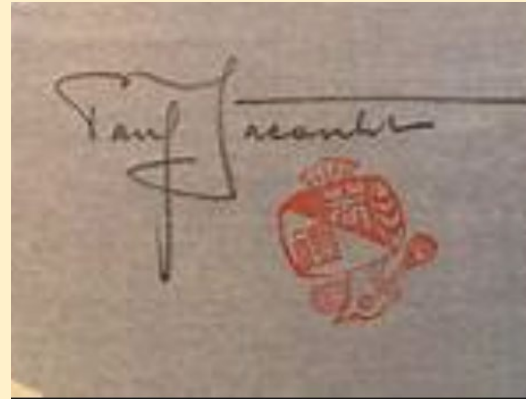
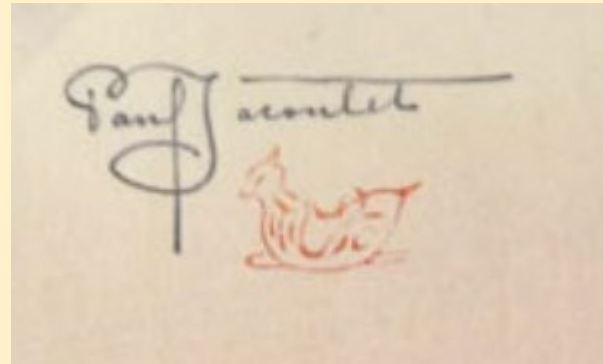
Good Luck Hammer (1936-1937)



Sparrow (1935, 1941-1942, 1947)



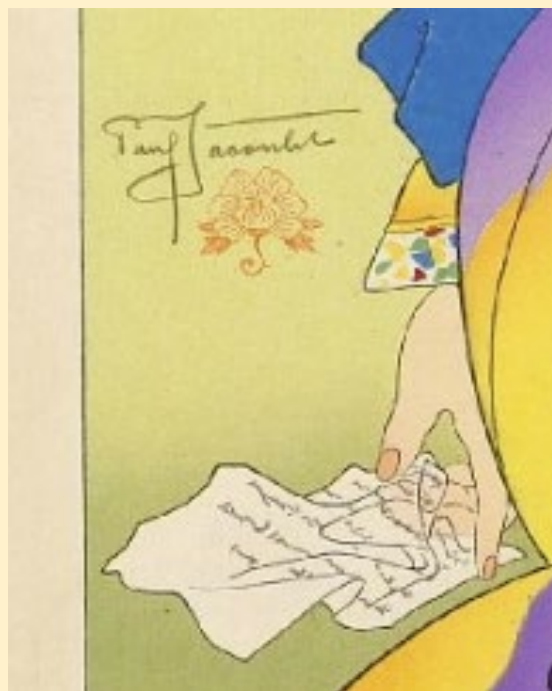
Arrow (1950)



Miles 1982, p 129



limited edition
seal 17/150



"Le Billet Doux The Love letter", Mongol,
1955

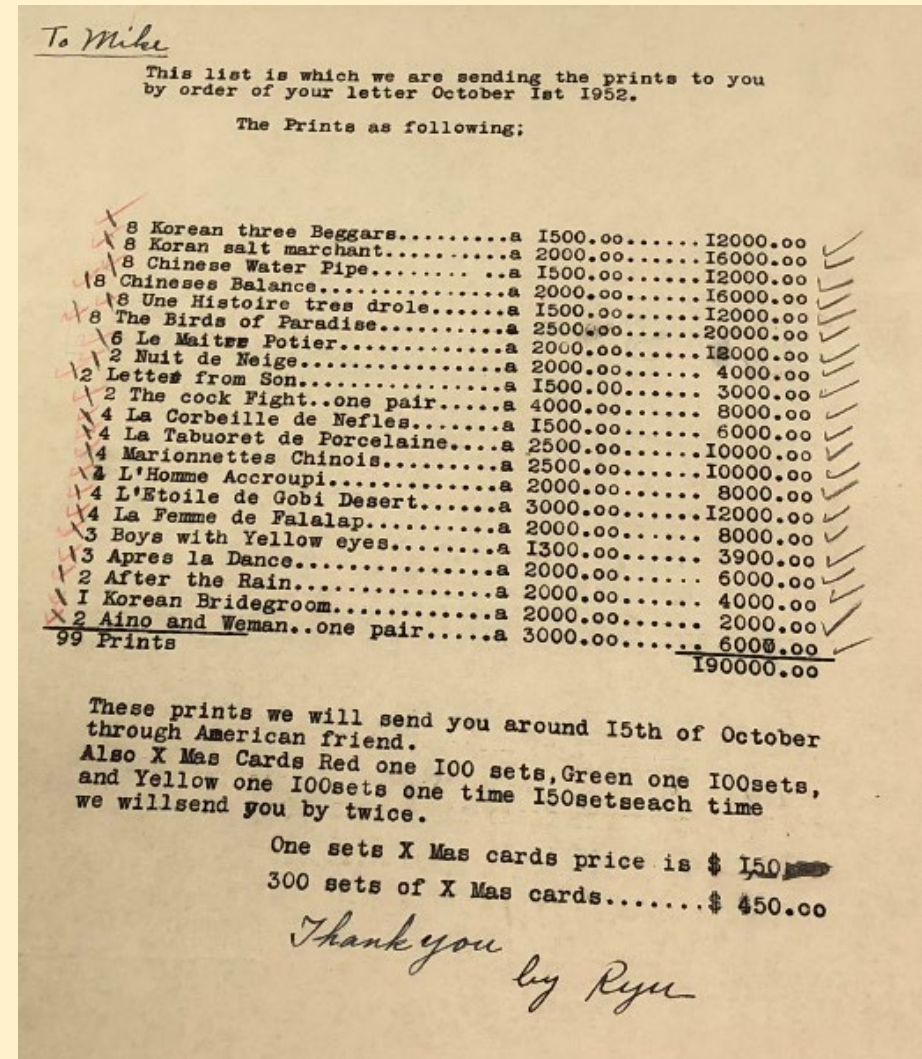
Self-Publishing & Distribution

Direct-to-subscriber model reduces dealer constraints

Selective printing rather than exhausting full editions

Explains rarity and uneven survival across titles

Studio retained control over materials and timing



Exhibitions in Japan



First international exhibitions

Thomas Nickerson Bookstore, Honolulu 1937

Mitsukoshi Keijo Department
Store, Seoul, 1936



November 1936

Solo exhibition of woodblock
prints and watercolors at
Mitsukoshi Keijo Seoul



FIG. 1. Beatrice Patton at Thomas Nickerson's bookstore at 175 South Queen Street, Honolulu, ca. 1936–37. Her book, *Blood of the Shark* is prominently displayed in the store's window. Hawai'i State Archives.

<https://commonbones.org/project/jacoulets-art/exhibitions/international/>

“Nogi-Stessel Conference” 1935

By Arai Mutsuo

Later named “The Opening of the City of Lushun (Port Arthur) during the Russo-Japanese war.”

Jacoulet posed as the Russian General Anatoly Stessel surrendering to the Japanese General Nogi Maresuke.





The war years (1940-1945)

- Moved to Karuizawa (in 1944) with other foreign nationals.
- Little work done. Subscription list dwindled, materials difficult to procure
- House in Tokyo firebombed, with loss of many documents, painting and photos
- Supposedly survived raising chickens and vegetables, did well on the black market, helped orphanage

During the war he was under constant surveillance by the Japanese police, who regarded him as one of the strangest of all foreigners.



Week 7 wrap up