

THE ARTIST AND THE WAR

YASUO KUNIYOSHI

I WAS once quoted by an art critic as saying that I would dig trenches to do my share in this war. What I really said was that I would like to contribute and do everything I could as an artist, but if I were needed to dig trenches I would—and I can, too. Being an artist doesn't prevent me from having the same feelings as other human beings. However, I feel that I can be of more use in the field I know best.

Just what is the artist's role in the war is a question that has been puzzling thousands of us all over the country. We have held countless meetings to try to decide just what we as a group and as individuals should do. And as far as I know we have come to no satisfactory agreement.

As a cultural group we have been alert to the world around us. We realized as far back as 1931 the menace in the invasion of Manchuria and promptly boycotted Japanese goods, picketed their consulate, and organized anti-fascist exhibitions to circulate over the country. We felt deeply about the Spanish Civil War. We realized the very real danger of fascism and tried to make this danger known through our work and through our activities.

To this total and absolute war, I think we have responded more as individuals, as persons, rather than as a group. Some who are too old for combat duty have thrown aside their brushes and taken jobs in war plants. Some have retired into the country to raise cattle. Others are making posters or expressing anti-fascist ideas in their painting. In Russia and England and

America artists have been sent to the very battle fronts to make pictorial records of the war. Unfortunately the plan of assigning 40 American artists by the War Department to active war fronts has collapsed, but since then Life Magazine has taken over. While this project is not official, it is gratifying to note that the artists' contribution is not ignored.

Attendance at museums and galleries has been steadily increasing since the war began. More people are buying paintings. More people feel the need of this kind of spiritual stimulus. We artists can fill that need.

But we are also part of the existing world, and we must fight for the things we believe, in whatever way we can. For the war against fascism is not only to be fought abroad by our armed forces. There is a big job to do here at home, too. I was lucky enough to have a chance to do propaganda radio scripts for the former Donovan Committee and, more lately, to make war posters and illustrations for the OWI. It has made me happy to have even this small part in the national effort.

Through these activities I received an interesting letter from a ten-year-old boy, a student at the Sheldon School, Grand Rapids, Michigan. In answering him, I tried to focus for myself my relation as an artist to this America we love. Here is his letter:

Dear Mr. Kuniyoshi:

We are studying about "Worthwhile People," what outstanding things they

COMMON GROUND

have done. So we are studying you because our art teacher told us something about you.

Your pictures are very beautiful, because our art teacher showed them to us. We are going to buy one of your pictures with the fifty cents we got for having the most mothers at our PTA meeting.

The children of our room would like to ask you some questions. What do you broadcast to Japan? What kind of family do you have? Why do you give money from your pictures to China? If you have children, do you want them to be artists? What do you like in America? How does America differ from Japan in houses, churches, parks, schools, food, stores, clothes, amusements, hospitals?

Sincerely,

JAMES REED

P.S. We are going to get some more money and put with the fifty cents.

Dear James:

I was very happy to get your letter and I will try to answer your questions, telling you all about my activities and my attitude concerning the war and myself.

I was born in the southern part of the main island of Japan in the town of Okayama a long time ago and I came to America in 1906 as a boy, all by myself.

When I was a boy, I was very romantic. I wanted to see the entire world and all its people, but I didn't have any idea that I wanted to become an artist. I just came here to the United States out of curiosity and planned to go home after a few years of studying English. Frankly, that was about all I had on my mind when I first came here.

I landed in Seattle and then I went to Los Angeles where I attended public school. One of my teachers urged me to study painting because she thought I was

talented in that direction. That was how I started my art career—quite by accident. Although I always liked to draw and enjoyed seeing pictures, I didn't dream of being an artist until that time.

Nor did I think then that I was going to remain in America so many years. I am glad and happy to say that I have stayed. I will stay all my life because this is my home. America has given me everything; it has taught me the democratic way of life which to me is the real essence of worthwhile living. If I had children, I would be very proud of their being American. I am very proud to consider myself an American artist, and I am proud that I am generally thought of in that way. Artists are valuable to a community because they have vision and they add to the cultural background which is the strength of a democratic nation.

Do you know that no matter how long I live here I cannot ever become an American citizen because I was born in Japan and Japanese are excluded from that privilege by law? In appearance I am Oriental, but my beliefs, my ideals, and my sentiments have been shaped by living in the free American atmosphere most of my life. At heart I am an American, and I see and feel everything in that way.

I trust you and your friends know everything about what we are fighting for—about the cruelty of the Japanese militarists and the savagery of the Nazis. It is a war of one set of ideals against another. The Axis nations are bent on the destruction of democratic civilization and wish to return to a world of barbarism. We are determined to prevent them from succeeding. We visualize a better world in which everybody can be free. That is the war as I see it.

It is not a racial war. Look at the Chinese. They are an Oriental people, yet they are fighting the Japanese along with the other United Nations. They feel the

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same and have the same ideals as Americans have. We must all fight to win to a decisive victory without compromise. We will win because we know that our way of life is the only way to live, and that determination will carry us to victory.

In the past, people have asked me from time to time what I really felt about Japan. They were often kindly and considerate and made efforts to console me because I was born there. I have always replied that children are born everywhere all over the world, and it was my fate to be born in Japan. But environment and circumstances will mold a man no matter where he originated. I am very grateful that I came here and became molded by American attitudes and democratic viewpoints.

I have been actively anti-Japanese since the first Japanese invasion of China in 1931 and, needless to say, my feeling toward the other Axis powers is equally one of loathing. When the Office of War Information accepted my offer in January 1942 to write scripts for the short-wave radio, I insisted on doing it under my own name because I believed this the only way to transmit my messages to the Japanese. Whatever prestige my name enjoys could best be utilized by the United States in that way. My messages were to the cultural groups—to the artists, writers, musicians, and professional people who should be capable of understanding what democracy is. I told them all about the kind of life here, what America is like, what we believe in, the advantages of life in a democracy. I tried to make clear why we are fighting. I told them about myself, how I was able to live as usual and con-

tinue painting, how I was able to continue teaching painting in two schools where, in spite of being an “enemy alien,” I had more students than ever before.

I warned them that under a government such as that of Japan there can be no future for cultural pursuits such as art and literature. I told them it is never too late to awake and rise up in opposition to their cruel regime. Recently I have been doing posters for the OWI, and I like this sort of work very much. War posters are to me weapons with which to fight the enemy.

Such are my beliefs.

I hope that when you and your classmates have time you will write me again. I will always be glad to hear from you.

Good health and best wishes to all of you.

YASUO KUNIYOSHI

This was a speech by Yasuo Kuniyoshi at the American Common at the close of an art exhibit sponsored by Japanese American artists, writers, and musicians for the benefit of the National War Fund. Mr. Kuniyoshi is represented in all the major museums and art collections in America. Winner of many awards and Guggenheim Fellow in 1935, he is active in the work of many art groups in the country—the American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers, the Woodstock Artists Association, the American Artists' Congress, Salons of America, and the H. E. Field Art Foundation. He is instructor at the Art Students League and the New School for Social Research in New York City.

SOUTHERN DEFENSIVE - I

J. SAUNDERS REDDING

THERE has been much highly publicized activity on the interracial front in recent months. The impression is abroad that a major offensive is being waged against the forces of racism. Blown up by both the well-meaning and the merely ambitious to look like offensive actions of the first consequence, there have been organized skirmishes, patrols, and feeling-out thrusts. Some of these have had a modicum of importance and all have been of sufficient effectiveness to justify them in the minds of the participants. Other engagements are planned. A troop of interracial crusaders has been on the alert in the Harlem sector of New York City for several months. In the late summer, part of this troop, armed with loud speakers mounted on scout cars, risked limb and life to defend public and private property against a swarm of disorganized rebels. Under the command of its battle-weary mayor, Detroit has such a troop. Winston-Salem, North Carolina and Birmingham, Alabama are at the ready. A squad in Chicago, faced with the bitter knowledge that the valiant battles of 1919 ended in no victory, are preparing for new battles under a new commander. Everywhere signals are up, flags unfurled, lines restive.

But this is no matter for ridicule, for what we have here is not folly. Or if it is, it is well-intentioned, stemming from the anxiety of minds too troubled to grasp the meaning of all this activity in such widely separated areas of the war against racism. The meaning is two-fold. First,

it means that no offensive is being waged and that the frantic activity is purely a defensive holding action. And second, it means that the war against racism is a national war and that it must be so fought and so considered. The habit of thought that would tear the Negro problem out of its national context is a southern habit of thought and (though not necessarily for the reason that it is southern) it is potentially more harmful than beneficial. When the newest expression of this thinking, the Southern Regional Council, was set up recently, the dangerous potentials became immediately evident. Became evident also the workings of the peculiarly regional mind that has traditionally believed in miracles.

II

The Southern Regional Council had an interesting beginning. In October 1942, a group of Negroes assembled in Durham, North Carolina. They met as Southerners and as Negroes, and their purpose was to discuss their unfortunate situation. Neither in position nor in opinion were the men who met there representative of the southern Negro. Indeed, they did not claim to be. They "met as individuals." It was a homogeneous grouping. There were fifty-six of them (excluding the wives), of whom thirty were educational workers—college presidents, college deans, school principals, and teachers. There were also some ministers, a publisher, one or two business