

BRIDGES TO HEAVEN

VOL. I



# Bridges to Heaven

ESSAYS ON EAST ASIAN ART IN HONOR OF  
PROFESSOR WEN C. FONG

VOLUME I

EDITED BY

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P.Y. AND KINMAY W. TANG CENTER FOR EAST ASIAN ART  
DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY  
P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art  
Department of Art and Archaeology  
Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544  
princeton.edu/tang

DISTRIBUTED BY  
Princeton University Press  
41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540  
press.princeton.edu

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Library of Congress Control Number:  
2011923675

ISBN: 978-0-691-15298-1

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication  
Data is available

Managing editor: Dora C. Y. Ching  
Text editor: Judith G. Smith  
Copy editor: Elizabeth M. Powers  
Typist: Angela Darling  
Proofreader: Richard Slovak

Book design, composition, and production:  
Binocular, New York

Printing and binding:  
Nissha Printing Co., Ltd., Kyoto

This book was typeset in Whitman and Gill Sans,  
and printed on 104.7 gsm Take GA-FS,  
an FSC-certified paper.

PRINTED AND BOUND IN JAPAN

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# Japanese Typographic Design and the Art of Letterforms

GENNIFER WEISENFELD

Typographic design, the art of arranging and styling the appearance and printing of type, is a visual mode of communication that functions on an aesthetic meta-level. Distinct from text and content but intrinsically allied with them, the visible language of letterforms can mark subjectivity and ideology. Building on expressive native calligraphic traditions and a rich commercial print culture, Japanese designers rapidly expanded their lettering lexicon from the late nineteenth century as they encountered Western typefaces and international professional editorial design techniques. In this essay, I will explore the emergence of modern Japanese lettering and typographic design in the pre-World War II period as it developed in tandem with the professional sphere of advertising. It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive survey of Japanese typographic design, but rather, through close analysis of selected examples of Japanese scripts and types in specific promotional contexts, to illuminate the multilayered and effective mode of visual communication constructed through printed text.<sup>1</sup> The examples I have chosen range from logotype designs to mass media publicity. Some are attributed, and others are anonymous. Employing distinctive historical, grammatical, morphological, and aesthetic aspects of the Japanese language, designers have been able to create a powerful visible language that has been instrumental in defining product and corporate, as well as cultural and national, identities in modern Japanese visual culture.

## DEBATES ON REFORM OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE

The Japanese written language is a distinct amalgam of Chinese-derived logo/ideographic characters (*kanji*), native syllabaries (*kana*; *hiragana* and *katakana*), and

I would like to express my great appreciation to John Carpenter for his invaluable insights into Japanese calligraphy and letter design. For their invaluable assistance, I also thank Kao Corporation, Morinaga & Co., LTD, Shiseido Corporate Museum, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Tokushu Paper Mfg., Waseda University Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, Yajima Chifune, and Kōgo

Eriko. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright-Hays Program, and the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures.

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of modern Japanese typographic design see, Matsuoka Seigō, Tanaka Ikkō, and Asaba Katsumi 1999.

Romanized letters (*rōmaji*) and numbers, offering designers an unparalleled and uniquely challenging range of expressive possibilities. The semantic evolution of Japanese is the result of centuries of highly mediated, transcultural interaction with other Asian and Western languages. The original derivation of the Japanese written script from ancient Chinese, the development of two complementary phonetic syllabaries to accommodate the distinct polysyllabic and inflected nature of spoken Japanese, and the introduction of Western words and alphanumeric writing systems to Japan are well-known facts. Less so are the Japanese debates on language reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which are equally critical to understanding the status and development of written language in the modern period. Standardization, legibility, and access were pressing concerns for both politicians and commercial entrepreneurs in Japan's rapidly emerging national public culture. As renowned designer and type aficionado Hara Hiromu (1903–1986) is quoted as saying, “Before the problem of scripts, the problem of national letters [*kokuji*] is an enormous wall that stands in our way.”<sup>2</sup> Contentious debates over what should constitute a national written language, which bear witness to the immense social and political significance of visible language, formed the ideological backdrop to the development of modern letterforms. These debates, while unresolved, merit discussion as a preface to an analysis of specific design programs.

Written language, according to design critic Matsuoka Seigō (born 1944), inherently constitutes the *écriture* of culture, that is to say, an evolving written language instantiates the living culture.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the hybridization of the Japanese language signifies the process of Japan's transculturation. The dialectical relationship between Japan and China and, later, the relationships constructed between Japan and its Others (“Asia” and “the West”) are thus encoded in the linguistic character of the language. Japan's experience of modernization and modernity, from the forces of the modern associated with Western nation-states and the nationalism incipient in Japan's newly created nation-state, had a profound impact on the heavily *kanji*-based writing system. *Kanji* became the focus of intense debate among so-called cultural reformers, whose proposals ranged widely, from character simplification to complete abolition. Believing themselves devoted nationalists, all sides defended their objectives for the good of the nation. Concerned primarily with issues of access and the democratization of the media, prominent newspaper editors like Hara Takashi (1856–1921) at the *Ōsaka asahi shinbun*, later prime minister, were staunch public advocates of the reduction of the basic *kanji* character set, the adoption of less complicated orthography, and the use of a more colloquial written style employing fewer Sino-Japanese words.<sup>4</sup> They were joined by a broad array of public figures, from linguists to politicians, who felt strongly about the need to standardize and simplify written characters (as well as the phonetic syllabaries) for easier recognition and legibility, which, it was hoped, would also greatly ease the burden on commercial typesetters. Unlike

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Matsuoka Seigō and Koga Hiroyuki 1999, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>4</sup> Seeley 1984, 269–70.

their Western counterparts, who had only the alphabet and numbers with which to contend, Japanese typesetters routinely had to deal with thousands of characters for a single publication.

More extreme views also came to the fore during this period, such as those of Maejima Hisoka (1835–1919), the father of the modern Japanese postal service, who argued that the national letters should be the phonetic *kana*, which would serve as Japan's alphabet, and that *kanji* should be entirely abolished. The actor and politician Suematsu Kenchō (1855–1920) went even further, suggesting that *katakana* alone should be Japan's primary script, printed horizontally in the manner of Western texts. Prominent business leaders, including Morishita Hiroshi (1869–1943), president of the well-known company that manufactured Jintan breath freshener and a leader in the field of Japanese advertising, formed the Phonetic Syllabary Script Association (Kana Moji Kai) to pursue this mode of language reform, believing such reform to be a critical means of internationalization. Members of the group viewed *kanji* as a direct obstacle to Japan's full entry into an international world order of modern nations. As radical as this proposition may sound, it bears keeping in mind that Korean nationalists at about the same time proposed a similar eradication of *kanji*, advocating adoption of the *Hangŭl* alphabet as the official national writing system.<sup>5</sup>

Other prominent Japanese intellectuals countered the *kana* advocates with the proposal that Romanized letters (*rōmaji*) should be Japan's national written language, and groups such as the Roman Letters Association (*Rōmaji Kyōkai*) were established to study the matter. Developing many *rōmaji* types and scripts, this group included famous novelists and poets like Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) and Kitahara Hakushū (1885–1942), who lent considerable cultural legitimacy to its activities. Many years later it was discovered that the poet Ishikawa Takuboku (1886–1912) even kept his personal diary in *rōmaji*.<sup>6</sup> These activities were also fueled by the increasingly strong aversion to the gap between spoken and written Japanese, which precipitated the “unity of spoken and written language movement” (*genbun itchi undō*) that eventually led to the widespread adoption of vernacular Japanese in modern literature and many other print media.

Japan's first minister of education, Mori Arinori (1847–1889), submitted an even more extreme proposal than the abandonment of *kanji*. He suggested that English be adopted as the primary language of Japan, going so far as to consult with American linguists to develop a simplified form of English to serve as Japan's national language. Needless to say, there was strong resistance to all of these drastic reform proposals. *Kanji* preservationists prevailed, hampering what even the most moderate thinkers felt was an imperative for some degree of character reform.<sup>7</sup> What remained was a highly charged, decidedly unstandardized, multivalent linguistic field.

5 Matsuoka Seigō and Koga Hiroyuki 1999, 12. For an in-depth discussion of debates about *kanji* and *kana* reform in the prewar period, see Seeley 1984.

6 Matsuoka Seigō and Koga Hiroyuki 1999, 12.

7 Preservationist efforts were buoyed by the increasingly militarist shift in national policy in the 1930s and claims that *kanji* were integral to the character of the Japanese

national polity (*kokutai*). Some defenders even made the argument that the proposed language reforms would require amending the imperial rescripts, which would not only be an insult to the emperor but would sap Japanese spirit. Seeley 1984, 270–71. *Kanji* and *kana* usage reform and standardization took place only after World War II. See Seeley 1984; Unger 1996.

## TYPE DESIGN AND LETTERING

Despite its repeated introduction to Japan from China, Korea, and Europe over many centuries, movable type (letterpress printing) was not widely adopted in Japan until the late nineteenth century due to the high cost and relative inconvenience of casting individual types for thousands of characters. The vast majority of printing in Japan was hand-carved on woodblocks.<sup>8</sup> *Minchō* (literally, Ming dynasty) was, and remains, one of the classic typefaces in Asia. As the name indicates, it was widely used in China during the Ming dynasty, an age of widespread printing with movable type. Motoki Shōzō (1824–1875), pioneer of movable type in Japan, developed Chinese *Minchō* into a Japanese typeface (fig. 1),<sup>9</sup> a highly regular and balanced type that is characterized by thick vertical and thin horizontal lines. One of its distinctive features is the inclusion of small triangular decorative flourishes at the ends of horizontal lines, called *uroko* (literally, fish scales), that simulate the ends of brushstrokes in regular script calligraphy (*kaisho*). These parallel the use of serifs, small decorative embellishments

FIG 1



なたさかあナタサカア奈太左加安  
 にちしきいニチシキイ仁知之幾以  
 ぬつすくうヌツスクウ奴州寸久字  
 ねてせけえネテセケエ禰天世計衣  
 のとそこおノトソコオ乃止曾己於

FIGURE 1 *Minchō* digital font set

on letters in Western typography. *Minchō* has been in continuous use since its creation, and multiple variants, such as narrow and bold versions, have appeared over the years.<sup>10</sup> Staunch supporters of *Minchō* have even made efforts to install it as a national script to the exclusion of all others. Design historian Kawahata Naomichi has likened this move to racialized cultural campaigns under the German National Socialists, who initially adopted the Fraktur typeface for official publications, imbuing it with the Germanic national qualities that supposedly characterized the Third Reich, while at the same time prohibiting the use of other ostensibly less “German” types.<sup>11</sup>

8 <http://www.honco.net/japanese/01/page1.html> (accessed February 7, 2006).

9 For an overview of Motoki’s work, see the Dai Nippon Printing Company website, <http://www.honco.net/japanese/index.html> (accessed February 8, 2006). Later versions of *Minchō* include the *kana* syllabaries, as well as Roman letters to form a full character set.

10 Several Japanese typefaces based on *Minchō* retain vestigial elements of handwriting and calligraphy in an attempt

to reproduce familiar traces of the brush. The standard Japanese typeface for school textbooks developed in the Meiji period known as *Kyōkashotai*, for example, is a variation of *Minchō* based on the model of regular script handwriting that was taught to children in school.

11 Kawahata Naomichi and Hirano Koga 2005, 6. The Nazis later abandoned Fraktur for a more legible international type style and, in a stunning reverse course of policy, labeled Fraktur a spurious “Jewish type.”

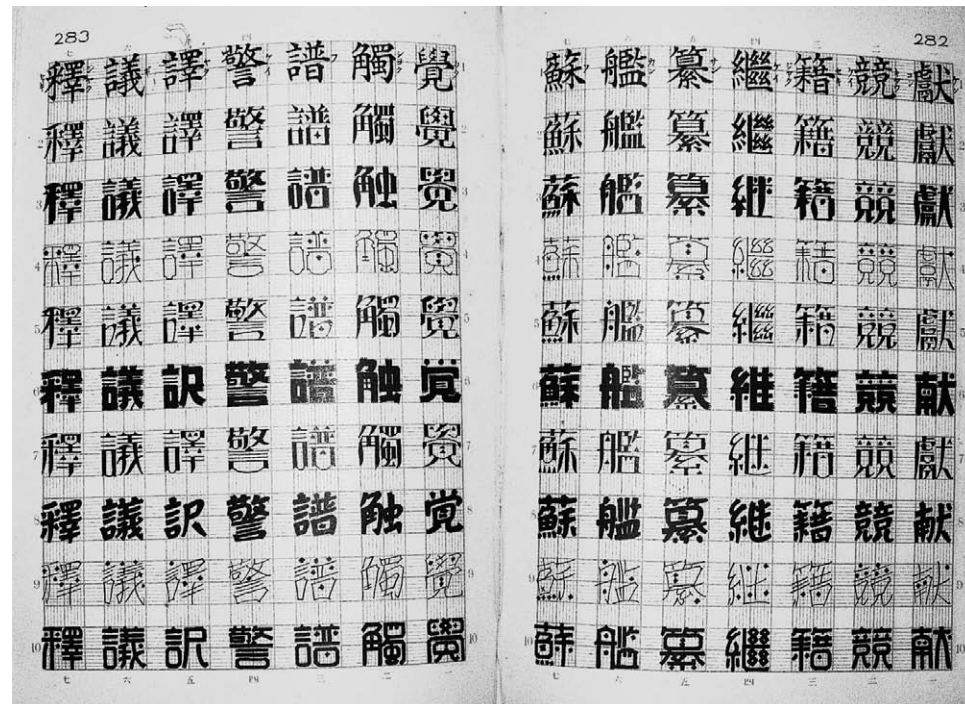


FIGURE 2 Ten examples of design lettering for the same character (read vertically). 26 × 37 cm. Private collection, Tokyo

Even in this age of seemingly limitless digital fonts, *Minchō* is still the standard default font setting in most Japanese word-processing software and defines the visual character of much of Japanese printed text.

Because of the difficulty and expense of developing type, as well as the inability of type to simulate adequately the dynamism of calligraphy, the majority of innovative and expressive letterform designs in Japan, until the inauguration of digital fonts in the computer age, has been hand-designed printed lettering rather than actual cast typefaces, what Kawahata has termed *kaki moji*.<sup>12</sup> During the 1920s, the heyday of commercial design studies in prewar Japan, lettering designer Fujiwara Taichi (active 1920s–30s), who worked for a brief period designing advertising for Morishita Hiroshi's breath freshener Jintan in Osaka, coined the new term “design letters” or “design characters” (*zuan moji*) to denote expressive hand-drawn letterforms. The principal designer for the Mitsukoshi department store, Sugiura Hisui (1876–1965), a prominent public advocate of professional design practices, wrote about the “designification of the letter” (*jitai no zuanka*).<sup>13</sup> In the introduction to the 1926 compendium *General Survey of Design Letters* (*Zuan moji taikan*), edited by poster designer Yajima Shūichi (1895–1982), Tokyo Imperial University professor Takeda Goichi (1872–1938) made a call for “new letterforms to fit modern commodities,” stating that “beautiful typography is the most effective way of promoting the worth of a commodity.”<sup>14</sup> Eye-

12 In the prewar period, there was a range of terms used to denote design lettering: *sōshoku moji* (decorative letters), *ishō moji* (design letters), *hentai moji* (anomalous cursive letters), and *kōkoku moji* (advertising letters), to name a few of the most common. Ibid., 10.

13 Ibid., 28; Matsuoka Seigō, Tanaka Ikkō, and Asaba Katsumi 1999, 17.

14 Yajima Shūichi 1926. Takeda quoted in Fraser, Heller, and Chwast 1996, 123.

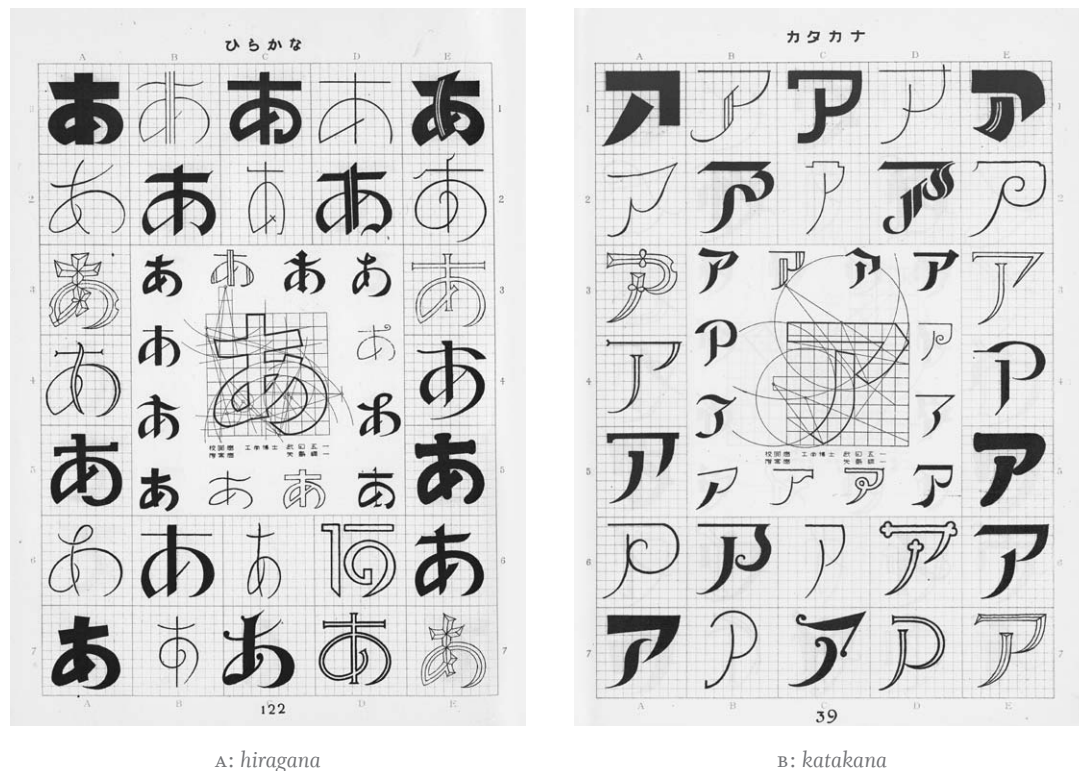


FIGURE 3 Different lettering examples for the *hiragana* and *katakana* phonemes “a.”  
26 × 18.5 cm. Private collection, Tokyo

catching letterforms were already crucial to visual communication in the Edo period, and modern design proponents sought to expand and diversify these expressive possibilities to encourage increased consumption of new products.<sup>15</sup> In the process they reinforced the important role of the designer as a creative mediator in communicating product identity to an expanding consumer public.

A boom in design-related trade publishing took place in the 1920s and 1930s, which, significantly, included a plethora of lettering compendia, many published in Osaka, the second-largest city in Japan and a center of commercial activity.<sup>16</sup> These were ostensibly trade publications for commercial retailers and designers to use as sourcebooks, an extension of the long tradition of pattern-book printing in Japan. The number of volumes published, many with multiple reprints, that specialized in practical design training and applications attests to their popularity and perceived efficacy.

FIG 2 In Yajima's best-selling 1926 volume, two thousand standard *kanji* were presented in ten varieties of lettering (fig. 2) with an additional eighty forms of *katakana* and twenty forms of *hiragana*.<sup>17</sup> Laying out the collection of scripts on an ordered orthogonal grid, Yajima compared their various aesthetic properties and systematically analyzed their relative proportions. Ultimately interested in breaking down letterforms into their constituent elements in the hope of producing a series of combinable and

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of Edo period lettering, see Tani Minezō 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Lettering compendia appear as early as 1912, but the major boom in this kind of publication started in the 1920s. Twelve lettering design volumes were published between

1925 and 1928 alone. Kawahata Naomichi and Hirano Koga 2005, 16, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Yajima Shūichi 1926; Kawahata Naomichi and Hirano Koga 2005, 30–33.



FIGURE 4 Lettering examples for sample promotional texts such as “giant end-of-the-year bargain” (*seibo daiyasuuri*) and “ornamental electric fixture designs” (*dentōgu sōshoku zuan*), far left and right, respectively. 26 × 37.5 cm. Collection of Gennifer Weisenfeld

re-combinable forms, Yajima went even further in his 1928 publication *Anatomy of Design Letters* (*Zuan moji no kaibō*), where he abstracted and geometricized *kanji* and *kana*, which he analyzed in a comparative framework. Example pages laying out various permutations of the *hiragana* and *katakana* renditions of the phoneme “a” display the broad variations and widely divergent aesthetic properties with which the same letter could be imbued (fig. 3). Thick and thin, angular and curvaceous, legible and scribbled, plain and decorative — the comparisons are myriad, as is the cornucopia of choices. This approach attempts to predetermine visual response by methodizing aesthetic response into a set of principles and rules.

FIG 3

Fujiwara Taichi’s 1925 compendium *Designed Practical Characters* (*Zuanka seru jitsuyō moji*) includes page upon page of sample letters in a variety of free-form styles spelling out model promotional phrases, such as “giant end-of-the-year bargain” (*seibo daiyasuuri*) and “ornamental electric fixture designs” (*dentōgu sōshoku zuan*) (fig. 4). On a double-page spread, vertically aligned character combinations for “Sunday” (*nichiyōbi*) on the left are paired on the opposite page with the full roster of the days of the week rendered horizontally in characters and in seven different *rōmaji* scripts (fig. 5).<sup>18</sup> The script types are all highly mannered, some more angular, and others more rounded. Each script has a distinctive decorative flourish; one even has small kitschy hearts scattered throughout the lines. Eschewing the quest for legibility and standardization, these designs emphasize subjective lyricism, a sensibility that

FIG 4

FIG 5

<sup>18</sup> Fujiwara Taichi 1925.

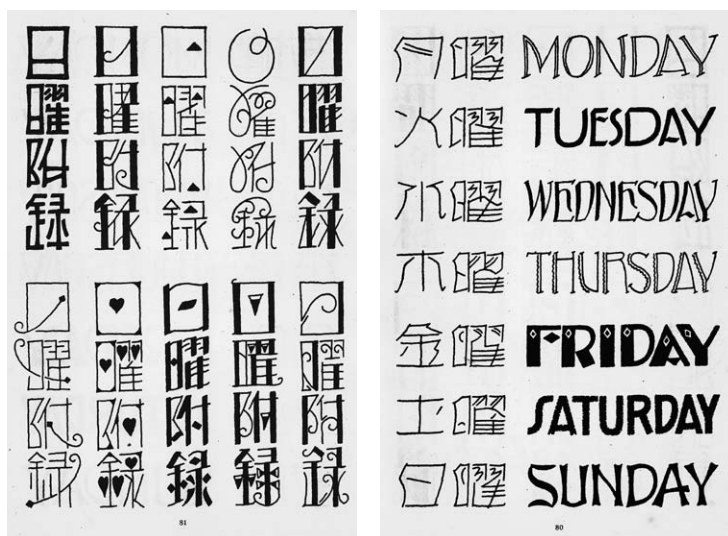


FIGURE 5 Various vertical design lettering combinations for “Sunday” (*nichiyōbi*) (left); seven days of the week rendered horizontally in characters and in seven different *rōmaji* scripts (right). 26 × 37.5 cm. Collection of Gennifer Weisenfeld

reflects the aesthetic spirit of what has commonly come to be known as “Taishō romanticism.” This spirit drew inspiration from the decorative and poetic imagery of the pan-European Art Nouveau movement and flourished in the heady age of individualism emerging in Taishō period Japan. As Art Nouveau was itself deeply influenced by Japanese aesthetics and the movement of Japonisme, Japanese designers were in effect drawn to an already familiar decorative sensibility. Their work emphasized ornate floral patterning and extensive use of decorative flourishes, conveying an overriding image of elegance and luxury.

The now world-renowned cosmetics company Shiseido is one of the commercial enterprises most associated with Taishō romanticism, epitomized by the elegant and curvy typography developed by Yama Rokurō (1897–1982) and Yamana Ayao (1897–1980). Both Yama and Yamana initially worked for the publisher Platon-sha, owned by Nakayama Taiyōdō, the manufacturer of Club cosmetics, where Yama first developed a highly mannered *kanji* script style evocative of European Art Nouveau and Secessionist style lettering for the titles of the company’s journals *Pleasure and Pain* (*Kuraku*), *Woman* (*Josei*), and *Theater Film* (*Engeki Eiga*). The letters were paired with sensual line drawings of women in fashionable, mostly Paris-inspired, attire. Strongly cultivating a modern decorative sensibility, the characters pushed the limits of legibility, emphasizing expressive ornamental flourishes and distorted stroke proportions. This signature style had tremendous influence on the subsequent advertising designs for the Japanese movie industry, underpinning a distinctive subgenre of lettering that came to be known as *kinema moji* (cinema letters).<sup>19</sup> Yamana soon brought this aesthetic to Shiseido to promote the company’s luxury cosmetic creams and powders. The designs, exuding delicate femininity, were targeted at a female audience. Unlike

19 Kansai designers have claimed the origination of *kinema moji* for Shōchiku Cinema designer Yamada Shinkichi, but analysis of examples from the period and the dissemination

of the style through Yajima Shūichi’s compendia of scripts supports the important foundational role of Yama’s work. Ono Takahiro, Nishimura Mika, and Akeo Keizō 2000, 133–39.

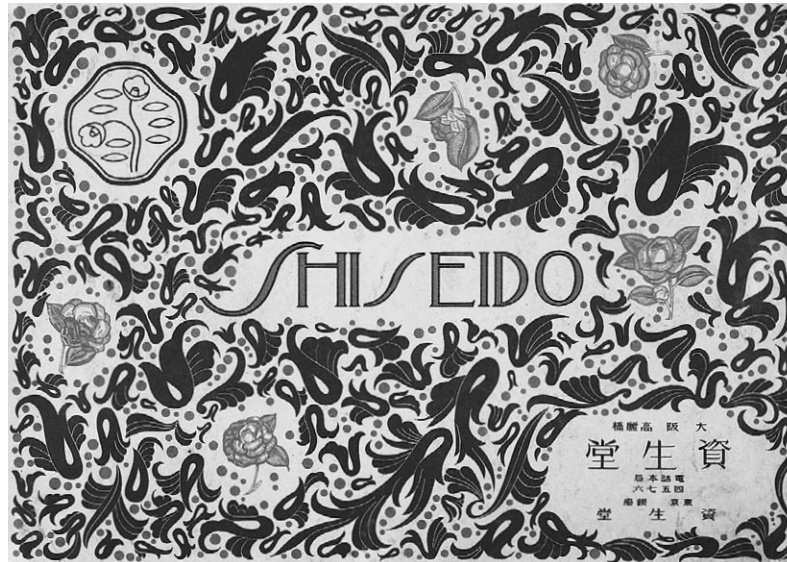


FIGURE 6 Sawa Reika (1896–1970). Shiseido Wrapping Paper, 1927.  
Shiseido Corporate Museum

the company's present emphasis on exoticized images of Japanese beauty, Shiseido in the 1920s cultivated a corporate identity based on fanciful images of luxury Western lifestyles. The woman of leisure, lolling in her beautifully appointed chaise longue, wearing her cosmopolitan fashions, projected a sense of visual softness.

Wrapping paper and packaging have been long-standing promotional media in Japan. Since Edo times, customers saved and reused elegant wrapping paper, producing an ongoing promotional effect (a bit like stylish shopping bags branded with identifiable logos that people nowadays carry around as accessories). Packaging has been dubbed the “silent salesman.”<sup>20</sup> Shiseido's iconic company wrapping paper produced in many iterations over the years featured the Romanized brand name with its characteristically elongated “S”s that evoked images of the languorously reclining, elegant flapper figures featuring prominently in Shiseido's pictorial advertisements (fig. 6). The graphically stylized Shiseido camellia logo sits to the upper left, and the Japanese *kanji* logotype rendered in a thin, delicate script is on the lower right. Together with the *rōmaji* brand name they combine to express refinement and grace. The three separate logos float in a sea of swirling florals and red arabesques.

FIG 6

The crucial role of lettering and of the editorial layout of advertising copy in the emergent field of commercial art was in evidence across the field of advertising design. Important trade publications such as the major twenty-four-volume commercial art compendium *Complete Works of Contemporary Commercial Art* (*Gendai shōgyō bijutsu zenshū*; separately titled in English *The Complete Commercial Artist*, 1928–30), edited by design theorist Hamada Masuji (1892–1938), devoted two full volumes to lettering and layout.<sup>21</sup> Yet even in the midst of a heavy emphasis on modern expressive letterforms (fig. 7), there was still recognition in these publications of the on-

FIG 7

<sup>20</sup> Nakada Setsuko 1993, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Hamada Masuji 1928–1930. For a full discussion of Hamada's pioneering role in championing a social status

for professional design and the significance of the *Ars* series, see Weisenfeld 2000.



FIGURE 7 Various examples of modern expressive design lettering. 26 × 38 cm.  
Collection of Gennifer Weisenfeld

going relevance of earlier scripts for the burgeoning national consumer market. The past continued to have meaning in the present, and there was no better example of this than the sustained use of Edo scripts through the twentieth century. Some have since been standardized into typefaces.

In Hamada's volumes, examples of pre-existing Japanese scripts are showcased.<sup>22</sup> A sampler of Edo characters (fig. 8) features two illustrations of *hige moji* (whisker characters; examples A, F). As the name describes, the characters have whiskerlike stylized brush trails at the ends of the strokes and simulate the "flying white" (*hihaku*) calligraphy technique that accentuates the white streaks and gaps within black *sumi* ink brushstrokes. Whisker characters are still widely used in the commercial sphere for everything from the shaved ice dessert (*kakigōri*) signs that dot city streets in the summer to the backs of *happi* coats. These coats, traditionally worn by Japanese shopkeepers, are emblazoned with their commercial crests and are now seen predominantly at street festivals. By nature of their association with the Edo period, *hige moji* are coded as "traditional."

*Hige moji* are also conspicuous on the product label designs of Japanese sake brand names, such as Hakutsuru and Ozeki. Even as Japanese national and overseas mar-

22 Some of the most well known Edo scripts featured are *sumō moji*, *kakumoji*, *botan moji*, and *Kanteiryū*. *Sumō moji* (Sumo script), as the name describes, is a form of script specifically associated with Sumo wrestling, a sport that has continued to be popular throughout the modern period. Sumo script has thick, rounded inky horizontal and vertical strokes. *Kakumoji* (square characters), a form of squared-off, highly stylized characters, was often used in household crests (*kamon*), particularly for insignias on clothing. *Botan moji* (see fig. 8, Peony characters, examples B and C), which also often appeared on the backs of *happi* coats, have puffy strokes with wavy contours, with the characters molded into a circular surround that makes

them appear like flower buds from above. Another popular Edo period script that was later codified into a typeface was *Kanteiryū* (literally, Kantei style; see fig. 8, example G), which is associated with the signage and publications for the Kabuki theater and is now the official Kabuki script. Developed around 1779 by the ninth heir of the Edo-based Nakamura-za Kabuki theater, and widely used for all Nakamura-za signage by painter Okazakiya Kanroku (artist's name Kantei; 1746–1805), whose name it bears, *Kanteiryū* is sinuous and displays a strong compression as if each character were being sat upon, leaving very little space between strokes. In Hamada's "fat Kanteiryū" example, the strokes are fat and fleshy.



FIGURE 8 Sampler of Edo characters (left); sans serif Futura lettering by Paul Renner (1878–1956), designer for Bauersche Giesserei type foundry, Frankfurt am Main (right). (A) and (F) whisker characters (*hige moji*); (B) and (C) peony characters (*botan moji*); (E) fat Kanteiryū (*tai Kanteiryū*); “Die schrift ist die seele jeder reklame” (The writing is the soul of each advertisement). 26 × 38 cm. Collection of Gennifer Weisenfeld

kets developed and regional manufacturers transformed themselves into national brands with cultivated corporate images, sake brand identity remained unchanged, not requiring a modern makeover. Unlike beverages newer to Japan, for instance, beer or wine, sake’s image was enhanced by association with centuries-old traditions of fermentation and brewing, even as much sake production was in fact being transformed in response to increased consumer demand, and even when straight alcohol was added to the fermented rice wine, a controversial practice to which purists adamantly objected. Coding a product as “traditional” through letterforms reinforced consumer confidence in the quality standards of the company.

Sake was by no means the only Japanese business that had its roots in Edo, and sake producers were not the only modern companies to use *hige moji* in their company logos. Industry innovator Mitsukoshi department store got its start back in the seventeenth century as Mitsui Echigoya dry goods. The company’s modern trademark displays the character 越 (*echi*, from Echigoya; also read *koshi*, from Mitsukoshi) written in encircled *hige moji* (fig. 9). Already in the Edo period Echigoya was a sophisticated advertiser, supplying logo-printed giveaways and hiring famous kabuki actors to endorse a range of the company’s products. Promotions also included important examples of product placement. For instance, woodblock prints by such well-known designers as Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1865) portrayed Edo beauties in front of the store with the company name and logo featured conspicuously on the hanging shop curtains (*noren*) in the background.

The company continued to be an innovator in promotional strategies, yet it consciously maintained its Edo heritage in the script logo. As the first department store to develop indoor display techniques that allowed customers to keep their shoes on

FIG 9



FIGURE 9 Sugiura Hisui (1876–1965). Poster. Mitsukoshi Department Store, Completion of the Restoration of the West Building of the Main Store and the New Shinjuku Branch, 1925. 107 × 73.5 cm. Collection of The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

while shopping, Mitsukoshi was consistently a modern trendsetter, complicating what was otherwise a strict delimiting of Edo scripts to wholly “traditional” business enterprises. Parallel identities could thus be indicated by pairing the *hige moji* logo with the company name in a range of different scripts, from capitalized Roman letters to highly expressive hand-drawn *kanji* design characters, many of which were created by Mitsukoshi’s design director Sugiura Hisui (fig. 9). The store’s modern identity was amplified in its promotional material with representations of its stylish new architectural edifices and its nattily dressed customers. Mitsukoshi’s interest in maintaining a connection to Edo was not merely a nostalgic nod to the past. To augment its signature business of selling kimono fabrics, the department store aggressively promoted the revival of various period styles. In her compelling study of Mitsukoshi and the prewar Japanese consumer market, Jinno Yuki has described the store’s central role in the construction of taste through its sponsored culture study groups, most prominently the Trend Association (Ryūkōkai) founded in 1905 and the group’s public relations journal *Fashion (Jikō)*. Mitsukoshi launched an enormously profitable Edo-period “Genroku” (1688–1703)-style fashion campaign that developed into a widespread “Genroku boom” during the period immediately after Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese war (1904–5).<sup>23</sup> Alongside the burgeoning demand for Western-style (*yōfū*) goods, the continued appeal of Japanese-style (*wafū*) goods, such as kimonos, traditional drinks and foodstuffs, and sweets, inaugurated a distinct strand in marketing

<sup>23</sup> Jinno Yuki 1994, 123–29.



FIGURE 10 Kaō Soap Promotional Calendar, 1932.  
Kao Corporation, Tokyo

catering to what became known as “Nihon shumi,” or “Japanese taste.” As evidence of the importance of this marketing sector, Hamada Masuji dedicated an entire volume of his design compendium to the area of Nihon shumi, advertising characterized by its aesthetic references to earlier Japanese forms of design display and packaging.

Corporate logotypes and corporate identity were as diverse as the companies for which they were created. In a competitive consumer market, manufacturers needed to differentiate themselves through their public image, and the visible language of letterforms greatly helped articulate their identities. The Nagase Company, manufacturer of the popular Kaō soap product, is a prime example of the sophisticated promotional techniques that innovative companies deployed in print publicity.<sup>24</sup> In a small 1932 Kaō soap advertising calendar, the text, in *kanji*, *rōmaji*, and *katakana*, travels in three different directions and is written in four different scripts (fig. 10). Distributed to loyal retailers at New Year’s, the calendar served a double promotional function by both promoting the company and directly showcasing its main product, the Kaō soap bar, which is displayed prominently in the middle of the composition in a new modern vermilion packaging designed by Hara Hiromu. Hara’s distinctive package design had been chosen in 1930 by open competition, and it was put into production in 1931 as part of a large-scale promotional campaign for “New and Improved Kaō” (Shinsō Kaō). On the calendar, the image of the soap bar itself opens up to reveal the months of the year.

FIG 10

<sup>24</sup> For a full consideration of Kaō advertising design in the 1920s and 1930s, see Weisenfeld 2004.

The brand name Kaō Sekken (Kaō soap), in semicursive logo script, appears at the top and in the center of the bar. A created compound, the name draws on Chinese poetry and refers to the beautiful fragrance of the “king of a hundred flowers,” the peony. However, the character combination would not have been widely comprehensible to Japanese consumers and therefore, alongside the *kanji*, written horizontally from right to left, is the phonetic reading, rendered vertically on the right side of each character in *katakana*. *Rubi* (alternately, *ruby*) or *furigana*, as such parallel annotative phonetic reading marks are known, are written above or beside *kanji* to gloss their transliteration, as many characters have several readings. Printed in a smaller point size than regular type, *rubi* (named in the nineteenth century after the British 5.5-point type size called “ruby”) are generally written in *hiragana*, but they can also appear in *rōmaji* or *katakana*, as is the case here.<sup>25</sup>

Historians date the application of *rubi* back to the earliest Japanese texts, for instance, the eighth-century *Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihon Shoki*) and *Records of Ancient Matters* (*Kojiki*), but those *rubi* simply provided alternative *kanji* readings. It is believed that *rubi* as we know them today came into common use after the creation of phonetic syllabaries in the ninth century in order to indicate in Japanese texts written in Chinese (*kanbun*) the reading of words that originated from native spoken Japanese, what was called *kunyomi*. While *rubi* were most widely used in the Edo period, when literacy increased dramatically, they were also prominent in modern mass newspapers and magazines. There were even newspapers written entirely in phonetic syllabaries, known as *furigana shinbun*.

The use of *rubi/furigana* was another point of contention for language reformers. The debate came to a head in the mid-1930s, right when the Kaō Sekken advertisement was being produced. Opponents, many of whom had studied in the West — for example, the writer Yamamoto Yūzō (1887–1974) — argued that this kind of annotative gloss was exceptional and did not exist in any other world languages. They felt that it perpetuated the use of difficult *kanji* and stood as an obstacle to language reform that would bring written and spoken Japanese closer together. Moreover, as a symbol designed to assist in reading, it was seen as a cultural crutch that was “uncivilized,” signified weakness, and cluttered the page. Supporters, on the other hand, advocated *rubi* as critical in the spread of literacy and as an important supplementary tool, imparting meaning that could be used dialectically with written text to enhance understanding, thus serving as a kind of contextual annotation. This function has been borne out in contemporary usage, in which *rubi* often serve as an abbreviated form of meta-textual commentary. While abolitionists succeeded in persuading the Japanese Home Ministry in 1938 to issue an official advisory to avoid the use of *rubi* in mass media journals and newspapers as well as in textbooks, *rubi* still visibly persisted in the public sphere on a reduced scale, a strategic weapon in the arsenal of graphic designers.<sup>26</sup>

Through a skillful deployment of visible language, the Kaō calendar was able to occupy every front. The *katakana rubi* gloss on the name associated the product

<sup>25</sup> For a general history of *rubi* and their rhetorical use in the Edo period, see Ariga Chieko 1989. I would like to thank

John Carpenter for bringing this essay to my attention.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 318–20.

with something foreign, as foreign loan words (*gairaigo*) were often transliterated in *katakana* rather than *hiragana*. It thereby reinforced the connotations of the newness of the product and an inherent association with Western cosmetics and modern hygiene practices. The Roman lettering “Kao Soap” on the package and above and below on the mount is round and loopy, almost as if written with toothpaste squeezed out of a tube, while the upbeat and rhythmic lilt of the letters imbues the product with a modern stylish air. The calligraphic brand name and its references link the soap with a long-standing Japanese sinophile poetic imagination. The stylized *rōmaji* adds a whiff of cosmopolitanism. The *katakana* reinforces the Western and modern roots of this hygiene product, the promotion of which benefited from government campaigns for national health and welfare.

To take this analysis a step further, the small *kanji* catchphrase “hinshitsu hon’i” (quality standard) printed in black from right to left, directly above and to the right of the brand name, in a highly simplified sans serif Gothic-style typeface, evokes a machine aesthetic that mirrors the high-quality mechanized production that the Nagase company proclaimed in its broader advertising campaigns in an effort to ensure consumer confidence in the quality of its products. Such regularized, rationalized type (without the decorative serif embellishments) imputed similar qualities to the production of the commodity. Gothic type was simple and clean,<sup>27</sup> underlining that Kaō soap, as advertised, 99.4% pure, was, without a doubt, clean. It is impossible to determine whether consumers, or even designers themselves, were overtly cognizant of these multivalent connotations or whether their visual enculturation in letterforms was so complete that this visual language functioned at an unconscious level.

The Kaō calendar also shows that Japanese letterforms were able to exhibit a free-form directionality — something that entered Western typographic design only with the experimentations of modernism. Multidirectionality is inherent in the polyglot nature of the Japanese language and enhances the possibilities of communication through editorial design. When first approaching a page for editorial layout, Japanese designers are confronted with the question of whether the text should read vertically or horizontally, and whether it should be read left to right or right to left. This tremendous personal liberty in making aesthetic choices also causes designers no end of difficulty, as each design decision was, and still is, freighted with ideological as well as aesthetic import.

Despite repeated attempts at standardization throughout the twentieth century, directionality is still an open issue, with most textbooks written horizontally and most popular magazines and newspapers written vertically. Like the linguistic reformers discussed above, some early twentieth-century modernization advocates even recommended abolishing vertical typesetting (*tategumi*).<sup>28</sup> In Japan, horizontal writing was associated with the West and was therefore a symbol of modernity. In the postwar period advocates of horizontal writing made a spurious biological argument

<sup>27</sup> Fujisawa Eihiko explains the origins and connotations of the Gothic typeface and its affinity to Chinese and Japanese square *kanji* forms. Fujisawa Eihiko 1930.

<sup>28</sup> Tanaka Ikkō 1999, 6. Word spacing and punctuation were also important contested areas of reform. See Twine 1984.

based on the side-by-side position of the human eyes. The association of horizontal text with modernity was not lost on the Meiji government, which during the period 1872 to 1883 took the bold and symbolic move of switching the orientation of Japan's national currency from vertical to horizontal type.<sup>29</sup>

The ongoing cultural consequences of these design choices are exemplified by a more recent crisis over promotional materials for the 1998 Olympics in Nagano, Japan, when the Japanese committee could not decide whether to print the multilingual promotional material, which included *kanji* and *rōmaji*, vertically or horizontally. There was an imperative to express the theme of the Nagano Olympics — “internationalism” (*kokusaisei*) — typographically, with vertical type encoded as Asian. The director of editorial design, Hara Kenya (born 1958), is said to have suggested to the promotion committee that everything be in horizontal type to underscore the international sentiment.<sup>30</sup> In the end, while the typeface on the official Nagano poster by Aoba Masuteru (born 1939) was in Roman letters read from left to right, the trilingual official program for the opening ceremony designed by Hara was rendered in a combination of *kanji* and Roman letters in vertical and horizontal type, respectively. Hara's layout balanced the vertical and horizontal texts through a skillful use of the pictorial elements. For instance, the large headline character 御柱 (read “*on-bashira*”), the visual focus on the top of the page, refers to the name of a pillar-raising ceremony that has been celebrated in Nagano for centuries. In this ceremony, incorporated in the Olympic opening ceremony, eight wooden pillars were raised in the four cardinal directions of the main stadium. Four pairs of vertical red pillars pictured in the program layout anchor the Japanese text and are aligned with the columns of the Roman text as a mechanism for visually unifying the page.<sup>31</sup> Highly inflected with nationalistic elements based on Buddhist and Shinto religious rites, the opening ceremony was an aestheticized spectacle of Japaneseness. Because of the need for accessibility by the international audience, however, the editorial design opted for a simple, clear typeface and a separate but equal layout that clearly differentiated and defined the Japanese elements while maintaining comprehensibility. The work represents a highly refined typographic essentialism in an internationalist context.

Internationalism and the perceived need for a universal canon of typographic standards inspired modernist designers in Europe in the 1920s to propose simplified, so-called elemental, typographies that would be clear and without embellishment (sans serif). They based their argument on the need to represent the rationalized, machine-production ethos of the modern age. Functionalism and transparency were the objectives. Reducing letters to their basic, hence elemental, forms was a means to this end. Bauhaus typography in Germany was the most representative of this trend, associated with the major design figures Herbert Bayer, Josef Albers, Joost Schmidt, Jan Tschichold, and László Moholy-Nagy. I have discussed the Japanese modernist and avant-gardist contribution to the discourse on new typography elsewhere, but it

29 The Portuguese first introduced horizontal lettering to Japan in the Momoyama period, in the late sixteenth century. See Matsuoka Seigō and Koga Hiroyuki 1999, 14, 16.

30 Ibid., 12.

31 Kim Min-Soo 2003, 183–84.

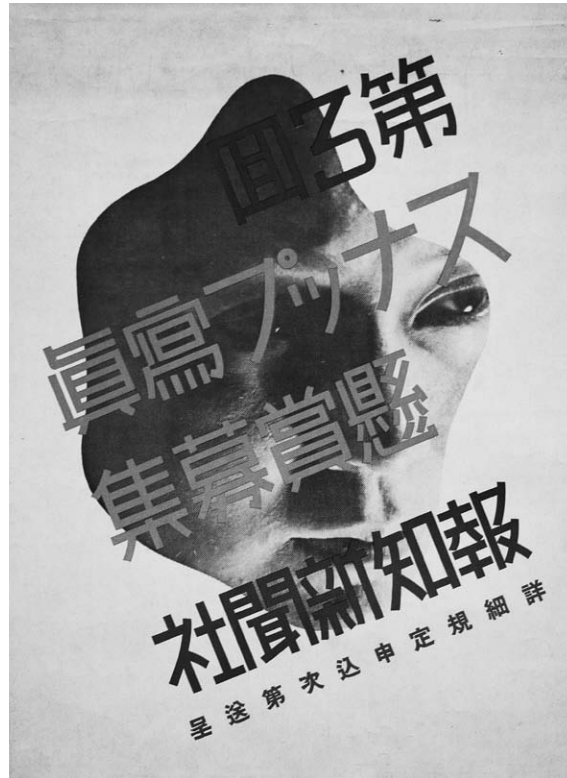


FIGURE 11 Hara Hiromu (1903–1986). Poster. Third Annual Snap Photography Competition, Hochi Shinbunsha, 1935. 52.2 × 37.8 cm. Tokushu Paper Mfg.

should be noted here that artist groups like Mavo and its leader Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901–1977) were instrumental in interpreting these emerging theories of typography and strategies of typographic layout in Japan.<sup>32</sup> In their eponymous magazine published from 1924 to 1925, Mavo explored the expressive potential of text-image compositions and dynamic asymmetrical layouts, including diagonal and even upside-down printing, further breaking down the orthogonal orientation of the page. The magazine reflected the dynamic tension between the standardizing impulses of mechanically produced forms of new typography and the continuing appeal of expressive hand-drawn letterforms.

New typography came to be known in Japan as *tanka moji* (simplified characters) and was taken up by a range of Japanese designers in the 1930s. Prominent among them was Hara Hiromu, the designer of Kaō's new soap packaging. A graduate of the printing division of the Tokyo Metropolitan Craft School (Tokyo Furitsu Kōgei Gakkō), Hara was a leader in the study of typography in Japan, forming the research group Tokyo Printing Artists Circle, abbreviated as PAC (Tokyo Insatsu Bijutsuka Shūdan), in 1932. In the same year he also translated Jan Tschichold's important typography manifesto *The New Typography* (*Die neue Typographie*, 1928) from German into Japanese (*Kihonteki kappanjutsu*). While questioning some of the basic premises of new typography, such as the exclusive use of lowercase letters from the standpoint

32 See Weisenfeld 2002, chap. 5. Murayama Tomoyoshi's 1926 book *Study of Constructivism* (*Kōseiha Kenkyū*) was a landmark publication in Japan for articulating the philosophical principles of rationalized typography. In its edito-

rial layout, the book also formally instantiated the very principles it was describing, using a simplified Gothic-style typeface with geometric layout elements to order the text on the page.

FIG 11

of increased legibility, Hara in the introduction to his translation urged Japanese designers to seriously reassess the communicative potential of letterforms. He later advocated editorial compositions that integrated text design and photography (what Moholy-Nagy had dubbed the “typophoto”), which Hara and his associates at the design studios Nippon Kōbō, Chūō Kōbō, and Tōhōsha actively employed in their work in poster design and pictorial graphs from the mid-1930s through the war years.<sup>33</sup> Hara’s poster design for the Hōchi shinbun–sponsored Third Annual Snap Photography Competition of 1935 displays his stark geometric simplification of letterforms for maximum clarity (fig. 11). The individual character strokes are unmodulated, their ends squared off without any additional decorative accent. The blue and red characters and the *kana* letters, though evenly spaced and of similar overall proportions, are set slightly on the diagonal to animate the layout. The colored letterforms are also superimposed on an organically shaped fragment of a dramatically illuminated black-and-white photograph of a person’s face, thereby contrasting the softly curving contours of the image with the strict angularity of the script.

The promotion of legibility and script simplification, in the interest of complete transparency and functionalism, avoids the ideological values undergirding this process of standardization. That is to say, what might be lost or excluded in the attempt to gain clarity? And what values does the notion of clarity itself signify? As Katie Salen has noted in her analysis of a seminal 1932 essay by Beatrice Ward describing typography as a “crystal goblet,” the assertion of functional transparency belies the fact that letterforms are never neutral or transparent, thus never free of ideological values. The advocacy of the moral virtue of functionality, machine aesthetics, and rationalism by Ward and other new typography proponents excluded other visible linguistic dialects. Standardization and normalization created so-called default settings, and in the process marginalized and pathologized alternative modes, whether these be subjective handwritten decorative letterforms or consciously historicizing script forms.<sup>34</sup>

FIG 8

This cultural standardization was never totalizing, and it was countered on many fronts. In general trade publications like Hamada’s multivolume design compendium, for instance, new typography was interspersed with examples of historical Euro-American and Asian scripts, a melding that would have been anathema to purists like Tschichold. Hamada even sometimes curiously paired the new typography with Japanese scripts. In the two-page spread featuring the Edo sampler with *hige moji* discussed above (see fig. 8), the facing page displays a stylized Futura type sans serif printed text (the German reads “the writing is the soul of each advertisement”) in a geometric editorial layout with abstract ornamental elements. This juxtaposition is a perfect representation of the lively coexistence of divergent lettering tendencies in modern Japan.

Despite the widespread appeal in Japan of new typography (much of which was actually hand-rendered), expressive lettering design continued to flourish throughout the prewar period, particularly in the *kinema moji* (cinema letters) of film publicity.<sup>35</sup> It was felt at the time, however, that this design had lapsed into a kind of re-

33 Kawahata Naomichi 2002, 55–57. For a full biographical account of Hara’s career in design, see *ibid.*

34 Salen 2001.

35 Nishimura Mika 1998.

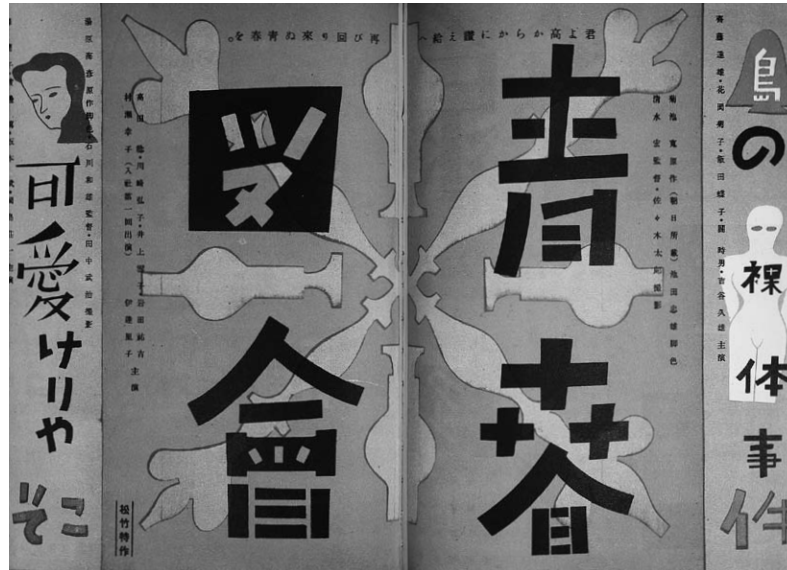


FIGURE 12 Kōno Takashi (1906–1999). Magazine advertisement in *Kinema Junpō*, 1931.  
*Seishun Zue* (Pictures of Our Youth), Shōchiku Cinema, 1931 release, directed by Shimizu Hiroshi.  
 Waseda University Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum

petitive decorative mannerism that merely added ornamental flourishes to regular characters without fundamentally rethinking the form of the characters themselves. In response to this popular style of advertising, one designer, Kōno Takashi (1906–1999), who joined the Shōchiku Cinema Company in 1929, developed a distinctive fanciful style that was soon widely imitated throughout the design field.<sup>36</sup> Kōno produced numerous posters and print advertisements for films in which he played with the thickness, balance, and proportion of characters, all of which are demonstrated in his charmingly awkward and abstract design for a magazine advertisement promoting Shōchiku's 1931 film *Pictures of Our Youth* (*Seishun Zue*; fig. 12). Kōno's personal lettering style had enduring appeal among designers well into the postwar period. Because this style draws on the intentional asymmetry and emphasis on imperfection ascribed to Japanese aesthetics, rather than on the rationalizing and standardizing impetus of Euro-American modernism in typography, it has been deemed by design historians to be an alternative, distinctly "Japan-made modernism" (*wasei modanizumu*).<sup>37</sup>

FIG 12

The dissemination of Kōno-style quirky lettering in the broader field of prewar commercial advertising is evident in a small pamphlet printed by the Morinaga Confectionary Company as a program for the company's sponsored competition of celebrity performances in the mid- to late 1930s (fig. 13). This small bit of anonymous ephemera vividly reveals the complex choreography of typographic design and its ability to speak simultaneously on multiple linguistic registers. The front shows a typographic layout with simple, deliberately awkward characters announcing the title of the celebrity competition, "Morinaga Meiryū Kyōenkai." The character strokes are short and intentionally clumsy, almost childlike in their awkwardness. The characters are also internally unbalanced with exaggerated and stunted proportions. The result

FIG 13

36 Kawahata Naomichi 1999, 55. For an in-depth discussion of Kōno's long career and rare examples

of his extensive oeuvre, see Kawahata Naomichi 2000.

37 Kawahata Naomichi 2000, Foreword.



FIGURE 13 Morinaga Confectionery Company. Pamphlet (front and back), mid-1930s. Morinaga Celebrity Recital Contest (Morinaga Meiryū Kyōenkai). Morinaga & Co., LTD

is one of playfulness. Below, in a red box, are the words “Morinaga’s show,” written in a simple lowercase Roman cursive script paired with the figure of a bird.

The letters and characters on the back of the pamphlet, an advertisement for Morinaga milk chocolate, display several different logotypes and are in vivid contrast to those on the front. The Morinaga milk chocolate candy bar floats in the upper right with the company’s name in its signature gold serif Roman lettering. Immediately below it is the company trademark, an upside-down angel grasping the letters TM (for Taichirō Morinaga [1865–1937], the company’s founding president). In the middle, the brand-name logotype for Morinaga milk chocolate is rendered in chunky bevel-edged *kanji* and *katakana* scripts that exude a sense of heartiness, which is in turn mirrored by the smiling faces of the two young women pictured at the bottom, in all likelihood shot by well-known commercial photographer Horino Masao (1907–2000). The young women’s hair is tousled as if they were running, and they radiate health and vigor. Marketed as a nutritional food supplement that would provide healthy calories to the still undernourished Japanese population, Morinaga’s milk chocolate was, as proclaimed in the white *Minchō* text in the red box at the top, “A youthful food that produces the beauty of good health!” Appealing to families and the youth of Japan, Morinaga was able to promote its basic sales points of vigor, health, and fun through the orchestration of diverse letterforms.

## CONCLUSION

The 1920s and 1930s mark the emergence of a modern professional design field in Japan. An increasing division of labor in the visual arts (particularly between fine artists and those in applied arts) led to a broad-based systematization of specialized knowledge. A new professional self-awareness among designers took place concur-

rently with the rapid expansion of the consumer market, and the mass media ignited a widespread interest in the communicative potential of letterforms for national and commercial purposes. Japanese designers transmitted artistic, subjective, and ideological meaning through the skillful orchestration of the linguistic multivalence of the Japanese language. A renowned graphic and typography designer, the late Tanaka Ikkō (1930–2002), addressed such multivalence in another connection: “Japanese can skillfully differentiate the use of chopsticks and forks. They don’t feel that it is difficult to distinguish which one to choose. These are two tools that have coexisted for them since they were born. They eat Japanese food [*washoku*] for breakfast, Chinese [*chūka*] for lunch, and for dinner they eat authentic Western food [*seiyōshoku*] that is exactly the same as Westerners eat. They get in a Western-style bathtub and sleep in a *tatami* room. None of these are unusual customs.”<sup>38</sup> Just as the Japanese today live a daily life inflected by transcultural culinary practices, they also live in and continue to produce a dynamic visual culture animated by a polyglot language made visible through typography and letterform design.

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38 Quoted in Matsuoka Seigō and Koga Hiroyuki 1999, 31.

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