Introduction

On February 8, 1904, Imperial Japan launched war against Tsarist Russia and changed the global balance of power. A Japanese armada under Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō attacked the Russian Far Eastern Fleet—inflicting heavy losses, driving the Russians back into their anchorage at Port Arthur, and clamping a blockade on them.

On February 10, Japan formally declared war.

Despite the initial surprise attack, the war itself was no surprise. Both nations looked upon northeast Asia—Manchuria and Korea in particular—as critical to their strategic interests. Russia was developing its vast eastern frontier and completed the Trans-Siberian Railway between Moscow and Vladivostok (a distance of 5,772 miles, passing through eight time zones) at the turn of the century. Links to lines running across Manchuria (the Chinese Eastern Railway) and south to Port Arthur (the South Manchurian Railway) were in operation by 1903. Ever since the 1880s, Japan had cast its eyes west to Korea ("the dagger pointing at the heart of Japan") and the northern reaches of China, including Manchuria north of the Great Wall. The two expanding empires were on a collision course.

The Russo-Japanese War took place neither in Japan nor Russia, but largely in Manchuria—the vast part of China that lay north of the Great Wall.

Much of the fighting focused on control of Port Arthur, where the Japanese had bottled up the Russian Far Eastern Fleet at the outset of the war in February 1904. The greatest land battle took place at Mukden in March 1905. The greatest naval battle was Admiral Tōgō's devastating May 1905 victory at Tsushima, where he destroyed a huge Russian fleet that had sailed around the world from the Baltic.

The vast distance that Russian troops and supplies had to travel to get to the front posed enormous difficulties. The Trans-Siberian Railway and connecting railway lines were the key to these challenging logistics.

Tension between the two countries had been intense since 1895, when Russia, France, and Germany intervened to force Japan to give up one of the territorial spoils it acquired by crushing China in the Sino-Japanese War. The prize in question was a strategic leasehold in Port Arthur and the surrounding Liaodong Peninsula—and three years later, in 1898, Russia extracted this same concession from China for itself. That is how the Russian fleet came to be in Port Arthur; and that is why Admiral Tōgō's early victory brought almost delirious joy to the Japanese.

Japan entered the war well prepared. Its military machine had been enlarged and updated in major ways in the decade since the defeat of China. Beyond this, a bilateral military alliance with Great Britain, dating from 1902, guaranteed that no other nation would intervene on Russia's side (for this would trigger British support of Japan). Japan and Russia would be left to pound each other one against one. To help finance the war, Japan raised large loans in London and New York.

The Russo-Japanese War was brutal and left hundreds of thousands dead before a peace treaty was signed on September 5, 1905. For journalists, photographers, artists, and military attaches from around the world, it was an engrossing and even attractive affair—modern war turned into a spectator sport. Foreign observers flocked to the scene, and large numbers of them traveled officially with the Japanese army. British, American, French, and German warships gathered off the China coast to witness the mayhem, occasionally dropping anchor together. In the United States and Europe, photographs of this titanic struggle between "East" and "West" were published in periodicals and collected in large-format volumes.

Military attaches, journalists, and photographers from around the world flocked to Asia to observe the Russo-Japanese War. This photo depicts "embedded" Westerners who accompanied Japanese forces led by General Kuroki.

War photos were also popular in Japan, where their reproduction in the mass media made graphic coverage of the front "realistic" and widely accessible in ways that were only beginning to emerge at the time of the war against China a decade earlier. Not only had the technologies of warfare changed. The technologies of communication had changed as well. The brilliantly colored "war prints" that flooded the market during the Sino-Japanese War suddenly seemed old-fashioned.

The disappearance of a Japanese audience for woodblock-print "reportage" of the war was precipitated by more than just wide-scale reproduction of photographs, however. As it happened, the Russo-Japanese War coincided with the emergence of picture postcards as a global phenomenon. Photographers, artists, illustrators, flat-out propagandists—all suddenly possessed, in these engaging little mass-produced graphics, a new vehicle for reaching a huge popular audience.

International postal conventions made it possible to circulate these images globally. Collecting postcards became a modest way to become cosmopolitan without much expense, and the war between Japan and Russia provided the first dramatic international spectacle for postcard manufacturers to focus on in common. Admiral Tōgō's surprise attack triggered a postcard boom—not just in Japan but around the world.

In retrospect, although there are exceptions, most photographs of the Russo-Japanese War are prosaic—warships not in action, officers and conscripts sitting for the camera, troops en route to battle, soldiers in trenches, stationary artillery, barren landscapes and nondescript buildings. Cameras were still too slow for action photos as such, and no cameramen had the consistent, steady, tragic eye of a Mathew Brady. Certainly for viewers today, it is only rarely that these photographs succeed in capturing the imagination.

This is not the case with the general genre of picture postcards of the war. A great proportion of these is literally colorful (the significant breakthrough involved perfection of high quality color lithography just after the turn of the century). The graphics accommodate a variety of mediums and styles, extending from photos, paintings, and sketches to caricature and caustic political cartooning. Many carry a distinctive "national" flavor. At the same time, postcards can be idiosyncratic and subjective, for more than a few artists and illustrators imposed their own distinctive styles.

In Japan, the kiss of death to war reportage in the form of woodblock prints thus came from picture postcards as much (or more) than from photography per se. This new mode of expression attracted many of the nation's talented artists, including some who were or would become well known. The postcards themselves became ephemeral little works of art as well as little gems of propaganda.

This makes Japanese postcards of the Russo-Japanese War interesting in their own right, but this is just the half of it. Because Russia was also producing postcards of the war, and not only Russia but also France, England, Germany, Italy, and the United States, the great "war in the Far East" of 1904-1905 is the first modern war we can revisit, in a compact and manageable way, from a truly multi-national perspective.

We can literally "see," through thousands of fixed-format images (postcards have remained the same size to the present day), what people throughout the world were being offered as a mirror to the war and all that it portended.

Images from the Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Unless otherwise indicated, all are by unidentified artists and date from the 1904-1905 war years.

Heroes & Heroines

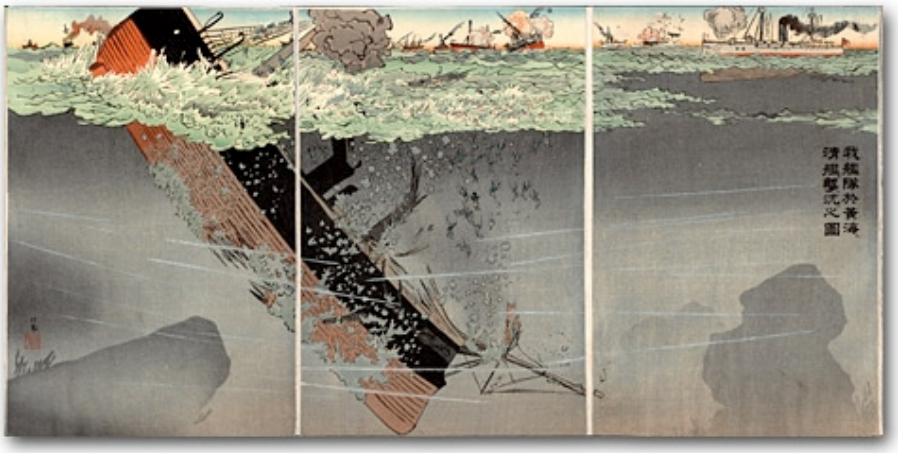
By sheer happenstance, the history of postcards overlaps with the early history of modern Japan. In Europe, postcards first appeared in Austro-Hungary at the very end of the 1860s and quickly spread to other nations. Their origin thus coincides with the Meiji Restoration of 1868 that saw the overthrow of the feudal regime and genesis of the modern Japanese state. In the early 1870s, the Japanese government modeled its postal system after that of Great Britain and commenced issuing plain postcards on which the address was written on one side and a message on the other. By the late 1880s, as Anne Nishimura Morse (curator of the stunning Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) has noted, this was the most popular form of mail in Japan.

In Europe, issuance of privately printed postcards was authorized in 1898. The Japanese government followed suit two years later, paving the way for manufacturers to enter the market and compete for consumers with attractive graphics. (Until 1907, the address took up the blank side of the card in Japan, and messages had to be written on the illustrated side.)

With the outbreak of the war in 1904, manufacturers found a huge audience hungry for the appealing mix of war coverage and visual entertainment that postcards provided. Apart from some official sets issued in large printings by the Ministry of Communications, it is estimated that around 4,500 different designs were commercially produced in Japan commemorating the war, with print runs usually in the neighborhood of one to three thousand. Shops that had featured woodblock prints during the earlier conflict with China became natural purveyors of these new graphics; by the end of the war, there were more than four thousand such outlets in Tokyo alone.

Kendall Brown, writing about the Lauder collection, has observed that postcards quickly became "both symbols and vehicles of modernity" in Japan. Mass production, consumerism, commercial art, homogenization and democratization of culture, the emergence of "middle-class" tastes—all this was part and parcel of the postcard phenomenon. So was a new sense of "internationalism," since these cards crossed national boundaries and became more than just mail. They became advertisements for national cultures and national glories. They contributed to the popularity of international "pen pals." They became collectors' items, frequently issued in sets and series or with captions in several languages.

The transformation in visualizing modern war (and modern times more generally) that took place in Japan between the wars against China and Russia emerges vividly when we juxtapose celebratory woodblock prints from the earlier war and postcards commemorating victory in the latter. In a well-known woodblock triptych by Kobayashi Kiyochika, for example, a Chinese cruiser torpedoed off the Yalu River in 1894 sinks beneath the waves. We behold the stricken warship underwater, corpses of its crew suspended in the brine.

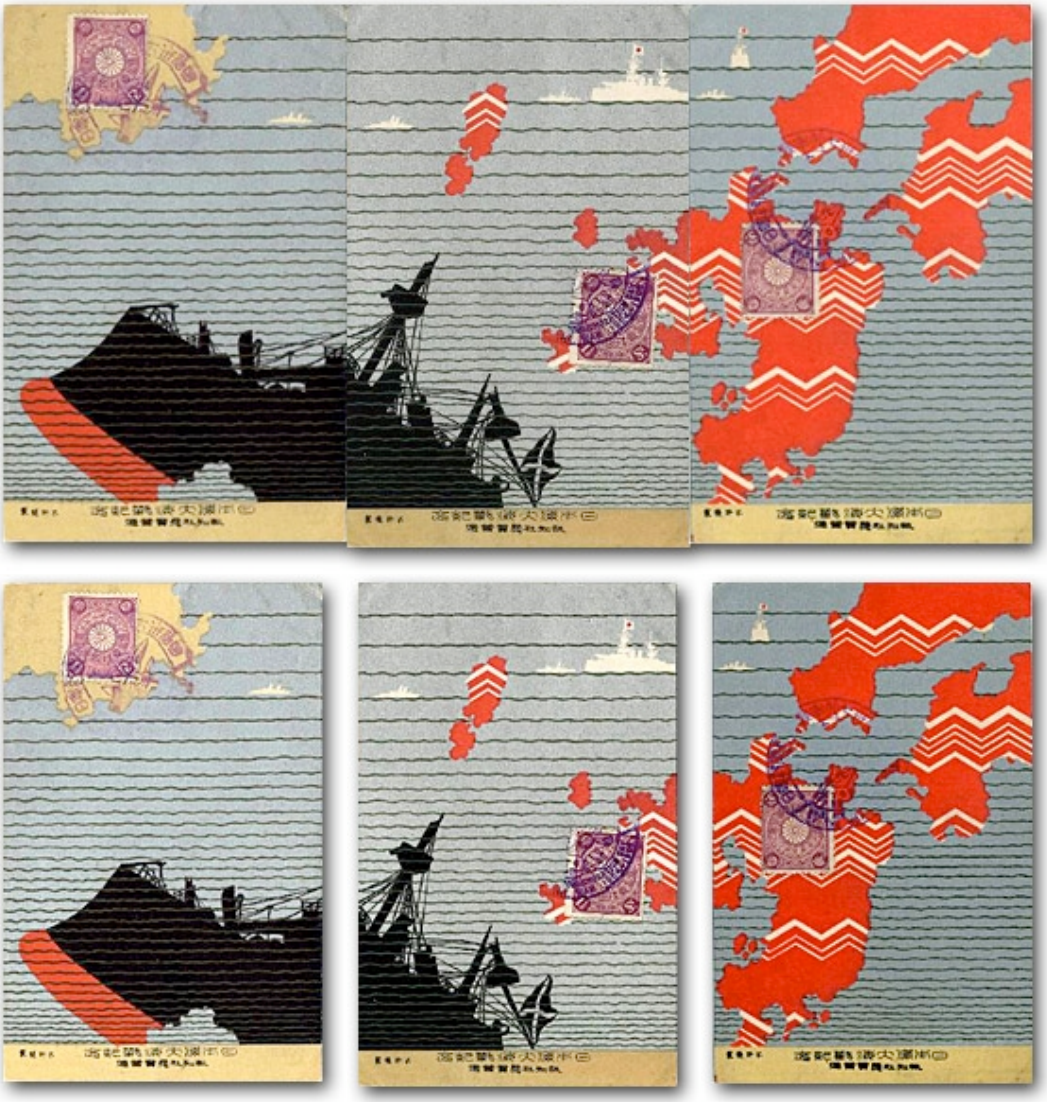


This stunning woodblock triptych from the Sino-Japanese War foreshadows some of the more avant-garde artwork that emerged in postcards of the Russo-Japanese War ten years later.

"Illustration of Our Naval Forces in the Yellow Sea Firing at and Sinking Chinese Warships" by Kobayashi Kiyochika, October 1894

[2000.380.22a-c] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Much the same striking image of a stricken enemy vessel is reprised in a postcard set published in 1906 in commemoration of "the great battle of the Sea of Japan" that took place on May 27, 1905. In this celebrated victory, Admiral Tōgō managed to sink Russia's Baltic Fleet (which had sailed around the world to meet its doom). Here three postcards combine to make the scene, and the artist's vision and style are both similar to Kiyochika and strikingly different. The islands of Japan are introduced as almost abstract geometry. The enemy ship, flattened into a black and red silhouette, sinks through a grid of serrated parallel lines representing waves. Admiral Tōgō's victorious warships float like white ghosts (or angels) high in the scene, red dots no bigger than pinheads signaling the rising sun flag. Text at the bottom of each card states that the design was produced for a competition sponsored by a newspaper company. The artist (whose name is not given) was clearly inspired by the vogue of European art nouveau.



These three postcards commemorating the Russo-Japanese War form a "triptych" that is strikingly similar to Kiyochika's famous woodblock print—and at the same time dramatically innovative and modern.

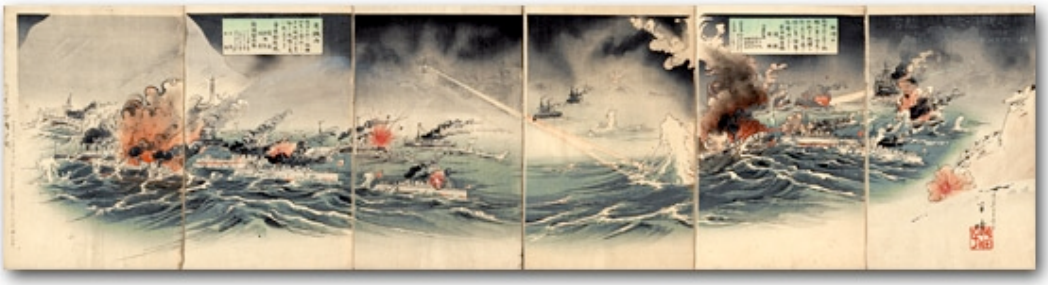
"Commemorating the Great Naval Battle of Japan Sea," three-postcard series presented as a single image (top) and as separate cards (bottom), 1906

[2002.1577] [2002.1576] [2002.1578]

This impression of entering a significantly altered and "up-to-date" world also comes through vividly when we set a more extended set of postcards commemorating Tōgō's 1905 triumph against comparably sweeping woodblock panoramas. Designed by Saitō Shōshū and made up of ten cards that fit together like fine joinery, this commercial tour de force combines an expansive painterly vista of sea and ships with elaborate borders top and bottom, all studded with that most "realistic" of contemporary representations: photo portraits of the Japanese commanders.

The art of the postcard was elevated to a truly sumptuous level in this extended series by Saitō Shōshū depicting "The Battle of the Japan Sea" in 1905. (One card in the set [far right] has yet to be found.) Elegant and intricate compositions such as this reveal the broader appeal of postcards as a popular art form to be collected as well as used as an everyday means of communication.

Woodblock artists also turned their hand to panoramic naval battles. In the jubilation over Admiral Tōgō's successful surprise attack against the Russians in February 1904, for example, Yasuda Hanpō churned out a six-block "Illustration of the Furious Battle of Japanese and Russian Torpedo Destroyers outside the Harbor of Port Arthur." Set against postcard art like Saitō's assemblage, these ambitious prints suddenly seem modest and old fashioned. Certainly, that is how Japanese of the new century came to regard them. By the time Admiral Tōgō dispatched the Baltic Fleet (15 months after the initial surprise attack), woodblock war prints had all but disappeared from the scene.



Panoramic woodblock prints such as this six-block depiction of the opening naval battle between the Japanese and Russian fleets quickly fell into disfavor in the face of the postcard vogue.

"Illustration of the Furious Battle of Japanese and Russian Torpedo Destroyers outside the Harbor of Port Arthur" by Yasuda Hanpō, 1904

[2000.72a-f] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The melding of disparate images and design elements in a fluid montage that characterizes Saitō's evocative set was typical of the times—yet one more expression of being temperamentally and stylistically up-to-date. More than popular artists in other countries, the Japanese frequently set photos in painterly settings or drew on their rich tradition of design to make each card a tasteful and original composition. In a broader sense the postcard genre itself, taken as a whole, became an almost boundless montage that drew together an expansive range of "modern" images.

The portraits of individual naval commanders embedded in Saitō's panorama also reflected something new on the scene: not merely singling out contemporary heroes (an old practice indeed), but turning them into celebrities with instantly recognizable faces. In the circumstances, most of these modern heroes were military officers and civilian statesmen; and none was accorded greater popular veneration than Admiral Tōgō. Tōgō became the prototype of what came to be known in early-20th-century Japan as the *gunshin* or "military god."

In Saitō's set, Tōgō's was but one of six portraits. No other hero, however, graced more individual postcards or was presented in so many different stylistic ways. Sometimes he appears with no caption at all; sometimes the card carries a short caption in both Japanese and English. Certain iconic photo portraits are replicated in drawings. In one rendering, the admiral's benign visage peers out from the most "Western" of frames, a perfect heart—and is accompanied by the most Japanese of touches, a poem linking war and the beauty of nature ("Russian warships scattered like autumnal leaves").


Russian Warships scattered like autumnal Leaves.

Scores of postcards celebrated the exploits of military heroes such as Admiral Tōgō, who began the war in 1904 by driving the Russian Far Eastern Fleet into Port Arthur and blockading it there, and whose devastation of the Russian Baltic Fleet in the great battle of Tsushima in May 1905 marked the closing stage of the war. Postcards, with their great stylistic variety, contributed greatly to the war myths and celebrity cults spawned in Japan by the Russo-Japanese War.

"Admiral Tōgō and Battleships" 1906
[2002.3651]

"Russian Warships Scattered Like Autumnal Leaves" (left)
[2002.3613]

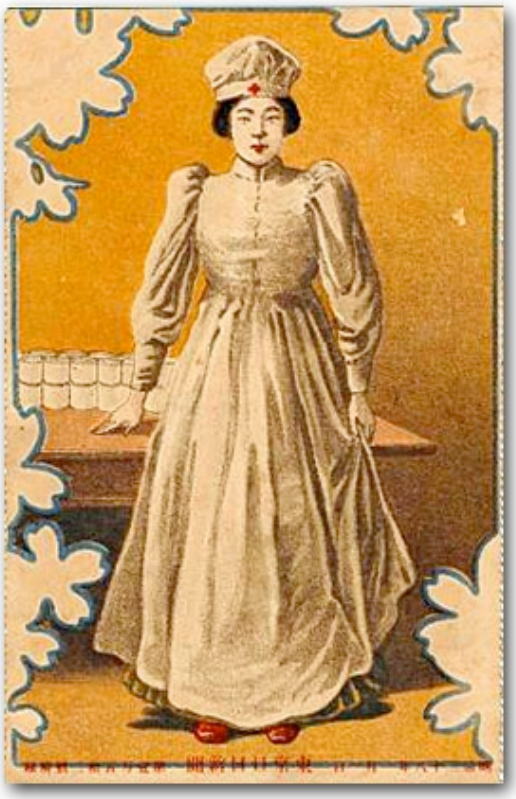
"Admiral Tōgō, the Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Squadron" (right)
[2002.5457]

"Official Commemoration Card: Japanese Warship at the Front Decorated on the Occasion of His Majesty's Birthday, with Admiral Tōgō"
[2002.4193]

"Painting of Admiral Tōgō on Deck" (with hand-written message)
[2002.2942]

"Admiral Tōgō on the Bridge"
[2002.1410]

Postcard artists also took care to personalize another new manifestation of the nation's modern identity: its embrace of the International Red Cross. War with Russia was more than a demonstration of military might. It was simultaneously a showcase of the nation's worthiness to stand alongside the "civilized" nations of the world—and there was no better way of demonstrating this than by behaving humanely to captured and wounded enemy in accordance with principles exemplified by the Red Cross. (The Red Cross was founded in 1863 and convened its first international conference in 1867, just months before the Meiji Restoration took place in Japan. The pertinent Geneva Conventions concerning treatment of wounded enemy were adopted in 1864, and the Hague Conventions governing "laws and customs of war" were adopted in 1899, between the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars.)



Postcards featuring the Red Cross thus resonated with many overlapping themes. Here again, in style as well as subject, they made the nation's modernity available for all to see. At the same time, they reminded viewers of the personal sacrifices of the country's fighting men and—by featuring female nurses—the purity and nurturing qualities of its women. With their comely nurses, moreover, the Russo-Japanese War artists also neatly updated an old tradition of "pictures of beauties" (*bijin-e*). More than a few postcard nurses carried an erotic charge. Some, indeed—including photos as well as drawings—essentially amounted to "pinup girls" and were sent to soldiers and sailors who treasured them as such.

"Nurse from Tokyo Nichinichi shinbun"
[2002.3600]

Many postcards called attention to Japan's civilized conduct and embrace of humanitarian ideals by depicting its participation in the International Red Cross. A conspicuous element of modern "pin-up" girls entered the picture in portrayals of beautiful Red Cross nurses.

"Nurse and Soldiers" 1906
[2002.3597]

"Red Cross Nurse" by Kaburaki Kiyokata
[2002.953]

"Nurse Holding a Branch of Camellia" (right, with hand-written message)
[2002.3594]

"Nurses" from the series "Thousand Contemporary Figures" (left)
[2002.3599]

"Nurse Holding a Cherry Blossom Branch" (with hand-written message)
[2002.3593]

Occasionally postcards offered the novelty feature of revealing something new when held to the light. In one of these (marked "hold card to light" in English), a nurse handsome as any woodblock-print beauty gazes down on what illumination reveals to be not just a wounded soldier in bed, but a wounded Russian. (No identification is necessary: his features are craggy and his nose is enormous.)

"Show-through" postcards, which sometimes carried instructions in English, revealed hidden images when held to the light. Here the patient is transparently a wounded Russian, as his craggy features and prominent nose make abundantly clear.

"Nurse Looking Over a Wounded Soldier"
[2002.1572] [2002.1572b]

Here was a confluence of impressions indeed: war as healing, with a classic Japanese beauty in Western garb, a whiff of romance, and a reassuring propaganda message concerning the nation's adherence to international humanitarian norms. Usually, such propaganda did not require holding cards to the light. Japanese medics were portrayed tending wounded Russians on the battlefield. Nurses posed for group photographs with their burly Russian patients.

The Japanese took great care to portray their humane treatment of wounded Russians. Captions frequently were given in English as well as Japanese.

"Our Soldiers Conveying Wounded Russian Soldiers to Red Cross Hospital at Chemulpo" 1906
[2002.5119]

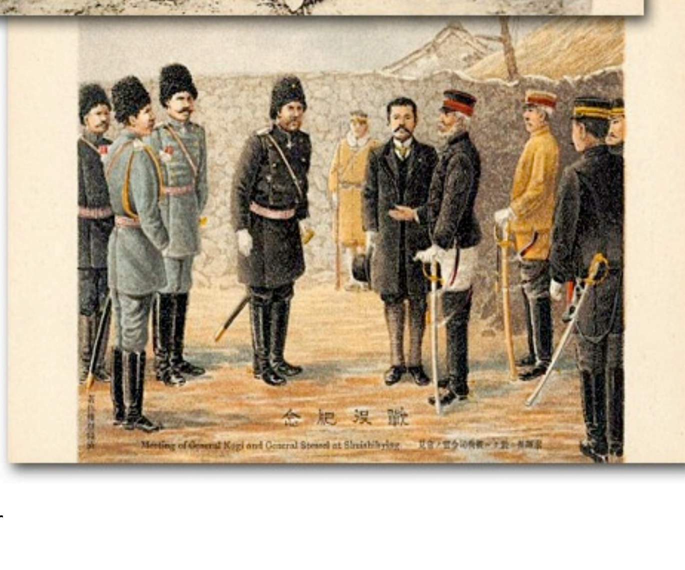
"Wounded Russians in the Red Cross Hospital at Chemulpo"
[2002.2965]

Such solicitous care, the postcards suggested, extended to prisoners and defeated foe in general. One series of softly rendered drawings, for example, includes the unexpected scene of captured Russians learning Japanese calligraphy. Another postcard, captioned in Russian as well as English and Japanese, features an artsy photograph of Japanese joining POWs at an outdoor party celebrating a Russian holiday. After hard-fought battles, it was not uncommon for the high command of both sides, Japanese victors and Russian vanquished, to pose for a collegial photo together or be "commemorated" in a dignified official color lithograph.


露國捕虜兵手習をなす
RUSSIAN CAPTIVES LEARNING JAPANESE PENMANSHIP.


靜岡俘虜收容所庭内ニ於テ露國祭日ニ付酒宴ノ景
GARDEN PARTY TO CELEBRATE RUSSIAN FESTIVAL IN THE SHIZUOKA QUARTER FOR RUSSIAN PRISONERS, JAPAN.
Пирушка русскихъ плѣнныхъ въ саду при помѣщеніи въ день русскаго праздника въ г. Сизуока въ Японіи.


旅順開城ニ際シ我軍司令官乃木將軍及ステッセル將軍會見ノ
光景中央ノ右ハステッセル左ハ乃木將軍最右ハ伊地知參謀最
左ハレース參謀其他ハ幕僚ノ將校及通譯官ナリ


Meeting of General Nogi and General Stessel at Shuishihying

Japanese postcard propaganda sometimes romanticized the war almost as a benign cultural exchange—as seen in the above scenes of Russian POWs learning calligraphy and celebrating a holiday. Other postcards emphasized the common humanity (and shared elitism) of high-ranking officers on both sides who came together in the wake of Japanese victories.

"Russian Captives Learning Japanese Penmanship"
[2002.3440]

"Garden Party to Celebrate Russian Festival in the Shizuoka Quarter for Russian Prisoners, Japan,"
[2002.3287]

"Meeting of General Stoessel and General Nogi upon the Surrender of Port Arthur"
[2002.3275]

"Official Commemoration Card: Meeting of General Nogi and General Stoessel at Shuishiying"
[2002.4201]

Images from the Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Unless otherwise indicated, all are by unidentified artists and date from the 1904-1905 war years.

Victory

The other side of celebrating Japan's chivalry toward captured, wounded, or defeated foe was celebrating Japan's moral as well as martial superiority. Chivalry did not preclude condescension, and many graphics put the Russians down. One of the more sophisticated postcard sequences, for example, done in silhouette without captions, renders the Russians as bears routed by a burning red sun.

"Tug-of-War between Japanese and Russian Soldiers"

[2002.3403]

Some postcards tell the story of the war without any captions whatsoever. In this sophisticated "silhouette" set, both sides are represented by fixed symbols as well as human figures—the Russian as bears or an eagle, for example, and Japan as a blazing red sun.

"Russian Bears Versus Rising Sun (left)"

[2002.3405]

Other artists were less subtle. A series featuring bilingual Japanese and English captions includes illustrations of how "The Russian ran away hoisting a Red Cross flag," and how "The Russian surrendered hoisting a white flag."

These bilingual graphics mock Russian retreat and surrender. The addition of English captions reveals an acute sense of both public relations and commercial opportunities on the part of the Japanese, since this made the cards accessible to a wider international audience.

"The Russian Ran Away Hoisting a Red Cross Flag"
[2002.5266]

"The Russian Surrendered Hoisting a White Flag"
[2002.5265]

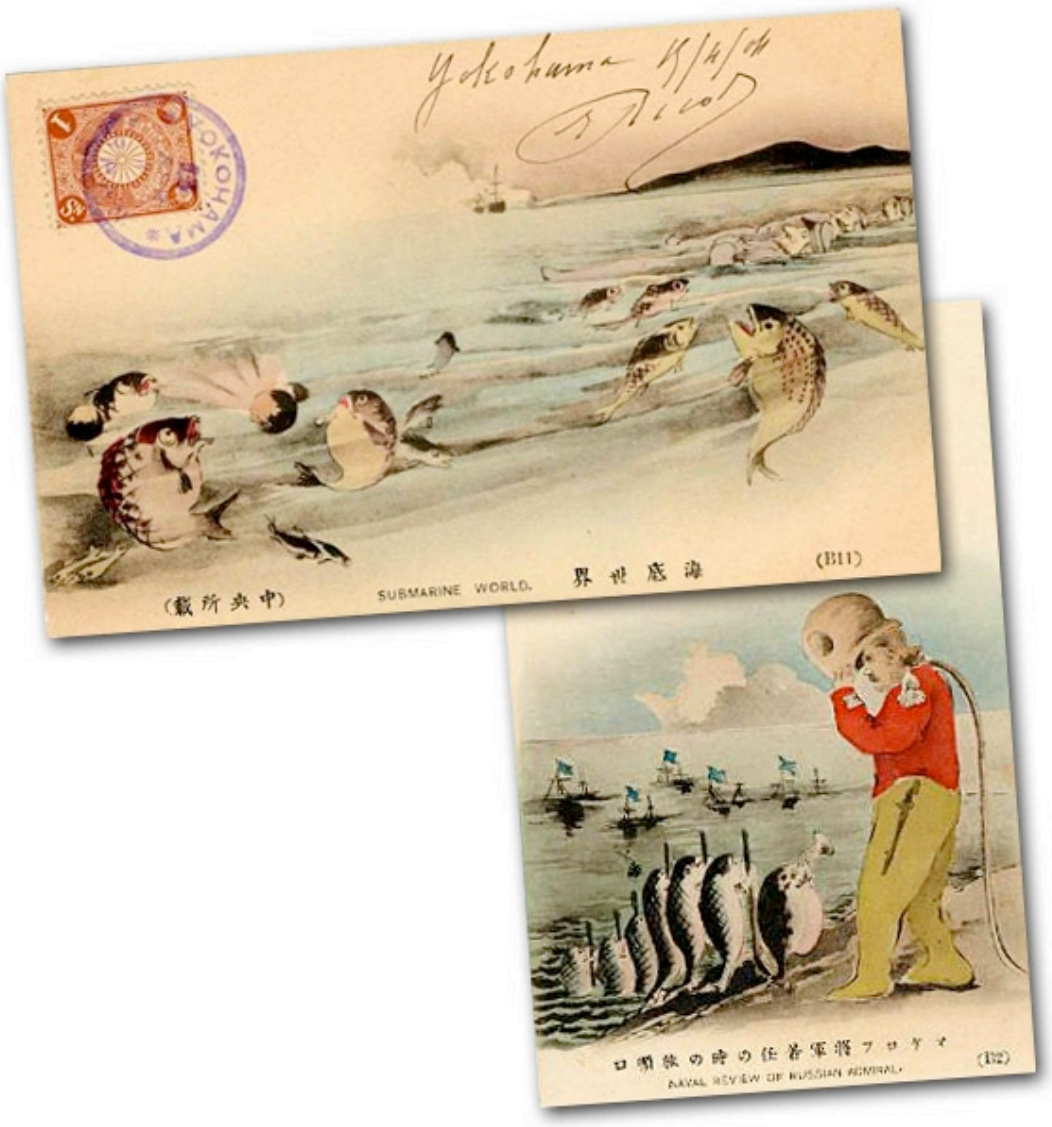
Another series, carrying captions in English alone and obviously directed to a foreign audience, includes a stalwart Japanese officer on a bluff, peering through binoculars over this caption: "Look how they run away. We never saw such cowards." Another card in this series pictures Japanese cavalry galloping over a tattered Russian battle flag. Here the caption reads: "So great was their hurry to get away, that they left even their colours behind."

These Japanese postcards deride the enemy with English captions alone:

"So Great Was Their Hurry to Get Away, That They Left Even Their Colours Behind."
[2002.2408]

"Look, How They Run Away, We Never Saw Such Cowards."
[2002.2407]

Sometimes mockery was cartoonish (and, in such cases, the humor was usually sophomoric). Thus, a postcard captioned "Naval review of Russian admiral" depicts a Russian donning a diving suit to view his sunken fleet, while fish stand at attention to greet him. The same series also offers fish and floating Russian corpses under the title "Submarine world."



The sinking of the Russian navy inspired mockery of a harsh sort, with the Russians having joined the fish as corpses in a "submarine world.".

"Submarine World"
[2002.5284]

"Naval Review of Russian Admiral"
[2002.5282]

Trembling cartoon Russians are literally forced to eat lead, or bite the bullet. Retreating cavalry sit backward in their saddles to give the appearance that they are really charging.

In these examples of forced humor, abject Russians "bite the bullet" (above), while retreating Russian cavalry pretend that they are really charging.

"The Feast of the Bullet and Ball," from the series "Laughing Stock"
[2002.3455]

"Russian Soldiers Retiring, Apparently Charging"
[2002.5287]

Doomed soldiers at Port Arthur drop their colors and dance around in consternation at the sight of the Japanese army and navy. A weeping officer hoists a white flag in one hand and an electric light bulb in the other to make sure his abject surrender will be seen.

These caption-less graphics belittle the Russians who were forced to surrender Port Arthur early in 1905.

"Russian Soldiers in a Fluster"
[2002.5095]

"Russian General Showing off a Flag of Surrender to a Japanese General in the Distance"
[2002.3554]

Another cartoon rendering of flags takes Japanese children playing war games as its subject. Youngsters waving the rising sun flag are naturally routing those playing the role of Russians, but in this case the artist has added a special touch. Seated on a rise nearby is a boy waving both the Japanese flag and the Stars and Stripes—clearly suggesting American support for Japan's great victory. (U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt brokered the peace conference that brought the war to a formal end in September 1905.)

"Children Holding Japanese and Russian Flags" 1906

[2002.3552]

In this illuminating postwar postcard of Japanese children playing war games at home, a boy in the background holds the Stars and Stripes as well as Japan's own rising sun flag—an apparent reference to U.S. support of Japan's victory.

Other runs of postcards essentially replicate in miniaturized form the militaristic style and outlook hitherto associated with woodblock war prints. Indeed, one can literally see artists of the old school tumbling into this compact new mode of communication. In illustrations of this sort, the play of heroism versus ineptitude is usually etched with particular sharpness. Japanese sailors kick Russians into the brine; sword-wielding officers lead their disciplined men in chopping down the foe; a Japanese cavalryman topples his Russian antagonist in one-on-one combat; Russian corpses lie scattered as Japanese troops storm Port Arthur under the Rising Sun flag.


JAPANESE CAVALRY DRIVING AWAY THE RUSSIANS.
FALL OF PORT ARTHUR

Although postcards replaced woodblock prints as the most popular art form for visualizing the Russo-Japanese War, some postcards retained the old-fashioned "look" of the woodblocks.

"The Great Battle of Japan and Russia"
[2002.3414]

"Japanese Soldiers Attack Russians"
[2002.5350]

"Japanese Cavalry Driving Away the Russians"
[2002.5117]

"Fall of Port Arthur"
[2002.5296]

In the full corpus of picture postcards of the war, however, such formulaic renderings —like the woodblock prints themselves—seem now, as they already did at the time, out of date and out of tune. Photo postcards, for example, convey the nature of the war in ways these more traditional renderings could not match. Modern weapons, including artillery captured from the enemy and displayed as "spoils" back home, are more impressive in collotype prints or black-and-white halftones.

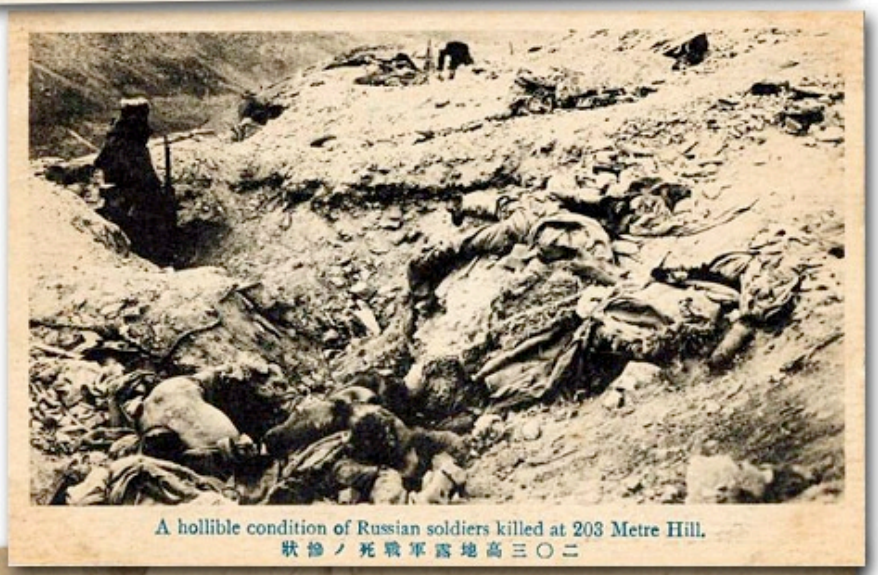
Although photography was introduced in the 1840s and 1850s, the technology of mass reproduction was not perfected until the turn of the century. The Russo-Japanese War marked the moment when war photography became truly accessible to the general public worldwide—and postcards were one of the major vehicles for their dissemination. As seen here, photos captured such subjects as the machinery of modern warfare in ways conspicuously different from the impressions usually conveyed in artists' illustrations.

"Firing of a 6" Quick Firing Gun" (1906)
[2002.3247]

"Official Commemoration Card: Siege-guns Firing on the Enemy at Port Arthur"
[2002.4182]

"Captured Russian Artillery Displayed at the Imperial Palace Garden" (1906)
[2002.2985]

Huge explosions erupt like volcanoes on the Manchurian landscape. Real enemy corpses litter the battlefield. In one unusual tinted photograph, sailors pose after battle with a few of their wounded, including a comrade in a full-body splint that looks almost like a makeshift coffin.



Photographs also succeeded in conveying in new ways the explosiveness, carnage, and human faces of modern war. Some photos were artificially tinted to enhance their impact, as seen in the unusual group portrait of Japanese sailors (above), which includes a wounded comrade in full body splint.

"The Explosion of a Caponiere of the North Fort of East Kikwan Hill"
[2002.3261]

"Horrible (misspelled) Condition of Russian Soldiers Killed at 203 Metre Hill"
[2002.2974]

"Japanese Sailors with a Wounded Colleague"
[2002.2935]

More often however, and more originally, Japanese postcard manufacturers romanticized the victorious war on land and sea by combining photographs with elegant designs, or by relying entirely on modish and distinctly Westernized (and yet still distinctively Japanese) illustrations. In the former case, land battles are framed in autumn foliage, melting snow, even smoldering ruins that somehow manage to soften the real impact of the war on local populations and communities in Manchuria. Warships may be set against a naval motif such as anchors, but just as often they are graced with a border or background of flowers.

In their Russo-Japanese War graphics, Japanese postcard designers often introduced a strikingly "modern" approach by combining war photographs with accomplished (and often aesthetically elegant) artists' illustrations. This beautification of war was sometimes further enhanced by embossing parts of the card.

"The Battle along the Yalu River"
[2002.1558]

"Vignette of Railroad and Border with Winter Scene"
[2002.2410]

"Entry of Marshal Oyama, Commander-in-Chief, into Mukden; Mukden Railway Station after the Battle"
[2002.1560]

"Official Commemoration Card: Our Ship on Blockade Duty off Port Arthur and Our Ships at Anchor"
[2002.4173]

"Naval Boats Vignette with Japanese Military Flag and Chrysanthemums in Background"
[2002.3571]

Many postcards that eschewed photographs entirely are almost breathtaking in their stylistic verve. A flat, abstract, fire-red explosion carries no caption at all. A mysterious wisp of cloud (or smoke) and tiny Japanese flag float suspended in a red sky above an outline of tile roofs suggestive of the continent. In one remarkable design, a sailor strides through a torn Russian flag toward Japan's own triumphant military ensign. Another image employs lines fine as fingerprints (and pink, blue, beige, and black colors) to turn underwater mines into a delicate design motif. A bold silhouette rendering of a sleek cruiser cutting through high seas, with swallows flying across the foreground in the opposite direction, might well have made for a celebratory poster—except that the vessel flies the Russian flag. One remarkable design even celebrates picture postcards themselves, scattering several commemorations of the naval war on an elegant underwater scene of small fish and graceful strands of seaweed.

Avant-garde Japanese artists used the new medium of postcards to introduce popular audiences to a world of dramatic images that often seemed to make the harsh realities of the war secondary to sheer aesthetic virtuosity. Explosions, enemy warships, underwater mines, nationalistic symbols such as the rising sun and cherry blossom; all were rendered with an ebullience that sometimes bordered on adoration.

"Side View of Temple Building with Red Sky Background"
[2002.2697]

"Red Explosion Motif and Silver Lines" (with hand-written message)
[2002.2700]

"Balloon with Japanese Flag in the Sky" (with hand-written message)
[2002.2698]

"Sailor"
[2002.1412]

"Russian Fleet and Swallows"
[2002.5172]

"The Fall of the Variag"
[2002.5476]

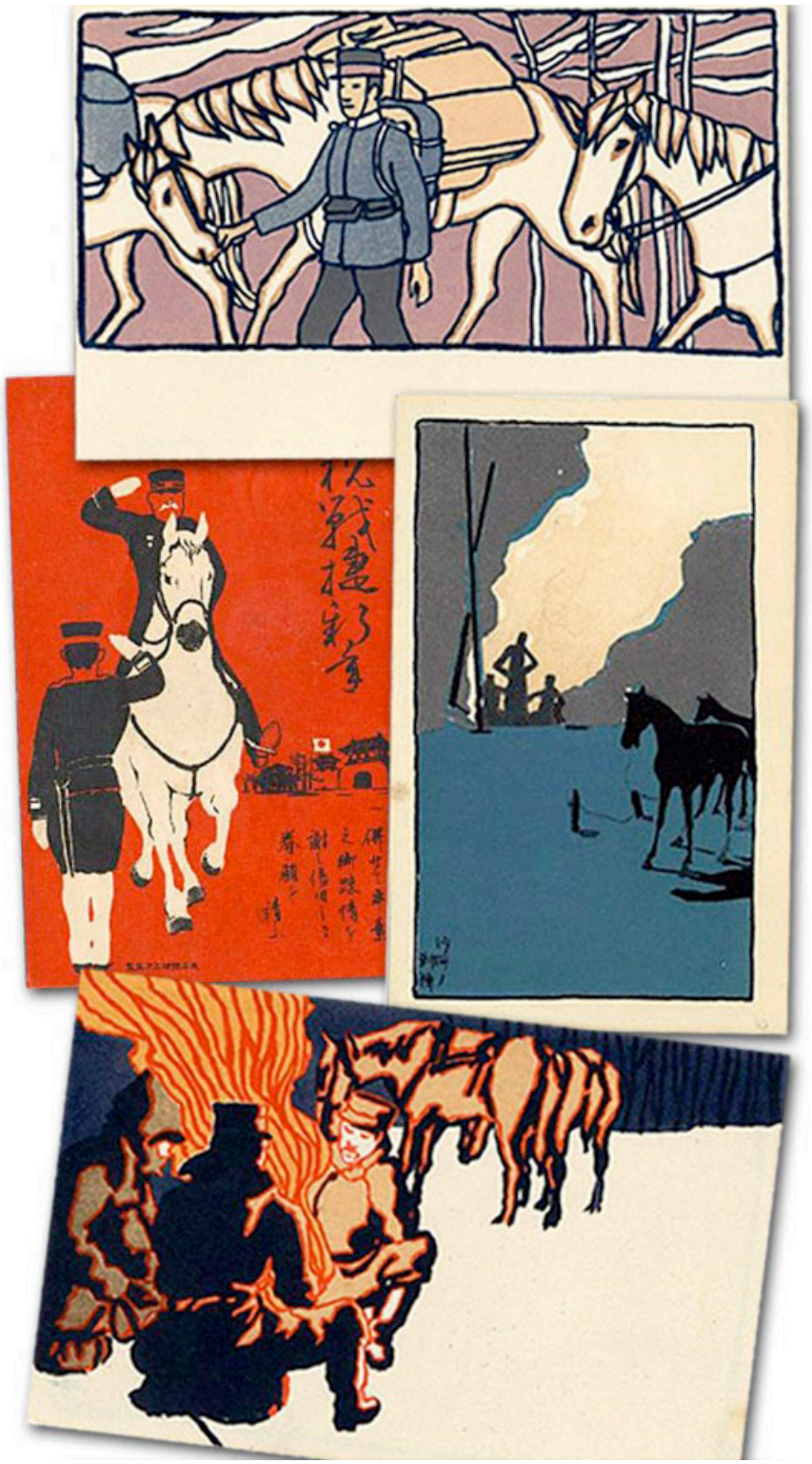
"Sinking Russian Naval Boat"
[2002.15761]

"Rising Sun, Cherry Blossoms, and Eagle"
[2002.3138]

"Naval Boat Kolz"
[2002.1128]

"Danger Off Port Arthur"
[2002.1409]

Illustrators let their imaginations run free in comparable ways for the imperial army. Horses, to take one simple but popular example, might carry generals, cavalry, local "mounted bandits," or supplies; or rest unsaddled while their riders gathered around a campfire. In one composition artfully linking the battlefront and home front, an attractive female student hands a bouquet of flowers to a handsome mounted officer who is framed, as it were, in a perfect rising-sun circle.



Ordinary aspects of modern land warfare such as infantry movements, bivouacs, and cavalry were turned into a remarkable range of original and still distinctively Japanese designs.

"Relocating Soldiers"
[2002.5215]

"Soldiers Holding their Guns Ready" (left)
[2002.3131]

"Soldier" (right, with hand-written message)
[2002.1392]

"Soldiers on Horseback with Rising Sun Motif" (left)
[2002.3327]

"Advancing Soldiers Viewed from Above" (right)
[2002.1374]

"Japanese Soldier Leading Horses"
[2002.1565]

"Saluting Officer on Horseback" (left, with hand-written message)
[2002.5188]

"The Opposing Troops of the Shaho River" (right) by Kanokogi Takeshirō
[2002.1563]

"Japanese Soldiers around Campfire"
[2002.1566]

"Army Troops"
[2002.1380]

"Mounted Bandits" (left, with hand-written message)
[2002.5186]

"Japanese General on Horseback" (right)
[2002.15763]

"Soldier on Horseback Receiving Flowers from a Female Student"
[2002.2403]

Images from the Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Unless otherwise indicated, all are by unidentified artists and date from the 1904-1905 war years.

Celebration

"Women back home" were an integral part of the postcard boom, and artists devoted almost as much time to the home front as they did to the battlefront. Unlike the earlier war against China, where Japanese fatalities were relatively light, close to 100,000 Japanese perished in the Russo-Japanese War. The sense of ultimate sacrifice was always present, and picture postcards did not exclude the grieving widow and orphaned child from their subject matter.

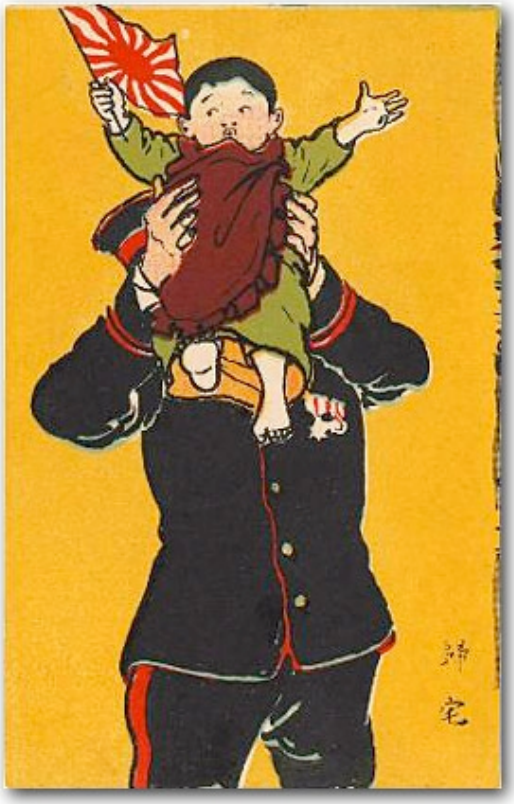
Japanese postcards did not shy away from the hardship and sacrifice the war imposed on families back home. This rendering of a war widow with her little boy incorporates a memorial service for the war dead and a scene of the Shōkonsha at Yasukuni Shrine, where the souls of those who died for the emperor were enshrined.

"Surviving Members of a Family"
[2002.3371]

Most often, however, the message was one of concerned but optimistic support for the men on the front. Wives dreamed of their husbands celebrating victory in battle. They waited patiently with their children for heroic homecomings, and devoured letters sent from the front. Women sewed clothing for the military and joined in making the "thousand-stitch belly warmers" (*senninbari*) that symbolized an intimate relationship between brave men abroad and their communities back home. (In theory, a different girl or woman added each of the thousand decorative stitches on these stomach warmers.) Schoolgirls in their distinctive uniforms lined up to offer a ceremonial banzai for the men at the front. Fashionable Japanese women (sometimes virtually indistinguishable from high-society Caucasian ladies) saw troops off with flowers at the railway station.

"Occupation of Nanshan and Dream of the Homes"
[2002.3370]

"Mother and Child Giving a Soldier a Send-Off"
[2002.3182]



"Returning Home"
[2002.5180]

"Mother and Child Holding the Japanese Flag," 1906
[2002.3515]

"Commemoration of the Ceremony of the Army's Triumphant Return"
[2002.5130]

"Letter from the Front"
[2002.6865]

"News from the Seat of the War"
[2002.5125]

"Woman Sewing for a Soldier"
[2002.3181]

"With Whole Heart"
[2002.5244]

"School Girls' Banzai*"*
[2002.5133]

"Ujima"
[2002.5179]

By far the most eye-catching "war" postcards seemed, at first glance, as far removed from carnage and sacrifice as could possibly be imagined. Almost amounting to a little sub-genre, these depicted victory celebrations at home and the popular frenzy for glorious "news" from the front.

In one of the more conventional but instructive postcard depictions of domestic war coverage, a traditionally dressed young woman stands in the doorway of a news shop that displays a large rising sun flag. All kinds of war reportage surround her. Newspaper street vendors hawk a special edition (the English caption on this bilingual card reads "Extra of Victory"). Two uniformed policemen and a male pedestrian in Western dress peruse the papers, while two other men wearing straw boaters read the news posted on the shop front itself. Woodblock war prints are also on display, alongside a nice self-referential touch: numerous postcards.

"Latest News from Seat of War" [2002.2406]

"Extra of Victory" [2002.5267]

Other illustrators found this communications boom not only appropriate as a subject, but also conducive to exceptionally energetic compositions. On one picture postcard, for instance, a newspaper vendor with tiny flags in his headband runs straight at the viewer. In another absolutely sensational rendering—done entirely in black and white against a red background—vendors hawk their papers while two stylish, anglicized gentlemen stroll into the scene engrossed in a newspaper they hold between them. (While this rendering is a fine example of the fresh eye artists brought to the scene, the lively street vendors might almost have run out of one of Hokusai's famous mid-19th-century sketchbooks of ordinary people in every imaginable pose.)

Celebration of the war was often indistinguishable from celebration of Japan's rapid Westernization and modernization—which included a great boom in mass communications. In this milieu, "news of the war" became, in and of itself, a popular subject for postcards. This emerged in depictions of traditional shops selling war prints and postcards, as well as scenes of hawking the latest news from the front. Rival newsboys butted heads, and crowds gathered around news sheets posted in public places. Some postcards not only depicted highly-Westernized "modern men" devouring the news, but also did so in a strikingly fashionable "art nouveau" style.

"Newspaper Man Rushing in the Latest"
[2002.1580]

"Newsboy Selling Extras" (left, with hand-written message)
[2002.3335]

"The Newsboys Selling Extras" (right, with hand-written message)
[2002.5245]

"Newsboys in Fight" (left)
[2002.5242]

"Newsboys Rushing with the Latest News" (right)
[2002.5241]

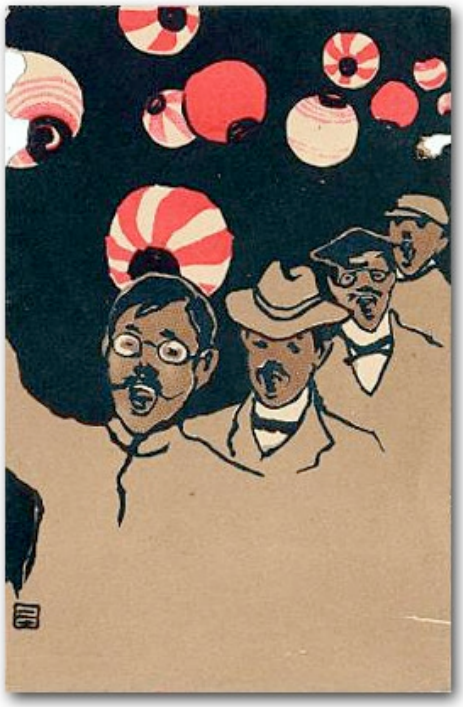
"News Runners Rushing in with the Latest"
[2002.1581]

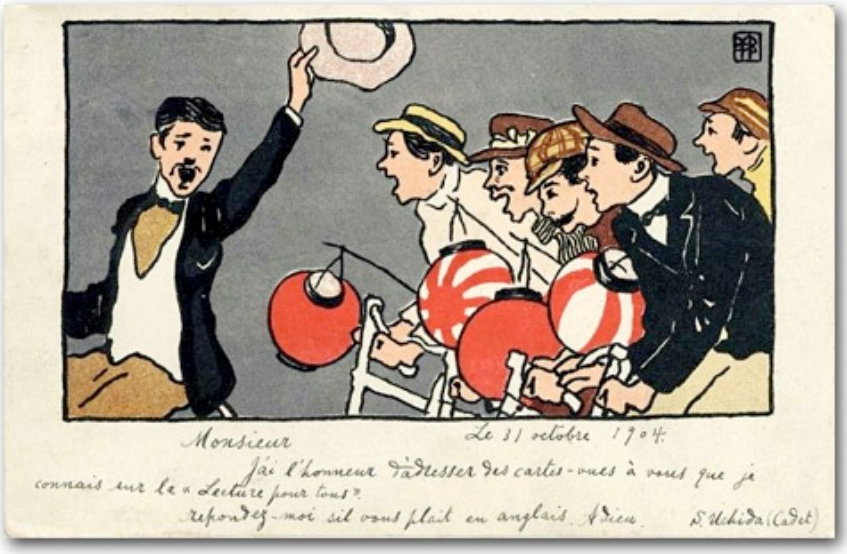
"Crowds Gathering to Read the News"
by Hashimoto Kunisuke (left, with hand-written message)
[2002.926]

"Newsboy Selling Paper"
by Hashimoto Kunisuke (right, with hand-written message)
[2002.927]

A favorite subject is “paper lantern” festivities, where the victory celebration spilled over into nighttime and festive lanterns were strung about and even hand-carried by participants. In one joyful rendering, men in Western suits and carrying lanterns ride bicycles to a celebration, each sporting a different style of hat. They do not really look Japanese at all. War, patriotism, celebration, and fashionable “Westernization” have all blurred into one.

The same exuberance pervades most depictions of victory celebrations. In many instances, seen without context or captions, these might easily pass for parties, festivals, or holidays utterly divorced from war. (Even where flags are featured, one can easily imagine some sort of national holiday or civic celebration.) Women wear up-to-date Western as well as Japanese fashions and hairstyles. Men commonly wear Western suits, and frequently even top hats.





Victory celebrations on the homefront drew festive crowds from all levels (including nattily-dressed high society), and often featured paper lanterns that could be illuminated in nighttime. This too captured the fancy of postcard artists and collectors.

"Crowds Celebrating with Flags" (left, with hand-written message)
[2002.1587]

"Celebrating War Victory," 1906 (right, with hand-written message)
[2002.1582]

"Parade with Japanese Flags" (left)
[2002.3358]

"People Marching Under the Commemorative Lanterns" (right)
[2002.1377]

"Triumphal Lanterns"
[2002.3130]

"Men Bicycling with Lanterns"
by Hashimoto Kunisuke (with hand-written message in French)
[2002.0928]

Images from the Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Unless otherwise indicated, all are by unidentified artists and date from the 1904-1905 war years.

Commemoration

After the war ended, especially in 1906, both the government and private publishers issued postcards commemorating Japan's victories—often in conjunction with parades and triumphal military reviews. (The three-card sinking ship with which this unit begins was published during these commemorations.) Some of these cards, especially those issued under official auspices, are conventional and predictable. At the same time, the government in particular also took this opportunity to promote "traditional" images from mytho-history and the age of the samurai that had rarely been played up during the war.

More striking by far, however, are postwar commemorative cards that carried the aestheticism seen in wartime graphics in ever more "modern" directions. These are not only highly Westernized, but again—certainly at first glance—sometimes seem to have little if any connection to war and destruction.

"Goni Fair: In Commemoration of the Triumph," 1906
[2002.1595]

This is the case, for example, with "triumphal" cards produced in conjunction with the 1906 Goni Fair, a trade show that had served since 1894 as a showcase for domestic crafts (ceramics, lacquerware, paper products, metalwork, etc.) and light industry (notably textiles). One Goni Fair postcard, for example, offers an art nouveau rendering of an elegant female representing sericulture. Stylized white moths rest along the line of her lithe body. Silk thread whirls gracefully behind her, against an abstract pattern of cocoons, while mulberry leaves form a border at the bottom. The woman's garment itself is a hybrid of kimono sleeve and the wasp waist of fashionable Western gowns. All that actually connects this image to the recent war is a bilingual caption that reads (in the English): "Published for the Goni Fair in commemoration of the triumph."

A companion postcard from the same Goni Fair series features a roundel enclosing a lovely muse and lyre, resting above a Western-style musical score. Although a popular motif in European art nouveau, the Japanese touch is both subtle and unmistakable. An embossed chrysanthemum decoration graces the muse's hair, and the musical score is *Kimigayo* ("His Majesty's Reign")—the unofficial emperor-centered national anthem that was composed in 1880, with lyrics taken from a tenth-century poem. (Basil Hall Chamberlain's well-known 1890 translation of *Kimigayo* runs as follows: "Thousands of years of happy reign be thine; / Rule on, my lord, till what are pebbles now / By age united to mighty rocks shall grow / Whose venerable sides the moss doth line.")

"Muse and Musical Score in Commemoration of the Goni Fair," 1906
[2002.1596]

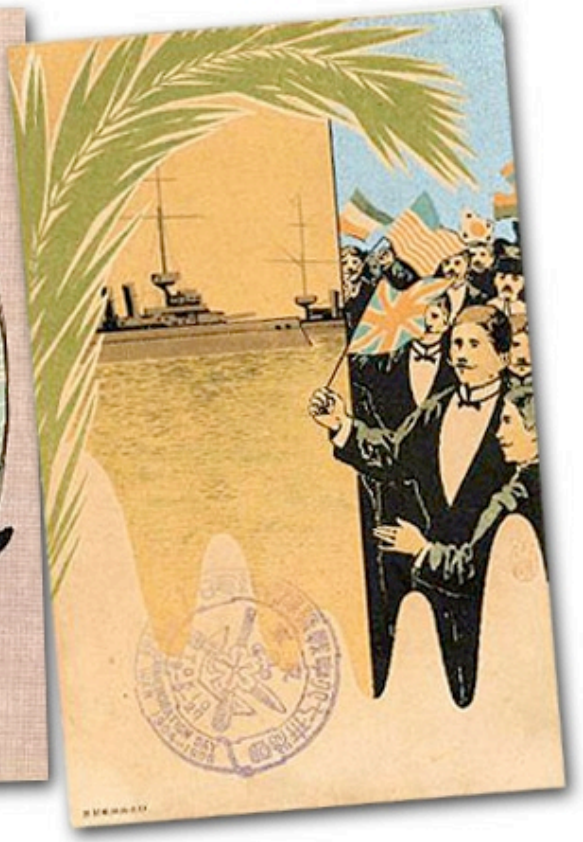
Kimigayo was introduced to classrooms and public ceremonies in the 1890s as part of a campaign to pump up the mystique of the imperial institution. For historians today, it is a good example of how "reinvented traditions" were carefully manipulated to buttress Japan's modern nationalism. With this little postcard, the resuscitated old poem went beyond the upholstery of a Western musical setting to acquire an up-to-date art nouveau gloss!

"Woman Holding Floral Garland" from the series "Commemoration of the Victory of the Russo-Japanese War" by Ichijō Narumi, 1906
[2002.936]

In another more restrained art nouveau rendering from 1906, an elegant kimono-clad woman holds up a wreath of flowers. Only the title of the series from which this postcard comes, "Commemoration of the Victory of the Russo-Japanese War," makes clear that this too is a celebration of martial triumph.

Other postwar postcards replicate the exuberance of wartime renderings of home-front celebrations and lantern parades—sometimes with an illuminating international spin. One such graphic, celebrating the first anniversary of Admiral Tōgō's May 1905 victory, offers men in formal dress waving British, American, French, and Japanese flags. The identity of the crowd is unclear—are these men a mix of nationalities? Japanese waving a variety of flags?—but the viewer is left with the understanding that Japan has taken its place among the great powers of the world, which all cheer its triumph. A more startling graphic in the same series picks up the lantern-parade theme with a vivacious, bare-shouldered Japanese woman strumming a samisen while sitting on a lantern with the markings of the British flag—obviously a salute to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance that enabled Japan to take on Russia without fear of another nation coming in on the enemy's side. Roman letters on one lantern read *Banzai Nippon*; Japanese writing on another celebrates Admiral Tōgō and the imperial navy.

*"*Banzai *Nippon*, Banzai *Admiral Tōgō" from the series "The Battle of the Japan Sea Commemorative Postcards," 1906*
[2002.1583]



"Commemoration of the Battle of the Japan Sea," 1906
[2002.5199]

Other postwar commemorative postcards are less humanized but hardly less innovative as plain design. In several three-card sets celebrating the victory over the Baltic Fleet in May 1905, for example, subject and design are wedded in the most subtle manner imaginable. The Russian fleet alone is framed with a border featuring the enemy's simple "X" flag (more properly known as the St. Andrew Blue Cross). Where the two fleets engage each other, the border becomes half the Russian ensign and half the Japanese sun-with-rays military flag. With Japan's decisive victory the sun-with-rays motif becomes dominant. In one of these sets, only two Russian flags remain in the border, near the forlorn funnels of a sunken ship.

Some postcard sets celebrating the first anniversary of the destruction of the Russian fleet in 1905 made innovative use of borders that featured Japan's sun-with-rays military flag and the blue-and-white St. Andrew Cross flown on Russian warships. One of the graphics above includes underwater mines floating amidst fish and seaweed.

"Commemoration of the Battle of the Japan Sea"
[2002.5201] [2002.5202] [2002.5203]

"Battle Scenes" from the set "Commemorative Postcards of Naval Battles in the Japan Sea"
[2002.1573] [2002.1574] [2002.1575]

Another 1906 celebration of Admiral Tōgō's great victory found inspiration in the "stained-glass" style fashionable in contemporary European and American design. Other artists turned artifacts of war as mundane as barbed wire and artillery shells into attractive emblems of Japan's glorious victory.

These handsome 1906 cards celebrating the anniversary of Admiral Tōgō's decisive victory over the Russian Baltic Fleet on May 27, 1905 feature the "stained glass window" effect associated with European art nouveau designs.

"Battleship" from the series "Commemoration of the Naval Battle of the Japan Sea"
[2002.1591]

"Waves Swallowing the Russian flag" from the series "Commemoration of the Naval Battle of the Japan Sea"
[2002.1594]

"Eagle and Anchor" from the series "Commemoration of the Naval Battle of the Japan Sea"
[2002.1593]

Even mundane items such as barbed wire and artillery shells became aesthetic motifs in the postwar celebrations of "glorious victory."

"Glorious Victory," 1906
[2002.5148]

"Japanese Flag with Battle Scene in Background," 1906
[2002.1567]

"Glorious Navy and Army," 1906
[2002.5209]

A 1906 commemorative postcard bearing the slogan "unity through cooperation" (*kyōdō itchi*) captures much of the energy, vision, and elan of these celebratory graphics. Here the intricate design, blue against a grey background, draws on plain items to suggest how many disparate forces had to come together before the army could emerge victorious. It includes a horseshoe (for cavalry), cannon barrel (heavy artillery), rifle (infantry), saber (officer corps), wagon wheel (supply, logistics), and pickaxe (labor, construction)—all folded into a harmonious whole.

This postwar design extolling "unity through cooperation" incorporates symbols of various units of the armed forces. The three cards above reflect the various forms in which postcards have survived for contemporary collectors—in their original pristine form, with stamps and cancellations indicating the commemorative date of issue, and with an actual message brushed over the design (the reverse side being reserved for the mailing address).

"Unity through Cooperation," 1906
[2002.2258]

with stamped cancellation (bottom)
[2002.2257]

with hand-written message (right)
[2002.2259]

The design is sophisticated, elegant, and up-to-date. War is made modern and beautiful. Unity is extolled—and no Japanese would have failed to understand that this meant mobilizing not merely the army and navy, but the nation as a whole. Artists and their commercial publishers were themselves an intimate part of such patriotic mobilization. So were the consumers of postcards. (Serendipitously but fittingly, this postcard involved the collaboration of two artists.)

As it happens, this particular graphic has survived in various forms that remind us of the various roles postcards played. It has come down plain, as the design sent out to market; with a stamp and cancellation on the picture side, in all likelihood done by a collector; and as mail, a real item of correspondence, with a personal message brushed over the entire picture side. The card with writing on it was sent to a veteran in a military hospital, congratulating him for his valor and wishing him a speedy recovery.

Typical in its modish style, which is usually associated with the vogue of art nouveau, the "unity through cooperation" postcard is also a small but concrete reminder of how rapidly the world was changing. This is a wedding of art and propaganda and popular war "reportage" very different from the woodblock prints that had been so overwhelmingly popular only a decade previously. The Western influence in both technology and style is unmistakable. Indeed, it is known that Japanese artists who visited the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900 were particularly impressed by art nouveau. But as Anne Nishimura Morse and other art historians have pointed out, "cultural influence" was also moving in the opposite direction. Art nouveau itself, after all, was strongly influenced by Western admiration of Japanese art.

While Europeans and Americans may not have grasped the dynamism of such circular aesthetic and cultural influences, they certainly did see that Japan was now a major player on the world scene—a far cry from the backward society Commodore Perry had encountered almost exactly a half century before the Russo-Japanese War. How these foreigners visualized the war, and the Japanese who were fighting it, is another story.

It is a story, moreover, that also can be told in good part through the picture-postcard boom that made the war between Imperial Japan and Tsarist Russia a truly global spectacle.

Images from the Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Unless otherwise indicated, all are by unidentified artists and date from the 1904-1905 war years.

Sources

To come.

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