

THROWING OFF ASIA III

WOODBLOCK PRINTS OF THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR (1904-05)

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Chapter Two: Old Media, New Enemy

The new levels of military technology displayed in this first major war of the 20th century had a counterpart in the way the war was visualized. The Russo-Japanese War attracted military and journalistic observers from throughout the world, and was widely depicted through both photographs in the mass media and something new on the scene: international picture postcards based on drawings, paintings, and cartoons as well as photos.

These new forms of popular visual communication extended to Japan, and in this milieu the role of woodblock prints was greatly diminished. Some of the artists who had distinguished themselves during the Sino-Japanese War turned to war prints again, joined by a small group of new illustrators. Only rarely, however, did their work convey the energy or inventiveness that had characterized renderings of the earlier war. The Manichaeic sense of “modern” Japan versus “old” Asia was missing. The novelty of adapting an old art form to depiction of modern violence was gone.

This fizzle of the woodblock print as a vehicle of popular “reportage” did not become apparent until a few months into the war. The attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur that initiated hostilities sparked a burst of war prints commemorating Japan’s opening victories, but long before the war ended this had dwindled to a trickle. When the war reached its climax with Admiral Tōgō’s stunning destruction of the Baltic Fleet at Tsushima over a year later, few prints were published in celebration. The market had all but disappeared.

There was more than a little irony in this. The woodblock prints that had played such a conspicuous role in propagandizing “throwing off China” had themselves fallen victim to the relentless forces of modernization. Their time had passed. They had abruptly become obsolete as a vehicle for visualizing the contemporary world.

Still, the dwindling number of prints that addressed the conflict with Russia show us more than just how ways of seeing the world were changing. They throw further light on racial identity in modern Japan, and on the glorification of war as well.

A print by Nobukazu published at the outset of hostilities in February 1904 conveys the great difference between the Russians and Chinese in Japanese eyes. Titled “Illustration of Russian and Japanese Army and Navy Officers,” this amounted to a fashion plate in which the antagonists emerge as mirror images of one another—comparable in bearing, in martial apparel, in their mustaches and beards, even in the generally rectangular

structure of their faces. Few such overarching impressions of similarity were ever seen in prints from the Sino-Japanese War.



Details reveal how closely Japanese officers (right) resembled Russian officers (left).



“Illustration of Russian and Japanese Army and Navy Officers” by Watanabe Nobukazu, February 1904



[2000.087]

Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Kokunimasa, another old hand at war prints, also responded to the outbreak of hostilities with a few original scenes. As early as March 1904, he introduced what became a popular subject: a Japanese Red Cross battlefield hospital offering solicitous care to wounded Russians and Japanese alike. Japan’s humane treatment of Russian prisoners became a staple in all Japanese depictions of the war, including photographs and the new picture postcards.



“Russo-Japanese War: Great Japan Red Cross Battlefield Hospital Treating Injured” by Utagawa Kokunimasa, March 1904 (above, with detail, left, of Russians mistreating Asians)

[20 00.367] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Kokunimasa’s contribution to this propaganda was to include an inset in his print depicting Russian troops behaving harshly toward Asian civilians. The point could hardly be missed: the Japanese were more chivalrous than the Western foe.

“The Humane Great Japanese Red Cross Medical Corps Tending to the Injured in the Russo Japanese War” by Gakyōjin, March 1904 (detail of Japanese caring for wounded Russian)

[2000.541] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Kokunimasa also produced an early and memorable symbolic rendering of the doom that lay ahead for the Russians, whose overland supply lines to the Far East were extremely long and extended through forbidding terrain. Inspired by a news report, he offered his audience a train full of Russian soldiers crashing through the ice on Lake Baikal, where tracks had been laid to carry troops to the front.



“News from the Russo-Japanese War: The Russian Railway Carriage Falling to the Bottom of the Frozen Lake” by Utagawa Kokunimasa, March 1904

[2000.068] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Kiyochika, whose prints of the Sino-Japanese War were unsurpassed, responded to the outbreak of war with Russia with a few vigorous graphics. In one, a torpedo commands the scene as it streaks toward an enemy warship. Another Kiyochika print celebrates the death of Captain Hirose Takeo, who was officially designated a “military god” (*gunshin*) for his exploits during the blockade of the Russian fleet in Port Arthur (Hirose was killed while on a small craft searching for one of his men).



“Illustration of Our Torpedo Hitting Russian Ship at Great Naval Battle of Port Arthur” by Kobayashi Kiyochika, February 1904

[2000.074] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Captain Hirose of the Japanese Navy, one of the most celebrated heroes in the Russo-Japanese War, was killed on a dangerous mission while searching for one of his men who was missing.

“Navy Commander Hirose Takeo” by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1904

[2000.542] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Yamada Hampō, an artist new on the scene who appears to have still been in his mid-teens, momentarily outdid the old master in terms of sheer innovation. In an unusual vertical triptych, Hampō created an underwater world where a torpedoed Russian warship sank through a field of floating mines.

“Picture of the Eighth Attack on Port Arthur. The Flagship of Russia Was Destroyed by the Torpedo of Our Navy and Admiral Makaroff Drowned” by Yasuda Hampō

[2000.070] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Hampō also produced an early hexptych (six-block print) of “Japanese and Russian torpedo destroyers” engaged in “furious battle” in the opening clash outside Port Arthur.



“Illustration of the Furious Battle of Japanese and Russian Torpedo Destroyers outside the Harbor of Port Arthur” by Yasuda Hampō, 1904

[2000.072] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

This conformed to graphics familiar from the Sino-Japanese War, however, as did most war work by other artists as well. In naval prints, warships blew enemy vessels to smithereens. Blizzards whipped the ocean. Explosions burst like airborne flowers. Searchlights pierced night skies. “Death-defying” sailors in small craft engaged the enemy in turbulent seas.

“Illustration of the Great Naval Battle at the Harbor Entrance to Port Arthur in the Russo-Japanese War” by Rosetsu, February 1904

[2000.073] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“Naval Battle in the Japan Sea” by Getsuzō, 1905

[2000.451] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“A Righteous War to Chastise the Russians: The Night Attack of the Destroyer Force” by Shinohara Kiyooki, 1904

[2000.453] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“News of Russo-Japanese Battles: For the Fourth Time Our Destroyers Bravely Attack Enemy Ships Outside the Harbor of Port Arthur” by Migita Toshihide, March 1904

[2000.088] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“The First Blockade of the Entrance to the Harbor of Port Arthur on the Night of February 24, 1904” by Ōkura Kōtō, 1904

[2000.244] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“Illustration of How Outside Port Arthur Our Death-Defying Naval Squads, in Scrapped Vessels Disguised as Warships and under a Shower of Bullets, Bravely Destroyed Their Ships to Block the Entrance of the Harbor—In the Gray Dawn, February 25, 1904” by Kōkyo, 1904

[2000.067] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston





“Harbor Entrance of Port Arthur: Russian Flagship Sinking at Port Arthur” by Nitei, 1904

[2000.063] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston