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POLITICS, ARTS AND POP CULTURE OF JAPAN IN  
LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

MUTUAL IMAGES

ISSUE 5 – AUTUMN 2018

# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

AUORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA, MAXIME DANESIN & MARCO PELLITTERI

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POLITICS, ARTS AND POP CULTURE OF JAPAN IN  
LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

EDITED BY  
MARCO PELLITTERI & HERB L. FONDEVILLA

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# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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# Master of Silence: Matsumoto Shunsuke's *Muon no fūkei* and his quiet resistance to *Sensōga* during the Fifteen-Year War

Hope B. STEINER | Seizan Gallery, New York City, USA

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## ABSTRACT

This article is focused on the wartime works of Japanese artist Matsumoto Shunsuke (1912-1948). In particular, it examines his *Muon no fūkei* (silent landscapes) series from 1941-1945 and the artist's motivations behind choosing to depict everyday street scenes in Japan during the Fifteen-Year War (1931-1945).

The war was a difficult time for most artists; they were either forced to conform to social and governmental pressures to paint *sensōga* (war paintings), or they had to virtually stop production rather than run the risk of being arrested. Matsumoto Shunsuke was one of the few painters to focus on individual expression and everyday life scenes during this period. He spent much of Japan's war wandering the streets, sketching and taking photographs that would later become the templates for his landscapes.

The study of wartime art in Japan is still a relatively new topic, but much speculation has been given to Matsumoto's works as symbols of anti-war resistance. However, the artist's motivations were far more complex. This paper will explore Matsumoto's alienation from Japanese society due to his deafness and artistic principles and how these factors, along with his political disagreements with the government and other artists, led him away from *sensōga* and instead towards the silent landscapes that have today become some of the most popular paintings from the era.

## KEYWORDS

Matsumoto Shunsuke; World War II; *Sensōga*; Censorship; War art; Propaganda.

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## Introduction

Clouded by dark hues of blue and green and with a deep, embedded sense of isolation, Matsumoto Shunsuke's 1942 *Landscape with the Diet Building* is hardly the image of Tōkyō one might have expected to be made in Japan in the early 1940s, a time when nationalism was at an all-time high and patriotic war paintings sponsored by the government called *sensōga* were being viewed by millions throughout the country. Indeed, *Landscape with the Diet Building* was created by Matsumoto barely a month after the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, one of the country's greatest military victories during the course of the Fifteen-Year war (1931-1945). Yet

symbols of patriotism or strong Japanese soldiers which became standard elements of Japanese wartime art are conspicuously absent in Matsumoto's work. Instead, he shows a lone shadow struggling to drag a cart through an empty street and away from the darkened National Diet Building.



**Fig. 1.** Matsumoto Shunsuke, 1942. *Landscape with the Diet Building* [oil on canvas]. © Iwate Museum of Art, Morioka [online]. Available from: <http://www.ima.or.jp/en/collection/search-shiryo/> [Accessed 23 August 2018]

The trees lining the street are black and stripped bare of any leaves or flowers. In the background, seas of grey factory buildings are overshadowed by a singular towering chimney stack, which rises cold and grim at the apex of the work. The painting depicts Tōkyō, a bustling capital at the height of its empire's war campaign, but devoid of life except for the single figure who seems immobilized within the silent scene. Matsumoto was only thirty years old when he painted *Landscape with the Diet Building*. Why, one must ask, would a young artist create such a painting while the vast majority of his contemporaries were celebrating the victories of Japan through their art?

Matsumoto Shunsuke (1912-1948) was one of only a few artists who produced artworks during Japan's era of military expansionism that does not fall under the categories of *nihonga* (traditional Japanese-style painting) or *sensōga* (war paintings that were supported and commissioned by the government of Japan). He was also one of barely a handful of artists who openly spoke out against painting the war. Instead, Matsumoto focused his efforts on images of streets, canals, railroads, and isolated

figures within empty cities. These works, dubbed by later critics the *Muon no fūkei* (silent landscapes), are the antithesis of popular artistic standards during the Fifteen-Year War, which saw the Japanese government take strict hold of the art world and artists' production through the consolidation of various artistic institutions and the systematic arrest of dissidents.

As the war progressed it became next to impossible for artists who were not sponsored by the government to exhibit their work or even to get basic painting supplies. A critic of *sensōga*, Matsumoto worried that the government-mandated form was reductive and would hamper Japan's cultural advancement. His refusal to paint the war meant that his own work was largely ignored by the public and fellow artists during the war period. This led to a deep conflict within the artist, who felt shunned by the country he loved and even by his fellow artists. This sense of alienation was compounded by the fact that Matsumoto was deaf and exempt from serving in the army, a disability which may have allowed him to escape more severe governmental censorship, but which put him at odds with the image of a strong able-bodied soldier that was being dissimilated through the media and *sensōga*.

As he struggled to reconcile his place in Japan during the war and still express himself artistically within the political purview given to him, Matsumoto settled upon the empty streets and industrial buildings as a means of expressing his own predicament. These usually overlooked areas of Japan had been the key building blocks of Japanese modernisation, brought into the country during the Meiji Restoration by the government in order to make Japan compatible with the West. While his contemporaries like Fujita Tsuguharu (1886-1968) also seized upon Japan's modern industrialism, lionizing its new tanks and planes, *sensōga* artists were much more focused on using these elements as examples of how Japan had taken Western technologies and was now using them in a more skilful manner against their enemies to become the dominant power in Asia. Matsumoto, by contrast, examines the factories and train tracks as continuing elements of Japanese achievement that were being disregarded in favour of flashy tanks, much like how the advancements in contemporary art that he believed were necessary to Japan's status in Asia were being tossed aside for the filtered viewing of war art.

This article will discuss how Matsumoto Shunsuke's depiction of Japan's railways, canals, and waste sites in the *Muon no fūkei* as disregarded yet vital foundations of the

country's success in forming a unified Asia, defines how he refused to agree with the government's position that avant-garde art and disabled individuals such as himself were irrelevant to the country's success. As Masumoto laid out in the opening pages of his famed 1941 article "The Living Artist,"

I am merely a humble young painter. I am committing my life to discovering one general concept of beauty, but based on the opposition of the government, and the realities of this country, and the actions of our leaders, it would appear that I am just one of the foolish and extremely weak masses who do not know anything about the present state of the government of this country. It may be extremely insolent...but I don't believe silence is wise at this time (Matsumoto 1941, 477).

Even while limited in what he could paint, say, or write, Matsumoto was still able to publicly through a canvas make his case against the homogenisation of art into popularized visions of victory.

*Sensōga* remains a highly controversial topic in Japan, and as such research on the works and those artists who opposed their production has only recently begun. While there has been research focusing on the effect of governmental censorship on artists and Matsumoto Shunsuke's refusal to paint the war, most notable in the 2013 *Art and War in Japan and Its Empire 1931-1960* (ed. Ikeda, A., McDonald, A.L., and Tiampo, M.), an exceptional compilation of essays on art produced during the war, and by Maki Kaneko in her 2014 *Mirroring the Japanese Empire: The Male Figure in Yōga Painting, 1930-1950*, the first publication to seriously address Matsumoto's deafness in relation to his life as an artist, this essay mark the first time that Matsumoto Shunsuke's *Muon no fūkei* will be evaluated as a collection and in comparison to *sensōga* works of the time.

Examining these works and their place in Japanese wartime art history will comprise of an exploration of the time period and the limitations artists faced during wartime, followed by a visual analysis of the *Muon no Fūkei* with a focus on Matsumoto's critical *Bridge in Y-City* series (1941-1946) and his self-portrait, *Standing Figure* (1942). Finally, this paper will analyse the importance Matsumoto put on these everyday street scenes in relation to himself, and his status as a nonconformist within an increasingly regulated country.

### **Japan goes to war: Military censorship and the rise of *Sensōga***

The environment in which Matsumoto Shunsuke created his *Muon no fūkei* series was unique in that not only was Japan engaged in a state of total war, but it was the first time in the nation's history that the government achieved systematic control of artists and art groups. Imperialism had been on the rise in Japan since the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 when Japan's surprise victory spurred new nationalistic sentiments and altered the nation's relationships with foreign powers (Shichor 2007, 201). In large part, expanding liberalism had been able to function within this environment; however, in 1931 the Kwantung Army, a section of the Imperial Japanese Army, staged an explosion at a railway line near Mukden and blamed the blast on Chinese soldiers (Ikeda *et al.* 2013, 14). Japan used the false sabotage, now known as the Manchurian Incident, as an excuse to launch the full invasion of Manchuria and establish a puppet state within the region. Most of this was unbeknownst to the Japanese at home. Newspapers and media, under the guidance of the military, positioned the annexation as a heroic act of liberation (Dower 2012, 37). The events set the stage for the Second Sino-Japanese War beginning in October of 1937, and the island nation's era of expansionism (Akihisa 2013, 27). Still, most Japanese citizens were largely unaffected by the war until 1938, when the National Mobilisation Law (*Kokka sōdōinhō sensō*) came into effect and the government methodically instigated an extensive propaganda campaign and 'spiritual mobilisation' (*Seishin sōdōin*), which focused on uniting the Japanese people through education, media, and entertainment in order to raise support for the war (Shillony 1981, 5). The theory was that the creation of Japan's New Order in Asia could only be achieved through the unification of mind and body, resulting in the need for the Japanese government to wield near total control over print media, speech, and art.

This was not the first time the government had sought to exert control over Japanese artists; a previous reorganisation of the Imperial Fine Art's Exhibition (*Teiten*), was attempted in 1935 by the Minister of Education Matsuda Genji (1875-1936). The effort largely failed when both new and seasoned artists decided to leave the Academy or boycotted the exhibition (Sandler 1996, 75). But with the National Mobilisation Law in place and the entire nation now turned towards the war effort, the second attempt at consolidation was a success. A similar effort was launched in regard to art magazines. In October of 1940 the three largest magazines, *Atorie*, *Mizue*, and *Zōkei geijutsu* all issued edicts for artists to comply with the new national order and demonstrate their support for

the government (Hirayama 2013, 50). Then, in July 1941, all art magazines were forced to reorganize and combine into eight publications (Rimer 1996, 58). While these magazines managed to sustain partial independence from the government, they were consolidated once again in September, and finally merged into just one publication under the title of *Bijitsu* (Art) in 1944 (Akihisa 2013, 31).

At the same time, detractors of government mandates were being systematically arrested and 'reeducated.' From 1928 to 1934, arrests were centred on proletariat and avant-garde artists such as the founder of the radical Mavo group, Murayama Tomoyoshi, who was detained in both May of 1930 and April of 1932 (Lucken 2013, 80). The primary goal of arresting critics of the Japanese government was not eradication or long-term incarceration, but rather to police the populace for 'thought criminals' and subject them to *tenkō*, a reorientation process by which they might rejoin the populace in service to the government. This effective strategy was used by the military to turn their critics into public assets. For example, Fukuzawa Ichirō (1898-1992), an art critic and leader of the avant-garde group The Art and Culture Association (*Bijutsu bunka kyokai*), was detained for over a year starting from 1941. Upon being released, he reversed course on his earlier criticisms and painted the *Annihilation of the Americans and British* for the military (Cook and Cook 1992, 254).

As the country entered its state of total war in 1937, the government gained the ability to largely control what supplies artists received and could limit their ability to create work if they did not fall in line. According to married painters Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi, there were "no art supplies. [Only] those who drew war pictures received money, paints, and brushes" (Cook and Cook 1992, 253). The establishment of the Artist's Federation in 1942 ensured that supplies were regulated via a ration card system through which only government-approved artists could receive materials (Cook and Cook 1992, 253). Even if artists were not arrested or drafted into the military, they were repeatedly threatened. The Marukis, who resisted painting for the government, recalled intimidating visits to their home from the military, urging them to fulfil their patriotic duty through the creation of *sensōga* (Sandler 2001, 191). By 1943 the government exercised vast control over artists, dictating what they read and how they painted. Japan's censorship and reeducation tactics were so successful that there was no true opposing force within the country during the entire course of the Fifteen-Year War.

### **The birth of *Sensōga***

As it sought to stymie independent groups, the government publicly supported the newly emerged genre of *sensōga*, or literally ‘war paintings.’ War art is a difficult category to define, as it often falls into several classifications ranging from landscape art to historical paintings (Hariu 2007, 153). *Sensōga*, however, is a specific term referring only to those images produced during Japan’s military campaign from 1931-1945, with depictions that supported the government’s ideology, such as military victories or heroic deaths. Standard *sensōga* works were done as ‘monumental paintings’ in the size of around 190.0 x 260.0 cm, the dimensions deemed appropriate for the genre by the government in the 1940s (Tsuruya 2013, 71). The beginnings of *sensōga* came not with the military, but with artists themselves. In June of 1938 a few dozen artists gathered to form the Greater Japan Army Embedded Painters Association (*Dainippon rikugun jūgun gaka kyōkai*), and by 1939 they had been absorbed into the Army Art Association (*Rikugun bijitsu kyōkai*), having grown their numbers to over 200 members (Akihisa 2013, 28). The Army Ministry’s Information Division officially embarked on its *sensōga* project in 1940, unveiling sixteen works in 1941 with the intent to further increase the production of war art and present them to the Imperial Palace’s Storehouse for preservation as records of Japanese military achievements (Akihisa 2013, 29).

*Sensōga* functioned not only as historical record paintings, but as powerful propaganda tools to inspire support at home for the Japanese military. Miyamoto Saburō (1905-1974) received the Imperial Academy Fine Arts Prize for his 1942 painting, *The Meeting of General Yamato and General Percival*, with the judges exalting the work for its depiction of a white Englishman surrendering to an Asian general (Akihisa 2013, 33). The extraordinary work eschews the bloody battle scenes that make up a large part of *sensōga*, such as Fujita Tsuguharu’s violence-laden *The Fall of Singapore (Bukit Timah)* from the same year, but instead highlights the moment when Singapore was officially surrendered to Japan, showing General Yamato as an imposing, broad-chested figure opposite the smaller Percival, who hunches over the table. While perhaps quieter in its display of military power than the aforementioned *Fall of Singapore*, Miyamoto’s painting shows an Asian man clearly in a position of strength over his white counterpart, refuting the idea that the Japanese race was ‘weaker,’ as it was often depicted by Western countries (Tolischus 1945, 78).

*Sensōga* was done in Western style, as the military had deemed that the realism inherent in *yōga* would more effectively convey soldiers' suffering to the Japanese people (Tsuruya 2013, 74). But the paintings focused heavily on Japanese bodies in their composition, thus asserting claim over European techniques and moulding them into a purely Japanese art form that many, like Fujita, believed finally allowed them to overtake Western art. As the government had strongly directed against the continuation of other Western-influenced genres such as abstraction and surrealism, *sensōga* became a way for contemporaries to experiment within their art and still retain the mobility to show to a national audience.

### **Matsumoto Shunsuke**

Though *sensōga* presented many opportunities for artists within Japan, giving them a national platform to display their work and government-backed support, there were still those that remained in direct opposition to the new policies and censorship. Matsumoto Shunsuke was born Sato Shunsuke in Tōkyō in 1912, but his father's work took the family North to Iwate Prefecture when Matsumoto was two years old (Hamabuchi 2012, 16). It was during this time that Matsumoto became ill with cerebrospinal meningitis. Though he survived the disease, Matsumoto lost his hearing in 1925 (Sandler 1996, 78). As he struggled to adjust to his deafness, Matsumoto's older brother, who was living in Tōkyō at the time, sent him a set of oil paints in hopes of lifting his brother's spirits (Hamabuchi 2012, 16). The effect was immediate, and Matsumoto quickly shifted his focus to art. His earliest paintings, such as *In Early Autumn* from 1928, come from his childhood city of Morioka and show an immediate attraction to the genre of landscape. But they also fall much into the category of Japanese artists who were copying the style of European masters. These early works are full of bright colour and wide brush strokes and are fairly literal representations of the landscapes with very little reinvention on the artist's part. Matsumoto himself expressed this concern at an early age, seemingly realizing a need to find his own style rather than simply copying those of others (Hamabuchi 2012, 16). Thus, in a desire to push himself to find his own unique voice as an artist, Matsumoto moved to Tōkyō and attended the Taihei Yōgakai Institute.

As a young artist in Tōkyō, Matsumoto's style continued to evolve as he experimented with brushstrokes and pigment. He was deeply enamoured with Tōkyō itself, and it would soon become the main focal point of his paintings. While he had many friends such as Ai-

Mitsu (1907-1946) and Masao Tsuruoka (1907-1979) amongst the growing Dadaist and Surrealist population of Tōkyō in the 1930s, Matsumoto never formally entered any mainstream avant-garde group.

Prior to *sensōga* becoming the government backed art form of contemporary Japan, Matsumoto's style leaned towards abstraction. As seen in his 1939 *Prelude*, Matsumoto was focused on creating non-realistic dream-world settings in which figures and buildings overlapped one another to create the crowded atmosphere of a city. This is a fascinating effect that Matsumoto may well have developed due to his deafness, as the confusing collage of images in *Prelude* seem to act as visual representations of noise. Within the painting, urban women and men transverse the city landscape, which pushes the roughly outlined buildings and people together into a flat composition. The artist manages to eloquently capture the feeling and vibrations of the boisterous city into a single scene.



**Fig. 2.** Matsumoto Shunsuke, 1939. *Prelude* [oil on canvas]. © Iwate Museum of Art, Morioka [online]. Available from: <http://www.ima.or.jp/en/collection/search-shiryo/> [Accessed 23 August 2018]

From the beginning, Matsumoto never expressed any desire to paint the war in his own art. His opinions about the fighting itself were complex, but as Michael Lucken observes:

[Matsumoto] retained a meditative and reflective position. On a political level, he was never an opponent to the war, and even believed in the idea of Japan civilizing Asia...Yet he could not bring himself to be part of what he saw as artistic mediocrity imposed by the propaganda department (Lucken 1998, 12).

Matsumoto's career had been just starting to take off when Japan entered a state of total war; he had his first one-man show at the Nichido Gallery, the first gallery in Japan to specialize in western-style paintings, in 1940 and was exhibiting regularly in the Nika Society exhibitions (Lucken 1998, 27). But the era of *sensōga* was no place for Matsumoto's abstract cities. His frustration with the governmental suppression and worship of *sensōga* that had gradually made it impossible to exhibit his art in Tōkyō became public in 1941 when he published his article "The Living Artist" in *Mizue*, a monthly magazine. The article was a direct response to a previous publication in *Mizue* entitled "The National Defense State and the Fine Arts: What Should Artists Do" (*Kokubōkokka to bijutsu: gaka wa nani o nasubekika*), which detailed a debate over an artist's place in wartime Japan.

Within this round-table discussion, three military art officers and art critic Araki Hideo had stressed the importance of art as a part of Japan's ideological warfare and lampooned any artist that followed the ideas of Western individualism and freedom, which they declared to be self-serving aspirations (Tsuruya 2007, 90). Matsumoto heavily disagreed with the article, attacking not only the credentials of the participants in the debate but also insisting that a diverse art world was needed for Japan to become a leader in Asia (Matsumoto 1941, 477). Instead, he advocated for a continuation of humanism in addition to showing national and ethnic characteristics, and cautioned the government against cutting short the progress Japanese art had made by restricting avant-garde practices (Matsumoto 1941, 478).

This was not the first time an artist had disagreed with the government's intrusion into the art scene; Takiguchi Shūzō (1903-1979) was arrested in early 1941 after expressing irritation with the government and the dismissal of individual artistic development (Clark 1993, 181). Given this, it is rather remarkable that Matsumoto was never arrested himself. Unlike Takiguchi, who was being monitored even before his publication, there is no evidence to suggest that Matsumoto was ever in real danger of facing criminal charges, despite several instances of censorship on exhibitions and groups he joined. This is perhaps due to the artist's deafness and the police not considering him a threat, or because of the fact that Matsumoto's "The Living Artist" actually gained little support from his fellow painters. Clearly, at the time, he was not seen as an individual with a particularly wide influence.

***The Muon no fūkei (Silent Landscapes):***

**Matsumoto Shunsuke as an outsider in his own country**

A critical factor in Matsumoto Shunsuke's work that is often not given the study it requires is the fact that the painter had been deaf since the age of thirteen. This had a profound effect on Matsumoto, as it led him to art, but it also posed significant challenges to his status in Japan that he rarely spoke of. Anti-discrimination laws for Japanese citizens with disabilities only began to come into effect in 1946 as part of the postwar Japanese Constitution (Stevens 2013, 68). Prior to this, in the 1920s and 1930s when Matsumoto was growing up, there were little safeguards for the disabled. In the case of deaf children, most were kept at home and out of school until 1948, when compulsory education for the deaf was put into law (Nakamura 2003, 211). This means that many individuals who were born deaf from Matsumoto's generation never received proper schooling and were illiterate. Sign language was also an impairment as it did not become standardized until the postwar years. Before this, many deaf children only learned local signs, if any, and would have had trouble communicating with deaf individuals from other areas (Nakamura 2003, 217). Matsumoto avoided some of these issues due to the fact that he was not born deaf and had been in school until he lost his hearing. But he could not have escaped the social stigma that came with being disabled, particularly during the war when individuals with physical disabilities were labelled as 'deviants' along with Communists and homosexuals (Kaneko 2014, 91). Whereas Fujita Tsuguharu discarded his famous Parisian haircut and flamboyant clothing when he returned to Japan from Paris at the start of the war to better fit the image of a straight-laced Japanese man, Matsumoto could not so simply shed his disability (Winther-Tamaki 2012, 135).

In his early paintings like *Prelude* Matsumoto's deafness had materialized in a visual and abstract pastiche of a noise-filled city, but during the war this colourful vibrancy dissipated into morose and soundless landscapes. The focus on Japan's urban elements, however, remained. Urbanisation rose drastically in Japan before and during its wartime era. This was propelled by the government, which saw the appropriation of Western styles and architecture as a key means of avoiding colonisation and rivalling foreign powers (Guth 1996, 17). By the late 1920s trains, airplanes, automobiles, and engines were proud symbols of Japan's modern achievements (Dower 2012, 30). This production fit into the narrative that Japan was leading Asia to modernize as a whole, and the

symbols of industrial modernity quickly became important metaphors for Japan's power and successful self-production.

It is no coincidence therefore, that Matsumoto relies on the industrial landscape for his series. Matsumoto was well known to have loved the city landscape, remarking that:

During my early life from infancy to youth, there was nothing dirty in the physical nature around me or in my family life...When I think about that time while smelling the gasoline fumes of the city, it seems like something on a screen.

When I began living in Tokyo again 6 years ago, the nervous lines of the town had a fresh feeling. Even the smell of gasoline was appealing. And yet I got a headache and couldn't walk around town for even an hour. But now I walk through the crowds of the city with the same feeling as walking through the fields.

The nature in my reveries probably cannot be found anywhere today. Tin roofs and gasoline have spread to the farthest corners of the countryside.

I do not search for nature. I always have it. I love the city as I love the country. Both are the same to me now. And I am not at a loss without either of them. However, everything today is becoming urbanized. The city of today must seem suffocating even to the person used to living in cities. In my heart, which has learned to walk through the crowds of the city with the same feeling as walking through the fields, I find something like the creation of life. (Motoe 1986, 25).

The *Muon no fūkei* series relies heavily on this evolving urban background of Japan. Brightly coloured trees, streams, and hills, the usual hallmarks of Western landscapes that Matsumoto had begun his painting career with, are absent. Rather, the silent landscapes illustrate smoky scenes of back alleys and public toilets. No painting from this time period is more illustrative of the *Muon no fūkei* than Matsumoto's 1943 work, *Bridge in Y-City*. The canvas belongs to a longer series of works that stretched from 1941 to 1946, all of which depict the same scene; the titular bridge and its evolving surroundings as the war progressed. This key bridge depicted in the series is identifiable as Tsukimi Bridge, most likely first encountered during Matsumoto's sojourns across Tōkyō as he looked for new material for his work (Nagato 2012, 182). The area was a familiar one to Matsumoto, particularly in the later years of the war. After a series of Allied bombings in 1944, the company Matsumoto was working for relocated his position to an office in Kanagawa, a four-hour commute that took him via train past the Tsukimi Bridge each day (Nagato 2012, 182). The first painting in this series, *Bridge in Y-City* from 1942, shows the Tsukimi Bridge, painted in a pale white colour that might meld into the similar backdrop of sky if not for the dark river that runs underneath it and the thick black columns from a railway overpass that make up much of the middle ground.



**Fig. 3.** Matsumoto Shunsuke, 1942. *Bridge in Y-City* [oil on canvas]. © Iwate Museum of Art, Morioka [online]. Available from: <http://www.ima.or.jp/en/collection/search-shiryo/> [Accessed 23 August 2018]

In this work, the bridge is shifted to the right of the scene's composition, as opposed to being in the centre as Matsumoto would later reposition it. A factory is seen in the middle ground on the right with two short chimneys, but appears to be some distance away from the viewer. The work is completely devoid of any people or action.

With the next set of drawings and paintings that began in 1943, Matsumoto altered this original composition to put more of a focus on the factory and canal. *Bridge in Y-City* from 1943, is Matsumoto's most acclaimed work from the series. Here, the viewer is pushed back from the scene so that more of the concrete canal wall can be seen.



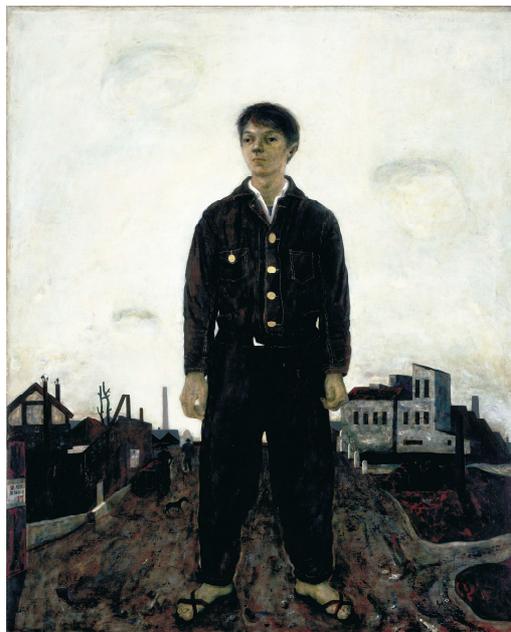
**Fig. 4.** Matsumoto Shunsuke, 1943. *Bridge in Y-City* [oil on canvas].  
 © The National Museum of Art, Tōkyō. Photo Credit: Marendo Müller

The bridge is smaller, less of a focal point as opposed to the factory and canal wall. The lines of the bridge's railing and the scaffolding are thinner, more delicate, and the framework for the overpass ceases to dominate the painting. Instead, the factory now rises higher and is clearly closer to the bridge than in the 1942 iteration. The two small chimneys are joined by a tall smokestack, a sure sign that construction has taken place. Whereas the factory was previously a background piece to the bridge, it now dominates the landscape. A drastic evolution has taken place, wherein the new technology that will spur Japan forward in its war effort has begun to overwhelm the once familiar area. In fact, there is hardly a piece of the painting besides the sky and water that is not taken up by concrete and machinery.

Existing within these elements, yet distinctly separated from them, are three shadowy figures that are barely perceptible against the darkened landscape. These shadow forms appear in many of the *Muon no fūkei*, such as the one who pulls the cart in *Landscape with the Diet Building*. The shadow figures of Matsumoto's landscapes are nondescript and lack any sense of individualism. They wander the deserted streets as if lost and overwhelmed by the scenery. In *Bridge in Y-City* 1943, the telephone lines and buildings tower over them, reducing them to afterthoughts. This is a great departure for Matsumoto from *Prelude*, where the colourful figures intermingle with each other and

Tōkyō's buildings in a much more harmonic manner. But through the *Muon no fūkei*, Matsumoto's people become so nondescript that they nearly disappear. The ordinary citizens of Japan are shoved aside within the country's push to proclaim itself the most dominant modern power in Asia.

While the factories loom large and the human figures fade into the background, Matsumoto makes a fascinating insertion to the scene. First visible in *Scene in Yokohama* from 1941 and reappearing in the 1943 *Bridge in Y-City*, is a bright white cross-shaped structure in the lower right hand of the paintings. This has been identified as an outdoor bathroom in Yokohama that Matsumoto saw and incorporated into the landscape (Motoe 1986, 29). This is not the only series in which Matsumoto incorporated illusions to public waste. He made several sketches and cartoons focused on public bathrooms, such as with *Public Latrine, Shinjuku* from 1941. His 1942 work, *Landscape*, focuses on a set of figures seen pulling a cart along a road. The image of the cart in fact came from a picture Matsumoto took himself during his walks around Tōkyō, while the figures are indicated to be those of garbage men heading towards a dump (Kano 2012, 152). These same figures and cart act as the backdrop to Matsumoto's famed self-portrait, *Standing Figure*, a remarkable work in which the artist blended himself into one of his silent scenes.



**Fig. 5.** Matsumoto Shunsuke, 1942. *Standing Figure* [oil on canvas]. © The Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura & Hayama [online]. Available from: [http://www.moma.pref.kanagawa.jp/webmuseum\\_en/detail?cls=atkn&pkey=421&dicCls=author&dicDataId=1041&detailnkIdx=0](http://www.moma.pref.kanagawa.jp/webmuseum_en/detail?cls=atkn&pkey=421&dicCls=author&dicDataId=1041&detailnkIdx=0) [Accessed 30 August 2018]

In this case, the buildings, figures, and street are pushed to the background to make way for Matsumoto's physiognomy to dominate the central focus of the work. The only other signs of life, besides Matsumoto, are the garbage men heading towards a disposal site. The insertion of the cart and garbage men is without a doubt carefully planned. They are not seen in his first sketches but were instead injected afterward in preparation for the full paintings.

This deliberate insertion of waste sites and garbagemen alongside the dominating presence of factories and wartime production demonstrates that Matsumoto was not simply celebrating the industrial achievements of the country, but specifically highlighting overlooked and underappreciated aspects of life that were usually deemed too 'unclean' for public discussion or artistic representation, but which were vital to the country's survival and modern status. He takes this idea a step farther in *Standing Figure*, painted just months after his publication of "The Living Artist" and his public feud with the government's attitude towards artists such as himself who refused to paint *sensōga*. Within the painting, Matsumoto has depicted himself, a disabled man rejected by the war effort, as taller than any building in the scene. In no other work from the *Muon no fūkei* does a human figure stand higher than a building. Yet here, the chimney stacks and roadway bend to make way for Matsumoto's imposing stance, and he becomes the axis for the work, forcing the landscape to rotate around him. He is a crucial and undeniable piece of Japan that cannot be erased or forgotten from this landscape, and the placement of himself directly in front of the waste disposal site and far larger than the garbagemen repudiates the idea that his deafness and refusal to paint *sensōga* makes him a worthless member of society, as "The National Defense State and the Fine Arts" article had named him. The *Muon no Fūkei* echoes this ethos, and underlines how even with his dispute over the importance of diversity of the arts Matsumoto clearly loved his country and believed that his words and paintings were necessary for Japan's advancement, even if they broke protocol.

## Conclusion

In his short postwar career, Matsumoto reverted almost immediately back to abstract figures and even ventured into Cubism. Like many other artists, he was determined to move on from the war, returning to his vocal insistence of the need for individuality and experimentation. Ironically, the war seems to have intensified these beliefs despite the

government's attempts to quash them. Matsumoto became an early leader in unifying young artists towards rebuilding the Japanese avant-garde art scene that had been put on hold at the beginning of the war by arrests and government censorship, and it is a true loss to postwar Japanese art that Matsumoto passed away from health complications in 1948.

*Sensōga* and wartime art in Japan is still a developing field in academia. All known surviving *sensōga*, which number around 150 paintings, are held in the National Museum of Modern Art, Tōkyō. In 1977, shortly after they were returned to Japan by the United States, which had confiscated them in 1951, an exhibition was planned to display fifty of the works together but was cancelled due to controversy (Ikeda 2009, 21). The images, which were once intended to be preserved as glorious renditions of Japanese victory and resilience, are now largely removed from public eye. War art remains a difficult subject to discuss, as it forces viewers and museums to address the issue of Japanese war guilt, a still heated conversation.

This modern discomfort with *sensōga*, particularly the bloodier works from the later part of the war when artists turned to making images of heroic sacrifice as it became clear Japan was nearing defeat, has allowed Matsumoto Shunsuke's paintings to come back into the light. The landscapes and factory settings can easily be read in a non-political context or even as antiwar, making them much easier for institutions to showcase as examples on wartime art. But this idea belies the true nature of the works, which were Matsumoto's expression of both disagreement and support for Japan. In "The Living Artist," Matsumoto contends that as people from Asia had for decades now gone to Europe and America to learn different styles of painting and for education, rather than to Japan, any greater unification of the continent under Japanese rule could not be done through military force alone, and would require cultural dominance that put Japanese art on par with the famed Paris Salon (Matsumoto 1941, 479). While the collective was the key to success for Japan's military aims and the government believed the same could be true for art, Matsumoto did not see a path forward with *sensōga*. Therefore, in 1941 with the publication of "The National Defense State" and the arrests of his colleagues, Matsumoto Shunsuke found himself in a position where he was decried for being unable to meet both artistic and physical ideals. He was soundly rejected from both art and society.

The *Muon no fūkei* was Matsumoto's answer on how to make art during this time that would not land him in trouble with the government, and yet would convey his belief in the need for artists such as himself. As seen against popular *sensōga* of the time such as

Miyamoto's *The Meeting of General Yamashita and General Percival*, Matsumoto was specifically focused on an internal examination of Japan and national identity rather than on glory and power. Rather than constantly compare the East and West in their struggle for dominance, Shunsuke was far more concerned with the internal struggle of Japan and its non-conformists, pieces. The industrial focus of his landscape paintings from the time creates an image of Tōkyō that emphasizes overlooked and forgotten elements of the city. This hints at how, like a concrete bridge or canal, Matsumoto believed himself a product of Japan's Western-style modernism that was necessary in the creation of new industrial Japan. Meanwhile, the artist replaced his noisy city montages with images of empty roads populated only by solitary silhouettes in order to give a physical representation of his own feelings of entrapment and suppression. Intimacy with his surroundings disappears in the *Muon no fūkei*, and Matsumoto seems to more relate to pieces of overlooked waste and concrete. He becomes, quite literally, a shadow within Japan, the stigma of his deafness and desire for individualism making him unseen in the grand scheme of the country's all-encompassing war.

Physically, Matsumoto Shunsuke could not join his compatriots at the front lines. But he waged a quiet battle of his own during Japan's Fifteen-Year War through his art. Though he died young, it was Matsumoto who emerged victorious in the end. His position as a prolific non-*sensōga* painter has drawn him the posthumous fame and exhibitions that his disability and individualism cost him during the war.

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