

worthy of it.” These stern words are not based on the science of human differences but on a consciousness that clearly understands it. Perhaps humility and acknowledgment of the biological basis of human differences by the elites would lead to more rational public policies. Strident resistance to the science and comfort in the prevailing orthodoxy suggests that this may not occur anytime soon.²⁰

Aldric Hama

The Politics of Painting: Fascism and Japanese Art during the Second World War

Asato Ikeda

University of Hawai'i Press, 2018

Art history, as history, will eventually depend upon categorization. Aesthetics, to be sure, is much bigger than the logic of the mind. Beauty moves the soul, the emotions, the body, and more. The entire human person is at play in the presence of art. But tracking art qua art, and not qua aesthetic experience, over time is inevitably a function of how one defines terms, how one categorizes.

This holds a fortiori when the terms, and the periods, in question are contentious. It would surely be impossible to satisfy every interested party with a definition of “impressionism” or “faivism,” no matter how conscientious the attempt. And there would almost certainly be interdisciplinary squabbles over whether the work that Edgar Degas did in New Orleans should be properly considered European or American. But these questions, as important as they are, are unlikely to raise hackles to the extent that questions of politics, and especially twentieth-century politics, do.

It is for this reason that one would expect art history books about that most contentious of all political terms, “fascism,” to be written with the utmost meticulousness. “Fascism” is a much-abused term, after all. As eminent scholar Paul Gottfried laid out in *Fascism: The Career of a Concept* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press,

²⁰Cofnas, N. (2018). Research on group differences in intelligence: A defense of free inquiry. *Philosophical Psychology* 33: 125-147; Woodley of Menie, M.A., et al. (2018). Communicating intelligence research: Media misrepresentation, the Gould Effect, and unexpected forces. *Intelligence* 70:80-87.

2016), the term has a very specific meaning arising from a very specific historico-political context. Those who wish to label this or that thing or person or style or event “fascist” must first explain why they are abstracting “fascism” from its setting and transplanting it into new ground.

Unfortunately, this is precisely not what has been done in Asato Ikeda’s new book, *The Politics of Painting: Fascism and Japanese Art during the Second World War*. The title is a showstopper, but the contents are a bust. Ikeda’s definition of “fascism” is so labile as to be unserviceable. As a result, her interpretation of the artworks in question—some of the finest paintings by some of the most renowned artists in Japan from the last two centuries—is an exercise in its opposite. What might have been explication and insight, given well-defined categories and a clear grasp of what the operative term means, instead languishes as innuendo, a tacit confession that there is nothing new on offer in this book except for an exposition of the way in which ideology has eviscerated current American scholarship. *The Politics of Painting* reveals, not the politics of painting in Japan some three generations ago, but the politics of writing about Japanese painting in the United States today.

The touchstone for Ikeda’s foray into Japanese art history is the “War Campaign Record Paintings (Sensō sakusen kirokuga) [...] confiscated by the American occupational government in 1951 and rediscovered in 1967 by Japanese photographer Nakagawa Ichirō at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.”²¹ This collection of 153 paintings, commissioned by the Japanese state and executed by various artists, comprises mainly battle scenes from the Greater East Asia War. Japanese art critic Sawaragi Noi, Ikeda explains, calls the War Campaign Record Paintings a “Pandora’s Box” because of the fact that it reveals the “hidden violence inherent in Japanese modern history.” In other words, like Pandora’s Box, if one were suddenly to open this trove of supposedly disturbing paintings, then all sorts of inconvenient truths would fly out along with the images packed within. Japan has dark secrets, Ikeda insinuates, and the Japanese people do not have the stomach to reckon with their horrifying past.

But in the very next paragraph is where Ikeda’s troubles begin. The War Campaign Record Paintings, she assumes, are definitely

²¹Sawaragi Noi, *Bakushinchi no geijitsu* (Tokyo: Shobunsha, 2002), 390.

fascist, as they were commissioned by a “fascist” wartime government. (The only justification that she gives for this view is the nebulous fear that China and Korea “would be angered” if the paintings were displayed today. One could argue that such “anger” says much more about current mainland Chinese and Korean politics than it does about actual East Asian history, but Ikeda is content with the initial assumption and does not bother elaborating.) For Ikeda, the 153 paintings are not nearly representative of Japanese fascism. Even images of “landscapes, women, and children,” which are often deemed “‘non-militaristic,’ ‘apolitical,’ and ‘unproblematic’ and ‘happened to have been produced during the war’” should be grouped in with the fascist wartime artistic output. Why? Because her “model of analysis [...] focuses on works that allude to Japan’s traditions, icons, and culture—such as Mount Fuji, historical warriors, beautiful women, and rural customs—and engages with the concept of Japanese fascism.” Surely, upon reading this pronouncement that there are fascists and fascism secreted everywhere, the careful reader leans back with suspicion.

It is sufficient, for Ikeda’s analysis, that works “allude” to other categories: traditions, icons, and culture. These categories encompass Mount Fuji, beautiful women, rural customs—in short, whatever is in some way “Japanese”. All of Japan, past and present, on this view becomes fascist, by the definition that Ikeda advances in her book. Overtness, such as the depiction of hakenkreuz rallies, paramilitary gangs, or humiliated subalterns, is not a requirement for a work to be fascist. It is enough that paintings merely “allude” to things in or of Japan. Allusion, for Ikeda, then begets “engage[ment]”. The War Campaign Record Paintings were props to make convenient a rhetorical feint. By using nebulous language and unsubstantiated gesturing, Ikeda illicitly inflates her category, and in doing so grants herself license to indict anything she chooses as “fascist,” in se. This question-begging forms the foundation, such as it is, of the entire book.

To wit, Ikeda’s definition of “fascism” is both tautological and vague:

Japanese fascism, just like German and Italian fascism in Europe, was characterized by the belief that there was once a culturally authentic community that became lost in the process of modernization and that must be restored. Japanese fascism sought to recreate a traditional, national community inhabited by Japanese people and

united by their authentically Japanese spirit, uncontaminated by modernity. Fascism, in the context of the Second World War, used cultural authenticity as a justification for violence against other countries, such as the United States and Britain, which espoused democracy, individualism, and liberalism.²²

Based on this, Ikeda declares that her book “revisits the issue of Japanese fascism to elucidate the connection between non-battle paintings produced during the war and their political meanings.”²³ Ikeda aims at “careful historicization,” she avows, in order to “understand [...] the art of fascism, in which politics has been rendered merely ‘aesthetic,’ as Walter Benjamin has observed.”²⁴

The informed reader will detect in Ikeda’s definition strands of many of the fallacies debunked by much more serious scholars than Ikeda, and long before the publication of her unserious book. Maruyama Masao, Peter Duus, and Daniel Okimoto are just a few who have subjected the term “fascism” to much more interrogation than Ikeda has. Duus and Okimoto’s classic 1979 essay “Fascism and the History of Pre-War Japan: The Failure of a Concept,” for example, is a must-read for anyone who wants to know what fascism is and why it simply does not work as an explanatory category for Japan. For instance, those who thought they were espousing fascist ideas in Japan were struggling with what they saw as aporia in the Meiji Restoration,²⁵ and many of these so-called fascists were shot or shunned by those who rightly saw their ideas as dangerous and unhinged. (In Europe, of course, the shooting went in the other direction.) What’s more, there was never a thug-ization of the political class in Japan as there was in Italy and Germany. Duus and Okimoto make clear that elites remained firmly in control of Japanese politics, even after the assassination of Inukai Tsuyoshi in 1932.²⁶ None of this adds up to fascism, and it

²²Asato Ikeda, *The Politics of Painting: Fascism and Japanese Art during the Second World War* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2018), 2

²³Ikeda, *Politics of Painting*, op. cit., 2

²⁴Ibid., citing Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), in Hannah Arendt, ed., Harry Zohn, tr., *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

²⁵Peter Duus and Daniel I. Okimoto, “Comment: Fascism and the History of Pre-War Japan: The Failure of a Concept,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1 (Nov., 1979), 69.

²⁶Duus and Okimoto, “Comment: Fascism and the History of Pre-War Japan: The Failure of a Concept,” op. cit., 70.

certainly does not lead to the conclusion that all of Japanese culture was tinged with the stuff, as Ikeda assumes.

The following key paragraph from Duus and Okimoto puts paid to any notion that Japan was “fascist” during the time Ikeda alleges it was (or at any other time):

If “fascist” is not a very useful adjective to describe all this, then what is? It might be most useful to see the 1930s as the formative period of a managerial state or polity, in which a dirigist bureaucracy became the central element in the formation and execution of national policy, especially with respect to economic and social development. In a sense, of course, this was nothing new—except that the scope of state intervention and management expanded considerably during the 1930s. Since the 1890s, sub-oligarchic bureaucratic leaders, jealous of their autonomy as servants of the emperor, had been impatient with the intransigent haggling that went on in the Diet. Many had also become convinced of the need to forestall the disruptive consequences of industrialization that had affected the European nations. As Kenneth Pyle, Sumiya Mikio, and others have suggested, during the post-Russo-Japanese War period elements in the Home Ministry bureaucracy attempted to manage the future course of social development in the countryside—and perhaps broaden the popular base of bureaucratic power—by creating artificial community structures closely integrated with the administrative structure. The merging of local shrines, the promotion of pseudo-*gemeinschaft* organizations like the Seinendan and the Zaigō Gunjinkai, and the shoring up of local elites through the propagation of the Hōtokusha all represented an attempt to create bureaucratic leverage in local communities where none had existed before. Did these policies represent an attempt by the bureaucracy to enlarge its sphere of competence? Did they express in a modern context the didactic function of officials that was part of the Tokugawa bureaucratic tradition? Or were they a harbinger of attempts to create a managerial polity in the 1930s?²⁷

²⁷Duus and Okimoto, “Comment: Fascism and the History of Pre-War Japan: The Failure of a Concept,” op. cit., 71, citing Kenneth B. Pyle, “The Technology of Japanese Nationalism: The Local Improvement Movement 1900-1918,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1 (November, 1973), Kenneth B. Pyle, “Advantages of Followership: German Economics and Japanese Bureaucrats, 1890-1925,” *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Autumn, 1974), and Sumiya Mikio, “Kokuminteki Vuijiyon no tōgo to bunkai,” in Ito Sei, ed., *Kindai Nihon shisōshi kōza* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1960), 5, 51-106.

Clearly, Japan in the 1930s (and before and after) was not, by any responsible definition, “fascist”. A stringent analysis such as Duus and Okimoto’s would obviate the necessity of Ikeda’s book, however, so she takes the Walter Benjamin route instead. But once the Benjaminian flourish of the aestheticization of politics has been added to the tautology of “fascism”—itself defined as, essentially, everything associated with whoever opposed Great Britain and America in the Second World War—the door is wide open to daub any Japanese work of art with the fascist brush. By her own standards, all Ikeda must do, really, is suggest that a particular work of art “alludes” to something even remotely Japanese. If it does, then by the definition given above it will not be either British or American, and so must, therefore, “engage” with fascism. If something is Japanese, it is fascist. Japanese art, then, by extension, must be fascist art, too.

But as will already be obvious, this wide-open door makes for an unworkable flood of candidates for “fascist painting”. So, Ikeda will have to choose. Over five chapters, she focuses on four major Japanese painters (after a first chapter, “Japanese Paintings, Fascism, and War,” in which she hopelessly remuddles the ground rules she laid out in her introduction), deciding that all of them were part of the fascist milieu.

Readers should look through the book’s color plates first before reading Ikeda’s four main chapters. That these images are purported to be fascist—windswept snowscapes with straggling, lonely pines, Song Dynasty-inspired metaphysical mountain passes, seated portraits of defeated generals from a thousand years ago, ladies holding fans or listlessly reading books by lamplight, a reclining nude à la Modigliani flanked by a napping cat, a girl with cold feet standing next to a basket of rabbits, and a panorama of a north country festival—is the best argument against Ikeda’s categorical profligacy. The rest of the book is a variation on the anti-theme. Ikeda has written a book about fascist painting in Japan, but the candid reader is likely to finish the volume thinking, as this reviewer did, “If all of those artworks are fascist, then what artwork, East or West, *isn’t*?” Or, to put it more succinctly, why are Japanese painters, working from within the Japanese tradition, assumed to be fascists, while others who paint scenes of different countries and different pasts, not? What is the secret axe that Ikeda is grinding here?

Yokoyama Taikan, the subject of Ikeda's second chapter, is a good place to start to problematize Ikeda's approach. Yokoyama's name may not be familiar to many outside of Japan, but his graceful and quietly strong paintings of Mt. Fuji painted during the pre-war and wartime periods are recognizable around the world. There is nothing inherently fascist about a geological feature, of course. One would hope that Ikeda would agree, but even this is not to be taken for granted. The real problem for Ikeda, at any rate, is that Yokoyama intended his paintings to be uplifting for a nation at war. The "spirit of Mt. Fuji," for Yokoyama, was the spirit fighting against Western imperialism in Asia.

Apart from Yokoyama's patriotic desire to support his country in a time of trouble (was Norman Rockwell also a fascist?), Ikeda is particularly exercised by the fact that Yokoyama chose to eschew older, Chinese-literati styles of brushwork in favor of a cleaner Japanese aesthetic—circumstantial evidence, we are supposed to believe, for Yokoyama's "fascism". An artist sloughing off influence from one genre and experimenting with another should not be cause for alarm, especially to an art historian, but because Japan was at war with China, the implication is that Yokoyama was motivated by chauvinism, or some other malfeasance, and not by aesthetic sensibilities. Alas, if Walter Benjamin is right, then there can be no explanation for art other than politics, and so Yokoyama, by definition, must be trapped within the flypaper of his political surroundings.

But wait--astoundingly, Ikeda concedes, after a futile chapter spent spitballing non sequiturs at a truly great artist, that "my analysis shows how there was nothing inherently 'fascistic' about the iconography or the style of [Yokoyama] Taikan's Mount Fuji paintings. Rather, it is the resonance between Japanese fascism and how Taikan's paintings were intended and received that is essential to our understanding of the art of Japanese fascism."²⁸ When 'allusion' and 'engagement' have failed, there is, as a last resort, resonance.

But even resonance was apparently not enough, so directly above the paragraph including this admission of failure Ikeda includes a picture of Adolf Hitler looking at a Japanese picture at an exhibition of Japanese art in Berlin in 1939, not the Mt. Fuji picture in question, though, nor any other picture by Yokoyama Taikan. The object of the Führer's gaze is "a painting by Sesson," a Japanese painter who lived in

²⁸Ikeda, *Politics of Painting*, op. cit., 47

the sixteenth century (some four hundred years before Yokoyama's time), but by Ikeda's standards this deployment of Godwin's Law is all that the evidentiary standard requires. The fact that Hitler once saw a Japanese painting in a museum means that the taint of his viewership extends throughout the Japanese art world in perpetuity. Hitler was a failed watercolorist, so he must have seen other paintings in other museums, too. Why are those not also fascist?

Even more baffling than Ikeda's chapter on Yokoyama Taikan is her fourth chapter, on the *bijin-ga* ("paintings of beautiful women") of female artist Uemura Shōen. The argumentation in this chapter is so scattershot as to be unfollowable. Uemura painted women, and Partha Chatterjee says that women have been identified with tradition, and tradition is fascist, so Uemura is therefore fascist. This is the chain of logic Ikeda deploys in one paragraph. Elsewhere we learn that Miriam Silverberg saw modern girls (*moga*) as "sex workers," and that *moga* were women, and that Uemura once wrote a book about the Edo practice of women shaving their eyebrows (which sexually-liberated *moga* did not do), so Uemura, Ikeda concludes, is therefore fascist. And so forth. Ikeda tries every which way she can to shoehorn Uemura into a fashionable, contemporary academic category, coming at her from feminism and the pop-Foucauldianism of Tak Fujitani, and tarring her by association with Noh, to name just a few. But in the end, Uemura's works speak for themselves. Uemura, to the consternation of critics, is above all an artist. Her work can be guessed at, but it defies saran-wrapping in this-or-that academic theory. Uemura's portraits are more than the accuser of fascism can handle, and the art here is clearly too big for the critic to tackle, so, as in the Yokoyama Taikan chapter, Ikeda quietly closes with another appeal to "resonance" and moves on.

Ikeda's third chapter, on Yasuda Yukihiko and his explorations of the Heian aesthetic, must be left out of the discussion in the interest of space. But much of what could be said about Yasuda—and about Yokoyama and Uemura, for that matter—can also be said about Foujita Tsuguharu, the subject of Ikeda's fourth chapter who also happens to have been the most famous Japanese artist of the twentieth century. Foujita left Japan (and his wife) as a young man and settled in Paris, where by dint of talent and hard work he eventually came to be recognized as one of the greatest artists of his age. Inspired early by Amedeo Modigliani, Foujita developed a skill for fine lines and porcelain off-whites that make his style instantly recognizable. Foujita

was a genius of astounding range and technical prowess, but because he painted several battle-scene canvases during the war, some of them gorier and darker than others, he was later branded not only a fascist but a collaborator.

Ikeda chooses to focus on one painting in particular, Foujita's 1937 canvas "Events in Akita" (*Akita no gyōji*), as evidence for Foujita's abiding fascism. "Events in Akita" is a tour-de-force, a five-panel panorama in subdued earth tones banded by winter whites and blues and punctuated by quiet reds. It is a masterpiece of busy equipoise: as a story in pictures, it shows the liveliness of a country festival in rural northern Japan without allowing the composition to be overwhelmed by the subjects. "Events in Akita" is testament to Foujita's painterly chops, which exceeded all but a handful of other artists' from the past hundred years. And yet, for Ikeda, this painting is evidence that Foujita was... a fascist. The reason has to do with Yanagita Kunio, an ethnologist who argued, in early twentieth-century Japan, that the authentic Japan was to be found outside of the cities, far from the corrupting touch of modernity. Akita is far from Tokyo, and was often portrayed by romantics and romantically-minded ethnologists as a repository of real Japan amidst hyper-modernization. Foujita's portrayal of a country scene in the northern extremities of Honshu must mean, by some occult leap of the imagination, that Foujita was, as the reader has surely guessed by now, really a fascist, too.

As Ikeda writes, though, Foujita did not choose to paint the Akita scenes of his own accord. He did not visit the north country on a romantic quest for the real Japan. The painting was a commission by a son of Akita who hoped that having a famous artist like Foujita paint the bumpkins in the boondocks would redound to the economic benefit of the forgotten countryside. If anything, this is a capitalist way of viewing one's natal village. In any event, Foujita was not a Kita Ikki looking for the purest strains of tradition and authenticity. He was a big-city painter making a living with his brush (and also embroiled in no small number of love affairs), and so he painted Akita on request, not because he was trying to "overcome modernity" or unite the East with pan-Asian ideas. The suggestion that a man whose social circle included the finest painters in Europe and North America was anti-cosmopolitan easily refutes itself. But for those still left wondering, consider that, in his lifetime, Foujita spent years traveling the world, visiting out-of-the-way places in South America, Africa, and far

beyond. Why single out Akita as evidence for Foujita's sinister romance with quaint nowheres, when he painted canvas after canvas of just such places from postmarks in all four hemispheres?

It is precisely this kind of selective indictment that makes Ikeda's book a rather pathetic mess. At every turn, in the Foujita chapter and throughout the volume, Ikeda's attempts to link Japanese painting with fascism fall flat. One must grant, in fairness, that she pulls out all the stops. She tries running the connection through Bruno Taut (although Taut himself fled the Nazis for Japan). She tries Stefan Tanaka's once-chic argument that Japan "Orientalized" her Asian neighbors. She even tries snow—yes, snow—endorsing Alan Tansman's reading of the Kawabata Yasunari novel *Snow Country* that whiteness of snow meant purity, and that purity meant anti-Western "Japanese authenticity".²⁹ Each attempt fails, many of them badly. Readers who are not morbidly interested in watching a book on art unravel as one reads it should not buy or read Asato Ikeda's disastrous *Politics of Painting*. The only real reason to "engage" with this book is that it shows, in spite of itself, the bankruptcy of contemporary mainstream academic attempts to understand Japan, but this evidence is in such abundance elsewhere—nearly every other book about Japan published over the past twenty years—that there is hardly any particular reason to choose Ikeda's contribution from among the lot.

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²⁹Ikeda, *Politics of Painting*, op. cit., 96, citing Alan Tansman, *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 106