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JAPAN SOCIETY PRESENTS

Shikō Munakata: A Way of Seeing

As Japan Society's 125th Exhibition, Rarely Seen Collection of Shikō Munakata's Visionary Artworks, Including 61 Prints on View for the First Time Since 1965

December 10, 2021—March 20, 2022

Press Preview: December 8, 10:00 am – 3:00 pm EST



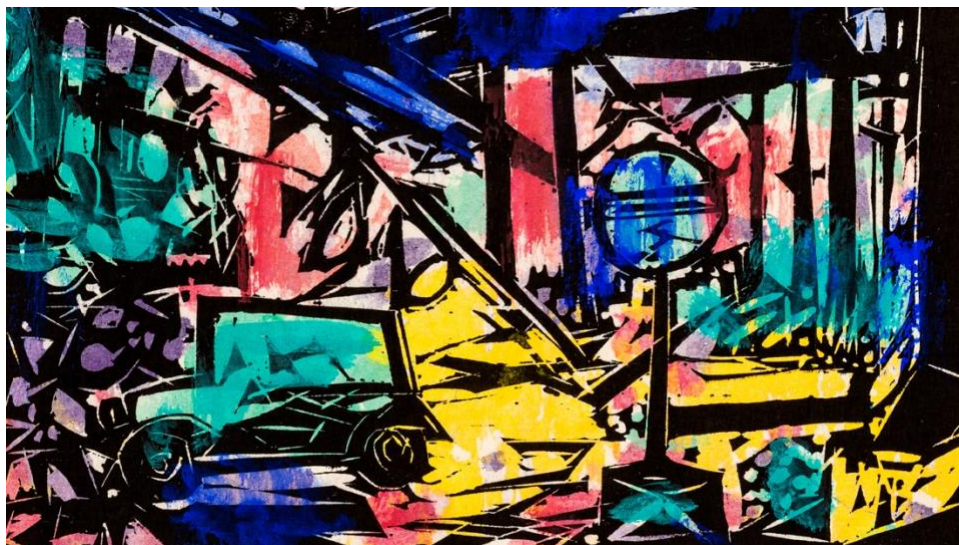
Shikō Munakata, *Yokkaichi: Kombinat (Factory)*, from the *Tōkaidō Series*, 1964. Photograph by Nicholas Knight.

"Black and white are absolute. Expressing the most delicate vibration, the most profound tranquility, and unlimited profundity." —Shikō Munakata

November 2, 2021 (New York, NY)—Japan Society is pleased to present ***Shikō Munakata: A Way of Seeing***, a new presentation of nearly 100 path-breaking works by the celebrated artist Shikō Munakata (1903–1975). Primarily known for his powerfully expressive woodblock prints in black on white paper, this exhibition reveals the breadth of Munakata’s oeuvre, which spanned from prints to calligraphy, sumi ink paintings, watercolors, lithography, and ceramics and occasionally included a vibrant color palette inspired by the colorful lantern floats in the annual Nebuta Festivals of his native Aomori Prefecture. Organized from Japan Society’s rare collection—the largest Munakata collection in the United States—the installation revisits this imaginative twentieth-century artist.

A highlight of the installation is the complete *Tōkaidō Series* (1964), a set of sixty-one prints—half in color and half in black-and-white—that depict scenes the artist witnessed while traveling along the historic coastal route between Tokyo and Kyoto. Munakata’s series extends to Osaka, building upon the nineteenth-century *ukiyo-e* master printmaker Utagawa Hiroshige’s (1797–1858) portrayal of the traditional fifty-three stations. This full set by Munakata will be on view for the first time since 1965.

No matter the medium, Munakata’s artistic explorations were characterized by a spirited curiosity and relentless experimentation. Munakata incorporated diverse sources and inspiration in his dynamic works, including Japanese folk tales, Buddhism, Western literature and poetry, and nature motifs. With his bold, spontaneous, and sketch-like lines, Munakata developed an innovative style that revolutionized the woodblock print medium. Associated with the twentieth-century *sōsaku hanga* (creative prints) movement and recognized by leaders of the *mingei* (folk craft) movement of the same era, Munakata expanded the traditional *ukiyo-e* small-scale format to create large-scale pieces that extend across the full woodblock. His widely acclaimed prints have been awarded internationally, including at biennials in Lugano (1952), São Paulo (1955), and Venice (1956). In addition to a selection of his seminal woodblock prints, this exhibition introduces an important, though lesser-known body of work, including Munakata’s highly regarded calligraphy and paintings.



Shikō Munakata, *Mukō-machi: Crossing Point of Highways*, from the *Tōkaidō Series*, 1964 (detail). Photograph by Nicholas Knight.

A major focus of the exhibition underscores Munakata’s first time in the United States, and includes works made expressly for Japan Society as well as works made in New York. The city

held particular significance for Munakata. In 1959, he traveled to New York as a Fellow in Japan Society's Print Artists Program, which invited artists—including Munakata and Yayoi Kusama—to exchange cultural ideas and build an international dialogue. Based in New York City for his six-month visit, Munakata lectured and held exhibitions throughout the U.S. accompanied by Beate Sirota Gordon (1923–2014), a women's rights advocate and contributor to the writing of the Constitution of Japan following World War II. Gordon was the founding Director of Performing Arts at Japan Society and she also served as Munakata's interpreter, ultimately becoming a lifelong friend. Munakata again returned to New York in 1965 under the auspices of Japan Society, and it was then that he donated many of the works that form the core institutional collection today. Other important works by Munakata were given to the Society by Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd at the opening of Japan Society's building in 1971.

Other works in this exhibition connect thematically to Munakata's Buddhist influences and recurring motifs, such as owls, hawks, and sunflowers inspired by Vincent Van Gogh—Munakata's artistic hero. This installation is further enriched by personal ephemera of the artist and two original woodblocks—shown for the first time in the U.S.—for *Ten Disciples and Two Bodhisattvas* (1939/1948), which complement Japan Society's rare, complete set of this important artwork. These items are on loan from the Family of Beate Sirota Gordon, researcher and Munakata's granddaughter Yoriko Ishii, and the Munakata Shikō Memorial Museum of Art in Munakata's native Aomori.

Original exhibition design is by New York-and-Barcelona based MAIO who provide a fresh, complimentary display that uses the artworks themselves to define the exhibition space and viewing experience. "Shikō Munakata created his artworks from an unusual closeness. A visual impairment made him work with his eyes just inches from the woodblock, thus focusing on specific areas and details more so than the whole, a fact that reinforces even more the haptic nature of the works," says MAIO." The exhibition display aims to reconstitute this feeling of closeness, while playing freely with reinterpreted techniques and concepts, such as *urazaishiki* (back-coloring) or *zakkī* (a set of ordinary elements) to bring a new perspective to the broad corpus of his works."

Shikō Munakata: A Way of Seeing is organized by Japan Society and curated by Tiffany Lambert, Curator, Japan Society.

ABOUT SHIKŌ MUNAKATA



Photo of Munakata, 1967: © Laura Beaujon

Shikō Munakata (1903-1975), born in the northern Aomori Prefecture as one of fifteen children to a blacksmith, began his career as a self-taught oil painter. In 1924, at the age of twenty-one, Munakata moved to Tokyo to pursue an artistic career where, upon seeing a woodblock print by Sumio Kawakami, he changed course and became active in the woodblock print community. He continued printmaking throughout World War II and was awarded prizes in international exhibitions and biennials held in Lugano (1952), São Paulo (1955), and Venice (1956). Visiting the United States in 1959 at the invitation of Japan Society as part of its Print Artists Program, Munakata spent six months lecturing and exhibiting his work throughout the country. Munakata's accolades continued, including the Medal of Honor (1963), the Asahi Shimbun Prize (1964), and the Order of Culture (1970), Japan's highest honor in the arts. Munakata was famously myopic, and in 1960 he lost the use of his left eye completely. Despite this, he continued producing work at a prolific output until his death in 1975.

ABOUT MAIO



© José Hevia

MAIO is an architectural office based in Barcelona and New York that works on spatial systems which allow variation and change through time. MAIO's projects embrace the ever-changing complexity of everyday life while providing a resilient, compromised, and clear architectural response.

MAIO's work has been published in magazines such as *Domus*, *AIT*, *Volume*, *Blueprint*, *A10*, and *Detail*, and exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Guggenheim Bilbao, The Art Institute of Chicago, and Storefront for Art and Architecture. MAIO has participated at Venice Biennial 2016 in the Spanish Pavilion, which was awarded with the Golden Lion, and at Chicago Architecture Biennial (2015 and 2017 editions) and has co-curated a Weekend Special at the Biennale di Venezia 2014 together with SPACE CAVIAR and DPR-Barcelona.

MAIO has taught and lectured at The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Barbican Center; Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation; RIBA; UC Berkeley; Yale School of Architecture; and Piet Zwart Institute among others. MAIO is run by Maria Charneco, Alfredo Lérída, Guillermo López, and Anna Puigjaner.

ABOUT JAPAN SOCIETY GALLERY

Since 1971, Japan Society Gallery continues to be the premier institution in the United States for the display and interpretation of Japanese art and culture in a global context. Through groundbreaking exhibitions and related programs, the Gallery cultivates a broader

understanding and appreciation of Japan's contributions to global artistic heritage; explores the artistic interconnections Japan shares with Asia, the U.S., Latin America, and Europe; and celebrates the diversity of Japanese visual expression from prehistoric times to the present day.

ABOUT JAPAN SOCIETY

Japan Society is the premier organization connecting Japanese arts, culture, business, and society with audiences in New York and around the world. At Japan Society, we are inspired by the Japanese concept of *kizuna* (絆)—forging deep connections to bind people together. We are committed to telling the story of Japan while strengthening connections within New York City and building new bridges beyond. In over 100 years of work, we've inspired generations by establishing ourselves as pioneers in supporting international exchanges in arts and culture, business, and policy, as well as education between Japan and the U.S. We strive to convene important conversations on topics that bind our two countries together, champion the next generation of innovative creators, promote mutual understanding, and serve as a trusted guide for people everywhere who seek to appreciate the rich complexities and abundance of Japan more fully. From our New York headquarters, a landmark building designed by architect Junzo Yoshimura that opened to the public in 1971, we look forward to the years ahead, which will be defined by our digital and ideational impact through the *kizuna* that we build. Our future can only be enhanced by learning from our peers and engaging with our audiences, both near and afar.

This year, Japan Society is celebrating our heritage through the 50th anniversary of our landmark building with the launch of a new distinct modern logo and visual identity. The "JS" monogram is created via overlapping, interconnected lines and shapes, reinforcing the idea of *kizuna* and that Japan Society acts as a platform that connects across, cultures, people, and time.

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DIRECTIONS:

Japan Society is located at 333 East 47th Street between First and Second Avenues (accessible by the 4/5/6 and 7 subway lines at Grand Central or the E and M subway lines at 53rd St. and Lexington Ave.).

HOURS:

Thursday–Sunday, 12 pm to 6 pm

Member hours: Thursday and Friday, 12 pm to 1 pm

ADMISSION:

\$12/\$10 students and seniors | FREE for Japan Society members and children under 16.

View our visitor guidelines and safety protocols [here](#).

PRESS PREVIEW:

The press preview will feature timed entry, every half hour from 10:00 am to 3:00 p.m., and limited capacity. Proof of vaccination, photo ID, and a mask will be required for entry. Social distancing guidelines will be observed.

Shikō Munakata: A Way of Seeing is supported, in part, by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, the W.L.S. Spencer Foundation, and The American Chai Trust.

Exhibitions and Arts & Culture Lecture Programs at Japan Society are made possible, in part, by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Endowment Fund, the Mary Griggs Burke Endowment Fund established by the Mary Livingston Griggs and Mary Griggs Burke Foundation, Masako H. Shinn, Peggy and Dick Danziger, Raphael and Jane Bernstein, Friends of the Gallery, and an anonymous donor. Support for Arts & Culture Lecture Programs is provided, in part, by the Sandy Heck Lecture Fund. Transportation assistance is provided by Japan Airlines and American Airlines, the exclusive Japanese and U.S. airline sponsors for Japan Society gallery exhibitions.

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