

Foujita and the Modern Mural

Ruth K. Meyer, Mika Kuraya and Midori Tomita

日本の画家たちは19世紀末の西洋の壁画の描画法を学び、機会があれば明治時代の洋風建築の内装に広く壁画を描いた。レオナルド・藤田嗣治は東京美術学校で壁画を学んだが、本稿は藤田嗣治の著作と壁画について論じるものである。本稿では特に藤田嗣治が壁画を論じた論文二篇（1936年）を取り上げる。二篇とも英訳があり、藤田嗣治の壁画作品の傑作「秋田の行事」（秋田県平野政吉美術館所蔵）を分析するのに予備知識となる註が付けられている。「現代壁画論」（1936）及び「壁画の新しい方向」（1936）は共に藤田嗣治が秋田のこのすぐれた壁画に取り掛かる1937年以前に発表されたものである。本稿はこの二篇の論文と註によりながら、平野氏が藤田嗣治に壁画の注文を出した経緯や背景を描き出し、更に現代壁画の運動におけるこの壁画の意義を論じるものである。

Japanese artists adopted the techniques of Western-style mural painting late in the 19th century. When the opportunity was offered to these painters, murals were used extensively for the interiors of Western style buildings that were constructed during the Meiji era. Leonard Tsuguharu Foujita (1886-1968), whose writings and mural paintings will be discussed, studied mural painting in Tokyo as a part of his curriculum at the National Fine Arts Academy. This paper focuses upon two articles on murals written by Foujita in 1936. They have been translated from Japanese into English and annotated to provide the background for an analysis of Foujita's mural masterpiece, the *Festivals of Four Seasons* in the Hirano Museum of Akita, Japan. Both articles, "A Theory of the Modern Murals" (1936) and "New Directions of the Mural" (1936) were published before Foujita undertook his mural masterpiece for Akita in 1937. Following the two texts and related commentaries the circumstances of Hirano's commission to Foujita will be described and the painting's significance within the modern mural movement will be discussed.

Mural painting has its origins in early human history and has flourished in different cultures and different eras. Revivals of mural painting seem to occur at moments of social change when new orders of artistic value and communication are being generated. Although developments in the history of panel paintings and easel paintings can also be linked with changes in patronage systems, it seems that revivals of mural painting in modern times frequently take place in a revolutionary atmosphere. Modern mural painting has been preeminently an art for the people or to put it another way, a popular art form.

Japanese artists adopted the techniques of Western-style mural painting late in the 19th century. When the opportunity was offered to these painters, murals were used extensively for the interiors of Western style buildings that were constructed during the Meiji era. Leonard Tsuguharu Foujita (1886-1968), whose writings and mural paintings will be discussed, studied mural painting in Tokyo as a part of his curriculum at the National Fine Arts Academy.¹ There was little in Foujita's early career that embodied an interest in murals although as this paper will show, his murals have become important public evidence for the development of his mature career in his native Japan and in his adopted homeland, France.

This paper focuses upon two articles on murals written by Foujita in 1936. They have been translated from Japanese into English and annotated to provide the background for an analysis of Foujita's mural masterpiece, the *Festivals of Four Seasons* in the Hirano Museum of Akita, Japan. Both articles, "A Theory of the Modern Murals" (1936) and "New Directions of the Mural" (1936) were published before Foujita undertook his mural masterpiece for Akita in 1937. Following the two texts and related commentaries the circumstances of Hirano's commission to Foujita

will be described and the painting's significance within the modern mural movement will be discussed.

The Modern Mural

The modern mural appeared in Europe and America in the late 19th century as an expression of social self-confidence and artistic entrepreneurship. Grand programs of architectural decoration using murals had long been featured in palaces and churches. Now the new buildings that were brought into existence by early modern urbanization gave painters fresh opportunities to paint murals on a scale not offered since the late Renaissance. Temporary and permanent buildings erected for the series of international exhibitions that began in the mid-19th century featured murals portraying national customs and values. New city halls to meet the needs of growing populations were also decorated with murals showing civic virtues. Libraries, train stations and department stores all provided the spaces for edifying displays of artistic talent. As a result national art academies throughout the world responded by training a new generation of mural painters.

Behind this revived mural movement was an educated corps of talent who had traveled to Italy and seen the works of Michelangelo and Raphael in the Vatican and even the earlier works by Giotto in Assisi and Padua. After the turn of the century in France the murals of the Romanesque churches were cleansed of their coatings of whitewash so that 20th century eyes could gaze upon the imposing works of their Gallic ancestors. Theoretical discussions of the modern mural began to appear in leading art journals and encouraged new debates on the purposes, subjects and techniques of the modern mural painter. The 1925 exhibition of the Society of Artists-Decorators that gave birth to the Art Deco style also launched the abstract mural, a play of colors, forms and textures

Artists were imported from France to teach mural painting and Japanese artists went to Europe to learn techniques and see historic masterworks for themselves.

The Mural in Japan

In the late 19th century, the Tokyo Academy of Fine Arts was also linked to this mural movement. Japanese artists who traveled to and studied in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s saw at first hand the murals of the French artists trained in the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Among them was Kuroda Seiki (1866-1924), who was Foujita's teacher. In 1893 Kuroda had returned from Paris after a stay of ten years during which he had studied and admired the murals of Puvis de Chavannes. After his graduation in 1910 Foujita next studied with Wada Eisaku (1874-1959). This artist had studied from 1899 to 1903 in France with Raphael Collin. Both Kuroda and Wada were attempting to develop techniques for teaching large-scale composition to Japanese art students as they anticipated the expansion of opportunities for murals in the Western-style buildings that were going up in Meiji Japan. Kuroda himself made a series of murals in Tokyo Station, completed in 1914. Concerning Wada, Mika Kuraya has written:

In 1911, Eisaku Wada and Saburosuke Okada each secured an opportunity to produce a large-scale proper mural for the *Teikoku Gekijo* [Imperial Theater] designed by Tamisuke

Yokokawa. This theatre was built in French Renaissance style with due consciousness of the Paris Opera. Wada was commissioned to decorate the ceiling above the audience and the restaurant and Okada the mural for the VIP lounge. Okada decorated the four walls with landscapes entitled Morning, Noon, Dusk and Evening, none of which include the depiction of any human figures. Wada covered the ceiling with a view of celestial nymphs floating in the heavens after the *Noh* song *Hagoromo* [Feather Robe]. For the restaurant, he executed a series covering the twelve months of the year entitled *Playing Kanuta* [Cards] in the Meiji Period for January and from then on in sequential order, *Grafting in the Ashikaga Period*, *The Dolls' Festival in the Bunka and Bunsei Periods*, *Viewing the Cherry Blossoms in the Genroku Period*, *Horse Racing at Kamo in the Kamakura Period*, *A Sunny Spell During the Rainy Season in the Meiji Period*, *Sea Bathing in the Momoyama Period*, *Covering the Chrysanthemum with Cotton in the Heian Period*, *Falconry in the Ashikaga Period*, *Watching the Snow from a Boat in the Tempo Period*, and *A Year-Ending Fair in the Meiji Period*. As they were decorations for a theatre, the themes all concerned entertainment...Unfortunately, the entire roof, including th[e] ceiling painting...got burnt in the grand earthquake in the Kanto area in 1923 so that it no longer remains to be seen.²

The commission to Wada and Okada coincides with the years in which Foujita was Wada's student prior to the pupil's departure for France in 1913. Foujita had already graduated from art school but Wada recalled that Foujita and his classmates helped Wada to complete these murals as his assistants.³ Although the paintings can no longer be seen, the titles amply convey their elegant theme.

In 1929 Foujita published an account of his years in France on which Buisson and others based their biographical studies. From this account we learn that on his arrival he knew very little of Western painting and the earliest extant examples of his work are usually described as vaguely Impressionistic. Nevertheless, by the 1920s he had begun to develop a signature style and a following among the Parisian avant-garde located in the Montparnasse district. At first he painted landscapes in a faux-naïve style said to be influenced by contact with the art of Henri Rousseau, but he abandoned these and turned to figure painting. With the encouragement of his new wife, Fernande Barrey, a French artist whom he married in 1917, Foujita painted religious subjects, the first indications of a growing interest in Catholicism that would lead eventually to his conversion. Alongside of scenes of the Crucifixion and of women in prayer he also painted youths in a sinuous style reminiscent of Amedeo Modigliani, (1884-1920).

The Italian artist's tragic early death at the beginning of the 1920s left the way clear for Foujita to develop as a celebrity painter of elegant nudes who were frequently accompanied by lounging cats, his emblematic personal touch. Foujita's typical style of thin lines and a monochrome palette on a smooth white background became widely recognized. These characteristics were considered to be typical elements of traditional Japanese art by European and American critics of his time. But he explained these characteristics of his paintings as follows: "Since I was in Paris I always tried to make the Japanese style of painting. That does not mean a repetition of the tradition but the creation of my own idea of what Japanese style painting must be."⁴

Foujita as a Mural Painter

The artistic career of Leonard Tsuguharu Foujita underwent a sequence of transformations during the 1930s. In 1929 he completed two large murals in the *Maison du Japon*, a university student center. One set of canvas panels was installed

to form a decorative background on a low stage in the main reception hall. The arrival of Westerners in Japan was depicted by a group of allegorical figures ranged against a gold leaf ground. The monochrome palette and linear expression, recognizable now as Foujita's Ecole de Paris style, shows Foujita's love of magnificence and exaggeration at this moment which became a turning point in his career.

He returned to Japan from Paris in 1930 after an absence of more than 15 years during which he had established his European reputation. But although the Tokyo art world was ready to acclaim his success, Foujita immediately left Tokyo once again to tour Latin America from 1931 to mid-1933. His stay in Mexico City, from November 1932 until the spring of 1933, was decisive for his future interest in mural painting and Foujita wrote about his experiences in an illustrated article, "Looking back on Mexico."⁵

On his next return, which we will call his *real* return to Japan, Foujita continued to write frequently for various art magazines. In two articles, both published in 1936 and presented here in translation, we see Foujita promoting his knowledge of the international art scene and his experience as a mural painter. We will reverse the order of publication and present first the shorter one, "New Directions of the Mural," that appears to be an abstract from the longer because it reads as a summary of "A Theory of the Modern Murals."

New Directions of the Mural, 1936⁶

It is not true that no murals have been made since the Meiji era. Some murals were made under the support of the government with the aim of promoting education about people's morals or for use as historic references through themes representing national honors. It was both good and significant that many murals were made in universities and in other places. With an increasing number of concrete buildings being made today entirely new directions have begun to be conceived and cultivated that are different from those described above namely as murals for the people. There should be murals that could show people the production process of products being related to commerce and industry apart from such murals that are created for the mere decoration of structures. In short, we should create murals that could connect the general public to commerce and industry with an aim at advertisement.

For the purpose of advertising saké, for instance, the production process could be shown through murals. Thus, it would be possible that science could be introduced to the general public without much difficulty. Even if murals were used for advertisement purposes, murals would be wonderful things when the themes are appropriate and treated properly. Only historical themes and educational materials are not necessarily good for murals. Now that today is an era of production by industrial civilization, new developments in the art world have been turned in this direction

During his visit to Mexico City from November 1932 until mid 1933 Foujita was able to see the major mural series at the National Preparatory School and the Ministry of Education. The works that inaugurated the Mexican mural movement had been completed in the 1920s by Jean Charlot, Roberto Montenegro, José

Clemente Orozco and others, not forgetting the leader of the group, Diego Rivera.⁷ Living in Mexico for more than half a year, Foujita would have heard a great deal about the murals painted by Diego Rivera in the central court of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan, where Rivera began to paint on July 25, 1932.⁸ The Detroit murals were completed on March 13, 1933. The theme and title of the murals is *Detroit Industry* and Rivera had spent several months in preparation visiting the Ford Motor Company's Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan to increase his knowledge of industrial processes. Into these were incorporated both spiritual and technological themes that elevate the murals far beyond a documentary of automobile manufacturing.

Human industry was already a prominent theme of Rivera's murals. The back-breaking work of the Mexican laborers was presented at both the Ministry of Education building and the National Palace and mingled with scenes of popular festivals and events in the history of colonial Mexico. With the subsequent *Detroit Industry* mural Rivera internationalized his themes and invited North American criticism that his works were too overtly political.

Following this project Rivera embarked on his infamous commission for the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center.⁹ This was the fifth commission Rivera had received in the United States and it ended dramatically when the Rockefeller family objected to the artist's inclusion of a portrait of the Communist leader Lenin. The artist declined to remove the portrait, the commission was cancelled and the mural was destroyed. Receiving full payment of his fee, Rivera went on to benefit as the lost masterwork acquired a legendary status in American modern art.

It has not yet been established that Foujita met with Rivera or saw his US murals during this turbulent period of the Mexican's career. Their association reached back to their early years in Paris when Foujita and another Japanese artist, Kawashima Rí'ichiro (1886-1971), posed for one of Rivera's "cubist portraits"(1914).¹⁰ While in Mexico City, Foujita exhibited his current work at a gallery in the Ministry of Education and in his second essay on mural painting found below he retells the legends of Rivera's prodigious labors as a muralist. Foujita's biographers report that he traveled in the United States for four months in 1933 after leaving Mexico, just when the protests and denunciations of the "battle of Rockefeller Center" were being covered in the international press.¹¹ When we return to Foujita's 1935 text we see that he expressed some reservations about painting potentially "political" themes.

Appropriate themes for mural painting had been the interest of another of Foujita's Parisian contemporaries and neighbors in Montparnasse, the artist Fernand Léger (1881-1955). In 1923 Léger and Foujita were both commissioned to design sets and costumes for productions of the Ballet Suédois, possibly the first time that either had worked at the scale of a mural. Léger's décor for Darius Millaud's *La Création du Monde*, performed October 25, is better known than Foujita's for *Le Tournoi singulier*, a ballet about a golf game between gods and mortals performed on November 19 of the same year. Léger was also better connected to the French architectural profession where he had hopes of influencing architects Le Corbusier and Robert Mallet-Stevens to include his murals in their projects.

To advance his career as a muralist Léger wrote essays on mural art for Le Corbusier's magazine *L'esprit nouveau* and other publications in which he

expounded his theories of a new urban art. As we will see, Foujita echoed these theories a decade later in his Japanese publication. Léger also attempted in his writings to define the difference between his easel paintings and those that he considered as mural art. Examples of both were displayed in two model rooms at the 1925 International Exposition of Decorative and Industrial Modern Arts in Paris, the show that gave us Art Deco. Léger's *Composition*, (1924; MOMA, New York) and *Mural Painting*, (1925; private collection) are abstract compositions that typify Léger's post-Cubist art in the 1920s, mingling geometric figures with simplified and silhouetted objects already examined in his series of paintings titled *The City*, (1918-1919). The Art Deco exposition was an immensely popular and widely publicized event that Foujita would certainly have attended even though he did not participate in the popularization and commercialization of Cubism that swept Paris in the Twenties.

Here is Léger on the need for a new style of mural paintings from a lecture given at the Sorbonne in 1923 and published in 1924.¹² The title is "Le spectacle, lumière, couleur, image mobile, object-spectacle."

La couleur et la lumière fonction sociale, fonction nécessaire. Le monde du travail, le seul intéressant, vit dans une ambiance intolérable. Pénétrons dans les usines, les banques, les hôpitaux. Si la lumière y est exigée qu'est-ce qu'elle éclaire? Rien. Faisons entrer la couleur, nécessité vitale comme l'eau et le feu, disons-la savamment, qu'elle soit une valeur plus agréable, une valeur psychologique, son influence morale peut être considérable. Une ambiance belle et calme.

La vie par la couleur
L'hôpital polychrome
Le médecin coloriste
L'hôpital lépreux et glacial s'habille et devient multicolore.
Nous ne sommes pas dans des prophéties nuageuses,
nous touchons de très près la réalité de demain.
Une société sans frénésie, calme, ordonnée, sans exclamation ni romantisme.
Voilà où nous allons tout simplement.
C'est une religion comment une autre. Jusqu'à preuve de contraire, je la crois utile et belle.

In Foujita's writings, along with echoes of Rivera's esthetics of labor and production, we can also hear as an emerging sensitivity to the machine esthetics of Léger. And yet as will be shown further on, Foujita never fully incorporated the philosophies of these two potential mentors with his theories of mural painting.

Foujita's text "New Directions of the Mural" concludes:

Anything like Chavannes' style, those reminding us of the Tempyo era or any previous concept of murals that are symbolic and philosophical, should be wiped out and it is high time that such murals must come into existence as those depicting realities of the society. Activities in the town by artists have as much significance as their works being exhibited in art museums. It is strongly recommended that artists expand their activities not only to art exhibitions but also to new spheres like murals, by finding their way to the town. It is also

desirable that (apart from powerless and halfway advertisements using posters, etc.) in such organizations as tourist bureaus, railways ministries and those for the promotion of cultural events, murals could be used and implemented to create a significant and eternal second nation which will come into existence in the future.

The New Mural in Japan

In the mid-1930s, there arose a movement introducing the new mural in Japan. Several art magazines published special issues and introduced mural paintings from Mexico, USA, USSR, Germany and others. Some writings of Rivera were translated into Japanese. Painters such as Noda Hideo (1908-1939), born and educated in the United States, came back to Japan having begun his career as an assistant of Rivera. Meanwhile, Tokyo had become an urban metropolis. With the presence of international style buildings and motor cars, department stores and cafés, a new appreciation for murals that could express the sense of modern life was justified. Foujita, faithful to his declarations quoted above, also moved from his juvenile tastes schooled by Kuroda and Wada and acclaimed murals more suitable for a modern society.

But when we closely examine Foujita's mural paintings that will be described more fully below, we will find that Foujita was not really interested in the themes of laborers or machine esthetics that had engaged his European and Mexican counterparts. Instead, he admires modern beauties in Western dress enjoying the privileges of a consumer society. We can even find nymphs sprinkling flowers from the sky à la Puvis de Chavannes in his Osaka Sogo Department mural. Modern esthetics and the growing labor problem in Japan at this moment were left to the brushes of the younger generation including Noda.

Despite his strong impressions of Mexican *muralismo*, Foujita's "New Directions of the Mural," mainly informs us of his sensitivity to the fashionable new movement and his painterly ambitions to position himself within the excitement it had generated. And it must be recorded that he succeeded in becoming the most active and prolific mural painter of this decade and beyond it to the early war years, when techniques of murals were adapted to paintings intended to stir up the national fighting spirit.

"A Theory of Modern Murals," 1936

Foujita's first text on murals is far more detailed than the later version and therefore considerably more useful as a source for establishing the chronology of his career as a mural painter prior to his masterpiece *Festival of the Four Seasons of Akita* (1937). The translated text is presented here without interruption. Comments on the murals Foujita mentioned will be found in the notes to this paper.

A Theory of Modern Murals¹³

The prosperity of Japan is shown by the fact that the number of architectural buildings which are built with the latest construction technology, are permanently strong and are comparable with Western ones, has been increasing not only in Tokyo or Osaka but in many other places in Japan. However, these

buildings lack harmony because they have no connections with other architecture. Unfortunately, the appearance of the new architecture has not established a unified beauty as an urban city, except for a few examples. The current conditions such as uncleanness of drainage for wastewater underneath these buildings, vulgar billboards, neon signs, too many telephone poles, and bicycles arranged in an unsightly manner between sidewalks and highways, indicate that cities in Japan are still far behind the western cities. However, even if we brought the appearance of buildings to a satisfactory level, would there be anything inside the buildings which is worth bragging about? Even if walls, ceilings, floor boards, furniture, lighting fixture are completed at a certain level, would these buildings have excellent decoration such as murals of which I often mention the significance? No, we have not yet reached that era. I shudder when I think about whether there are any buildings in Japan that possess magnificent ornaments such as those found at the Vatican in Rome, at Versailles in France, or in other palaces and theaters in many other countries. In Japan, murals and *Fusuma* paper sliding doors exist insignificantly as tourist attractions in Horyuji Temple, and the Imperial Palaces and other famous temples in Kyoto.

Currently, fire-resistant and earthquake-resistant facilities have been completely realized, and strongly-built buildings are spread all over Japan. It could be said that the time for introducing murals as the best decoration of architecture has come.

Murals with educational and historical stories could be used as references and historical sources. Murals also could inspire people's religious beliefs. Murals could provide a short-cut to understanding explanations by illustrating them. It is also easy to introduce new things using murals. In addition to these advantages, murals can change the atmosphere of a room, improve aesthetics, and relax people. Naturally, the bigger the building is, and the larger the room is, the greater the disadvantage of small paintings and the greater the necessity of murals.

I always imagine if places like tourist bureaus and railroad offices had murals with illustrations from the Kuril Islands to Yap Island located at the southern tip of Taiwan, how much tourists would like them and how much advanced knowledge they could acquire. There is no doubt that murals would have a greater impact than movies or photographs.

If theaters such as the Kabuki-za had murals that illustrated classical pieces of the Kabuki repertoire, how much more useful they could be to the audience. The same thing could be said for department stores. They should stop decorating the shelves in their stores with paper lanterns or paper flowers in a cheap manner that gives customers the feeling of festivals. I believe if they had murals on the walls of the stairs near the front entrance, portraying a scene of a bride preparing for a wedding ceremony and including a chest of drawers for seasonal changes of clothing, a wardrobe chest, and other furniture, then the murals would provide much information about Japanese culture to foreign tourists, and could also introduce Japanese art.

I believe that it would be spectacular to see the beauty of the Japanese mode of life in one view. I think the appropriate size for murals would be approximately 20 to 36 meters wide and 3.6 to 5.4 meters high in tourist bureaus,

bus or train terminals, theaters, department stores and exhibition halls. I think it is the best way for other places such as prefectural offices in each prefecture and exhibition halls with regional specialty goods to have murals depicting their regional folkways, festivals, dances, and other regional products in order to introduce their regions. Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan have plenty of subjects for murals, and Pusan, Talien, and Chi-lung, which are gateways to Japan, should be among the first to be depicted in murals as the first reference for tourists.

I have traveled through many countries all over the world. From my experience, Mexico can be said to be one of the richest countries in murals. Mexico has a long history and has preserved pyramids from several thousand years ago. Mexico has become aware of art and produced two artists, Rivera and Orozco, who are acknowledged world wide as muralists. Not only in Mexico City but also in many places, public as well as private buildings' walls are decorated by murals. The Ministry of Education of Mexico has a mural by Rivera that is several miles long on walls of hallways surrounding two patios of a three-story building. I met with Rivera in Paris. He was a friend of mine. So was Picasso. Rivera became very famous in Paris, but he thought that Paris was too small for him so he went back to his home country where he completed this great work being paid as little money as the wage of a physical laborer. He was paid four pesos per square meter of painting. He painted fast, and he painted ten square meters a day. It was said that he climbed a stepladder carrying two guns at his hips and he fired these guns before he started painting. When he was asked the reason, he answered that before starting to paint, he wanted to threaten newspaper reporters and critics so that they would not badmouth his painting. These murals illustrate the history of Mexico. Of course, most of the murals are about the revolutionary war. He also painted murals in city halls, schools and churches. About two years ago, he went to New York and did a mural depicting civilization with machinery at the request of Mr. Rockefeller. He added Lenin's portrait at the corners of the mural and was criticized for being a socialist. He was criticized and it became a big problem; however, the mural came to be valued at 400 dollars per square meter. Orozco is a different type of great painter from Rivera, and Orozco left much work in the state of California. Because of these artists as well as other artists, Mexico owns many nationally important murals. Shiploads of tourists who come to this country first visit these murals. I felt really envious when I saw this. I regret the fact that currently Japan does not have modern art to satisfy foreign tourists; we only have Nikko, Kyoto, Nara and Miyajima to offer them.

Since Mexico City is in dry country located on a flat highland with an elevation of 2,400 meters above sea level, the technique used for murals was painting directly on white walls, which was the same mural technique used in Italy. However, since it is humid and rains a lot in Japan, walls will get moldy and look ugly; therefore, murals should not be painted directly on walls in Japan. Water changes colors. Even though there are techniques to strengthen walls by concealing wire nets or cloth against earthquakes, because there are many earthquakes in Japan, I think walls are not appropriate for painting, but canvas is ideal. The safest way is to stretch canvas over layers of Japanese rice paper on walls. The perfect way is to build other walls made with framed cardboard and stick canvas on the

cardboard walls to cut off moisture completely. Different from paintings, murals require special techniques. There are special rules of perspective because murals are painted on large walls and are viewed from a longer distance. Murals need deformation, exaggeration, and creative compositions.

The Sistine Chapel of the Vatican in Rome, Italy has a famous large mural painted by Michelangelo. It is said that Michelangelo spent so long painting on the ceiling using a scaffold that his neck became stiff and his spine got stuck and he could not stretch his neck at all. Having only a piece of bread and wine, he devoted himself to painting every single day. He did not even take off his shoes when he took naps, and the bottom of his feet got stuck to his shoes. It is also said that he did not put down his brush for 24 hours. Michelangelo's great work is very famous as one of the most important treasures of the world.

Chavannes, a French master artist of the 19th century, painted murals in a lecture hall at the Sorbonne University, in the city hall of Paris, and in art museums in Lyon, Marseille, Amiens, and Rouen their subjects are based on Greek myths. The murals are classical and sacred, and they are national treasures of France. Interestingly, Chavannes' personality was totally different from his work. He was a glutton and was good at throwing epithets. It is said that he became naked when he painted nudes.

My first mural work was in the artist club building on the Royal Hospital Road in Chelsea in London, and it was painted about 20 years ago. I painted murals 4.5 meters wide and 2.7 meters high on each wall of three floors, the basement, the first floor, and the second floor illustrating "Deluge of Noah" in the Bible, dances, and music. I carved these murals with a little knife and painted in the colors. I was an unknown art student and sometimes went to London from Paris to paint these murals in the artist club. Two years later, the owner of the building changed, and the new owner painted these walls and erased the murals. One of my friends living in London told me in Paris that 10 years later, after I became renowned in Paris as well as in London, the owner of the building found out for the first time who painted the murals. He regretted what he had done, but it was too late and he could not restore my murals because they were totally covered with paint.

My second mural work was in a banker's residence in Antwerp. I illustrated the whole scene of Antwerp Harbor, the castle gate, and other scenes of the town of the past and present in seven murals. I also painted clouds, wind, angels, mermaids, and dolphins that symbolize the ocean in the murals. After I finished painting them, I went back to Paris with only half of the honorarium. The banker did not give me the other half. He never responded to my many letters. I sent him a telegram every day from spite so that his servants would know what he had done to me. Finally, he twice sent me some money. Before he finished paying the whole amount, he was arrested and put in jail for embezzling official money. The bank was shut down, and the bank's real estate was put up at auction. I heard that my seven murals were separated and sold to different people. Later, I painted three murals illustrating young Chinese acrobats. These murals were thin like a "Byobu" folding screen. When Mr. Rothschild, a rich man, came to my studio and saw them,

he wanted to buy them but asked for a discount. While he was negotiating with me, an American bought them and took them back to New York.

I painted two large murals in the Maison du Japon student center at the request of Mr. Jirohachi Satsuma.¹⁴ One of the murals is 12 meters wide and 3 meters high with the title of "Importing Western Civilization to the East" and I depicted a distant view of Nagasaki. I put gold leaves on this mural myself and drew many people and animals. On the other mural, I painted a herd of a few strong horses. The size of this mural is also large. In contrast to the movement of the horses, I painted a silent scene with a blue sky and green land with gold leaves on the other side of the mural from the herd. This mural is at the front wall at the entrance. The French president Doumergue was invited to the opening ceremony of the Maison du Japon. After the ceremony, the president told me that he was only watching the mural in front of him without listening to the many cut-and-dried speeches, and gave me his praise for my work.

The Cercle Interallié in Paris is a club whose main members are among the most powerful people in Paris such as ambassadors, and it is located at a place from where one can view both Champs-Elysees and the Place de la Concorde. I painted seven murals of 1.8 meters wide spaced 1.8 meters apart with gold leaves by request of Count Beaumont, the chair of the club.¹⁵ I drew land birds and water birds, and land flowers and water flowers. Right after I arrived in Paris, I was poor. I had to work as an artist's model for as little as five francs. During those days, I once posed for a Russian painter, Mr. Tercobsky. He sold my portrait for 2,500 francs to an art collector called Mr. Munie, who made a fortune in the chocolate industry. Mr. Tercobsky boasted about this story to me and bought me champagne sold by the glass to celebrate at the stand-up bar of the café, La Rotonde. Even though he knew that I was a poor artist, not a model, and was living hand to mouth, he never gave me any money except for posing. This painter was an ambitious man. Eventually, he divorced his Russian wife, married a daughter of Mr. Reag, the Minister of the Navy, and started developing his career in Paris. Thus, he painted a large landscape mural in the Cercle Interallié building. However, the mural was in terrible disrepair and the members started complaining about it. It was decided that the mural had to be removed, and by coincidence my mural replaced it and enjoyed a great reputation. I finally took revenge on the pitiless artist. A few years ago, Mr. Munie, the art collector, sold my portrait painted by that artist. An art dealer bought it, brought it to me, and asked me to buy it. I told him I would buy it for five francs which is the same amount of money I got paid for posing for it. The art dealer took the painting back and left. I felt as if I had taken revenge again, but this time it was in an invisible way.

I recently came back to Japan and painted a large mural which is 18 meters wide and 3.6 meters high in the publicity office for Brazilian coffee in the Ginza Seisho Building at the request of Mr. Assomson and the Embassy of Brazil.¹⁶ The mural illustrates a distant view of a hill of coffee fields with 47 people and 15 animals as seen from a town near Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. I finished the mural within one month from September 5 to October 5 of last year. I spent 12 hours every day from nine o'clock in the morning until 9 o'clock at night, a total of 360

hours.¹⁷ I declined every single invitation and obligation of social commitment. The reason why I used only domestic materials from Bunbodo Store was that I wanted to prove the improvement of Japanese domestic products. I didn't use models, and I didn't draw drafts. I painted hiding from my friends without informing the newspaper companies.

Last year, I again painted six murals on the ceilings of the Colombian, a confectionery in The Ginza.¹⁸ Each mural is 2.1 meters wide and 1.5 meters high. They illustrate willows, olive trees, apple trees, groves, a row of poplar trees, a hill of oak trees, grape fields and others in Normandy, Burgundy, Dordogne, Seine-et-Oise, and the Alpes Maritime in the southern Mediterranean area. I incorporated a genre picture from an interior decoration of the 18th century, the era of King Louis, into these murals. I completed them at the end of October. Recently, there was a fire in The Ginza. Though the building caught fire from the next building, fortunately, the murals were not burnt. However, they turned brown from the smoke. I finished restoring them four or five days ago washing them with turpentine using a brush, because they were painted in oil on canvas, and touching them up a little.

Also recently, I started painting a mural of fashion on the second floor of the Ronmo Dressmaker in The Ginza. I painted the entire wall in black and carved a woman's figure on the wall with a knife so that the white lines under the black paint come up. This method can produce results similar to the Chinese stone rubbing method. Somewhat more than ten groups of women, girls, children, animals and others are illustrated in the mural.

After having the above mentioned experiences, I painted murals in The Ginza area in Tokyo this year, last year and two years ago.¹⁹

Last year in a special dining room of the Sogo Kimono Shop in Osaka I painted a mural called *Spring*. It is an oil-painting mural 3.6 meters wide and 1.8 meters high and illustrates two heavenly maidens sprinkling flowers from the sky and country girls and city girls playing with the flowers beneath the heavenly maidens.

Thus I made murals move into one of the most popular streets in Japan. It might be honorable to paint murals even in places where they are seldom viewed if a client were a baronet. As I am only a painter, if I am given opportunities to paint, I am happy painting and I don't need to select my audience. It would be my pleasure if my murals make uneducated urban people walking on the street interested in art, and educate and improve young people. So I was willing to advance to the Ginza.

There is no reason why a highly respected artist cannot show his work on the streets. If artists keep up great work, they must be able to gain reputation and earn much money. Rank and respect are results of what they have done, and they are the only real rewards. I think that if artists want to receive rewards first, then nothing will be accomplished. I always feel sad that some artists consider displaying on the streets with contempt.

Tokyo is typified by the area from Nihonbashi to Kyobashi and Shinbashi. I believe it is our responsibility to improve the content of the Ginza. If Kanebo,

Mitsukoshi, Matuya, Matsuzakaya, Shiseido, Senjoya, Yurakuza, and Nihongekijo were competing with each other through having murals as interior decoration, then the splendid specialty of The Ginza would be a national treasure forever. This is only an example using the Ginza, and I would like to spread my assertion all over Japan. I don't have many colleagues. If we make murals popular using techniques based on our expertise in western paintings, Japanese paintings, and illustrations and adding some creativity, Japan certainly will be reborn as an art-rich nation. I am counting on people on the streets of The Ginza, Kyobashi, and Nihonbashi because the Japanese government is still suffering from the Great Kanto Earthquake and has only small make-shift offices in Marunouchi.

On the other hand, private businesses are quite strong. They do not need public support. If we all cooperate in the creation of an era of murals, we eventually can create the wealth and pride of the nation. I would like to suggest that before a building is started, 2 to 3 percent of the budget should be planned for murals. Thus painters should demonstrate their talent in their work to the public, compete with each other, and achieve great works. If they devoted themselves to painting, day and night, through having more commissions, a problem like the Teiten incident, which is peculiar to Japan and revealed an ugly inside story of the world of art, would not have occurred. If business people give artists jobs such as murals, we, artists, would not make barriers among us and would be content engaging with our primary desire of creation which is painting. We should not calculate our honor based on who our clients are, nor demean the job of an artist. The artists who accomplish great work should be highly respected. Titles of paintings are nothing but borrowed for us. If paintings match the intrinsic conditions and express the artist's talent of creativity, they would be always new forever, and be kept as national treasures forever. This is an important current problem for Japan to solve as well as our demand in order to increase our glory. We could say that it is time to take action.

For the above reasons, I voluntarily went into the Ginza and exposed my humble work in public to increase the love of art and improve aesthetics among ordinary people hoping that rooms and interior decorations will remain forever and not shame Japan as a first class nation. I am making steady progress in creating more murals, dreaming that one day I will paint a great mural which comes close to satisfying me. I eagerly hope that the majority of readers of this essay understand what I mean and that famous murals will be painted all over Japan by many artists in all kinds of forms. Our simple Japanese architecture has been content with one "kakejiku" hanging scroll or one set of folding screens. However, I hope we become aware of the fact that Japan has reached an era when modern buildings should be decorated with large murals as soon as possible.

Foujita's Festivals of Four Seasons of Akita, 1937

Not long after the publication of this article Foujita had an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate his new theories and mature skills as a muralist. A young and super-rich landowner, Masakichi Hirano from Akita, a city in the northern part of Japan, commissioned from Foujita what was to be the biggest and the most quickly painted mural in the world.²⁰ This stupendous 365 cm by 2050 cm mural, *Festivals of Four Seasons of Akita*, was completed in 174 hours, from February 21 to March 7. On his visits to Tokyo in 1929, Hirano had been moved by Foujita's solo-exhibition held in Tokyo Asahi Shimbunsha. Seven years later Foujita visited Akita during a time when he was engaged in shooting a movie documenting the customs of Japanese children. While partying with Hirano and others Foujita bragged extravagantly about his successes as a mural painter in France. As a riposte Hirano challenged Foujita's ability to make the largest canvas mural in the world and offered him a commission. Hirano then invited Foujita up to Tohoku for frequent visits so that he could study the people and their customs.

When the time came for the artist to paint, Hirano provided Foujita with a commodious rice storage warehouse where the gigantic stretched canvas sections could be arrayed around the four sides of the building.²¹ Working with a team who helped to prepare and mix the colors, Foujita painted frenetically in the reputed manner of his Mexican friend Diego Rivera. The immense surface was rapidly covered by Foujita's energetic brushwork that gave strong visual momentum to the center of the canvas and amplified the vigorous activity of the figures congregated there.

Festivals of Four Seasons of Akita, 1937, Hirano Museum, Akita, Japan



The narration of the seasonal events unfolds from a frigid beginning. At the left is a wintry scene that depicts end-of-the-year activities. Heavily bundled against the cold, the northern farmers and their families, horses, and dogs gather amidst banks of snow to offer their year end taxes to the Hirano family. In the distance one notices the towers set up to pump oil and, within the village, racks of drying cedar timbers are reminders of the local economy and special products of Akita. The packed snow igloo called a *kamakura*, that is unique to the Akita region, shelters two children who kneel on straw mats preparing icy treats for their playmates. Foujita has enlivened their drab winter clothes and the neutral background with touches of red such as mufflers, some toys, and a child's sled, but generally limited the use of bright colors to show their muted activities.

Foujita's attempts at restraint disappear in the second and third scenes that show the famous summer Lantern Festival of Akita and the Bonden Festival of Taiheizann Miyoshi Shrine on January 17. The painter obviously delighted in painting the scrambling figures who raise up the lanterns and festival devices, the various onlookers and the drummers who pound enormous *taiko* drums. Again and again, Foujita skillfully uses contrasts of figures, costumes and postures to pace the activity across the composition and intensifies the popular - one could say non-elegant - taste of rural life in old Japan with the brilliant reds he has chosen for his palette. Making a strong contrast at the center-right of the composition is an impressively tall black-garbed gentleman identified as the landlord, Masakichi Hirano, who seems to stand positioned as the marshal for these revels.

The last seasonal Akita event is an autumn festival at the Yabase Hiyoshi Shrine. Market stalls and a temporary stage for performances make up a three-sided enclosure that provides an effective and appropriate termination to the entire



composition. Among the spectators in fall clothing can be seen several portrait heads who have been identified as members of the team who helped Foujita with the construction of the mural.

References in "A Theory of Modern Murals" to Mexican *muralismo* lead us on a search for Mexican influence in Foujita's Brazil coffee mural and in *Festivals of Four Seasons of Akita*. Both critical and visual evidence suggests that Foujita was far more attentive to Rivera's nationalistic subject matter, that appeared so exotic and foreign to him, than to Rivera's politics. Rivera developed an esthetic that projected his views on labor and production, whereas Foujita never got much beyond consumerism. "I believe if the scene for a bridal including the change of clothes was drawn on the whole wall in front of the steps, it could convey the knowledge of Japanese culture," Foujita advises.²² He was a foreigner in Latin America and in Akita, perhaps even now in Japan, the country he had abandoned for so long.

Foujita's murals have neither political, left-leaning ideology nor the machine glorifying esthetics that were very important to Rivera, Léger and other mural painters in the 1930s. This lack reveals him as belonging more to the earlier generation of Puvis de Chavannes than to his own. But when he found a chance to record exotic customs inspired by his Mexican experiences, Foujita's murals became important to him and to us as an expression of his lot as a member of the international diaspora.

Foujita's South American and Mexican experiences took place between his first return to Japan of 1929 and the second and real return of 1932. Through these decades there were two important changes in his works. The Brazil and Akita murals achieved both the large scale and monumentality of the *Maison du Japon* mural. They also verify the disappearance of his linear style, the more obvious expression of lights and shadows, and the overlapping of the space and the figures depicted as dynamic masses. The colors turned from monochrome to a vivid palette. At this stage, Foujita achieved a kind of "integration" of "lowbrow" people, who were his own contemporaries, with Chavannes-like allegorical figures who still linger among the figures in both murals.

With these points it is possible to indicate the influence of Foujita's 1932-33 sojourn in Mexico. Having now run away from his life in Paris, Foujita must have found in Mexican murals and their worldwide popularity a direction leading away from his *Ecole de Paris* paintings of sleek women and cats. The Mexican renaissance painters who became famous by stressing their Mexican singularity, gave stimulation to Foujita who had once before been famous for his well-calculated "Japanese/Oriental" style. The large-scale canvas format with its monumental figures, the dynamism of their masses and strikingly colorful palette are mingled through his Mexican experience in the Brazil coffee mural and the Akita Festivals mural.

Finally we have to separate the stylistic and ideological influences of Rivera on Foujita. While Rivera's work may have shown Foujita new ideas for his palette and compositions, Rivera's ideology of the murals for the revolution and for the ordinary people made virtually no impact on Foujita's murals. One understands from the underlying tone of embarrassment expressed in "A Theory of Modern Murals" that one of his goals was to make the streets of Ginza more attractive and to bring the "quality of life" in Tokyo up to the standard enjoyed by Parisians. From

this point of view, the lack of politics, his idea of murals remained identified with Chavannes-like murals compared to those of Noda and the younger generation.

Conclusion

Foujita continued his career as a mural painter in the 1930s with a series of paintings commissioned by the Japanese government. These works had nationalistic military themes and earned him an unfavorable reputation in the next decade following the defeat of the Japanese army and the creation of a new democratic nation. Controversial and rarely exhibited, these paintings have yet to receive objective scrutiny because of their painful content and the results of their post-war reception. In 1949 Foujita left Japan never to return. He went first to the United States, but he found no refuge there because of his reputation as a nationalist supporter among Japanese Americans. He then went to Paris where he was received with more compassion and he recommenced his career. In 1955 Foujita and his wife Kimiko Foujita took French citizenship and became Catholics.

Two final mural projects should be mentioned. In the 1950s Foujita purchased a cottage southwest of Paris in Villiers-le-Bac (Essone) and muraled the walls with his familiar and cherished motifs. The house was restored by the Essone departmental government in 1998; one day it will be open to the public. Foujita is buried nearby in the village churchyard.

Reims lies in the opposite direction, northeast of Paris. There Rene Lalou, a member of the family who produces Mumm's champagne, offered Foujita a commission to design a small chapel on their winery grounds and to fresco its interior. The project began in 1964. The architectural style of the chapel is Romanesque and so provided generous expanses of wall that Foujita covered with scenes of the life of Christ from the Nativity through the Passion and concluding with the Crucifixion and Resurrection. A tiny side chapel is consecrated to Our Lady of the Vintage. Foujita's last self-portrait locates him kneeling among the crowd in the Crucifixion scene. He died in 1968 not long after his work in Reims was finished.

Notes

¹ Sylvie and Dominique Buisson, *La vie et l'oeuvre de Leonard-Tsuguharu Foujita*, (Courbevoie: ACR, 1987) is a catalogue raisonné that provides a reliable biography, a useful bibliography and a list of the artist's principal exhibitions. See also the catalogue in Japanese and in French for Foujita's centenary exhibition for which these authors served as consultants. For information in English on Foujita see the translation of Jean Selz, *Foujita*, (Naefels: Bonfini, 1980)

² "From Murals to the Walls - The Genealogy of Decoration," *The Crossing Visions: European and Modern Japanese Art*, (Tokyo, NMWA and NMMA, 1996) 215.

³ "Foujita kun no kotodomo (On Mr. Foujita)," *Foujita Exhibition Catalogue*, (Tokyo, Ashahi Shimbunsha, 1929) 1-3.

⁴ Tsuguharu Foujita "Nihon-ga Shikan", *Chi wo Oyogu*, Shomotsu Tenbo-sha, Tokyo, 1942, p.179

("My Personal view on Nihon-ga", *Swimming on Earth*.)

- 5 "Mekisshiko wo kaerimite," *Chuobijutsu*, no.9, April, 1934, 57-62.
- 6 "Hekiga no Atarashii Hoko," *Atelier*, v.13, no.7, Tokyo, July, 1936. English translation by Mitsuyoshi Gejima, Miyazaki, 2000. It appears that this is a shorter version of the far longer article "Gendai Hekiga-ron" that appeared in *Kaizo*, a well respected intellectual magazine, a few months earlier in 1936. See note 13 below.
- 7 Julieta Ortiz Gaitán, *El Muraliso Mexicano: Otros Maestros*, (Mexico, UNAM, 1994).
- 8 Stanton L. Catlin, "Mural Census," *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective* (Founders Society of the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1986) 286-293.
- 9 Catlin, "Mural Census", 294-297.
- 10 Ramon Favela, *Diego Rivera: The Cubist Years*, Phoenix Art Museum, (1984) 76 (Figure No.22). At the time of this publication the whereabouts of this painting were unknown. It has since been acquired by a private collector through the New York art market.
- 11 Buisson, *Catalogue raisonné* 162.
- 12 *Bulletin de l'Effort Moderne*, Paris, July, October, November 1924. Reprinted in *Fernand Léger, Fonctions de la peinture*, Sylvie Forestier, ed. Paris, Gallimard, 1997.
- 13 Tsuguharu Foujita, "Gen dai heki ga ron," *Kaizo*, 1936. English translation by Midori Tomita with further editing by Masako Eguchi and Steven van Dresser.
- 14 These are the first of Foujita's murals that can be identified as extant. They are located at the Maison du Japon, on the campus of the Cité Universitaire in Paris and dated 1929. A recent Japanese publication *Salon des Artistes Japonais and the Baron SATSUMA: Japanese Artists in Europe before World War II*, (Tokyo, 1999) documents the creation of the Fondation Satsuma, as the building was then known. It still serves as a dormitory and student center for Japanese university students studying in Paris.
- 15 The Cercle Interallié murals are not nearly as impressive as those of the Maison du Japon, but well worth the effort of a visit to the club where they will be found in two locations; a small lounge off the main reception hall and at the entrance to the wing housing a swimming pool. They are conservative, even traditional, examples of Asian decorative painting and pleasant additions to the décor of the club.
- 16 Judging from photos published at the time that it was painted, the Brazilian Coffee Planatation mural has been cut down and presently a large portion of the left end of the composition is missing. In its reduced state it currently hangs in the mezzanine gallery of Fujita Vente, a public relations venture of the Fujita construction company in Tokyo. The mural has been ineptly repainted so that none of Foujita's fluid brush drawing and transparent surfaces remains. Only a cartoon impression of this once great composition can be said to exist.
- 17 Foujita's comments offer a self-comparison with his stories of Diego Rivera's prodigious efforts, but the mural might once have contained another comparative reference. The loss of the left end panel (or panels) forces us to study the photos of the mural in its original location. From these photos we see in the missing portion a self-portrait of Foujita seated at an easel out of doors at the edge of the plantation

fields. He is working on a canvas surrounded by his admirers in a pose reminiscent of Gustave Courbet in his famous painting *My Studio* 1855, now in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Foujita looks over his shoulder challenging our gaze while his lover Mady looks on in admiration. Mady appears several more times as the model for figures in the portion of the painting that has been left to us.

¹⁸ Photos of these murals were published along with this article, but the works are now lost. The café was destroyed during the bombing of Tokyo in World War II.

¹⁹ There are a number of large canvases in Japanese collections that might be identified with the murals Foujita says he created in the period 1935-37. Their sizes vary and all are framed and hung in new locations so that it is difficult to see them as anything more than large easel paintings. Within the Institut Franco-Japonais du Kansai in Kyoto there is a restaurant, Le Foujita, that displays a huge canvas with a scene of the French countryside. Other examples of Foujita's "murals" are in the lobby of the Mikayo Hotel, Shinagawa-ku, Tokyo and at the Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki-shi, Okayama-ken.

²⁰ The account of the commission from Hirano to Foujita was provided by his son Makoto Hirano, who has been until recently the director of the Hirano Museum in Akita where the mural is displayed. Mr. Hirano very kindly showed us the museum's collection of scrapbooks and photographs that detail the commission of the mural and its later history.

²¹ The mural remained in the warehouse for nearly twenty years pending the construction of the Hirano Museum which opened in 1955.

²² Refers back to page 8. in the second translation.