



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

The Art of Paul Jacoulet (1897–1960)

A TRIBUTE TO THE FLOATING WORLD

by Peter Adams

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA is perhaps best known for its New Year's Day Rose Bowl Game and Rose Parade. The world famous parade was initiated one-hundred nine years ago by members of the Valley Hunt Club who rode down Orange Grove Boulevard in their horse-drawn carriages laden with roses to celebrate the New Year. The Rose Parade is now viewed *via* television throughout the world. Yet, as anyone who has ever been to the parade can testify "the television cameras don't do it justice." The few times I have staggered out of bed early on New Year's Day to see the parade in person, I have been overwhelmed by the massive size, the imaginative movement, and wonderful sense of fantasy of the floats. However, what most impressed me has been the unabashed enthusiasm of the crowds cheering the floats. They were cheering not a sports event, but an art form! It is sad to contemplate that, because the floats must be decorated with flowers or other organic materials, their beauty withers within a few days.

However, the beauty and sophistication of Pasadena are not limited to the ephemeral flowering floats of the Rose



In the Official Box, 1942
woodblock print by Paul Jacoulet
carver, Maeda; printer, Fujii

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Parade. One of the great jewels of Pasadena is the **Pacific Asia Museum**. The museum's exhibitions are highly acclaimed throughout California, and attract tremendous attention in London, Venice, Hong Kong, and Tokyo. The most recent exhibition, *The Prints of Paul Jacoulet Revisited*, curated by the museum's Executive Director, **David Kamansky**, is a case in point. This is the third exhibition the museum has organized on the art work of Monsieur Jacoulet. The first exhibition in 1982 helped to establish a respectable position throughout the world for Jacoulet prints. So enthusiastic was the reception for that exhibit that a fashionable restaurant in Pasadena by the name of "Jacoulet" emerged into existence. It became the rage of Pasadena and within a few years expanded into two fine restaurants, *Cinnabar* and *Bistro 45*.

ESMÉ PAUL MARIE JACOULET was born on January 23, 1897 in Paris near the Rue Roma. Soon after Paul's birth his father, **Frédéric Jacoulet** moved to Tokyo to teach French and

German to young Japanese aristocrats. Paul and his mother soon followed. As a sensitive youth he excelled in art, music and languages. He had several



Photo of Paul Jacoulet in his Tokyo studio, 1923.

Japanese painting instructors and was strongly influenced by the works of **Utamaro** (1763-1806). He became a proficient violinist, but preferred playing the Japanese *samisen*, a three-string instrument visually resembling a banjo. Interestingly enough, he collected butterflies from all over eastern Asia; seven species of which are named after him. His language skills were so proficient that at a young age Monsieur Jacoulet became a translator in the French Embassy in Tokyo.

In his early twenties, quite slender and handsome, M. Jacoulet could well have been described as a dilettante. At this

time his nights were usually spent with myriads of friends at nightclubs or bars. During the day he would often leave work early to watch *sumo* wrestling

matches. He was characterized by a French diplomat's wife in the early 1920s as "certainly the best-looking young man in Tokyo."

However, his careless lifestyle immediately changed when on September 1, 1923 a great earthquake flattened Tokyo destroying almost 400,000 homes and killing tens of thou-

sands. Jacoulet felt his life had been spared for a purpose and that the purpose of his life from then on would be his art. He abandoned his position at the embassy and pursued his art with a fanatic-like commitment.

THE ART WORK OF M. Jacoulet is certainly derived from the Japanese *ukiyo-e* style. *Ukiyo-e* flourished from the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century, and roughly translated means the art of "the floating world." Believing nothing is permanent and that all life is in transition, *ukiyo-e* artists typically depicted

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the fleeting world of the famous Japanese actors and celebrated *geishas*. Jacoulet, however, also enjoyed drawing and painting peoples from various disappearing Asian cultures.

THE EXHIBITION AT the Pacific Asia Museum separates each of his woodblock prints into the categories of Japanese, Chinese and Mongolian, South Sea Islands, Korean, and European. Paul Jacoulet is sometimes compared to **Paul Gauguin** (1848-1903) and admittedly their work is often similar in subject matter. To my eye, however, Jacoulet's line is much more sensitive, and his colors much purer and more pleasing. In his prints every shape is beautifully thought-out and designed. The design of negative spaces is as important to the overall composition as is the design of the positive spaces. No doubt this is a Japanese trait, but there is much in Jacoulet's work that recalls the great masters of European

Art Nouveau such as **Aubrey Beardsley** (1872-1898) and **Emile Gallé** (1846-1904). Reputedly, Jacoulet greatly admired the work of **Jean**

a love of the common man and woman working at everyday tasks. It is because of these reasons that Jacoulet's work is often described as a unique mixture of Eastern and Western styles.

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It is true that Jacoulet painted only in watercolor. For many years he resisted the print market until 1934 when the famed woodblock carver, **Kazuo Yamagishi**, evaluated the French artist's paintings in an article in the *Nippon Times*:

Even the slightest details show refinement and taste. Above all, Jacoulet is careful where other artists are negligent. As to color, his effects are thoroughly Japanese. In many respects, there is no Western artist working in this medium who can approach him, and, even among Japanese artists, he stands out prominently.

The most surprising feature of his work is the manner in which

Jacoulet draws hands and feet. Many Japanese paint in the Western style, but none give the



The Porcelain Garden Seat, Manchuria, 1936
woodblock print by Paul Jacoulet
carver, Maeda; printers, Honda, Uchikawa, Fujii, Hoshino

François Millet (1842-1879) and though their art is unquestionably different in style, they share

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same expression to the eyes as Jacoulet does, both in his South Seas pictures and in his studies of Japanese character. His portraits of Japanese peasants are so convincing, that at a glance the character can be read.

Yamagishi did fourteen very successful woodblock prints for Jacoulet. However, Jacoulet soon came to feel that the prints reflected more of the vision of Yamagishi than of Jacoulet. He then employed one of Japan's finest carvers, **Kentaro Maeda** who served Jacoulet until the end of the painter's life.

THE ART OF Japanese woodblock printing is a complicated art form, but can be described as a collaborative effort between the painter, the carver, and the printer. Many woodblocks must be identically carved out of cherrywood for one print. Each color that is applied must have its own block, and there may be over a hundred color applications. The

inker or printer has to be extremely precise and know exactly how much color the paper will absorb at any given time. The quality of the paper is

sand years. Most of his editions originally consisted of one-hundred to three-hundred fifty prints. Unfortunately, many have been lost through mistreatment, natural disasters, or long exposure to sunlight. But those that remain, are wondrous.



Snowy Night, Korea, 1939
woodblock print by Paul Jacoulet
carver, Maeda; printers, Honda, Fujii, Ogawa

also vitally important. Because of the high quality of paper Jacoulet used, he often boasted that his prints would last a thou-

JACOULET BECAME an innovator in woodblock prints often using gold, platinum, silver, and bronze on one print. The 1930s brought him worldwide fame and prosperity. He had travelled to Korea and to many islands of the South Seas. Everywhere he went he insisted on painting people in their native costumes; even then some of these costumes were becoming rare. He was one of the few foreigners allowed to travel to outlying Japanese islands and paint their soon-to-vanish culture. During World War II, however, he was closely scrutinized by the Japanese police and was often accused of being a spy. His printers had been pressed into mili-

tary service and he was unable to locate good aged cherrywood for his woodblocks. Feeling constant pressure in Tokyo, he moved north to the mountains of Karuizawa. There he lived in relative safety, but was unable to produce any woodblock prints.

HAPPILY, AFTER THE WAR when Japan was occupied by American G.I.s, Jacoulet found a ready market for his prints among America's top military echelon, including **General and Mrs. Douglas MacArthur**. More importantly, he found that his carver, Kentaro Maeda, had survived the war, and so work began afresh on new prints.

The early 1950s found the artist at the zenith of his popularity and financial success. However, he had also developed many strange and flamboyant

eccentricities. He often entertained friends and clients while wearing a *kimono* and white makeup covering his face, giving the artist a ghost-like appearance. He began telling tall tales exaggerating his importance in the art world and became enamored with publicity. Jacoulet seemed to take a childlike glee in being photographed in exotic costumes, including one of his favorites, a cowboy suit. It could be argued that M. Jacoulet was beginning to lose a grip on reality and, like many artists, was retreating into a world of fantasy.

AT THIS TIME, HIS HEALTH WAS beginning to fail and among other ailments, he developed diabetes. Nevertheless, he cherished a plan to travel around the world visiting his many collectors and interesting them in a new pro-

ject. The proposed project was to be a series of a hundred new woodblock prints depicting the disappearing peoples of Asia and the Pacific Islands. To his credit Jacoulet was able to travel around the world. However, due to his poor health and untimely death at age sixty-three, none of the one-hundred woodblocks would ever be produced. Paul Jacoulet passed away on March 9, 1960.

Within Jacoulet's life span he witnessed the Pacific Asian peoples' great attention to traditional artistry flourish, and later wither. He had seen ancient ceremonial robes replaced by t-shirts and blue jeans. Yet, through his art he gives us a glimpse of the last flowering of a uniquely beautiful transient world, a kind of floating world, which has now passed us by.

Notes of Interest:

References for this article

This review was compiled mostly from two books: *The Prints of Jacoulet; a complete illustrated catalog* by Richard Miles; published in 1982 by Robert G. Sawers Publishing in association with Pacific Asia Museum. *Watercolors of Paul Jacoulet* by Richard Miles; published in 1989 by the Pacific Asia Museum in association with Meilinki Enterprise, Ltd, ISBN# 1-877921-02-5 (hardcover) and ISBN# 1-877921-01-7 (soft-cover).

Acknowledgments

My special thanks to author, Richard Miles, and to David Kamansky, Executive Director and Senior Curator of the Pacific Asia Museum.

The exhibition, *The Prints of Paul Jacoulet Revisited*, contains the full series of one-hundred sixty-six prints as well as a number of very rare watercolor paintings. The exhibition is beautifully hung and well labeled. A charming touch is the sequence of mannequins that have been positioned, costumed, and decorated to closely resemble certain prints. The exhibition also illustrates the process of woodblock printing with one print in twelve different stages of development.

The exhibition continues through Feb. 15, 1998.

Pacific Asia Museum, 46 N. Los Robles Avenue, Pasadena, CA 91101; 626/449-2741.

Hours: 10-5; Wednesday through Sunday.