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“Japan Against Japan”: Yasuo Kuniyoshi’s War Posters for the U.S. Propaganda during  
World War II

On December 8, 1941, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, a prominent émigré Japanese artist in New York, awoke to find himself an ‘enemy alien’ due to Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. ‘A few short days has changed my status in this country, although I myself have not changed at all,’ Kuniyoshi wrote. His statement reveals an astute foresight into a new historical period, in which he had to grapple with his racial and national identity vis-à-vis Japan, his home country, and the United States, his adopted home.

This paper examines the underlying contradictions in Kuniyoshi’s wartime work, in particular his ‘anti-Japan’ war posters for the Office of War Information, the U.S. federal agency in charge of war propaganda. The government’s enlistment became a double-edge sword, for it simultaneously recognized Kuniyoshi’s American artist status as the basis of enlistment, and reinforced his ‘Japanese-ness’ that rendered him the ‘enemy.’ I argue that his war posters served as critical loci where Kuniyoshi negotiated through vexing issues of allegiance, loyalty and self-preservation. By exploring representational strategies different from those that demonized everything Japanese, Kuniyoshi offered an alternative approach, through the rhetoric of universality and humanism, to the propaganda program of a government that was itself promulgating institutional racism in the form of exclusionary laws and the Japanese American Internment.

This project expands and complicates our existing understanding of the race history in the U.S. during World War II, which has focused predominantly on the narrative of the Internment. My paper examines the notions of race, assimilation and allegiance outside the camps, as they were contested and reconstructed in the work of Kuniyoshi during a critical period of American history.