

1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, A design Project

“Japanese-ness” in Olympic Designs

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Abstract: In this paper I would like to trace back the design works for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. The Tokyo Olympics were a major design project involving an all-out effort by leading Japanese designers in the 1960s. For the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Japan’s hope and expectation was to be part of the international community, to transcend cultural barriers and to be considered as a nation among developed nations, with modern Western values based on an idealized notion of the order of ancient Greece. Looking at the injection of Japanese traditional culture into the design work for the Tokyo Olympics, we can infer that while designs were based on modern Western sources, the designers were also seeking an expression of the character of Japanese culture.

Key words: *Olympic Games, 1960s, nationalism, Japanese-ness, traditional craft*

1. Introduction

The 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games are remembered as a significant national event and as a turning point in post-war Japan. A dramatic transition can be detected in comparing social life in Japan before and after the Olympics. The 1964 Olympics marked the first time the Olympic games were held in a non-Western nation. It also served as a kind of ‘rite of passage’ for Japan, symbolizing Japan’s miraculous economic recovery in less than 20 years after devastating defeat in World War II, and Japan’s readiness to re-join the ranks of the world’s developed nations.

Sometimes referred to as the ‘trillion yen Olympics,’ the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games were infused with a huge budget [1]. In preparation for the Games, Tokyo was transformed with new subway lines and metropolitan highways. The high speed Bullet Train (Shinkansen) was introduced on October, 1964. Satellite relay broadcasting was put in place and new automatic sports data transmission devices were developed. The historic events are carved into the minds of the Japanese people with images such as the heroic women’s volleyball team, called ‘Miracle Girls of the Oriental,’ and marathon runner Abebe broadcast live nationwide, ushering in a new era of television.

The design work for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic games, including Kamekura Yusaku’s Olympic posters and Tange Kenzo’s Yoyogi National Gymnasium and Swimming Pool, has become cultural media, the ‘memory’ of which continues to be passed on even to generations with no direct experience of the Olympics. Items sold to raise funds for the Olympics - commemorative postage stamps, medals, badges, picture postcards, cigarettes and other merchandise, have also taken their place as cultural media, contributing to the formation of a collective consciousness of the 1964 Olympics. Moreover, the products developed for the Olympics stimulated consumerism in a Japanese public still hesitant to spend, and accelerated the economic growth that followed in Japan. Looking back at the rise of Japanese political consciousness in the 1960s, between the resistance against the 1960 Security Treaty with the United States and the Osaka World Expo of 1970, the Tokyo Olympic Games surely intended,

through a system of commercial promotion, to produce a festival atmosphere and allow the Japanese people to put memories of deprivation behind to look forward to the riches to be reaped from a free economic system. The 1964 Olympics represented more than simply a state propaganda tool to promote Japanese nationalism. The fashioning of the Olympics as a festival for the amusement of the public gave the Japanese people their first experience of a national media event [2]. The transformative effect of the Olympics, and influence as a turning point in Japanese social life, extended from the development of the transportation system infrastructure to the rise of consumerism inspired by media and design.

The Olympics are a celebration of athletics, but the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games were also a major design project, benefitting from the strength and resources of Japan's top designers. The design project for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games had the participation of such post-war design frontrunners as Hara Hiromu, Kono Takeshi, Kamekura Yusaku, Tanaka Ikko, Awazu Kiyoshi, and Yanagi Sori, with design critic Katsumi Masaru heading the team. They presented the appeal of Japanese design to the world through their coordinated designs for posters, tickets, invitations, medals, badges, award certificates, promotional pamphlets, programs, reports, identification tags, uniforms, commemorative coins and stamps, the Olympic torch, Olympic decorations, and guidebooks. The majority of the 'trillion yen Olympics' budget was allocated to transportation infrastructure and civil engineering projects, with only a small amount assigned to design [3]. The designers, however, gave their all and their work remains prominent in the annals of post-war Japanese design history.

Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the present-day Olympics, thought that the Olympics had the potential to instill national pride and through sports contribute to international understanding and cooperation among nations that would aid in the resolution of a number of political and social problems facing mankind [4]. Aside from the lofty ideals of the modern-day Olympics to transcend differences in race, religion, and political values through sports, the games also offer an opportunity to transform existing social infrastructures. The city of Tokyo, currently at the center of a campaign to host the 2020 Olympics, is naturally interested in economic stimulation. There is also an expectation that the Olympics can effect transition to a sustainable society through renewal of a run-down infrastructure, and that this would enhance the image of Tokyo as an environment-friendly city, as well as promote the revitalization of Japan [5]. Rather than simply being an extremely large-budget celebration of sports, the Olympic games are an event capable of instrumentally accelerating resolution of a number of problems through transformation of existing social systems.

Looking back on the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games as a turning point in Japanese post-war society, we can see that the designers had been assigned the production of promotional media to boost the Olympic mood, and communication designs to allow smooth management. However, in addition to such practical matters, their designs were also expected to relate to the Japanese public the significance of the Tokyo Olympic games and of the Olympic ideals of international peaceful coexistence, as well as to demonstrate Japan's presence among the community of nations.

2. The Japanese Flag as Logo

Tokyo was selected as the site for the 1964 Olympic games at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) General Assembly in Munich in May of 1959. The Tokyo Olympic games design project was initiated the following year, in March 1960, with Katsumi Masaru, Hara Hiromu, Kamekura Yusaku and other top designers of

the time being invited to take part in a 'advisory design panel.' The World Design Conference that took place in Tokyo from May 11 - 16, 1960 heightened an awareness of the designer's role in society, and the Tokyo Olympics became an opportunity to put the ideas into practice [6]. The design team first of all devised basic principles that eschewed unnecessary decoration and mandated that designs be international in nature, but with Japanese elements [7]. Another pressing issue, since it had to be announced at the IOC General Assembly during the summer Olympics in Rome in 1960, was the selection of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics official emblem design.

Proposals, in an invitational competition, were elicited from Inagaki Koichiro, Kamekura Yusaku, Kono Takashi, Sugiura Kohei, Tanaka Ikko, and Nagai Kazumasa. In June 1960, the advisory panel unanimously selected, from among 20 proposals, Kamekura Yusaku's simple design combining 'The Rising Sun,' and the Olympic rings with the wording 'Tokyo 1964.' (Fig. 1) Kamekura relates that he had actually forgotten about the competition until he got a call on the day the design was due, reminding him to submit his proposal. With his staff, he hurriedly put together the design in the space of around two hours. Although he had dashed off the design in a matter of five or six minutes, he said that he had been considering the meaning of the Olympics for a long time before that [8], suggesting that he had sufficiently thought the idea through. He commented, "Making a simple design that would have the feel of Japan and of the Olympics was not an easy task, but I created this emblem design without too much complicated thinking or worrying. I wanted to express the idea of Japan cleanly and clearly, and at the same time incorporate the sense of movement and sportiness connected with the Olympics." [9] The requirement, as Kamekura intimates, was that the emblem design express both 'Japan' and 'the Olympics.'

Many Japanese people would have seen in the emblem an association with the Japanese flag and as a result have a feeling for the important meaning of the Tokyo Olympics. The Olympic emblem, reminiscent of Japan's flag, would also serve to promote Japan's presence in the international community and to enhance a sense of national consciousness among the Japanese people. In other words, it directly connected the significance of the Olympics to Japan's revival as a nation. Kamekura, however, clearly said of the emblem, "One might perceive in it the 'Japanese flag,' but for me the idea of the 'sun' was really stronger." [10] While admitting that it could be taken as the 'hi-no-maru' (the 'rising sun' flag of Japan), Kamekura's intention was rather to represent the universal symbol of the sun. The fact that both 'the sun' and 'the Japanese flag' are called to mind is actually this emblem's strength, linking the international Olympics event to the national identity of the Japanese people. Just as the Olympic emblem symbolizes the Olympics, the Olympics symbolize the ideal of peoples of all nations seeking, through sports, peaceful co-existence and respect for each other's differences. At the same time, however, the Olympics is an event that for a time intensifies nationalism. The Japanese athletes are cheered on with shouts of 'Japan' and the Japanese people feel proud to hear the national anthem and to see the Japanese flag hoisted on the center pole. Along with this, however, the tally of medals by country confirms that Japan has a place among nations and as a member of the 'community' of nations. In 1960s Japan, barely 20 years after the end of World War II, many Japanese people still had mixed feelings about the national flag. Kamekura's Olympic emblem design, with its dual reference displayed on all of the official posters, news releases, program pamphlets, and all official printed materials, as well as in the streets as part of the Olympic decorations, appealed broadly to the idea that the Tokyo Olympic games were significant for the 'revitalization of Japan.'

The design team aimed for a thorough-going policy based on the three principles of consistent use of official symbols, strict application of the five colors of the Olympic rings, and uniform typography. Once the official emblem was selected, it seemed only natural that Kamekura would design the official posters. [11] The first

Olympic poster, the Olympic emblem poster, issued in February 1961, consisted of the official emblem itself, simply enlarged to B1 size. The design, with margins almost eliminated and measuring 103 X 54.8 cm, longer than wide, was meant to highlight the sun symbol, giving it a sense of being something new by ‘filling the space’ with the ‘red circle.’ Placing the circle in contact with the 5 Olympic rings in gold was calculated to give a rotating effect. [12]

Hara Hiromu said, “It greatly helped in implementing the design policy that from the beginning the emblem represented national identity in a new form and with clarity and simplicity.” [13] With the emblem symbol as a starting point, a series of Tokyo Olympic design work variations became possible. The keynote circle design was repeated in all the design work that appeared for the Tokyo Olympics. Entrance tickets supervised by Hara Hiromu, for example, were color coded, all having the red circle and then the Olympic rings in specific colors consistently according to the different competitions. This also applied to square badges for staff and management that had the circle etched in relief. Stamps issued by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications that included a contribution to the Olympic fund were of a completely different color but displayed the circle in the square space. The themes were variations on the emblem, but is quite likely that people made association with the Japanese flag.

3. Japanese Traditional Craft Designs and Materials

Commemorative items designed for the Tokyo Olympics made with traditional Japanese craft materials seemed luxurious and were highly prized. The use of traditional Japanese materials in international designs highlighted the excellence of Japanese traditional culture. It also marked a departure from the Western standard, and offered an alternative type of design work.

The Tokyo Olympics Organizing Committee for the Games of the 18th Olympiad took particular care in the production of the ‘Invitations’ (Fig. 2) to be delivered to the various national Olympic committee members for the first official event of the Tokyo Olympics. Hara Hiromu, a recognized specialist in book design, was responsible for the invitation’s design. The invitation itself was done with hand made Japanese paper folded in two, in the shape of a decorative folding screen. This was mounted on luxurious silk decorated with a pattern of waves in silver and gold thread, encased in an indigo cloth folder, and finished splendidly as if it would be a work of art. Hara Hiromu was also responsible for the ticket designs. He had to confront the language barrier, and make sure that all would be clear visually, without language, for the type of match, the time, and the venue, and that entrances would be readily recognizable. At the same time, in order to somehow give a Japanese atmosphere to the designs, he used Japanese paper. He also used a watermark, in the style of Western paper, of the circle (hi-no-maru) and the 5 Olympic rings. Haru Hiromu was also responsible for the design of the diplomas. Here, he used thick Japanese paper and an outer frame of gold foil. At the top, ‘The 18th Olympic Games’ was inscribed in calligraphy.

Designs for many items aside from printed materials were made. For example, the strings for hanging the medals on the winners were made from Nishijin silk in the 5 Olympic colors. The boxes for the medals were made of black lacquer decorated with the Olympic emblem in gold. At the Awards Ceremony, women dressed in beautiful kimono graced the atmosphere as they delivered the medals on black lacquer trays. During the period of the Tokyo Olympics, Tokyo was dressed in Olympic decorations, and the Olympic emblem was to be seen everywhere. Curtains, lanterns, etc. decorated the streets. Lanterns in the Olympic colors hanging in the streets in

the Sukiya-bashi Ginza area of Tokyo also enlivened the mood. [14] Traditional Japanese architectural forms were adapted to contemporary architecture - the Olympic Memorial Tower (designed by Ashihara Yoshinobu) was constructed in Komazawa Park as a five story pagoda, and the Budokan (designed by Yamada Mamoru) and officially used for the Olympic Judo matches, was designed in the style of the octagonal Yumedono of Horyuji Temple in Nara.

Katsumi Masaru, supervisor of the design work for the Tokyo Olympics, was seriously concerned about the creation of a universal visual communications system. [15] Around 5,500 athletes and 2,000 officers from 93 countries were expected to come to the Tokyo Olympics, and in Japan there would be a staff of around 30,000 people. It was decided that a system of pictograms (at the time called 'isotypes,' picture letters (emoji), picture words (ekotoba), or 'symbols' or 'silhouette') would be employed to address the very important issue of smooth guidance for the athletes, journalists and tourists who would be coming to Tokyo from all over the world. The 'design office' was set up in February of 1964 and a group in charge of the pictograms, with Tanaka Ikko, Fukuda Shigeo, Yokoo Tadanori, Uno Akiro, Kimura Tsunehisa, Hirohashi Keiko, all together 11 young designers, worked on creating guidance signs for various facilities such as toilets, showers, restaurants, cloakrooms, etc. (Fig. 3) The pictograms developed for the Tokyo Olympics are an important design legacy. They were designed based on ideographic elements, like kanji characters in Japanese language. Pictograms also have something in common with designs rooted in Japanese tradition, such as Japanese family crest designs that are done in a single color within a square space. The pictograms worked efficiently to break language barrier. The pictograms developed for the Tokyo Olympics are very much in use today, and ubiquitous in transportation and public facilities, and in various uses that meet our eye everyday. The Tokyo Olympics provided an important opportunity for the Japanese public to recognize the power of design, and in particular the power of visual information communication.

4. Conclusions

The image of Kamekura Yusaku's Tokyo Olympic Games Poster no. 2 (Fig. 4) is widely recognized and is part of the national 'memory' even of generations who did not directly experience the 1964 Tokyo Olympic games. The vitality seen in the runners about to bolt represents the appearance of a Japan that would soon show itself to be a major economic power. This is the atmosphere of the times that surrounded the design work done for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic games and handed down to us. The Olympic games, with their origins in ancient Greece, are more than an international sports competition. For the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Japan's hope and expectation was to be part of the international community, to transcend cultural barriers and to be considered as a nation among developed nations, with modern Western values based on an idealized notion of the order of ancient Greece. Looking at the injection Japanese traditional culture into the design work for the Tokyo Olympics, we can infer that while designs were based on modern Western sources, the designers were also seeking an expression of the particular character of Japanese culture. From the time of Meiji period Japonisme, Japan had continually tried to present itself in the international community, in international World's Fairs and expositions, by consciously responding to Western understandings and expectations of Japanese-ness. However, the use of the 'hi-no-maru,' in the design work of the Olympics shows that the designers were rather, in representing Japanese-ness, strongly conscious of how the Japanese look at themselves. This kind of thing is also evident in the surge of writings from around the mid-1950s that theorized Japan had moved to 'resurgence,' and away from the 'self-doubt' of a

defeated nation. The design work of the 1964 Tokyo Olympic games reflects the trends of these times when Japan, positioned in the Western camp in the East-West confrontation of the Cold War, and rejecting nationalism in favor of economic growth, would look to traditional culture as a basis for a sense of commonality among the Japanese people. If we look at the design work for the Tokyo Olympics as an expression of ‘Japanese-ness,’ we can understand that the 1964 Tokyo Olympic games served to reintegrate a national consciousness among the Japanese people, to restore continuity with the past and reawaken pride in Japanese culture.



Fig. 1: Kamekura Yusaku, *The 18th Olympic Games, poster no. 1*, 1961



Fig. 2: Hara Hiromu, *Invitation letter to the 18th Olympic Games sent to the Olympic Committee of each country*, 1963



Fig. 3: *Facility symbols*, 1964



Fig. 4: Kamekura Yusaku, *The 18th Olympic Games, poster no. 2*, 1962

Notes

- [1] Noji, Tsuneyoshi, *Tokyo Orinpikku Monogatari*(Tokyo Olympics Story), Shogakkan, 2011, p. 80.
- [2] Sekiguchi, Eri, 'Tokyo Orinpikku to nihon bankokuhakurankai: shohisareru shukusai kukan (The Tokyo Olympics and Japan World Expositions: Commodification of Festivals),' *Ibid.*
- [3] Fukuda Shigeo, a member of the 'symbol' sub-committee, related that he had worked for three months without pay. His only pay was 'in kind,' his remuneration being paid in admission tickets. Noji, Tsuneyoshi, *op. cit.*, pps. 30, 224.
- [4] Pierre de Coubertin took the initiative for the foundation of the modern Olympics following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). As a passionate patriot, he wanted to inspire hope among French youth who had become hopeless in the dismal environment following the war. Azuma, Ryutarō, *Orinpikku*(The Olympics), (Waseda Shobo), p. 5.
- [5] 'Gorin no kaisai de Nihon o genki ni'(editorial), *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, January 11, 2013, morning edition, p.2.
- [6] Katsumi Masaru, 'orinpikku no makku ni tsuite'(on the Olympic emblem), *Design*, no. 11, August 1960, p. 2.
- [7] *Tokyo Olympics ofisharu subenir* (Tokyo Olympics official souvenir), 1964, Dentsu, p. 141.
- [8] Kamekura Yusaku VS Nakamura Yujiro Dialogue, 'kyokusen to chokusen no uchu: Nihon no aru nuvo o megutte' (space of curved and straight lines: Art Nouveau in Japan), *KAWASHIMA*, no. 3, April 25, 1981, p. 17.
- [9] Kamekura Yusaku, 'orinpikku no shinboru'(the Olympic emblem), *Tokyo orinpikku: orinpikku tokyo taikai soshiki iinkai kaiho*(Tokyo Olympics: bulletin of the Olympic games organizing committee) , no. 2., June 3 1960, p. 18.
- [10] Kamekura Yusaku, 'hinomaru to orinpikku dezain ju wa (7) '(10 stories on design, the flag of Japan and the Olympic, no. 7), *Mainichi Shinbun*, July 26, 1966, morning edition, p. 5. Concerning Kamekura Yusaku, the Olympic emblem and the flag of Japan, see also 'hi-no-maru to modan: '64 Tokyo taikai shinboru maku to posuta o megutte(the flag of Japan and modernism: concerning the 1964 Tokyo Olympic emblem and posters), *orinpikku sutadizu: fukusu nokeiken, fukusu no seiji* (Olympic Studies, multiple experiences, multiple politics), Shimizu Satoshi, ed., Serika Shobo, 2004.
- [11] Katsumi Masaru 'Tokyo Orinpikku no art direkushon: shikaku gengo no kokusai-ka no mondai' (Tokyo Olympic art direction: the question of an international visual language), *Nenkan kokoku bijutsu 1965*, ed. Tokyo Art Directors Club, Bijutsu Shuppan sha, October 1965, p. 16.
- [12] 'Nihon no aka'(red in Japan), *Kyokusen to Chokusen no Uchu* (the space of the curve and the straight line), Kodansha, 1983, p. 322 (first appeared in *Ogasawara Soka*, January 1981).
- [13] Haru Hiromu, 'Tokyo Orinpikku ni okeru gurafikku dizaina no katsudo' (activities of graphic designers for the Tokyo Olympics), *Nenkan kokoku bijutsu 1965*, ed. Tokyo Art Directors Club, Bijutsu Shuppan sha, October 1965, p. 224.
- [14] Yamashiro Ryuichi, 'kimochi no yoi toitsukan machi ni miru Orinpikku dezain'(joyful unity - Olympic design in the streets), October 13, 1964, morning edition, p. 22.
- [15] Katsumi Masaru, 'orinpikku Tokyo taikai no dezain - porishi 1'(Olympic Tokyo design – policy 1), *Graphic Design*, no. 17, October 1964, p. 13.