

Glory in a Line: A Life of Foujita--the Artist Caught Between East and West

By Phyllis Birnbaum

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The first biography in English of the Japanese artist who was a central figure in the dazzling artistic milieu of 1920s Paris

When we think of expatriates in Paris during the early decades of the twentieth century, certain names come to mind: Hemingway, Picasso, Modigliani?and Foujita, the Japanese artist whose distinctive works, bringing elements of Japanese art to Western oil painting, made him a major cultural figure in 1920s Montparnasse. Foujita was the only Japanese artist to be considered part of the "School of Paris," which also counted among its members such prominent artists as Picasso and Modigliani. Noteworthy, too, was Foujita's personal style, flamboyant even for those flamboyant times. He was best known for his drawings of female nudes and cats, and for his special white color upon which he could draw a masterful line?one that seemed to outline a woman's whole body in a single unbroken stroke.

With the advent of the Second World War, Foujita returned to Japan, where he allied himself with the ruling Japanese mili-tarists and painted canvases in support of the war effort. After Japan's defeat, he was scorned for his devotion to the military cause and returned to France, where he remained until his death in 1968. Acclaimed writer and translator Phyllis Birnbaum not only explores Foujita's fascinating, tumultuous life but also assesses the appeal of his paintings, which, in their mixture of Eastern and Western traditions, are memorable for their vibrancy of form and purity of line.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Birnbaum (*Modern Girls, Shining Stars, the Skies of Tokyo*) tackles the perplexing story of Fujita Tsuguharu, known as Foujita, the eccentric and controversial Japanese painter who achieved success in the West during the early decades of the 20th century. Born in 1886, Foujita studied art in Japan, but at the age of 27 moved to Paris, where he gained fame for his paintings—especially exotic cats and female nudes rendered in exquisite black lines against white backgrounds—combining Eastern and Western artistic traditions. He was equally well known for his wild behavior and flamboyant dress. But in 1940, inexplicably, he moved back to Japan and produced art works promoting its military ambitions, for which he was reviled after the war by his countrymen. Claiming he was being persecuted by the Japanese, he returned to the West in 1949 and managed to salvage his reputation before he died in France in 1968. Basing her biography on letters, archival material and interviews with people who knew Foujita, Birnbaum presents an engrossing account of his life but is unable to shed much light on his reversals of allegiance. The result is an incomplete picture of this inscrutable artist. 24 pages of b&w illus. *(Nov.)*
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From Booklist
So distinctive was his appearance, so flamboyant his pranks, and so popular his paintings of women and cats, Foujita was a Jazz Age superstar. Born in Tokyo in 1886, Foujita arrived in Paris in 1913 and soon forged an alluring style that combined Western settings with Japanese traditions to create, as Birnbaum so vividly attests, works distinguished by extraordinarily nuanced whites and breathtakingly supple and precise lines. Yet for all his success, the fastidious, disciplined Foujita was destined to arouse controversy. Birnbaum, whose earlier works focus on Japanese women, judiciously teases apart the many contradictions and mysteries enfolded in Foujita's dramatic life, chronicling his rise to fame, five marriages, return to Japan in the 1930s, and surprising metamorphosis into his at-war homeland's foremost military artist. With access to newly available materials and expertise in all things Japanese, Birnbaum tracks Foujita's ups and downs with compassion, humor, and discernment, exhibiting particular sensitivity in her analysis of the strange exhilaration Foujita experienced while making official war paintings so overwhelming people prayed before them and his despair at being viewed as a war criminal. Birnbaum's compelling biography reveals the shadow side of artistic compulsion. *Donna Seaman*
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Review

“Birnbaum skillfully evokes the complex trajectory and tragic dilemma of an artist literally caught between two worlds: condemned in Japan as a peddler of hackneyed oriental stereotypes whose success owed more to lifestyle than to artistic talent, yet ignored in the West whenever he tried to develop a purely Western, exotica-free, academic style. Birnbaum has done Foujita a great service in recounting what came before and after his golden age in 1920s Paris.” ?Joe Earle, Chair, Department of Art of Asia, Africa, and Oceania, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

“This is an outstanding study of a remarkable painter. Foujita was the first modern Japanese artist to achieve, and retain, international fame. To write a coherent biography of this flamboyant, attractive, and immensely gifted artist requires high linguistic skill in both French and Japanese and a superior sense of literary discrimination as well. Phyllis Birnbaum deftly peels through the layers of confession and confusion with

which Foujita often surrounded himself in order to produce a witty, thoughtful, and wise study of the artist and the often tumultuous times during which he lived and worked. He is the perfect choice for the first full-length biography of any modern Japanese painter to be written in English, and Birnbaum is the ideal writer to bring him and his work into focus." ?J. Thomas Rimer, Emeritus Professor, Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, University of Pittsburgh, a co-author of Paris in Japan.

"Phyllis Birnbaum uses wide-ranging research and access to both French and Japanese sources to bring to life an intriguing, enigmatic artist who lived and worked in two worlds, balancing between the art world of Paris and the demands of his Japanese heritage.

She re-creates the heady days of the Montparnasse artists' community in 1920s Paris, when Foujita's languorous nudes, incisive portraits, and moody cats made him a star among the artists, models, gallerists and collectors, and she also sheds new light on the more ambiguous legacy of Foujita's return to Japan and his paintings for the Japanese war effort.

Birnbaum has created a multi-faceted portrait of a 20th century artist whose life and work continue to fascinate us today." ?Julie Martin, co-author (with Billy Klüver) of Kiki's Paris

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gary Bloomfield:

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