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Contested bodies: female imagery in pre-war Okinawa

ERIKO TOMIZAWA-KAY

Abstract: In April 1938, the international celebrity painter, Fujita Tsuguharu (also known as Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita) arrived in Okinawa for a two-month stay during which he toured the islands, frequenting the Tsuji brothel district, visiting traditional fishing villages and painting the landscape and its inhabitants. Fujita's Okinawan works offer us critical insights into the complex role of art in negotiating the asymmetries of what scholars have come to call the 'contact zone' (Pratt 2008). Equally important, they provide us with a lens through which we can re-interrogate paintings of Okinawan women produced over the same period (1938–9) by his Okinawan colleagues: artists and admirers such as Ōshiro Kōya, Nadoyama Aijun and the little known Tōma Yukio, all of whom struggled to visually reconceptualise the relationship between the mainland and its colonial subject. Examining rarely discussed pre-war paintings of Okinawan women by both mainland and Okinawan artists, this essay explores ways in which representations of the female body – the canonical object of the exoticising gaze – offered both coloniser and colonised a means to investigate the ambivalences, contradictions and brutalities of the colonial endeavour. These paintings, this essay argues, were deeply imbricated in wider discussions of colonialism and subordination, and they have been implicated in debates that have produced a new perspective on tensions between Okinawa and mainland Japan.

Keywords: Fujita Tsuguharu, Nadoyama Aijun, Ōshiro Kōya, Tōma Yukio, Ryūkyūan clothing, yōga, assimilation, colonialism, the Okinawan female body, tourism

Contested bodies: Female imagery in pre-war Okinawa

In April 1938, the Japanese artists Fujita Tsuguharu, also known as Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita (1886–1968), Kajiya Ryūji (fl. mid-20th century) and

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Takeya Fujio (1907–1984) arrived in Okinawa for a two-month stay during which they toured the islands, frequenting the Tsuji brothel district (where they were lavishly hosted by prominent Okinawans), visiting traditional fishing villages and painting the landscape and its inhabitants.[1] Fujita was by now an international celebrity – he had been conferred the Belgian Order of Leopold in 1925, the same year the French government awarded him the Legion of Honour (Buisson and Buisson 2001, 120) – and he and his companions, all members of the progressive Nika-kai (Second Division) art society, were much feted by local artists and intellectuals, including the Okinawan *yōga* (Western-style paintings; i.e. oil and watercolour painting) painters Haebaru Chōkō (1904–1961) and Ōshiro Kōya (1911–1980). Eighteen of Fujita's *nihonga* (Japanese-style paintings) and six *yōga,* including *Tsuji Beauty* (*Tsuji bijin*) (Figure 1), discussed below, were displayed at the exhibition *The Work of Fujita*

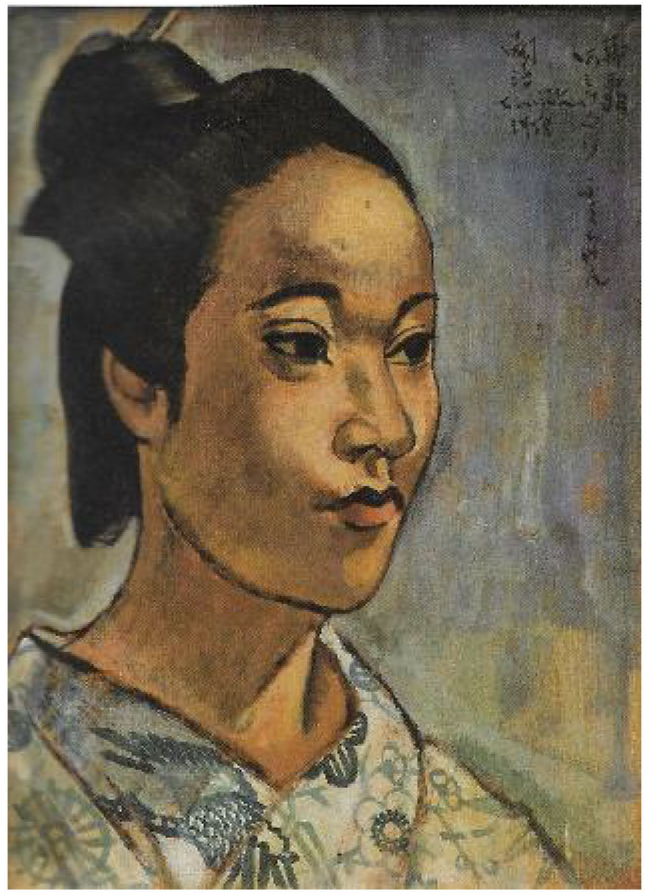

Figure 1 Fujita Tsuguharu. *Tsuji Beauty.* 1938. Oil on panel, 33.1 × 23.7 cm. Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum. © Foundation Foujita/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 2024.

Tsuguharu (*Fujita Tsuguharu sakuhin kanshōkai*) in Naha in May of that year (*Ryūkyū Shinpō* 1938, 3) (Figure 2). The exhibition garnered mixed reviews. Some Okinawan audiences appreciated Fujita's engagement with local culture, while others critiqued his portrayals for their exoticism and perceived detachment from Okinawan realities. The Okinawan poet Yamanokuchi Baku (1903–1963) grudgingly conceded, 'Only the Okinawan people depicted by Fujita appear somewhat authentic, speaking in the Okinawan dialect. This does not necessarily mean they fully embody the local identity, however' (Yamanokuchi [1939] 1976, 26).

Returning to the mainland, Fujita exhibited over twenty works in June at the Nichidō Art Gallery in Tokyo, including *Grave by the Sea (Hamabe no haka)* and *Ryūkyūan Woman* (*Ryūkyū no onna*). Three months later, he exhibited *In Front of the Cooking Stove (Naha)* (*Kamado no mae*, (*Naha*)), *Guests (Itoman)*


藤田嗣治畫伯
作品鑑賞會
本社後援・南陽樂品で
明日より二日間開催

Figure 2 Fujita Tsuguharu. Gahaku Sakuhin kanshōkai Article about 'Fujita Exhibition' in *Ryūkyū Shinpō* (15 May, 1938b).

Figure 3 Fujita Tsuguharu. *Guest (Itoman)*. 1938. Oil on panel, 114.5 × 89.5 cm. Masakichi Hirano Art Foundation.

(Kyakujin (Itoman)) (Figure 3), *Grandchildren (Naha)* (*Mago (Naha)*) (Figure 4) and *Farewell to the Islands (Naha)* (*Shima no ketsubetsu (Naha)*) at the twenty-fifth Nika Exhibition in Tokyo (Tokyo National Research Institute 1970, 56–59; Kobayashi 2007, 88). Sadly, no newspaper reviews survive. Moreover little is left of this corpus. The majority of the works were likely lost in the air raids that destroyed so much of Tokyo in 1944,[2] and whilst photographic reproductions exist, these have attracted scholarly attention only recently (Tomiyama 2022, Hayashi 2009, Hayashi 2008).

Despite these archival silences, however, Fujita's Okinawan works can offer critical insights into the complex role of art in negotiating the asymmetries of what scholars have come to call the 'contact zone' (Pratt 2008).[3] For they were painted at a moment when Japan was expanding its colonial ambitions, when throughout its colonies (including the annexed territory of Okinawa), it was introducing ever more rigorous assimilation policies, yet when, at the same time, tourism to colonial destinations was booming (Ruoff 2011).[4] Equally important, they provide us with a lens through which we can re-interrogate

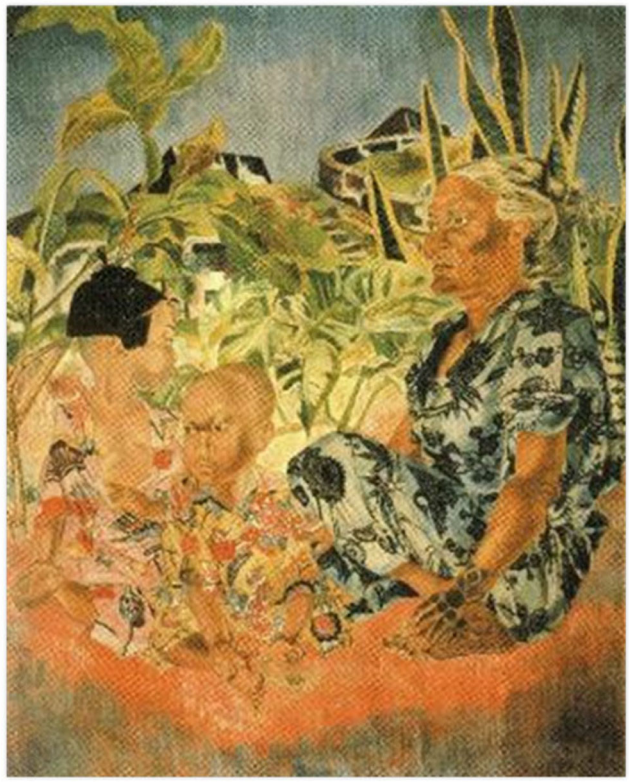

Figure 4 Fujita Tsuguharu. *Grandchildren (Naha)*. 1938. Oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm. Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum. © Foundation Foujita/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 2024.

paintings of Okinawan women produced over the same period (1938–9) by Fujita's Okinawan colleagues, including artists and admirers such as Ōshiro Kōya, Nadoyama Aijun (1906–1970) and the little known Tōma Yukio (fl. mid-20th century), as they struggled to visually reconceptualise the relationship between the mainland and its colonial subject.

Conflicting aspects of art in the contact zone

In a review of Fujita's Okinawan works for the art magazine *Mizue* in 1938, the Japanese art critic Moriguchi Tari summed up the contradictions of colonial art:

> In his depictions of Ryūkyūan customs, Fujita's use of local props such as dolls, dyed goods and vermilion-lacquer trays is skilful, and the painting compositions are excellent. His figures resemble depictions of Japanese people as seen by foreigners, but Fujita also captures something crucial that ordinary Japanese people do not notice. We hope that this technique will be used to capture the local customs of various regions of Japan in an attractive manner. (Moriguchi 1938, 330).

First, then, came the acknowledgment that Fujita's depiction of Okinawan commodities such as lacquerware and fabrics were appropriate celebrations of local crafts and of the island's cultural heritage. Indeed, the meticulous attention to detail afforded by his ethnographic gaze still enables us to accurately identify fabrics and costumes in his paintings. Moriguchi's second point was more problematic. Fujita's depictions of Okinawan people, he wrote, resembled paintings of Japanese people as seen through the eyes of foreigners. From other testimony that will be discussed later, we can assume that he was referring to the exaggerated representation of physiognomic traits, ochre-coloured skin and so forth that characterized early twentieth-century representations of Japanese people by Western painters.[5] Thus, in one sense, the artist was mimicking the colonial gaze. Yet he was specifically appropriating it not for the representation of a Japanese type, but for an implicitly racially differentiated Okinawan people. This was Okinawa viewed through the imperial eyes not of the west, but of Japan itself. While the Okinawan islands had been part of the Japanese nation-state for over sixty years, Fujita's reification of racial differentiation was symptomatic of an enduring perception of a gulf separating the islands' inhabitants from mainland Japanese people.

However, what distinguished Fujita's work (for Moriguchi at least) was the fact that the artist captured something crucial (*kyūsho*) in his depictions of Okinawa that other Japanese artists had failed to see. Exactly what Moriguchi meant by this reference is unclear. He appears to be suggesting that while Fujita, on the one hand, primitivised his subject (he represented them 'as seen through the eyes of foreigners'), he captured something of deeper significance on the other. This is a point to which we will return. But it was precisely this acuity that Moriguchi applauded. He concluded his article with the hope that a similar 'technique' – we might think of this as a sensitivity – 'will be used to capture the local customs of various other regions of Japan in an attractive manner'. It seems likely that he was alluding here to Fujita's recent representations of the vernacular manners and customs of Japan's Tōhoku region (in particular *Local Annual Events in Akita* (*Akita no gyōji*, 1937); he may also have had in mind the foreign propaganda film *Japan – its manners and customs* (*Fūzoku nihon*) (1936), which had been produced for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and had triggered a 'national disgrace' (*kokujoku*) scandal on account of the suggestion of poverty and backwardness in a region that, like Okinawa, was subject to political discrimination from central Japan (Siddle 1998).[6] Fujita's Tōhoku works had effectively confirmed and legitimated existing assumptions of cultural superiority. They had rendered themselves complicit in cementing the asymmetries inherent in Japan's (quasi-colonial) relations to its peripheral territories. His Okinawan works, for Moriguchi, were in some way different.

Little wonder then that there were acute sensitivities among Okinawans around the representation of Okinawan people, in particular women. This was

amply demonstrated in the contemporaneous reception of Fujita's painting of a traditional *juri* prostitute from the Tsuji brothel quarters, entitled *Tsuji Beauty* (Figure 1). According to a later account of the incident by the Okinawan artist Ōshiro Kōya, on each of Fujita's visits to the Tsuji brothel district, he would sketch a woman (and it is tempting to see here the ethnographic impulse of the colonial gaze). One woman in particular, a 'fair-skinned' *juri* called Amiyā gwā no Makatē, who was indentured to the brothel house known as Amiyagura in the Tsuji red-light district (Tsuji *yūkaku*), caught his eye, and he immediately made a drawing of her (Ōshiro 1967; Tomiyama and Okinawan Prefectural Museum and Art Museum 2021, 169–170). In the final painting, however, the woman is depicted with a high pointed forehead, exaggerated jawline, deep set eyes and strong reddish-bronze skin. In the manner of Edo period *ukiyo-e* courtesan prints, an inscription on the upper right corner of the painting names her *Naha Amiyagura Fumi-chan* (Fumi, of the Amiyagura brothel). Given that the woman was known for her fair skin colour, there is little doubt that Fujita was deliberately emphasising her racial difference. The significance of this was not lost on Okinawan audiences. When the work was displayed in May 1938 in Naha, readers complained to the local newspaper that the woman was not depicted as an idealised 'beauty'. Specifically, they alleged that the model's face was painted using a dark yellow colour considered to denote indigenous people. The artist, they declared 'had ruined a beautiful woman' (Okinawa Times 1957, 111–2; Tomiyama and Okinawan Prefectural Museum and Art Museum 2021, 169–170; Tomiyama 2022, 14). The local poet, Yamanokuchi Baku, who was otherwise supportive of Fujita's engagement with Okinawan culture, also expressed disappointment at what he considered to be a racial stereotype. Commenting on Fujita's description of pointed foreheads (*odeko*) as a physiognomic marker of Ryūkyūan beauty, Yamanokuchi noted: 'If a distinguished feature of Ryūkyūan beauty, such as the forehead, indicates an ungainly appearance (*gappai* in the local language, *bukakkō* in Japanese) in Ryūkyū, Mr. Fujita's point of view of Ryūkyū might be based on too much exoticism' (Yamanokuchi [1939] 1976, 26). There was a fine line between the realism of the ethnographic gaze, on the one hand, and the exoticizing gaze of the mainland visitor.[7]

This was made abundantly clear by the Japanese oil painter, Kajiya Ryūji, who accompanied Fujita on his tour of the islands. In his 'Impressions of Okinawa' , Kajiya noted that 'the women of Itoman (the southernmost tip of the island), like Gauguin's Tahitian women, exposed their strong bodies to the sun and walked with their heads held high and fish or vegetables on their heads. This is the motif of the tropics that I have longed for' (Kajiya 1939, 66–67). Certainly, Kajiya was talking of a different class of women: market traders, fishermen's wives and the like. Nonetheless, he set up an undeniable equivalence between Gauguin's representations of Tahitian women, executed in an

idiom designed to suggest a primitive race untainted by European civilization, and the women of Okinawa. Fujita's portrait of Fumi-chan, although sketched from life, was also informed by Western primitivism. But there were consequences to this. For in selectively dispensing with accepted mainland norms of female beauty and submitting, his subject to the aesthetic distortions associated with the representation of an 'uncivilised' other, Fujita was implying racial hierarchies. The primitivising colonial gaze exposed the process of othering that justified perceptions of Okinawans as secondary citizens. For the coloniser, it was a powerful weapon. For Okinawans, it posed a bona fide threat to their status within the Japanese nation.

Writing decades after the event, Ōshiro dismissed these criticisms. The style was characteristic of Fujita's paintings of Okinawan women, he wrote, and he excused it on account of the fact that the artist probably wanted to paint an image of a typical Ryūkyūan woman, rather than 'Amiyā-Gwā no Makatē' herself. The work was not intended as a literal portrait. The post-war Okinawan *yōga* painters Ōmine Seikan and Shimada Kanpei, in a discussion in 1957, similarly praised Fujita's skill in successfully grasping the character of the woman, noting (ironically) a resemblance to the traits of Ryūkyūan noble women (Okinawa Times 1957, 111–112).[8] But by this time, a wider public had had time to come to terms with the formalist distortions and shifting contours of modernist, specifically primitivist, art. What is clear, however, is that contemporary Okinawan audiences experienced these distortions in terms of the colonialist stereotypes we now acknowledge to be inherent in the primitivist endeavour. Painterly expressions thus became important signifiers in their own right.

Caught between assimilation and tourism

Tsuji Beauty makes clear the colonial ambivalences of Fujita's work. This was a local beauty, viewed, as Moriguchi wrote, through foreign – or imperial – eyes (Pratt 2008). Yet Moriguchi also admitted that Fujita had captured something crucial in his Okinawan paintings, something missed by other Japanese painters. Exactly what he meant by this is unclear. But we can at least begin to unpack some of the hidden complexities of Fujita's Okinawan works.

By the time Fujita and his colleagues arrived in Okinawa, tourism was in full swing. A direct route from Osaka to Okinawa had been launched by the Osaka Commercial Shipping Company (*Ōsaka Shōsen*) in 1924, and in 1937, the year before Fujita's arrival, the company had launched two new ships, the Naminoue-maru and Ukishima-maru, to service the line. It also organised group tours, known as Okinawa Inspection Groups (*Okinawa shisatsudan*) (Okinawa Prefectural Archives 2022), to introduce mainland Japanese tourists to the exotic landscapes of what it termed *nyogo ga shima*: a mythical island

inhabited exclusively by women (Motoyama 1925, Kanda 2004, 18). The implicit sexualisation of the islands was deliberate. The Tsuji brothel district was a central pillar of Okinawa's tourism industry during the pre-war period, and Tsuji prostitutes, dressed in traditional Ryūkyūan kimono of *kasuri* (ikat), commonly featured in sightseeing brochures and souvenir postcards as symbols of exotic otherness (History Museum of Naha City 2013) (Figure 5). The reputation of the quarters bled into a more general eroticisation of Okinawa. In a poem composed on his departure and published in the newspaper *Ryūkyū Shinpō* on 20 May 1938 (Shinpō 1938c), Fujita wrote of 'the reds and greens of strange luxuriant trees whose shadows embrace the traveller – exotic birds perch in their branches, while the spikes of the agave plant penetrate the moon'. The land literally performs its sexualised identity, as shadows of trees enfold the traveller and plants pierce the roundness of the moon. The poem continues, 'Island of nostalgia where women's breasts and legs – as though dyed in bronze – emerge from clothing ungirdled by the *obi*'. This was the eroticised landscape – the exotic 'other', the *nyogo ga shima* – to which mainland tourists flocked.

Yet, at the same time that artists were celebrating these differences, the Japanese government was hardening its assimilation policy towards the islands. Following the annexation of Okinawa in 1879, the Meiji government actively promoted an educational policy designed to effect the transformation of the Okinawan people into Japanese subjects by discouraging local Okinawan

Figure 5 Photographer Unknown. *Dance of beautiful girls in Tsuji brothel backstage*. Pre-war period. Souvenir postcard. Naha City Museum of History.

customs, dialects and, crucially, dress (Naha Shiyakusho Sōmubu Shishi Henshūshitsu 1970). While the reform of apparel applied to both men and women, its most obvious impact was on women: the traditional Ryūkyūan kimono (*ryūsō*), worn without a sash, was now restricted to the lower classes, while others were encouraged to wear either Japanese kimono or Western dress. The political significance of these reforms was felt keenly in some quarters. An anonymous author, writing in the newspaper *Okinawa Mainichi Shinbun* on 7 September 1912, declared,

> If they insist upon dressing like women from the colonies of Korea and Taiwan, they will continue to be misunderstood by people from other prefectures. Because of the deep harm that their behaviour will have upon all Okinawans, these women who continue to dress in Ryūkyū-style clothing and walk the streets of Naha in swarms should be labelled the enemies of civilization.

Traditional dress (for this writer) represented a terrifying justification for colonial subjugation along the lines of Korea or Taiwan. Women were thus at the very centre of political and cultural debates around assimilation and identity (Matsumura 2018), and female imagery was firmly located within the political landscape (Onaga 2010a, 36).[9]

By 1938, when Fujita and his colleagues arrived, Japan's assimilation policies were hardening. This was compounded by internal pressures both from the prefectural government and male commentators on the women of Okinawa to Japanize their dress (Onaga 2010a, 36). The islands were thus torn in two different and irreconcilable directions: Japanisation and exoticisation. Essentially, they were caught between a colonial order that needed to establish similarity in its subjects and a tourist industry that needed to protect its differences.[10] Thus, in representations of the female body, including paintings such as *Tsuji Beauty*, Okinawa's place within the Japanese state was ultimately at stake. Female imagery was a deeply contested space.

This inherent contradiction was not lost on mainland visitors. At a roundtable discussion organised by the *Ryūkyū Shinpō* newspaper on the prefectural policy of 'the abolition of Ryūkyūan apparel', for example, Fujita stated, 'I disagree with the idea of the abolition of Ryūkyūan clothing. It is definitely not uncivilised. If it were to be abolished, Okinawa's unique character would disappear, and it wouldn't be interesting if the world became the same, and there would be no need to go to distant places' (*Ryūkyū Shinpō*, May 2, 1938a). Clearly, Okinawa's exotic otherness held a deep appeal for Fujita and his colleagues. The artist nonetheless found himself torn between defending its cultural heritage in the face of assimilation and exploiting it for his own ends.

Fujita's metaphorical expressions of the colonialist conflict

There is another side to Fujita's work, however, that on the surface contradicts allegations of an exploitative artistic practice. Two paintings in particular – *Guests (Itoman)* (Figure 3) painted in 1938 and *Grandchildren (Naha)* (Figure 4) – appear to embrace more serious political themes that take issue with Japan's discriminatory policies towards Okinawa. It is these narratives, I suggest, that Moriguchi Tari was alluding to when he referred to Fujita's ability to 'capture something crucial' that other Japanese artists failed to grasp.

Guests (Itoman) depicts a first-floor room overlooking a fishing village, its jumble of red gabled roofs visible through the window. The village has been identified from pre-war photographs in the Okinawa City Museum of History as Itoman, although the inscription at the bottom left corner of the painting reads *'In Naha (Naha ni oite)'*, suggesting that the depicted room was located in the Tsuji Red-light District in Naha. The carefully depicted fishing village which has now given its name to the painting, is, in fact, simply local colour. There are two women in the room. One, with her back to us, wears a creamy yellow starched *bashōfu* or traditional garment made of banana fibres; the other, facing the viewer, wears a Ryūkyū *kasuri* (ikat) kimono made of cotton. Her garment is open at the chest, and a child suckles at her swollen breast. The two women wear their hair drawn back into a long loop splayed out on either side of the neck, a style typical of Tsuji prostitutes called *tsuji-yui*. They also wear prominently displayed silver hairpins, which were permitted only to noble women or Tsuji prostitutes (Uehara 1976, 168). These features carefully identify the women as prostitutes from the Tsuji quarters (Kobayashi 2007, 88).

The mood of Fujita's image is sombre. From the title, *Guests*, we can assume that the breastfeeding mother has just been told by her companion (the woman who kneels with her back to us, her head slightly lowered in a possible gesture of deference) that guests have arrived. Two teacups are arranged on the red-lacquer table, as if in anticipation. The mother's gaze is averted, and she fans herself. The presence of the child, in what we must assume is a brothel of some kind, is not necessarily anomalous. According to Iha Fuyū (1876–1946), now known as the father of Okinawalogy, in the Ryūkyū Kingdom era the Ryūkyūan ruler-class kept courtesans to entertain guests from suzerain domains such as China and Japan's Satsuma Domain. Given the established role of women in Tsuji as caregivers and wet nurses, it was not unusual for the offspring of the Okinawan elite to be nursed there (Iha 1919, 126). But this is no longer the Ryūkyū Kingdom era, and the only suzerain now is the Japanese male tourist. Yet Fujita seems at pains to portray the woman first and foremost as a mother feeding her child. Soon, she will be expected to abandon the child to service her guests – guests who, like the viewer, intrude on the intimacy of the nursing mother.

The trope of motherhood was not without political valence. From the early years of the Meiji era, the imperative of 'good wife, wise mother' had been introduced as a way to strengthen the sense of modern nationhood. These values were reinforced during the war and bolstered in Japan's colonies: in Korea, for example, by the early to mid-1930s, 'motherhood' had been promoted as the principal role of women (Shin 2003, 239). Fujita's nursing mother, therefore, embodies the contradiction inherent in colonised states. She is the target of government assimilation – the maternal role model – and the servant of the tourist. She is both assimilated and differentiated. Fujita is not, in fact, painting the exoticised, eroticised other, the prostitute who services Japanese tourists like himself. Nor is he painting the assimilated maternal subject. He is painting their contradictions.

There is a troubling postscript to Itoman, however. Whilst the narratives set up by the painting suggest an allusion to mainland policies towards Okinawan women, the actual genesis of the image points to Fujita's more exploitative approach to his subject. For the face of the woman suckling her child, much like 'Tsuji beauty', was modelled from life. The model was not a prostitute, however, but the wife of a newspaper reporter who guided Fujita around Okinawa. When she discovered that she had been depicted as a prostitute, clearly indicated by the hairstyle (Fukuoka Art Museum 2020, 94), the woman, who had sat as a favour for the artist, was apparently deeply upset. If in 'Tsuji beauty', Fujita was prepared to primitivize physiognomic features to the point of unrecognizability, in Itoman, he was prepared to depict an educated female acquaintance as a prostitute without her consent. The artist may have been prepared to defend Okinawan customs, but his willingness to demean his models raises questions once again about art and power in colonial contexts.

Fujita's painting *Grandchildren (Naha)* also appears to explore the inherent contradictions of Okinawa's position within the Japanese empire. One of the few of the artist's Okinawan paintings still extant, the image depicts an elderly woman, her long grey hair gathered in a bun at the back of her head. She is seated on the ground, her knees drawn up beneath her. She gazes to the left, beyond the picture space. Her expression is resilient, yet there is sadness in her eyes. To the lower left, two young children in colourful kimonos sit crouched. The elder, a girl with cropped black hair, looks backwards; the younger child looks ahead, but not towards the viewer. There is no eye contact between the three: they appear to belong to separate pictorial spaces. Yet encompassed as they are in a circle of scorched red earth so typical of Okinawa, they are nonetheless drawn together. Behind them is a curtain of tropical vegetation – snake plant, monstera, banana – and behind this, against the blue sky, a row of traditional tortoise-shaped tombs (*kamekō baka*) built over the centuries as family crypts for the nobility.

The distinctive physiognomic features of the grandmother in particular (her prominent cheek bones and pronounced chin) once again call to mind Fujita's primitivist but also ethnographic idioms. At the same time, her weathered skin and unwavering gaze suggest, above all, the wisdom of age. The bright semi-figurative designs of *bingata* stencil-dyed cloth represent, for Japanese audiences, cyphers of foreignness. Since it was rare for children to wear expensive *bingata* kimonos, the allusion to traditional clothes is clearly deliberate. Fujita himself, like the art critic and founder of the *mingei* movement, Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961), collected many Okinawa *bingata* textiles and incorporated *bingata* motifs into his paintings after sketching his models (Hayashi 2009, 117–119). The grandmother's most notable feature, however, is the *hajichi* (tattoo) that encircles her wrist like a band, extending arrow-like down over the ridges of the fingers that rest lightly on her foot. These tattoos constituted a rite of passage for women with important spiritual connotations, and the inclusion of one here reflects Fujita's ethnographic interest in Okinawa.[11]

Sub-tropical foliage, archaic graves, racial differentiation, clothing and tattoos – all of this points, on the one hand, to exotic othering and the ethnographic gaze of the colonial tourist. Nevertheless, these visual references simultaneously propose another narrative. The tombs, family crypts of Okinawan kings and aristocracy, point to a cultural heritage dating back centuries, to a moment in history when Okinawa was a nation in its own right, if only a tributary one, and ruled by its own people. The grandmother's *hajichi*, banned by the Meiji government in 1899, similarly points to an independent Ryūkyūan culture. Presumably, it was done before the ban came into force, before Japan had embarked on its process of assimilation. In this sense the figure of the grandmother belongs both to the past and the present: she has witnessed the suppression of her living culture, yet she is its unique representative. Her gaze passes over the heads of the two children, in their brightly coloured kimonos, who appear to belong to different temporal spaces. The elder child gazes back towards the tombs and an Okinawan past. The younger looks forward, but his gaze, evading that of the viewer, is wary, uncertain. The grandmother is disengaged from their plight, and the children seem alone. Moreover, this anomalous family portrait also lacks parents.

An obvious reason for this absence is that the parents are working to support their family. Yet the missing parents may also speak to a more troubling phenomenon. From the 1920s, when the collapse of sugar prices devastated Okinawa's economy, many Okinawans had been forced to leave the prefecture to seek work on the mainland. Other waves of migration followed as Japan's economic policies towards the islands became more punitive (Rabson 2012). As adults immigrated to the mainland, children were left behind. Read in light of contemporary demographic trends, Fujita's painting would then suggest the plight of Okinawans under Japanese rule, and given that the children were

modelled on the children of the Okinawan *yōga* painter Haebaru Chōkō, Fujita's friend who had guided him on his visit, the image may well have been intended as an allegory of Okinawans' own perception of their political predicament.[12] The desolate gaze of the younger child, so pronounced in the painting, becomes a general apprehension of an inhospitable and uncertain future.

The analyses offered above of *Grandchildren (Naha)* and *Guests (Itoman)* are not intended to exonerate the complicity of mainland artists (Fujita and others) in a fundamentally colonialist enterprise. Fujita's works cast an exoticising gaze on Okinawa's landscapes and women, and their primitivist and ethnographic idioms carried colonial implications. In their inherent othering, they may have cemented perceptions of the island's inferiority. Yet we can also read both images as incorporating complex narratives around Okinawa's subjugation, exploitation and, ultimately, the survival not simply of its culture, but of its people.

The response of Okinawan artists

Fujita's arrival in Okinawa, despite the lavish reception he received, was not universally celebrated. The aforementioned Yamazato Eikichi complained, in the monthly magazine *Ryūkyū* (December 1938), that:

> When Fujita came to Okinawa, it was very good that the well-known people in the prefecture gave him a hearty welcome. No matter how outlandish he was in his welcome, everyone applauded him with joy and admiration.... If Okinawan celebrities were even one-tenth as generous to artists in their own prefecture as they were to Fujita, then a true artist might finally emerge in Okinawa (Yamazato 1938, 22).

It was all very well for famous mainland painters to paint Okinawa, but there was a risk that the voices of Okinawan painters themselves might be consigned to silence. This was to some extent compounded by the fact that many were sent to Japan to study mainland painting idioms (in particular *yōga*) with mainland artists, which threatened to erase indigenous artistic and cultural traditions. The first wave of Japanese artists to take up roles as colonial educators specialised in *nihonga*. The *nihonga* painter Yamaguchi Zuiu (1868–1933), a pupil of Hirafuku Suian (1844–1890), father of the more famous Hirafuku Hyakusui (1877–1933), would be one of the islands' earliest art instructors. Within the space of a few years, however, *nihonga* specialists had largely been replaced by practitioners of *yōga*, and it was *yōga* that would become the dominant idiom of modern Okinawan painting. Ōmine Seikan, an Okinawan *yōga* painter, for example, recalled the situation in the early 1930s in the following terms:

> ... at this time *yōga* was undisputedly dominant in Okinawa, and people who painted *nihonga* were looked down on. There was a notion that Okinawa needed to try to catch up with mainland Japan and to learn from the West in order to effect its modernization. (Ōmine 1980, 259).

Consequentially, the most vocal defenders of traditional Okinawan culture in the pre-war period tended to be mainlanders: ethnographers such as Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) (who visited in 1921), the cultural scholar Kamakura Yoshitarō (1989–1983) (who stayed in Okinawa from 1923 to 1924), Yanagi Sōetsu (who came to Okinawa at the end of 1938) and of course Fujita himself whose detailed depictions of the Okinawan landscape, its artefacts and its fabrics has led Japanese art historian Hayashi Yōko to liken his work to contemporaneous ethnographers (Hayashi 2008, 395). These endeavours were inevitably ambivalent, however. While collecting objects belonging to the 'other' can be seen as a form of cultural protection in the face of modernisation, performed within a colonial context it also served to justify a sense of superiority and objectification of the 'other'.[13]

Indeed, it was only with the encouragement of Fujita and other members of the Nika-kai art society that Okinawan painters began to explore their own cultural heritage. The Okinawan *yōga* painter, Ōshiro Kōya, for example, who graduated from the department of Western style painting at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1934 before returning to Okinawa as an art teacher, was profoundly influenced by the Okinawan works of Fujita and his friends whom he met during their 1938 visit. As he later wrote:

> I spent a lot of time carefully watching the words and deeds of my teachers in order to absorb more of what they taught me about the beauty and preciousness of Okinawan craftware, products of the islands' climate, history and way of life … .I chose motifs that I loved and that celebrated my homeland. (Ōshiro 1971, 79)

Ōshiro was, in a sense, learning to view his home through the eyes of mainland painters. This new gaze was not limited to what he looked at, but also concerned how he looked. His painting *Courtesans with Horse* (Figure 6), which shares its style with Fujita's *Guests (Itoman)*, for example, and which was exhibited at the Nika exhibition in Tokyo in 1938 (the first time the artist had the opportunity to participate in the mainland art world) depicts two prostitutes. One stands on the left in a chequered (*ichimatsu moyō*) kimono, while the other is depicted semi-recumbent on the right, wearing a white *bingata* kimono with a pattern of bamboo fences.[14] A Ryūkyūan musical instrument, *sansin* (lit. three strings) lies on the ground in front of the women. Behind them is a horse. Given Ōshiro's commitment to celebrating Okinawa's indigenous culture, the subject of the painting may be the *Juri-uma* festival (Figure 7), when prostitutes from the Tsuji quarters processed through the streets carrying reins in their hands and boards in the shape of a horse's neck across their front belts, but again, the artist's intention is not fully clear. Most striking however, is the Cubist style of the painting, no doubt learned from his Nika-kai colleagues. Indeed, Ōshiro's interest in modernist idioms is suggested by the fact that the following year he painted a series of works influenced by Kitagawa Tamiji

Figure 6 Ōshiro Kōya. *Courtesans and Horse*. 1938. (No longer extant). In Ōshiro, Kōya. 1971. "Zuihitsu Fujita Tsuguharu sensei no omoide (Essay Memory of Master Tsuguharu Fujita.)" *Aoi umi* (April 1972): 78.

(1894–1989),[15] who had spent time in Latin America and had also explored primitivist painting idioms (Ōshiro 2020, 16).

By contrast, a very different process informed the work of the Okinawan *yōga* painter, Nadoyama Aijun. Like most Okinawan painters, Nadoyama was a product of the early twentieth-century Japanese art system. He was born in 1906, the eldest son of a Ryūkyū *kasuri* wholesaler in Naha. In 1927, he moved to Tokyo, where he studied at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts and was taught by the *yōga* painter Wada Eisaku (1874–1959). The following year, he presented his painting *Okinawan Summer Landscape* (*Natsu no Okinawa fūkei*) at the ninth Imperial Academy of Fine Arts Exhibition (*Teikoku bijutsuin bijutsu tenrankai*) and became a regular participant at central art exhibitions.[16] After graduating in 1932, he returned to Okinawa to teach painting and traditional crafts at the Okinawa Prefectural Second Girls High School.

Figure 7 Photographer Unknown. *Juri-uma Festival*. Post-war period. Naha City Museum of History.

Nadoyama's early work had often depicted Okinawan women. Notably, however, he cast them in either Japanese kimono or Western dress (Onaga 2010b, 5). Dressed like their mainland sisters, who were also participants in the process of modernisation and acculturation, the implication was that these women, as representatives of Okinawa, could aspire to parity of status within the Japanese empire. By implicitly refusing the exoticising gaze of the mainlander, Nadoyama was making the case that Okinawa was aligned with mainland values. In the latter part of the 1930s, however, at the urging of his Japanese colleagues, Nadoyama began to turn his attention to traditional Okinawan subjects, such as Okinawan women in indigenous Ryūkyūan dress. In 1939, a year after Fujita visited Okinawa, he painted an image titled *Ryūkyūan Classical Harmony* (*Ryūkyū koten chō*) (Figure 8)[17] which he decided to submit the work to the third Ministry of Education Fine Art Exhibition (*Monbushō bijutsu tenrankai,* also known as Bunten), despite having been absent from Tokyo by now for ten years.

While the painting itself was destroyed in the air raids of 1944, surviving photographs reveal a soft-focus naturalism, with no modernist distortions, exemplifying the conservative *yōga* style promoted at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Yet the subject of the painting is, ultimately, purely Okinawan. The work depicts a semi-reclining woman whose legs, bent slightly at the knees, stretch out to the side as her weight rests on her left arm. Her almond-shaped black

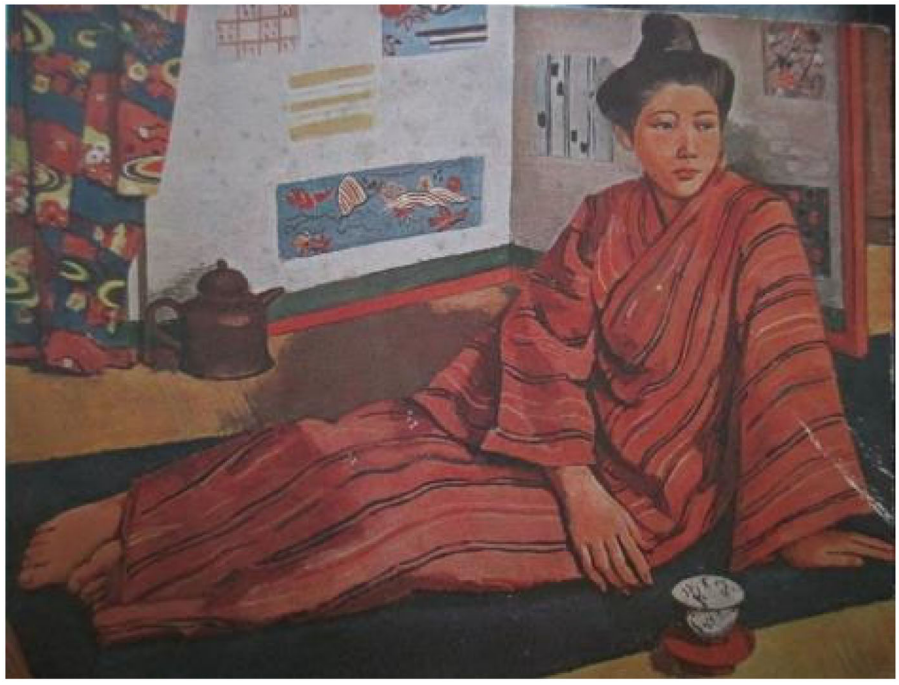

Figure 8 Nadoyama Aijun. *Ryūkyūan Classical Harmony.* 1939. Oil on canvas, 116.8 x 91.0 cm. (No longer extant, image from a postcard printed for the Bunten in 1939). In *Nadoyama Aijun ga aishita Okinawa: Nadoyama Aijun ten* (Okinawa, loved by Nadoyama Aijun: Nadoyama Aijun exhibition), 2009, p.79.

eyes gaze out into an undefined distance. Okinawan art historians have identified her as a Tsuji prostitute, on account of her painted lips and pencilled eyebrows which together with the lounging posture suggest an erotic subtext. However other visual markers typically used to signify Tsuji courtesans (such as hairstyle or haircombs) are absent and it is clear that Nadoyama was reticent to openly identify her as such.

The woman wears a red *bashōfu* kimono with fine black and white vertical stripes that follow the subtle curves of her body. She is surrounded by quintessential Ryūkyūan crafts: pottery, lacquerware, a rare Okinawan folding screen decorated with rectangles of *bingata* cloth and woven fabrics. A *bingata* kimono featuring a flowing water motif with red and white plums drapes over the edge of the screen, evoking seventeenth-century Japanese *tagasode* (*Whose sleeves?*) screens. In one sense, then, this is not just a painting of an Okinawan woman, a celebration of female beauty, but an assemblage of everything Okinawa has to offer for sale, an act of commodification. Exhibiting in a gallery in Tokyo, catering to Japanese audiences, Nadoyama, like mainland painters, was offering up for consumption the exotic other of his native land. Okinawan art historian Onaga Naoki, moreover, has suggested that by depicting a sexualised woman,

even if not specifically from the Tsuji pleasure quarters (which had served as the playground and cultural hub of politicians and intellectuals (both Okinawan and Japanese) from the Meiji era up until WWII) Nadoyama subconsciously gestured towards Okinawa's own status vis-à-vis Japan, namely its subordination and exotic objectification (Onaga 2010b, 5). Read in such terms, the semi-recumbent form of the woman in *Ryūkyūan Classical Harmony* becomes an embodiment of the subordinated body.

Despite this, however, contemporary Okinawan responses to the work were favourable. After completing *Ryūkyūan Classical Harmony*, the artist continued to paint women in traditional Ryūkyūan costume, and according to Kuba Toyo (1921–2017), a former student of Nadoyama's depictions of Okinawan women were considered to embody a deep appreciation of his country's traditions (Kuba 1982, 32).[18] The fact that these works were well received by local Okinawan audiences, despite the more recent critical evaluations discussed above, points to just how sensitive these audiences were to iconographic codes. Nadoyama's rejection of modernist distortions and his embrace of a normative *yōga* idiom allowed him to celebrate Okinawan culture on its own terms, subtly yet firmly rejecting the exoticizing gaze of mainland painters such as Fujita. His depictions of Ryūkyūan women would become something of a trademark. They earned him considerable success at prestigious events such as the Bunten, the Kofū-kai (*Zephyr Society*), and the 1940 *Art Exhibition in Celebration of the 2,600th Year after the Accession of the Emperor Jimmu* (*Kigen nisenroppyaku-nen hōshuku bijutsu tenrankai*). With time, however, critics began to challenge the originality of his work. They argued that his recurring depictions of Ryūkyūan women had become overly formulaic and lacked innovation (Kuba 1982, 35). What seems important to acknowledge, however, is that Nadoyama's *yōga* style paintings produced the most successful response to the primitivizing gaze of mainland artists. In the contested space of Okinawan female iconography, he inspired a template that celebrated Okinawan culture and Okinawan women in the normative *yōga* idiom of the mainland.

A more problematic response to the colonial assumptions inherent in the exoticising gaze is presented by the now little-known Okinawan painter, Tōma Yukio. In 1940, Tōma exhibited *Market* (Figure 9) at the third Governor-General Fine Arts Exhibition (*Sōtokufu bijutsu tenrankai*) in Taiwan. The painting depicted the bustle of an Okinawan marketplace thronging with local working women, small of stature, dark skinned and with exaggerated physiognomic traits. Some are barefoot and tattooed, some carry baskets on their heads, some sit on the ground in the shade. While Tōma Yukio's Market caused controversy, scenes of working-class women in bustling market settings were a common reality in Okinawa at the time (Figure 10). This representation of Okinawa's female working class was greeted by an outcry from local Okinawans, with the Association of Okinawan Residents (*Okinawa kenjinkai*) in Taiwan going so far as to insist that

Figure 9 Tōma Yukio. *Market*. 1940. Exhibited at the third Government-General Fine Arts Exhibition, Taiwan. (No longer extant). (sinica.edu.tw) (accessed 18 July 2024).

it be withdrawn from the exhibition room in order to maintain the honour (*meiyo*) of Okinawan citizens (*Ryūkyū Shinpō*, 31 October 1940).[19] Chief among its most offensive elements, according to a contemporary Okinawan newspaper article, were the women's white robes, worn with the right-side wrapped over the left, calling to mind Buddhist death robes; their unshod feet, a practice that had been specifically outlawed in Okinawa under the assimilation program; and the figures seated on the ground, which called to mind the deportment of 'barbarians' (*seiban*), the Japanese term for Taiwan's indigenous population.

Okinawan sensitivities to the painting and its representation of their culture speak eloquently to the shifting hierarchies within the Japanese empire. Whilst it is true that some Okinawan migrants to Taiwan occupied a subordinate position to the Taiwanese (Matsuda 2019), elite Okinawan residents in the country considered themselves imperial subjects as a result of the absorption of Okinawa into the Japanese empire. As such, they occupied a more elevated status than the colonised Taiwanese. For Okinawan women to be depicted, therefore, as 'savages' – Taiwan's indigenous people – seated on the ground, barefoot and dressed in the ghostly robes of the dead, was deeply insulting. Tōma was effectively locating Okinawa's population not just on the lowest rung of colonial subjects, but as uncivilised. The strategy appears to have been

Figure 10 Photographer Unknown. *Market in Naha*. Pre-war period. Naha City Museum of History.

deliberate. In a newspaper interview, he himself admitted that the women were intended to represent 'Japan's own barbarians'. Today, we can only speculate on his motives. Contemporary Okinawan audiences accused him of opportunism, claiming he deliberately caused a controversy – exploiting his scandalous subject matter to distract from the painting's innate quality and technical skill – in order to draw attention to his work and impress the exhibition's selection jury (*Ryūkyū Shinpō*, 31 October 1940). In this sense, by primitivising the Okinawan subject, he was mimicking and exploiting for his own ends the violence of the colonial gaze. But it may equally be that he was laying bare the colonialist pretensions of Okinawans in Taiwan. For if they themselves were ready to identify others as 'barbarians', *Market* implicitly exposed the shaky relativity of these colonial assumptions and hierarchies. In these terms, this lost painting by a minor Okinawan artist is a singular example of the ways in which art could negotiate the shifting sands of the 'contact zone'.

Ōshiro's *Courtesans with Horse*, Nadoyama's *Ryūkyūan Classical Harmony* and Tōma's *Market*, like many other works of the period, are no longer extant. It is, furthermore, unclear to what extent they are representative of wider Okinawan artistic production of the period. Yet their hugely divergent approaches both to Okinawan culture and to the role of painting in the expression of colonial relationships is indicative of the complexity of their subject.

Conclusion

Ōshiro, Nadoyama, and Tōma's responses to the predicament in which Okinawan artists began to find themselves in the immediate pre-war period speak to the larger subject of this essay: namely the complexities of representation in colonial contact zones and, more specifically, to the use of the female figure as a strategy for articulating the ambivalences and contradictions of colonial rule. At a time when Okinawa's position within the Japanese nation state was fundamentally unstable, when it struggled under the pressures of both assimilation and differentiation, the representation of Okinawan women served as a site to explore the urgent themes of subordination, exoticisation and exploitation that defined the colonial experience.

Nevertheless, the female figure was more than a cypher of subjugation. In the hands of Fujita and Nadoyama in particular, paintings of Okinawan women became a way for artists on both sides to interrogate, contest and reconceptualise mainland political and cultural assumptions. For Okinawan artists, however, especially those trained in the Japanese art system and influenced by their more famous mainland peers, the risk of appropriating (unconsciously or otherwise) the exoticising strategies of mainland tourists remained. Primitivist painting, for example, appeared in mainland art circles but troubled local Okinawan audiences. In contrast to Ōshiro's approach, Tōma's *Market*, which focussed not on the canonical subject of the prostitute but on Okinawan female labourers, called into question the shifting colonial hierarchies that structured Okinawa's relationship not just with Japan but with Taiwan. The degree to which these assumptions could be disrupted was amply demonstrated by the reactions of local Okinawan residents. It is in this context that Nadoyama's response to mainland representations of Okinawan subjects stands out. By mobilising the Westernizing *yōga* painting to depict local subjects, he implicitly asserted a parity between Japan and Okinawa, but his specific references to Okinawan instead of mainland Japanese culture suggested an effort to reclaim the curation of the islands' cultural heritage so often performed by the mainland Japanese artist.

Clearly, pre-war representations of Okinawa and its women by both Okinawan and Japanese artists were more complex than we often assume. The exoticising gaze may have been ubiquitous, yet it often masked more urgent political issues such as the uncertain status of Okinawa as a Japanese prefecture and the contested cultural identity of Okinawa under colonial rule. Representations of the Okinawan female subject thus offer an important insight into the ways in which art navigated the asymmetries of power inherent in colonial contact zones.

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Notes

1. This paper uses the Japanese spelling convention, Fujita.
2. Hayashi Yōko, personal communication, 22 September 2022.
3. 'Contact zone' is a term proposed by Pratt to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and struggle. It is also a space where geographically and historically separated peoples come into contact and establish ongoing relationships. It is used in the context of asymmetrical power relations, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermath, which exist in many parts of the world today.
4. For an account of Japanese tourism in Korea and also Nanjing between 1939–40, see Ruoff (2011).
5. We do not know which painters Moriguchi was referring to, but as an example of the representation of Japanese people by Western artists of the period one may point to the work of the American painter Robert Frederick Blum (1858–1903).
6. For a discussion of *Fūzoku nihon* and the national embarrassment incident (*kokujoku*), see Hayashi (2008), 392–393.
7. For an account of the complexities inherent in primitivism see especially Torgovnick (1991); and Etherington (2018).
8. Prior to his return to Japan, Fujita had travelled widely, including in Latin America, depicting local peoples, and it seems likely that it was this experience that drew him to the 'foreignness' offered by Okinawan themes.
9. Onaga Naoki has suggested that Okinawan culture has often been expressed through representations of the female figure.
10. As Tessa Morris-Suzuki has written, "the colonial order needed to produce both similarity and difference in its subjects." See Morris-Suzuki (2008).
11. Fujita collected many Okinawa fabrics, as did others such as the ethnographer Yanagi Sōetsu, and he added bingata motifs to paintings after sketching his models. See Hayashi (2009), 117–119.
12. Fukuoka Art Museum (2020), 96. However, according to Onaga Naoki, the daughter of a Naminouegū Shrine priest served as another model for Fujita.
13. Japanese art historian Shinobu Ikeda states that it was important for urban male intellectuals, who were the agents of modernisation, to depict the richness of the land while treating it as both a subject of domination and protection. See Ikeda (1998), 199.
14. Note that, despite the ubiquity of the ichimatsu moyō design from the mainland, it is uncertain whether this kimono is meant to represent a mainland ready-made product or an Okinawan-made kasuri. Regarding the obi sash, Japanese-style kimonos and knowledge of how to wear them became widespread after assimilation. Therefore, although we can only speculate as to his motive, Ōshiro might have intentionally tied the obi in the front using Okinawan kasuri and bingata to emphasize "Ryūkyū". Nitta Setsuko, personal communication, 26 September 2022.

15. Kitagawa Tamiji was a Japanese painter, printmaker and art educator. He dropped out of Waseda University and went to New York to study at the Art Students League, and in 1923 moved to Mexico, where he graduated from the San Carlos School of Fine Arts. He participated in the post-revolutionary art movement and became friends with Siqueiros, Rivera and Orozco, returning to Japan in 1936 and exhibiting *The Feast Day of Tasco* at the Nika Exhibition the following year, where he became a member.
16. For example, Kōfu-kai (Zephyr Society), which was derived from Hakuba-kai (White Horse Society); Taiheiyō gakai (Pacific Ocean Art Society), which has Meiji bijutsu-kai (Meiji Art Society) style; Shun'yō-kai (Spring Sunshine Society), founded by the member left the section of *yōga* of Nihon bijutsuin (the Japan Art Institute). See Kobayashi (200948), 8.
17. For previous studies on Nadoyama Aijun, see Onaga (2010), Kobayashi (200948) and Tomiyama and Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum (2009).
18. Kuba Toyo is the artist and founder of the Okinawa Women's Painters Association (*Okinawa joryū bijutsuka kyōkai*), established in 1977.
19. According to Siddle, the Association of Residents from Okinawa was initially a socialist organisation but after 1922 it was reorganised and run by local Okinawan élites. It encouraged the 'improvement' of customs and adoption of standard Japanese. This was supported by upwardly-mobile Okinawans who regarded hard work and self-improvement – becoming 'Japanese' – as their route out of 'the Okinawan labour market'. See Siddle (1998), 128.

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