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# Yasui Sotaro: *Seated Lady* and the Emergence of the “Yasui Style”

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## 1. Introduction: Yasui Sotaro’s Realism and Anti-realism

His 1933 essay “My Realism” is often cited as Yasui Sotaro’s (1888–1955) statement of his core approach:

I want to give expression to things as they are. I want my portrayals to be true to life. I want to place an object’s true nature on the canvas. If a tree, I want to paint it so that the sound of its leaves rustling in the wind can be heard. If a road, it should be one that can be walked. If a road with cars, I would paint the cars in motion. Houses where people actually live, rivers cold to the touch, lakes in their depth. If a human figure, a person who speaks, moves, and breathes and I want to fully depict their character and even possibly their occupation.<sup>1</sup>

Yasui reiterated this idea in lectures as well.<sup>2</sup> Such a simple view would normally not get attention, but Yasui was no ordinary artist. His description from around 90 year ago has been treated with respect, if sometimes criticized, in light of the high degree of perfection he achieved in his painting style, later called the ‘Yasui style,’ from the 1930s on. The weight of his words is supported by his painting.

Yasui’s painting steadily progressed, his career undamaged by wartime activities. He became a professor at Tokyo School of Fine Arts, despite not being an alumnus. After World II, he received the Order of Cultural Merit and was elected the first president of the Japan Artists Association. He earned the respect of his peers and of society. A radical painter restricted from exhibiting some of his nudes at the 1915 Nika Exhibition organized by the association that rejected the official government exhibitions, Yasui’s gradual perfection of a moderate version of figurative painting allowed him to climb to the top of the system. He traveled to France with Tsuda Seifu (1880–1978) who became his close friend. Yasui had to quickly return to Japan at the outbreak of World War I. The timing coincided with the founding of the Nika-kai group and the Shirakaba group and, in particular, Yasui at this time gained the admiration and generous support of Hosokawa Moritatsu (1883–1970) and Kojima Kikuo (1887–1950).<sup>3</sup> It was also a fortunate break for him that his physical condition disqualified him in the 1940s from recruitment as a war artist, a vanguard unit of the Army. The fact that he worked like a dedicated ascetic, instead of relying on benefactors, also won him praise. Absorbing a wide range of elements into his paintings, he

sought a perfect middle ground, refined and not offensive to anyone. Some criticized his works as too moderate, too ambiguous and distant from his subjects and from the real world. Yasui’s works, however, contain an undeniable truth because of their moderation.

The Ishibashi Foundation acquired Yasui Sotaro’s *Seated Lady* (fig. 1) in 2021. The painting had been shown at the 16th Nika exhibition in September 1929 and is Yasui’s first work fully reflecting the ‘Yasui style’ achieved during the 15 years from the time of he returned to Japan from Europe. The painting is a portrait of a woman in kimono, set against a gray background. The woman is seated on a chair, holding a fan in her hand. I previously noted the characteristics of Yasui’s new style as follows:

In 1929, 41 year old Yasui unveiled his *Seated Lady* portraying his acquaintance. It presented a new style, later called the “Yasui Style.” The Yasui Style, first appearing in this portrait, is marked by five features.

First of all, there is a triangular composition with the model’s head at the apex. The flow of the kimono’s right sleeve and hem outside the picture plane lends to the stability of the painting. The stable composition of a seated figure seen in this painting often appears Yasui’s portraits.

Second, the well-considered color scheme creates a sense of freshness and lightness. Notable here are the contrasts between the celadon colored kimono and the red obi, the black and orange of the fan, and the black and white of the cushion. These multiple combinations interact and create a harmony overall.

Third, the white pigment opacity creates a sense of unity and a moist texture that covers the entire picture plane. Painter Ishii Hakutei commented that Yasui’s works from this time on became brighter, with overall opaque white and less and less blurring. (Ishii Hakutei, “Yasui Sotaro,” *Mizue*, no. 507, 1948).

Fourth, the strategic placement of black pigment tightens the entire painting and strengthens the brightness of the other colors. Black appears on the hair, the chair, the fan, the pattern of the cushions, etc. In every instance, the effect is to raise the brightness and saturation of adjacent colors.

Fifth, the painting is composed of free flowing clear outlines that take advantage of the qualities of oil paint. There is a careful balance between straight and curved lines. The human body is organic, and organic curves naturally appear in the portraits. Straight lines, on the other hand,

are used for the back and legs of the chair and the edges of the open fan. These deliberately form right angles. Yasui's carefully calculated straight lines and curves work in harmony.<sup>4</sup>

Though often described as a realist painter, Yasui repeatedly insisted that he did not simply faithfully depict what was in front of him. The above quote from "My Realism" continues with: "This is not the same as copying nature exactly with a ruler. In other words, a painting should not be a reproduction of nature. It should not be descriptive or as a specimen."

"Pictorial beauty" and "deformation" were, along with realism and mimesis, important keywords for Yasui. In rejecting devotion to realism, however, Yasui engaged in a discourse perhaps best described as 'anti-realism.' For example:

A painting copied from nature, like a photograph, has no life, no surprise. Simple lines and colors are more powerful, lively, and effective than complex lines and color to fully express the vibrancy of life. Emphasis and transformation can more impressively express the individuality of a subject.<sup>5</sup>

When I produce a painting, I struggle with how I want to place things, that is, to create a composition to depict what I have in mind..... For the placement on the canvas, I deform as necessary. For example, I may deform something in relation to other shapes or shapes in the background. To emphasize the main objects, some things may need to be rearranged and unnecessary things need to be omitted. However, at the beginning, it is safer to just faithfully copy nature.<sup>6</sup>

Yasui characteristically achieved a delicate balance between realism and anti-realism. *Seated Lady* is perhaps not his best work but it is the best example to document the transformation from Yasui's previous works to those that followed - in other words, it holds the origin of the Yasui Style. This female figure seems to mark the very moment at which Yasui embarked on his new direction.

In this essay, I will begin by reviewing the favorable environment around Yasui and his connection with Hosokawa Moritatsu and Kojima Kikuo in relation to *Seated Lady*. Then, to trace the history of the Yasui Style, so clearly expressed in this portrait, I will compare this work with his previous paintings.

## 2. *Seated Lady*, Hosokawa Moritatsu, and Kojima Kikuo

Hosokawa Moritatsu, the 16th head of the Kumamoto Hosokawa clan, was Yasui Sotaro's greatest patron. The Hosokawa collection's *Catalog of Western-style Paintings* was compiled in 1943 when part of the collection was transferred for safe keeping from Tokyo to Kumamoto. It lists watercolors and oil paintings by modern Japanese and Western artists, and reveals that there were 31 Yasui works in Hosokawa's collection at this time.<sup>7</sup> *Seated Lady* was among these.

In 1901, Hosokawa was in the same class as Shiga Naoya (1883–1971), Mushakoji Saneatsu (1885–1976), and Kinoshita Rigen (1886–1925) at Gakushuin Junior High School. In April 1910, they launched the magazine *Shirakaba* and Hosokawa appointed himself 'treasurer' to support it financially. Kojima

Kikuo, was four years younger than Hosokawa and his junior at Gakushuin. He excelled at painting, did the cover art for the first issue of *Shirakaba* and then became a member of the group. He was selected for the Hakuba-kai and the Nika-ten exhibitions, but finally entered the Philosophy Department of Tokyo Imperial University and studied Western art history under Otsuka Yasuji (1869–1931) in graduate school. Though Hosokawa and Kojima apparently knew each other at Gakushuin and must have worked together on *Shirakaba*, they only began their close relationship in 1926. Hosokawa had been sent by the House of Lords to attend the 12th Universal Parliamentary Commerce Conference in England. He spent a year and two months in Europe and arrived in Paris at the end of March in 1926. He happened to run into Kojima who was standing on a stepladder sketching Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* at the Louvre Museum.<sup>8</sup> Kojima on leave of absence from Gakushuin to study abroad, was then appointed assistant professor at Tohoku Imperial University. That Kojima was standing in front of a painting by Leonardo da Vinci, his lifelong research subject, was propitious. Every day for the next two months, Kojima guided Hosokawa to museums and galleries in Paris. This is when Hosokawa purchased Cézanne's (1839–1906) *Climbing Road* (Eisei Bunko Museum) at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery. Kojima returned to Japan via Italy in July and took up his post at Tohoku Imperial University in Sendai but often came to Tokyo to meet Hosokawa.

Along with being a researcher in Western art history, Kojima was also involved in contemporary art criticism. In an exceptionally long commentary in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* he enthusiastically praised Yasui Sotaro's 44 works in the October 1915 2nd Nika Exhibition that Yasui painted in Europe. He returned from France in November 1914. Kojima's praise continued into the 1930s for Yasui's works exhibited every autumn in the Nika and Issuikai exhibitions. Despite being ridiculed for his excessive approval, Kojima's preference for Yasui remained constant from the mid-1910s on. Kojima was a year older than Yasui. Yasui went along with his advice to create paintings appropriate to their own time and to not imitate Western art. Yasui often visited Kojima in Sendai. From May 1933 onwards, Yasui was a judge for the Tohoku Art Exhibition organized by Kahoku Shimpō every spring. In 1934, he painted a portrait of Tamamushi Ichiroichi (1868–1942) commemorating his retirement as principal of the Second High School in Sendai. In 1936, he did a memorial portrait of Tohoku Imperial University president Honda Kotaro (1870–1954). In 1935, while still an assistant professor at Tohoku Imperial University, Kojima became an assistant professor at Tokyo Imperial University. Two years later he became a full time professor at Tokyo Imperial University and moved from Sendai to live at 3–3553 Mejiro, Toshima-ku, Tokyo. Yasui, who had been living in Mejiro since 1916, found Kojima's new home for him. Yasui did not seem to be good at practical matters but was able to find a promising site in Mejiro and advised Kojima about rent and construction costs.<sup>9</sup> Both Yasui and Kojima lived west of Mejiro Station. Yasui's address was 1–404–4 Shimo-Ochiai, Yodobashi-ku, Tokyo. The Hosokawa residence (Takada Oimatsu-cho, Toshima-ku, Tokyo) was at the site of the former Kumamoto Domain Tokyo residence, on the opposite side of the station and Gakushuin. It is significant that Hosokawa, Kojima, and Yasui lived in

such close proximity. As will be detailed below, they enjoyed deep mutual trust and met at Hosokawa's residence for frank discussion, at Yasui's studio for critiques of newly completed works, or engaged in talks about transfers of works.

Kojima introduced Hosokawa and Yasui. Art historian Miwa Fukumatsu (1911–1998), who studied under Kojima at Tokyo Imperial University and later became his son-in-law, selected and introduced a number of letters from Kojima's archives twenty-eight years after his death. The letters vividly convey Kojima, Hosokawa, and Yasui's dynamic interaction. Hosokawa wrote as follows in a letter postmarked May 27, 1933 to Kojima, who had come from Sendai to Tokyo and was staying, as usual, at the Gakushi Kaikan in Nishiki-cho, Kanda:

I came back from Kansai yesterday. On Sunday, I have time in the morning but am busy in the afternoon. I don't know Yasui very well and would be grateful if I could go with you to visit him. If you are willing to negotiate, how about coming by my place and going together? I wait for your reply.<sup>10</sup>

Hosokawa's meaning of "I don't know Yasui very well" was that he only knew Yasui's works. The first Sunday after May 27 was May 28 so, judging from the postmark, it would have been impossible to meet on that date. Yasui's letter to Kojima dated June 2, six days after May 27, when Kojima had already returned to Sendai, has the following description:

I have seen your letter. I thank you deeply and am grateful for Mr. Hosokawa's courtesy. I was very pleased when you mentioned it to me on the phone from Sendai the other day and I was glad to receive your letter today. I would not like to cause you any trouble, but your kindness would be very helpful to me. Please give my best regards to Mr. Hosokawa.

It was a pleasure to see Mr. Hosokawa again. He is such a pleasant and friendly person. He came to pick up the painting (*Lake Towada*) today and paid me 700 yen for it. Thank you again.<sup>11</sup>

On the next day, June 3, Hosokawa wrote to Kojima as follows:

I visited Yasui yesterday and brought the painting back with me. As you pointed out, it is a painting that shows emotion rather than unusual skill but is a masterpiece of Yasui's recent work. It is a bright and calm painting. I think it changes the atmosphere of the entire room.<sup>12</sup>

It seems that Hosokawa displayed the *Lake Towada* painting in his room immediately. We are not sure which of the *Lake Towada* series this painting was, but for sure it was Hosokawa's first. The letter gives us no clue as to what Hosokawa's 'courtesy' was and it is unfortunate that the content of Kojima's phone call before the meeting and Kojima's letter after the meeting are unclear. There is no doubt, however, that beyond the transfer of the work, it was somewhat of a complicated matter. Considering Yasui's exuberance and determination detected in the letter, I speculate that it may have been related to the commission for a portrait of Odagiri Mineko (*Portrait of Chin-Jung*, 1934, Oil on canvas, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, fig. 2) that Yasui started on 12 months later, in late May 1934.<sup>13</sup> *Portrait*

*of Chin-Jung*, of a woman in Chinese dress was produced after Hosokawa asked Yasui to do a portrait of Odagiri who was a close friend of the Shirakaba artists. Completed in three months, it was to be exhibited at the 21st Nika Exhibition that opened on September 3, 1934. It was submitted along with *Portrait of Professor Tamamushi* (Tohoku University Archives). The Nika Exhibitions traveled from Tokyo Prefectural Art Museum (now, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum) to Kyoto Enthronement Memorial Museum of Art (now, Kyoto City Museum of Art).

Yasui's letter written to Kojima two months later, dated November 6, contains what I believe to be significant information. It is a description related to the transfer of *Seated Lady*:

Greetings. We haven't met for a while. How are you? I returned from Lake Towada on the 30th of last month. The autumn leaves at Lake Towada were amazingly beautiful. I did four or five paintings and Hosokawa came immediately to see them. The repair and framing for *Shade of Trees* had been done at the same time so I showed that to him. Also, *Seated Lady*, the painting of a woman with a fan, had returned from Korea, as well as *Portrait of Chin-Jung* from Kyoto. He asked me to deliver all three and said that he would confer again with Kojima about the price. He gave me 2,000 yen as down payment and that made me happy as I could use it as a partial payment for construction. It has been taking some time, but we are finally able to move on the 19th of this month.<sup>14</sup>

Yasui, who was living near Mejiro Station at 1–1673 Mejiro-cho, Toshima-ku, was in the process of building a home and studio a little to the west at Ochiai 1-chome, designed by Yamaguchi Bunzo (1902–1978). The "partial payment for construction" refers to the building costs. *Portrait of Chin-Jung* had been returned to his studio from the Nika Exhibition in Kyoto. *Seated Lady* was on display at the Deoksu Imperial Palace in Seoul, Korea from October 1933 until September 1934.<sup>15</sup> The letter indicates that Hosokawa acquired the three representative Yasui portraits – *Shade of Trees* (1919, fig. 3) currently in the Ehime Prefectural Museum of Art, *Portrait of Chin-Jung*, and *Seated Lady*, between October 31 and November 6, 1934.

Hosokawa collected at least 31 works by Yasui over the course of ten years. His energy is impressive. Though the above mentioned *Catalogue of Western-style Paintings* does not fully represent Hosokawa's collection, it is important for understanding the direction of his collecting. It is notable that rather than being family heirlooms, the works of art were selected by Moritatsu from the 1910's onward according to his own taste and finances. He had good advisors, including Kojima, but he ultimately collected according to his own preferences. Of the 92 works listed in the *Catalogue of Western-style Paintings*, Yasui Sotaro's 31 works account for the largest number by a single artist. This is followed by Umehara Ryuzaburo, with 29 works, Fujishima Takeji, with 8 works. The predominance of works by Yasui and Umehara attest to close collaboration with Kojima.

For Yasui, who worked slowly and produced few works, Hosokawa's continued purchase of his works from 1933 on was the best support he could have for a stable production

environment. Among the works Hosokawa acquired were the important paintings *Oirase Stream* (1933, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo), *Model* (1933, Menard Art Museum), *Lamasery in Chengde* (1937, Eisei Bunko Museum), and *Mt. Yakedake* (1941, Urawa Art Museum). Hosokawa's interest in Yasui's works created in Europe as well as earlier works such as *Shade of Trees* and *Seated Lady* was also significant. Nevertheless, Hosokawa seems to have considered the 1930s to have been the most productive period of Yasui's career. The following is from an article that appeared in *Mizue's* memorial issue shortly after Yasui's death:

Yasui's work changed and developed several times, but the work he did and presented in the Nika Exhibition after returning from abroad attracted my attention most of all. At that time, I had not yet met him. I did not get to know him well until after he painted *Woman with a Fan*. I consider the period between *Woman with a Fan* and *Oirase Stream*, when he produced works such as *Professor Tamamushi* and *Portrait of Mr. Fukai Eigo* to be the period of his greatest breakthrough.<sup>16</sup>

Hosokawa's '*Woman with a Fan*' is a reference to *Seated Lady*. Hosokawa regarded the period from 1929, when *Seated Lady* was painted, to 1937, when *Portrait of Mr. Fukai Eigo* (Tokyo National Museum) was painted, as the pinnacle of Yasui's art.

Tomiyama Hideo (1930–2018) organized the April 1956 posthumous exhibition of Yasui Sotaro's works while he was curator at the National Museum of Modern Art, and edited the "Catalog of Works" in Kamon Yasuo's *Sotaro Yasui* (1979, Nihon Keizai Shimbun). He later served as director of the Bridgestone Museum of Art. In the course of his research on Yasui, he created cards with information on Yasui's works, such as ownership history, etc. along with monochrome illustrations.<sup>17</sup> According to Tomiyama's cards, the last Yasui work acquired by Hosokawa was the 1944 *Town of Lianyun*. That he did not acquire works from Yasui's last ten years points to his strong conviction as a collector, and that he was not a blind faith follower. Although I disagree with Hosokawa's view, I must deeply respect his aesthetic sense.

Hosokawa Morihiko (b. 1938), Moritatsu's grandson, recalled his grandfather's last days in an interview, as follows:

Q: Do you remember which painting was hanging near your grandfather when he passed away? I have heard that a Yasui Sotaro work was hanging by his bedside. *Seated Lady*, the painting with a seated lady holding a fan.

A: Yes, perhaps. I don't remember exactly what was hanging there at the time of his death. But that painting was displayed from time to time. Also Umehara's *Forbidden City*. Or *Woman with a Fan (Seated Lady)* or *Lamasery in Chengde*. I think Yasui was around there.<sup>18</sup>

Before his death in November 1970, Hosokawa was bedridden for a year in a room on the second floor of what is now the Eisei Bunko Museum. *Seated Lady*, the painting he considered to mark the beginning of Yasui's peak period, was among the works Hosokawa held on to and displayed until the very end.

### 3. *Seated Lady* and the Advent of the Yasui Style

Kamon Yasuo (1913–2007), who was well acquainted with Yasui, had the following to say about the positioning of *Seated Lady*:<sup>19</sup>

Comparing his works before and after 1929, it was as if a thin veil had been lifted from in front of his eyes. Before that there were gradual changes and transitions in color, for example, but color contained light and there was continuity with previous works. In the 1929 paintings, however, the character of the colors came to life and the contrast of color surfaces clearly emerged in the "composition." [...]

This kind of new development in Yasui's art can be seen clearly in the landscape painting *Garden of a Hotel*, but the first work that shows his brilliant departure is *Seated Lady*, exhibited in the 16th Nika Exhibition in 1929. This painting was, in every sense, a powerful first step in Yasui's subsequent career. The vibrancy and splendor of color is amazing. Further, there is a surprisingly fresh sense of reality in the portrayal of figures, and spontaneity, simplification, clarity of drawing and composition. This painting is the first manifestation of the portraits that would become Yasui's most important motif. The scene is a real human being, not a genre painting.<sup>20</sup>

Critics and painters contemporary with Yasui, as well as later art historians, agree that *Seated Lady* is a landmark work. How Yasui achieved such a sudden and seemingly radical transformation, however, has not been adequately examined. This is the topic we will now explore in our discussion.

With a few exceptions such as *Shade of Trees* (1919), Yasui was disinclined to include his works between the latter half of 1914 and the first half of 1929 in his own exhibitions or art book editions. It is almost as if he wanted to erase those 15 years of his career. I, however, believes that these represent important explorations during this period and should not be ignored. Without doubt, the trials and errors during this period led directly to the Yasui style that appeared in 1929. This argument has been previously stated by others, including Tanaka Yoshiaki, for example, who had a central role in the 2005 exhibition *Yasui Sotaro: the Fiftieth Anniversary of his Death*. Tanaka stated as follows"

Most agree that the Yasui style was established in 1929 when *Seated Lady* was exhibited at the 16th Nika Exhibition, but was it really such a dramatic evolution? [...]

The exquisite sense of "formative composition" that is the appeal of the Yasui style resulted from accumulated efforts during a period of exploration. A key point of the style is the suppression of three-dimensionality in the motifs themselves. Three-dimensional expression and its suppression vacillated during Yasui's period of searching. In some works the influence of Bonnard's color conscious expression is apparent, in others it is the simplified three-dimensionality of Derain. In still others, such as *Suburbs of Kyoto (Persimmon Trees)* there is a blend of these two influences. It is important to consider that Yasui continued to contemplate Japanese motifs and that this is precisely what

allowed him to advance the flattening of motifs to arrive at establishing his style. [...]

In addition to flattening, Yasui also effectively incorporated line in his drawings. The clear lines on the model's hands in *Standing Woman* and *Studio* were not seen in his paintings done during his stay in Europe. These lines are not simply outlines and they differ from Cézanne's line. They are bold lines that Yasui dared to use to create a three-dimensional effect.<sup>21</sup>

Using optical research methods to examine the technical properties of *Standing Woman* (Mie Prefectural Museum of Art, fig.4), exhibited at the 11th Nika Exhibition in September 1924, Tanaka found this work to be a typical example of Yasui's search for solutions during this time.

The 10th Nika exhibition had its formal opening on September 1, 1923. Members and guests were all gathered just before noon at the Takenodai Exhibition Hall in Ueno Park, Tokyo. Just then, they experienced the violent shaking of the Great Kanto Earthquake. Yasui had three works displayed – two nudes and a still life. The exhibit was immediately cancelled and scheduled to move on to Osaka, Kyoto, and Fukuoka. Yasui evacuated to Kyoto, his hometown. For the 11th Nika exhibition a year later he exhibited 10 works, including *Standing Woman*. Judging from the titles, there were 3 nudes, 4 landscapes, and 3 still lifes. The number would not be remarkable for other artists, but for Yasui, a slow worker, it is of special note and shows how ambitious his production was during that year period. Comparing *Standing Woman* from 1924 with *Reclining Woman* (fig. 5) of 1923, it is clear that Yasui went through major changes. The earthquake may have been a factor, but we will not explore that here. According to Tanaka, we can observe flattening of the human figure and effective use of line that is directly connected to *Seated Lady* five years later. In addition, the substantial use of black can be pointed out. At the same time, restraint in the use of black is one of the trajectories that gave rise to the Yasui style.

A major shift in Yasui's painting themes can also be seen over the 15 years following his return from Europe. When he came back to Japan, he painted nude women in natural landscapes or in spaces with ambiguous boundaries between inside and outside. This had to do with an attempt to incorporate Cézanne's style in Japan. The settings were, however, fictional and could not exist in reality. The scene in *Shade of Trees*, for example, of three nude women lying comfortably in a Japanese forest is impossible. Yasui wrote the following at the end of his essay "My Realism" quoted above:

I used to paint Japanese people bathing, but that was in the past. I am against that now. Were I to paint a nude, I would use a real model in the studio. And I would paint a modern model.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Yasui no longer saw it necessary to paint nudes in fictional settings and he began to depict professional models in his studio. Eventually, this led to not having the women disrobe and became one of the characteristics of Yasui's realism. With the exception of three paintings in 1952 and 1953, Yasui final nude was the 1935 *Seated Model*. From the 1920s on, his

tendency was more towards clothed figures. His large-scale *Studio* (Hiroshima Museum of Art, fig. 6) presented at the 13th Nika Exhibition, September 1926, is considered a milestone in this trend. It is a group portrait set in his studio and includes his wife, son, and nephew along with a reclining nude model. This is the first time since *Shade of Trees* that Yasui treated a group of figures. Even after that, the only works depicting two or more figures are *Early Summer* (1927) and *View of a Park* (1928-29). From his preliminary sketches, we understand that Yasui drew the model and the family separately and then combined them in the overall composition of the oil painting. This painting occupies a special position in Yasui's oeuvre, showing his efforts to reconcile nudity and real life. This is exactly connected with his experience in Europe.

Another factor in Yasui's move to dress his models was his interest in fabric. Even when the nudes disrobed, their clothes were painted next to them, with complex folds. The cloth is somehow part of the nude woman, like the cloths in Cézanne's paintings of apples or Yasui's still lifes imitating Cézanne's style. The human body becomes the main character of a still life. Yasui's interest in fabric had to do with his desire to depict the texture of fabric and also the possibilities fabric presented for adding color and movement to the canvas. The fabrics he incorporates in his painting are vivid in color and, in many case, pattern as well. In his later still lifes, Yasui often placed his motifs on fabrics with distinctive patterns and often draped cloth in the background of the nudes or portraits he painted. The fabrics of Japanese and western clothing were most appealing to Yasui. The fact that Yasui was born in the household of Momendonya, a cotton wholesaler in Kyoto's Nakagyo Ward, is not sufficient to explain this. He studied how fabrics were depicted in art works from all ages and locales, and how each artist applied them in their works.

After the Great Kanto Earthquake, Yasui took a break from color in his 1924 nudes but gradually revived color in his landscape painting attempts in the late 1920s. He admitted that the muted tones of ocher and brown, during his period influenced by André Derain (1880–1954), in the scenery of Kyoto and Nara began to change to brighter colors. The most typical example is *Garden with Blossoms of Paulownia Trees* (Uehara Museum of Art, fig. 7), exhibited at the 14th Nika Exhibition in September 1927. The colors radiate from the flowers and water surfaces in the scenery.

The gradually bolder combination of colors and fabrics reached a peak in 1928 with *Flowers and a Girl* (Toyota City Museum of Art, fig.8). The painting is a side view of a *maiko* arranging flowers in a Japanese-style room. There are numerous bright colors – red, purple, pink, yellow, blue, and black. Crimson, the central color, is used for the collar and obi, and the other different colors are scattered in the design of the kimono, the patterns on the vase and carpet and the screen and sliding doors in the background. The use of color is so profound as to be possibly confusing to the viewer. Yet, the balance gives the feeling that the Yasui style is almost fully expressed.

In September 1929, *Seated Lady* was presented at the Nika Exhibition, along with *Near Atami (Large)* and *Near Atami (Small)*. Using these two landscape paintings, I will consider the element of line, another component of the Yasui style. Yasui vacationed in Atami from winter 1929 until the following spring. Based on

sketches from the time, at least three landscape paintings with similar designs were produced. There are paths and grass in the foreground, with Sagami Bay visible through foliage and various thicknesses of trees. There is a record of a work titled *Sea Seen Through Trees* being exhibited at the 3rd Shiseido Art Exhibition in April. That may be the first of the oil paintings. Of the two *Near Atami* paintings exhibited at the Nika Exhibition, *Near Atami (Large)* (fig. 9) was pictured on postcards produced and sold at the time. The current location of this painting is unknown, but it was owned by businessman and politician Fujiyama Aiichiro (1897–1985) in the 1950s.<sup>23</sup> According to newspaper illustrations during the exhibition period, *Near Atami* (fig. 10) in the Chiba Prefectural Museum of Art collection corresponds to *Near Atami (Small)* (fig. 11). The catalog of the 16th Nika Exhibition notes:

- #455 *Near Atami (Small)*
- #456 *Seated Lady*
- #457 *Near Atami (Large)*

Although there is no visual of the venue and I can only speculate, it is likely that this order corresponds to the exhibition installation order and that the large *Seated Lady* was placed between the two horizontal landscapes, lined up like a triptych. The sizes (length × width) were 53.0 × 65.3cm, 81.0 × 65.3 cm, and 63.0 × 71.2 cm. Although the motif contours of the two *Near Atami* paintings are almost the same, *Near Atami (Large)* (fig. 9) depicts indirect sunlight while the sunlight is direct in *Near Atami (Small)* (fig. 10). The effect is something like the contrast between negative and positive photograph images. Considering Atami's topography facing the sea, *Near Atami (Large)* would be a morning scene and *Near Atami (Small)* would be an afternoon scene. This would clarify Yasui's intention in exhibiting the two works together.

*Near Atami* (fig. 10) in the Chiba Prefectural Museum of Art collection is a low-saturation image and what most draws attention is the thickness of the black outline that rises diagonally from the lower left corner of the foreground and bordering the tree trunk that reaches to the top of the picture plane. At the treetop, the outline becomes thicker than the diameter of the tree trunk. The outline of the upright tree trunk in the middle ground is also thicker than necessary. It is certain that Yasui did this deliberately. Such lines do not appear in Yasui's Kyoto landscapes from the latter half of the 1920s. According to Tanaka, the line that can be seen in this landscape painting is not simply an outline and is different from Cézanne's line. The Atami landscapes and *Seated Lady* were produced in parallel.<sup>24</sup> The new type of line that takes form in the still life paintings could be applied to portraits and is to be considered a decisive factor in the establishment of the Yasui style. The type of line in *Near Atami* can be clearly seen in the outline of the kimono in *Seated Lady*. Hijikata Teiichi (1904–1989) compared Yasui's *Seated Lady* to Cézanne's *Madame Cézanne in a Yellow Chair*, both half-length seated female figures, and found a common figurative structure but also noted that Yasui, in contrast to Cézanne, was essentially a line painter.<sup>25</sup> Though the characteristic line is an essential quality of his painting, it is compelling to think that Yasui acquired it through fifteen years of trial and error.

Contributing to the emergence of Yasui's style was his 1) shift in subject matter to relate to real life; 2) introduction of vivid color while preserving the painting structure; and 3) use of line to strengthen composition structure. He experimented with each technique separately, but *Seated Lady* represents the first time all three elements coexisted in a single painting. There are few works that convey an artist's repositioning as strikingly as *Seated Lady*. The key to Yasui's success at finding his way is that he persisted in his pursuit without giving up. What sustained him was his practice of taking his time and proceeding through trial and error rather than easily settling on a final form. I have several times described Yasui as a slow worker. However, he was not the type of artist who contemplated everything before putting brush to canvas. He could work quickly, but repeatedly rejected what he did and painted over it. He repeated this time and again. In Yasui's words, as quoted earlier, "Simple lines and colors are more powerful, lively, and effective than complex lines and color to fully express the vibrancy of life." The Japanese word for 'life' was used by many literary figures, intellectuals, and artists in the late Meiji (1868–1912), Taisho (1912–1926), and early Showa (1926–1989) periods and the implications were diverse and complex.<sup>26</sup> For Yasui, however, it means the ability to create new value in the interaction between the finished work, after it leaves his hands, and the people who view it. He most likely believed he could achieve this only by creating life-size paintings that did not under-state or over-state what he wanted to express. This is how he found a middle ground and struck a balance between realism and anti-realism.

The exhibition *Realistic Representation IV: Master Paintings in Japan in the 1930s* opened in the fall of 1994. It was held at The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, and The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto and featured 98 works by 10 leading Nihonga and Japanese Western-style artists, including Yasui, from the interwar period when society as a whole was leaning in the direction of increased warfare. I applaud the expression 'maturity of painting' used by Tanaka Atsushi in the Japanese exhibition title. The 'maturity of painting' means that each individual artist is no longer bound by a single style or particular spirit of the times. In Europe, after World War I, there was a major trend toward 'restoration of order' and 'revival of the classics.' Research on 'neoclassicism' in Nihonga, which seems to be linked to that, is currently actively underway. There is also the thought that the 'classics' overshadow avant-garde art. It may be time to review Yasui's oil paintings from the 1930s with a new perspective. At the same time, it is important to carefully trace the evolution of his mentality that could be lost in the broader perspective. These days, for example, there are many who study Yorozu Tetsugoro (1885–1927), Matsumoto Shunsuke (1912–1948), or the Gutai Art Association but very few researchers turn to Yasui. It is essential to build up a theory on each of Yasui's works and to also look at Yasui from a macroscopic point of view. I hope that this report may serve to encourage future Yasui Sotaro research.

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(Translated by Cheryl Silverman, CAS Associates, Inc.)

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## Notes

1. Yasui Shotaro, "My Realism," *Bijutsu shinron*, vol. 8, no. 1, January 1933. Yasui Shotaro, *A Painter's Eye*, Zauho Publishing Association, March 1956.
2. Miwa Fukumatsu recalled Yasui Sotaro's words at a round-table discussion in Sendai at the Second High School in 1933. See Miwa Fukumatsu, "Context of the History of the Painting World (I), Yasui Sotaro (part 1)," *Kokoro*, vol. 31, no. 2. February 1978.
3. Regarding Yasui's support from the Shirakaba group, see Sato Kaori, "The Background of the Shirakaba Group and Transformation of Japanese Western-style Painting Academism: The Portraits of Yasui Sotaro," *Art History Studies*, Volume 42, Waseda University Art History Society, 2004, and Kobayashi Shunsuke, "Who Made Umehara and Yasui 'Classics'? Taisho Liberalism and the Creation of 'Classics,'" Omuka Toshiharu and Kawada Akihisa, eds., *Classic Modern: Japanese Art of the 1930s*, Serika Shobo, 2004, and Kaneko Maki, *Mirroring the Japanese Empire: The Male Figures in Yoga Painting, 1930–1950*, Brill, Leiden, 2015.
4. Kaizuka Tsuyoshi, "Analysis of Yasui Sotaro's *Roses*," *Kokka*, no. 1425, July 2014.
5. Yasui Sotaro, "Brief Remark on Painting," *Dessan*, nos. 5, 6 combined issue, June 1955.
6. Yasui Sotaro, "About Paintings, etc.," *Atelier*, no. 241, August, 1946.
7. Catalog of Western-style Paintings, *Eisei Bunko Foundation 70th anniversary: Connoisseur Hosokawa Moritatsu*, ed. Hayashida Ryuta, Funakushi Aya, and Totoki Sakura, Eisei Bunko Museum, 2020, pp. 168–69.
8. Hosokawa Moritatsu, "Memory of Kojima," *Mizue*, no. 539, September 1950.
9. Miwa Fukumatsu, "Context of the History of the Painting World (II), Yasui Sotaro (part 2)," *Kokoro*, vol. 31, no. 3. March 1978.
10. Miwa Fukumatsu, "Context of the History of the Painting World (I), Yasui Sotaro (part 1)," *Kokoro*, vol. 31, no. 2. February 1978.
11. see note 10.
12. see note 10.
13. Odagiri Mineko was living in Harbin, Manchuria and had to adjust her schedule to model for Yasui at his studio. It is reasonable that it would be possible to start the painting 12 months later. Odagiri was also close with Kojima. According to Miwa Fukumatsu, a postcard dated June 13, 1933, during the time when Yasui was working on the portrait of Odagiri, was sent to Kojima by Hosokawa from his villa in Akakura and it is signed by six people: Hosokawa, Umehara Ryuzaburo and his wife, Yasui and his wife, and Odagiri. Further, in early May 1937, Yasui visited Shinkyo (Xingjing) with Fujishima Takeji to judge the 1st Manchukuo Art Exhibition. At that time, he met again with Odagiri who was working at the Harbin Yamato Hotel at the time. They sent a jointly signed post card to Kojima.
14. see note 10.
15. Yi Royal Household Agency, ed., *Deoksugung Palace Exhibition of Japanese Art*, exh. cat. October 1933. Maekawa Kimihide, *Modern Museums – Aspects of the Korean Governor General's Office*, Yuzankaku, April 2022, pp. 45–50.
16. Hosokawa Moritatsu, "Farewell Address," *Mizue*, No. 607, February 1956.
17. Currently in process of being re-organized with additional materials.
18. Hosokawa Morihiro, "Interview – talking about Hosokawa Moritatsu," Hayashida Ryuta, Funakushi Aya, Totoki Sakura, eds. *Eisei Bunko Foundation 70th Anniversary Hosokawa Moritatsu Seeker of Beauty*, Eisei Bunko Museum, 2020, p. 193.
19. Kamon Yasuo studied under Kojima Kikuo at Tokyo Imperial University and became assistant under Kojima after graduating. He later worked at the Tokyo National Museum and the National Museum of Western Art before becoming director of the Bridgestone Museum of Art. I once heard Kamon relate an episode about eating eel with Hosokawa, Kojima, Yasui, and Umehara Ryuzaburo. Umehara finished in no time at all and as Yasui was having a hard time finishing his eel, like his artwork, Umehara reached over with his chopsticks and took eel from Yasui's dish, saying, "Aren't you eating this?" It seems that Yasui laughed.
20. Kamon Yasuo, *Yasui Sotaro*, Nihon Keizai Shimbun-sha, February 1979, p. 206.
21. Tanaka Yoshiaki, "The Attraction of Yasui Sotaro's Technique (Fragments)," exh. cat., *Yasui Sotaro The 50th Anniversary of his Death*, Tokyo Shimbun, 2005, pp. 156–159.
22. see note 1 above.
23. *Fujiyama Collection Exhibition*, exh. cat., Kagoshima City Museum of Art, 1959.
24. Nose Yukiko, the *Seated Lady* model, told Mizuhara Shuoshi (1892–1981) that the painting took six months to complete, after sketches. (Mizuhara Shuoshi, *Yasui Sotaro*, Ishihara Kyuryudo, January 1944.) It is speculated that Yasui began work on *Seated Lady* immediately upon returning from Atami and continued to work on it right up until the time it had to be submitted for the Nika Exhibition. Nose was a granddaughter of Nogi Maresuke's (1849–1912) sister Ine. Ine was married to Hasegawa Katsutarō, a former retainer of the Tsuchiura clan who was her cousin on her mother's side. Hasegawa Ine and Katsutarō's son was the sculptor Hasegawa Eisaku. Nose is Hasegawa Eisaku's niece. She visited Yasui's studio from time to time to study painting and modeled for Yasui three times. In 1930, the year after *Seated Lady*, there was *Portrait of a Lady* (The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto) and in 1931 *Head of a Woman* (Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art).
25. Hijikata Teiichi, "Cézanne, Derain, and Yasui Sotaro," *Atelier*, No. 279. April 1950.
26. Further on life, see Suzuki Sadami, ed., *Taisho 'life-ism' and Modernity*, Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 1995, and Suzuki Sadami, *The Quest for a View of Life – in the midst of a complex crisis*, Sakuhinsha, 2007.
27. see further, Matsui Hiromi and Kimata Motokazu eds., *Classicism Reconsidered II: Avant-Garde Art and the 'Classics'*, Chuokoron Bijutsu Shuppan, 2021.

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