Maruki Toshi and Maruki Iri’s Hiroshima Murals and Religious Eschatology

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Abstract: Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi created large scale canvases depicting the effects of the nuclear experience on Hiroshima. This research will analyze the formal teaching of both Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi to demonstrate how they differ but also how they lend depth to their collaborative murals. This gruesomeness and torment of these Hell murals are comparable to the medieval Buddhist scroll paintings of Hell. These murals represent a moral consciousness made available as public art, just as Buddhist eschatology allows the believer to gain faithful understanding. This research will expand on the notion that in creating visual representations of the nuclear experience the Maruki’s were able to illustrate a living Hell in modernity, as does the ultimate destiny of mankind specified in Buddhism native to Japan. This research will look at representations of Buddhist eschatology, how it encouraged believers, and how the mural affect the observer throughout the twentieth century.

Hell and modern age are merged in this fifteen piece wall paintings known as the Hiroshima Hell Murals by Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi. These two artists are part of a generation that has been deeply affected by the nuclear experience and express a compelling need to expound on this influence. To fully understand the breadth of the Maruki’s work, the viewer must appreciate the interaction of the full series of murals in both subject and style. The depiction of gruesome torment in these Hell murals is comparable to the medieval Buddhist scroll paintings of Hell. These murals represent a moral consciousness made as public art, just as Buddhist eschatology allows the believer to gain faithful understanding.

Shintoism is considered a native religion of Japan, but the concept of hell is derived from Buddhism. Jigoku, the Japanese term for Hell, is closely related to influences of Shintoism, which was the official religion of Japan at the time of the nuclear bombing. Jigoku is understood as hot and cold expanses under the Earth’s surface. The definition of Buddhist Jigoku is similar to the belief of Christian Hell; there is a lord of the dead much
like Satan, and he passes judgment on all who enter his lair. The *Jigoku-zoshi* is a 12th-century scroll which depicts the 8 great hells of Buddhist teaching. These illustrations of religious Hell story resemble that of the man-made Hell created by the nuclear bombing of Japan. Both sets of imagery are visually compelling and require the viewer to reflect upon the events leading up to this disaster.

The Maruki’s began their first mural in 1950 and extend their series work into the 1980s. These murals, “...depict the atrocities and man-made disasters of the mid-twentieth century...a vision that leaves race and country far behind to grapple with questions concerning human nature, the modern state, and quite literally, the very meaning of hell in the modern age.”¹ These murals have the ability to address such moral complexity because both artists have a contradictory training in illustration. Maruki Iri was trained in traditional Japanese brush painting, also known as Nihonga. He was an apprentice to a water-and-ink or suiboku artist. This training allowed him to paint landscapes with suggestive strokes and the ability to blur the line between the abstract and the representative, whereas Maruki Toshi was trained in Western-style oils. She took influence from her Buddhist upbringing (her father was a Buddhist priest.) She studied at the Women’s Art Institute in Tokyo specifically rendering realistic figures and still-life imagery. Because of her travels throughout Europe, Maruki Toshi was exposed to the works of contemporary artists like Marc Chagall and Pablo Picasso which encouraged her pursuit of Western-inspired art.

The Maruki’s did not begin to collaborate until the nuclear bombing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August on 1945. Maruki Iri had family in Hiroshima and left Tokyo to rush to their aid just a few days after the bombing. Maruki Toshi joined him several days later and they stayed for a few weeks. After experiencing such a tragedy and being immersed in it for weeks the couple could not simply return to landscape and figure paintings. It wasn’t until 1948 that the pair decided to use their experience of Hiroshima in their painting. “They resolved to paint people rather than desolation and a wasted landscape, for that was the essence of the tragedy they had witnessed.”² Thus far, the Maruki’s had only heard official reports of damage done to buildings in Japan; nothing was reported.

² Dower, *Hiroshima Murals*, 13
on the human loss that was suffered. They wanted to paint the bomb as a testament to the
affected people and began figure sketches.
To prepare for such an undertaking they sketched many figure studies often using each
other as models depicted in the nude because the victims of the nuclear bombing had
their clothes stripped from them in the blast. Maruki Toshi takes a heart wrenching
approach to rendering her subjects and imagines they are her loved ones. She wants the
tragedy and the beauty of the figure to be represented with kindness. The pair painted
with ink and chalk. Maruki Toshi used the chalk to create a subtle world while Maruki Iri
splashed India ink onto the realistically illustrated figures. They went back and forth with
this method of painting and concealing until eventually they were both able to see the
depth they were adding to the world by repeating the applications.
This artistic exploration was kept secret because they were living in an occupied Japan
and the topic of atomic bombing was a forbidden subject. As they furthered their study,
their goal was a single composition illustrating the bomb victims and their severely
burned limbs. “Procession of Ghosts,” (Figure 1) became the first mural in the Hell Mural
series. Figures were sketched and painted with their arms in front of them, fully extended,
with dangling wrists. This sort of observational imagery can also be found in depictions
of ghosts and Hell figures in Buddhist art. *Hell of Shrieking Sounds from the Jigoku
zoshi* (Figure 2) is one of seven fragments of a long scroll painting depicting the Hell of
Shrieking Sounds, which is the hell where Buddhist monks that have tortured animals
are condemned. Here the viewer is presented with stylized flames and fluid movement
of figures. The monks are nude and are running with their arms stretched out in front of
them. Both of these images illustrate a sense of chaos and confusion. A group of people
are fleeing to save their lives; one at the hands of an unidentified source, the other at the
hand of horse-headed ghouls. The people are left unidentified. The Maruki mural allows
for a greater understanding of scale because many more figures are represented and they
are shown at every angle. There is more anarchy represented in the Maruki mural titled,
“Fire.” (Figure 3) The viewer is shown stylized flames, just like that of Hell of Shrieking
Sounds. This group of people seems to be in a bigger hurry to get away from the red hot
flames. These two images have the same color scheme and depict the similar horror and
pandemonium.
Comparing the Hiroshima Mural titled, "Water" (Figure 4) with another Jigoku image (Figure 5), the viewer is able to understand the importance of water in both settings. The Water mural is accompanied by written word (as each mural is). This one states, "Water! Water! People wandered about searching for water. Fleeing the flames, crying for water to wet their dying lips." The Maruki's unique method of painting and concealing is hard at work. The viewer's eye is drawn to the center of the mural to a mother holding her child with the implication that the child is no longer among the living. They are surrounded by a pool of floating dead bodies. Those still alive are thirsting for water. The imagery of mother and child is a common religious theme although usually depicted in a heavenly manner; the Maruki's force the viewer to see the mother and child in total anguish. The Jigoku Scroll of Hell portrays several suffering bodies, both on land and in a fiery red sea. The quench of the sea does not seem to offer any relief or deliverance to those who have reached it just as the Maruki Water mural demonstrates a need for water. In both cases, salvation is not granted to the poor and suffering.

A body engulfed in flames is a recurring theme for the Maruki murals and Buddhist depictions of death. The illustration of a deva engulfed in flames in Buddhist art (Figure 6) shows clothing and flesh nearly dripping from the man's body. This deva, a being of the spiritual world, is a wears a calm and serene expression almost in acceptance of his fate. He represents the spirit of the underworld and appears to have control over the flames surrounding him. The flames are again, very stylized and completely surround the figure in a red oval. The Maruki mural, "Mother and Child" (Figure 7) almost depicts the effects of the Hell devas on the mortal beings of the natural realm. There is a pile of bodies on the left side of the mural, all overwhelmed by deep red flames. On the right side of the mural people are hiding their eyes and bodies from a fiery fate. A woman cradling a baby is centrally located. She stands upright and faces the viewer. She is completely swallowed by the flames. It seems as though she has accepted her fate and clings to her lifeless child. Although represented with different styles of painting, these two illustrations seem to be in conversation. The deva is a spiritual being responding to moral infractions and the mother and child are the innocent suffering at the hands of a man-made Almighty experience. There is also a Jigoki zoshi Scroll of Hell, (Figure 8)

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which illustrates a fiery ring surrounding a group of people depicted in agony. The flames are colossal and take up almost the entire image, full human figures are unrecognizable. The Maruki’s expound on their experience and education and as a result, are able to create a chronicle of twentieth century war and addressed great human suffering through visual culture. It was their goal to display the nature of the darkness that was war, in their experience. The artists themselves were overwhelmed by the atmosphere their immense paintings created. This idea; overwhelmed at the visual representation of an event, is one that applies to Buddhist depictions of Hell. The purpose of illustrating Hell was to convey the eternal damnation a person would face in the afterlife. It was meant to frighten and force the viewer into self-reflection. The Maruki’s historical imagery expands the notion that in creating visual representations of the nuclear experience, they gained the ability to illustrate a living Hell which is also represented by medieval Buddhist teaching and painting. These murals eliminate race and country, and address a moral issue of human nature and the meaning of Hell in modernity, as does the ultimate destiny of mankind specified in Buddhism native to Japan.
Bibliography:

Books:


Journals:


Figure Reference:

Figure 1: Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi, *Procession of Ghosts*, ink and chalk on paper, 1950

Figure 2: Anonymous Japanese Artist, *Hell of Shrieking Sounds from the Jigoku zoshi*, Kamakura Period c.1200, ink and color on paper, Seattle, WA

Figure 3: Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi, *Fire*, ink, chalk and glue on paper, 1950

Figure 4: Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi, *Water*, ink and chalk on paper, 1950
Figure 5: Jigoki Zoshi Emaki: *Scroll of Hell*, Hell of fire, flame and stones detail, scroll painting, 1185-1600 AD, University of California, San Diego
Figure 6: Untitled, Painting of one of the 12 devas of the Toji 1191, ink and color on silk

Figure 7: Maruki Iri, Maruki Toshi, *Mother and Child*, 1959, ink and paper
Figure 8: Jigoku Zoshi (Scroll of Hell), “Hell of Fire, Flame and Stones, detail, Kamakura (Momoyama) Period 1185-1600 AD, University of California, San Diego