

Capturing the South Sea Mirage: Paul Jacoulet in Micronesia

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After Japan ended its isolationist policy in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, we see an increase in artists venturing to foreign lands and depicting exotic landscapes and cultures. Examples include Yoshida Hiroshi, who recorded exotic landmarks in his travels overseas, to Yamamoto Kanae and his focus on French pastoral scenes. This artistic interest in foreign cultures also satisfied curious minds in Japan, who were eager to see the world after centuries of being confined to their country. Out of all the artists who traveled abroad, however, none was more peculiar than the artist Paul Jacoulet. Born in Paris in 1896, Paul Jacoulet moved to Japan with his family soon after his birth. Jacoulet occupied a complex position as a French-born artist living in Japan, drawing upon both French and Japanese artistic traditions to produce prints for the Japanese art market during the colonial period. After starting his career as a woodblock artist, Paul Jacoulet spent the majority of his life traveling to foreign locations, mainly Japan's oversea territories, and depicting their culture.

Jacoulet not only stood out from other traveling artists in Japan because of his identity as a French man, but also because of his art's subject matter. While many traveling artists took interest in capturing foreign landscapes and architecture on their canvases, Jacoulet focused solely on representations of indigenous people. Almost all of Jacoulet's prints are full-body portraits of indigenous peoples from Oceania and Asia, usually those from Japan's overseas colonies during the early imperial period. The cultures that Jacoulet depicted range from the Manchurian, Mongolian, and Ainu people. However, it was his images that

depicted various peoples from Micronesia that garnered him the most fame. Jacoulet was in fact one of very few foreigners allowed by Japanese officials to travel through territories in the Western Pacific that the Japanese military was fortifying, and as a result his work has often been consulted as an authority on indigenous and Pacific attire from this time.¹ This paper explores Japan's cultural connection with its Micronesian colonies through the prints of Paul Jacoulet.

Unlike other foreign locations in which he traveled, Jacoulet had a more personal connection to the islands of Micronesia. In 1929, Paul Jacoulet had a chance encounter with a young expatriate student from Truk, an island among the Carolines. After befriending the student, the boy's father invited Jacoulet to visit the Caroline Islands, initiating the artist's future practice of spending his winters in the warm tropical climates of several Micronesian islands. Initially, Jacoulet visited islands in the Pacific for casual travels and vacations, but as he matured as an artist his visits became more serious inquiries into indigenous cultures for his woodblock prints.²

In regard to his interest in foreign cultures, scholars often speculate that it was Jacoulet's personal fascination with travel and seeing the world that motivated his art. I argue, however, that Jacoulet's objective in his travels was to capture the culture of the "South Pacific", which was perceived as being threatened by modernization; a threat that seemingly echoed Japan's own struggle with shifts in "traditional culture" during its transition to an industrialized and modern colonial power. Jacoulet's 'South Sea' series especially resonated with Japanese audiences, as it drew upon the established visual conventions of primitivism to portray the Pacific Islands as a beautiful utopia believed to be slowly fading away, conveying a sense of melancholy and nostalgia for the past. Jacoulet also purposefully employed the medium of the wood block print and incorporated Japanese artistic conventions in his 'South Sea' series, juxtaposing two seemingly contrasting cultures and highlighting the interactions between Japan and its Pacific territories.

¹ Andrew Horvat, "Karhu and Jacoulet: Western Printmakers in an Eastern World," *Japan Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1994): 467.

² Florence Wells, "Paul Jacoulet: Woodblock Artist," in *Contemporary Japan: A Review of Far Eastern Affairs* (Tokyo: The Foreign Affairs Association of Japan, 1932), 514.

It is useful to begin by analyzing why Jacoulet's prints were considered so valuable in the context of their production, as Jacoulet was one of few European artists perceived to have mastered wood block skills. Yamagishi Kazue, one of Japan's most renowned carvers and a frequent collaborator with Jacoulet had this to say about his prints:

“The most surprising feature of his work is the manner in which he draws hands and feet. Many Japanese artists paint in the Western style but none of them give the same expression to the eyes as Jacoulet does both in his South Sea pictures and his studies of Japanese character. [...] Perhaps, the best point of Jacoulet's work is the originality with which he gives expression by means of one sweeping line, where it would take several for another less gifted to accomplish.”³

In formally and stylistically analyzing two examples by Paul Jacoulet, *Tattooed Woman from Falalap* (fig. 1) and *Young boy from Saipan* (fig. 2), we can see why Yamagishi was so amazed by Jacoulet's linework. Not only are the prints visually colorful, but Jacoulet also drew refined contours that highlighted the bodies of his human figures. His prints also boast immaculate detail, as is demonstrated by the ornaments worn by the tattooed woman and the seashells that the boy is holding, both of which show intricate patterns on their surface that enhance the dimensionality of the objects.

Another important feature of Jacoulet's prints is the way he draws eyes, which is where he diverges from the traditions of Japanese woodblock prints to add his own idiosyncratic style, presenting an amalgamation between European and Japanese artistic techniques. The use of the gaze could also be analyzed as symbolic of particular cultural stereotypes. In both

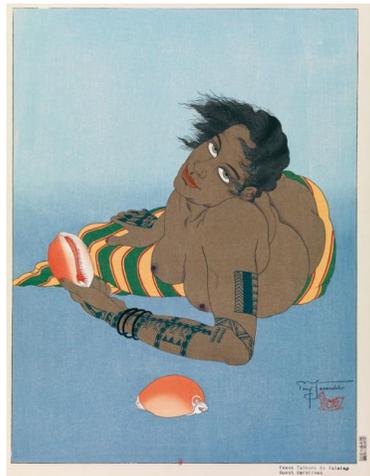


Fig. 1 Paul Jacoulet, *Tattooed Woman from Falalap, Western Carolines*, 1935, Yokohama Museum of Art

³ Zoe Kincaid “Jacoulet and Yamagishi Pool Their Skills on Color Prints,” *Nippon Times* (Tokyo, April 1934).

Tattooed Woman from Falalap and *Young Boy of Saipan*, Jacoulet uses the eyes of his human figures to convey emotions associated with the idea of the Pacific as a place free from modern restraint and inhibition. For his depictions of Micronesian subjects, Jacoulet always has his figures meeting the gaze of the viewer, proudly displaying their bodies which was conceived as a display of a lack of sexual inhibition.⁴ The body language displayed by Jacoulet's 'South Sea' subjects contrasted greatly with his East Asian subjects, such as *The Confidante* (fig. 3) which displayed noble women from Manchuria in their elaborate dresses. Unlike his 'South Sea' portrayals, these figures have their gazes averted from the viewer, signifying the sense of mystery and distance that was associated with this culture.



Fig.2 Paul Jacoulet, *Young Boy of Saipan*, 1934, Yokohama Museum of Art



Fig. 3 Paul Jacoulet, *The Confidante, Manchuria*, 1942, Yokohama Museum of Art

In his representation of the South Pacific as a vibrant, proud, and unrestrained world, many scholars point out how Jacoulet's experience with Micronesian indigenous cultures resembled the nineteenth century French artist Paul Gauguin, whose own encounters with indigenous peoples in Tahiti influenced his art

⁴ Donald Rubinstein, *Paul Jacoulet's Vision of Micronesia* (Guam: ISLA Center for the Arts, 2007), 18.

heavily.⁵ Jacoulet certainly did not ignore his European heritage. Another significant event in Jacoulet's youth was a visit to Paris with his father where he encountered the works of European artists such as Matisse, Picasso, and Gauguin.⁶ Considering the striking similarity between Jacoulet's ventures to the Micronesian islands and Gauguin's own journey to the island of Tahiti, the significance of Jacoulet's visit to Paris is unambiguous. Like Gauguin, Jacoulet's prints have been criticized as presenting a mythologized version of a Pacific that had already undergone colonization and was involved in processes of modernization. However, more than simply echoing a fascination with the 'exotic' and 'primitive' that was prevalent among Western artists such as Gauguin and Picasso, Jacoulet also took inspiration from Japanese *ukiyo-e* for his depiction of overseas cultures. A close study of Jacoulet's biography and training will reveal how the artist also incorporated Japanese influences into his prints of the Pacific and looked towards woodblocks by Japanese masters as a template for his South Pacific figures.



Fig. 4 Paul Jacoulet, *Returning from the Jungle, Tondao Celebes*, 1948, Yokohama Museum of Art



Fig. 5 Paul Jacoulet, *Songs of the Seamstresses, Mongolia*, 1958, Yokohama Museum of Art

⁵ See: Elizabeth Childs, *Vanishing Paradise: Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁶ Richard Miles, *Watercolors of Paul Jacoulet* (Pasadena, Calif.: Pacific Asia Museum in association with Meilinki Enterprises 11 Ltd., 1989), 14.



Fig. 6 Kitagawa Utamaro, *Three Beauties of the Present Day*, 1792-93, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Ever since beginning his career as a woodblock artist, Jacoulet had always looked toward the great classical woodblock artist Kitagawa Utamaro as a model for his own prints.⁷ In looking at Jacoulet's prints of other cultures, such as Indonesia (fig. 4) and Mongolia (fig. 5), we can see how influential Utamaro was to Jacoulet's prints such as *Three Beauties of the Present Day* (fig. 6). For his Pacific depictions, Jacoulet looked to a print series by Utamaro for inspiration: the abalone divers from Enoshima. The abalone diver series depicts the traditions and lifestyles of *ama* divers in Enoshima, a small island off the shores of mainland Japan. Translated as "sea people" or "sea women," *ama* divers were women abalone divers who dove underwater to retrieve shellfish and pearls. Utamaro is



Fig. 7 Kitagawa Utamaro, *Awabitori*, 1798, Tokyo National Museum

⁷ Wells, *Paul Jacoulet: Woodblock Artist*, 501.

remembered today for prints popularizing the portrayal of idealized and traditional Japanese female beauty, and the diving women with unkempt hair in his diver series might be seen in stark contrast to his usual subject matter. In 1910 Jacoulet received a copy of Utamaro's divers triptych entitled *Awabitori* or "diver women" (fig. 7).⁸ Through a comparative analysis between *Awabitori* and Jacoulet's South Sea series, we can see how the French artist dedicated many hours in studying this triptych in order to grasp Utamaro's style and motifs; it is apparent that the half-clothed females in Utamaro's triptych serve as the ideal model for Jacoulet's own depictions of indigenous people from the Micronesian islands.

First, Jacoulet draws upon the atmosphere and theme of Utamaro's diver series for his depictions of the Pacific. While Utamaro's abalone diver series is often classified among the print artist's erotic themed prints, or *shunga* as they were otherwise known, I would argue that eroticism was hardly conveyed within the abalone diver prints. Instead, we see the women participating in quotidian activities such as relaxing on the rocks, drying their clothes, or breast feeding a baby while combing their hair. Through this display, Utamaro's abalone divers celebrate a sense of liberty, showing women who were not confined by the strict social norms that defined pre-modern Japanese society, especially the stressful and tiresome standards of Japanese beauty expected from women of Utamaro's time.

The theme of liberty visually expressed through bare bodies is apparent throughout Paul Jacoulet's Micronesian prints, where portrayals of half-dressed subjects aimed to showcase the indigenous people's attire and their lifestyle; a lifestyle that was perceived to be one of freedom and vivacity in contrast to an increasingly industrialized Japan. This display of liberty in Jacoulet's South Pacific prints, as an intentional contrast against Japanese conformity, is especially apparent in two of Jacoulet's prints: the earliest print depiction of a Saipan subject by Jacoulet

⁸ Kiyoko Sawatari, "L'art De Paul Jacoulet. Vivre au Japon," in *Un artiste voyageur en Micronésie: l'univers flottant de Paul Jacoulet* (Paris, Somogy: Musée du quai Branly, 2013), 103.

when he began his career, titled *Young Girl of Saipan* (fig. 8),⁹ and a print produced as his South Sea series gained popularity in Japan: *The Geisha Kiyoka* (fig. 9).



Fig. 8 Paul Jacoulet, *Young Girl of Saipan with Hibiscus Flower*, 1934, Yokohama Museum of Art



Fig. 9 Paul Jacoulet, *The Geisha Kiyoka*, 1935, Yokohama Museum of Art

In this image, we see Jacoulet's friend, Kiyoka, in formal Japanese attire inspecting the *Young girl of Saipan* on her knees, creating an unmistakable juxtaposition between the conservative and traditional dress of the geisha and the subject in the print that she's admiring. We see a mimicry in posture between the geisha and the Micronesian woman, as both are kneeling in a formal manner. With this juxtaposition, Paul Jacoulet seeks to depict difference but also similarity between Japan and the Pacific, creating a conversation between the two cultures. This print further demonstrates Jacoulet's ability to not only use classical Japanese woodblock prints as sources of inspiration, but to also experiment with them and innovate meaningful responses to established conventions of Japanese art and beauty in his prints. *The Geisha Kiyoka* showcases Jacoulet's ability to play with both Utamaro's

⁹ Paul Jacoulet, Kiyoko Sawatari 猿渡紀代子, and Christian Polak, *Poru Jakure* ポール・ジャクレー [Paul Jacoulet] (Kyoto: Tankoushya in association with Yokohama Museum of Art, 2003), 8.



FIG. 10 YOKOYAMA TAIKAN, *Ryutou*, 1909, Ibaraki Museum of Modern Art

standards of beauty and the subversion of such standards in the same way that Utamaro breaks his own rules with his abalone divers series.

Jacoulet's strategy of emphasizing a connection between Japan and foreign cultures may also have responded to a Japanese audience's sentimentality for foreign cultures, whereby viewers were interested in knowing how the world outside was similar to their own rather than solely how it was different and exotic. For example, *Ryutou* (fig. 10), a painting by Yokoyama Taikan that depicts Indian women celebrating a lantern ceremony near the banks of the Ganges, managed to earn widespread acclaim at the Third National Exhibition in Tokyo. This was reportedly not because of the public's interest in the exoticism of Indian cultures, but rather because the artwork struck a chord with Japanese sentimentalities, especially the sense of religious harmony whereby Japanese audiences were delighted to see India having a lantern festival similar to their own. Seeing a distant land celebrating a festival in a familiar manner resonated with the Buddhist sensibilities shared between Japan and India.¹⁰ Additionally, it is this perceived connectivity with the rest of Asia and many foreign cultures that spurred Japan's

pan-Asian imperial ambitions as the nation rapidly industrialized into an Asian superpower. Thus, rather than seeking solely for differences, Japanese viewers too sought similarities that were shared between their culture and foreign ones to feel a sense of affinity with the rest of the world. Paul Jacoulet especially used this desire to his advantage.

While *The Geisha Kiyoka* (fig. 9) demonstrated Jacoulet's subtle messages of cultural reciprocity, we can see a more apparent message in Jacoulet's print *The Mysterious Pacific: Sea of the South* (fig. 11). Interestingly, this print, which depicts a mermaid on top of

¹⁰ Miriam Wattles, "The 1909 Ryuto and the Aesthetics of Affectivity," *Art Journal* 55, no. 3 (1996): 49.



Fig. 11 Paul Jacoulet, *The Mysterious Pacific, South Sea*, 1951,
Yokohama Museum of Art

a rock, is probably the only print where Jacoulet explicitly depicted a subject not from reality but from mythology or folklore. It is apparent that this print is again heavily influenced by Utamaro's ama divers. The mermaid's long wet hair, the oceanic environment, and the style of the jagged rocks bear resemblance to Utamaro's prints. However, instead of a sense of liberty, the print conveys a sense of melancholy. Here too the gaze acts symbolically, as the mermaid's eyes gaze into the distance, perhaps signifying an uncertain future. The melancholic atmosphere combined with the mythical status of the mermaid presents the 'South Sea' as a fantasy of the past, fusing European notions of primitivism and noble, dying Pacific cultures with Japanese sentimentality.¹¹ As a print dedicated to Japanese audiences, Jacoulet is perhaps even calling attention to how Japan was exacerbating damage to Pacific culture through their

¹¹ Susugu Yoshida 吉田 漱, "Nankai no Miraju 南海のミラージュ [The Mirage of the South Sea]," *Hanga Geijutsu* 版画芸術 60 (1988): 73.

colonization and industrialization efforts. Given his previous prints of the Geisha Kiyoka, his use of Japanese artistic conventions and motifs, and within the context of his time, Jacoulet's strategy may have been to depict the South Pacific as exotic yet familiar, raising awareness about how these cultures resonated with Japan's own idea of its traditional past, and commenting on the responsibility of the Japanese to preserve the culture of the regions that they occupied.

As a man whose own artistic and personal identity was informed by both France and Japan, Jacoulet was able to perceive the clash of cultures during his travels around the Pacific from a unique position. While portraying the indigenous people of the Pacific islands, Jacoulet made references to themes that had long existed in Japanese art, specifically the wild sea divers from Utamaro's prints. In building this connection between Japan and the Pacific islands, Jacoulet sought to convey a message about Japan's disconnectedness from its pre-industrial past. His portrayal of the 'disappearance' of indigenous Pacific cultures free from modernization found recognition in a Japanese audience reflecting on how Japan's own cultural heritage might suffer from the processes of industrialization and modernity.

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