A Japan Not to be Forgotten

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Throughout history, cultures have both thrived and faded. Despite efforts to restore and understand ancient civilizations, we still cannot fully imagine how past cultures lived. In my lifetime, I have seen natural disasters destroy whole cities and hinder the thriving culture in the area. However, unless disaster strikes close to home, we easily forget and move on with our own lives. A culture should never be forgotten. It should leave a lasting imprint on the world around it. A year after I visited the northern coast of Japan, much of the area was destroyed by an earthquake that triggered a tsunami. An area full of life and culture was decimated in only a few hours. The places I went, and the monuments I visited, undoubtedly look much different in the aftermath of the tsunami. However, we should not forget what these places were like before. We should not forget the life that once filled these communities. In a series of woodblock prints, I tried to capture life the way it was prior to the devastation of the tsunami. Each print represents a place in Japan as I remember it, and not what it has become since the earthquake.
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I would also like to thank my parents for giving me the opportunity to go to Japan, and allowing me to get a glimpse of the life and culture there.
A Japan Not to be Forgotten

In March 2011, an earthquake off the Northeast Coast of Japan triggered a massive tsunami that swept through coastal Japan causing massive devastation. Having family that lives in northern Japan, I was personally affected by this natural disaster. I got a firsthand account of the struggles the people of Japan faced. They are still facing many of these struggles as they continue to rebuild their lives and their communities. However, many people who showed interest in the immediate aftermath eventually forgot about the issues the people of Japan are continuing to face. Over time, unless we are personally affected, we tend to forget about the hardships of others and move on with our own lives. In the meantime, cultures affected by these types of disasters continue to struggle to rebuild their communities, and some aspects of their culture may be forgotten all together. We have learned so much from past cultures, and continue to learn from cultures both past and present. For this reason, I don't believe that we should forget what life in northern Japan was like before much of it was destroyed. For my thesis project, I chose to depict the places in Northern Japan as I remember them from my trip in the summer of 2010. I showed them the way they were before the tsunami swept through and changed everything.

When starting my thesis, the first thing I needed to decide was the content of my work. Based on the stories I heard from family members and news articles I read, I constructed a list of places that were hit the hardest. Based on this list a looked through my personal photographs, and chose images to base my sketches upon. These included castles and monuments that were important to the history of the area as well as cities and public areas that were affected. During my research, I discovered that Japanese artist Un’ichi Hiratsuka had also explored a similar concept. In 1924, he did a series of prints titled “Tokyo After the Earthquake” (Smith pg. 18). His prints depicted scenes of devastation after an earthquake hit Japan. However, I chose to depict the opposite. I chose to depict scenes of how northern Japan looked before the tsunami. I felt it was important to show people who haven’t had the chance to visit Japan, how life was before the devastation.
Once I decided on the content of my sketches, I focused on the style I would depict them in. Everyone has their own personal style, but I also wanted to reflect the style of the culture I was representing. I chose to translate my sketches as woodcut prints because it is a medium that speaks to the Japanese culture. Woodcuts have been a traditional art medium since ancient times. I wanted to produce prints similar to those created in ancient Japan. There were certain aspects of Japanese prints that I tried to mimic. Traditional Japanese woodcuts were cut with the grain rather than across it as in Western-style wood engraving. Also, the traditional method of taking an impression consisted only of a small hand-held pad called a baren instead of a press as used by printers in the West. After the block was inked, the paper was placed on to it and rubbed from behind by the baren. This often left swirling patterns on the print, which came to be admired in traditional Japanese prints (Smith pg. 13). While I did not have access to a traditional baren, I was able to “spoon” all but the largest of my prints. I went through the same printing process but simply used the back of a wooden spoon in place of a baren. This produced some intriguing patterns on a few of the prints. Using this method, I felt I was able to capture more of the feel of the Japanese culture.

Another stylistic quality I wanted to produce was the inclusion of color into my prints. Traditional woodblock prints started out merely using flat colors with an outline. However, by the late 18th century the technique called bokashi started being used by many woodblock printers. With this technique, printers applied colored ink to flatter areas of the block and then gradated the ink from strong to light tones (Smith 14). While they generally used thin rice paper, also called mulberry paper, to create their gradation, I tried to recreate the effect by wiping off ink with the back of my hand. I am overall very pleased with the effect it gives to the prints. I think the simple addition of color gives the print some life to it, and the gradation gives it more dimension. I think the finished prints reflect the Japanese prints that inspired them, but I also reflect my own personal style.

While sketching and producing my prints, I looked at a variety of Japanese printmakers for inspiration. I looked at works by artists such Kanae Yamamoto, Tadashige Ono, Benji Asada, and Un‘ichi Hiratsuka. Many of these artists
produced landscape and cityscape prints that gave me ideas on how to approach the subjects for my prints. Traditional prints, by artists such as these, were a popular art form that the common everyday person could enjoy. For this reason, prints depicted everyday scenes people would recognize and appreciate (Faulkner, Robinson, Narazaki & Lane pg.9). My hope is that people will be able to recognize the scenes depicted in my prints and appreciate these places for what they were like before the tsunami swept through. Like many of the old Japanese printmakers, I chose to depict scenes that the average person would be able to recognize. I chose to depict a Sendai cityscape because it is a well-known big city that was greatly affected by the earthquake and tsunami. I depicted a fishing harbor because fishing villages dotted the northern coast of Japan and felt the brunt of the tsunami. While I know everyone might not recognize these places for what they are, I believe everyone will be able to relate them to places they have seen or heard of.

Many factors affected the style and content of my prints. Throughout the process, I continued to work my prints until they successfully captured the style of the Japanese culture. The six scenes I depicted show a variety of places affected by the tsunami. I want people to realize that all aspects of life were affected from small towns and fishing villages to big cities and international airports. These six prints effectively communicate my message without being too daunting of a project for a single semester. The prints work well together to communicate this message since they are all similar in both style and content. With each print, I included a short caption that explains what the viewer is looking at and why it is important. Working in conjunction with the prints themselves, these captions give viewers an idea of what the people of Japan are still struggling through. I wanted to display my work in the month of March as it marks the one year anniversary of the tsunami in Japan. My hope is that it sparks people to remember not only what happened to northern Japan a year ago, but also the life that they are struggling to rebuild.

Though I know this series of prints can be viewed and interpreted in many ways, I mainly wanted to get people thinking. I want people to think about how
short our lives are, and think about what future generations will remember about us. What do we want them to remember, and do we really want to be forgotten? I choose to remember and learn from cultures from the past, and I hope for the preservation of current cultures around the world. Our culture is what makes us unique and brings life to our communities. It has been a year since disaster struck the northern coast of Japan, and I have not forgotten the struggle they face as they rebuild their lives. In honor of those who lost their lives and their homes, these prints recall when these communities were full of life, and they hold on to the hope that life can be fully restored to the way it was.
Works Cited


Fishing Harbor along Japan's northeast coast

Sketch of a boat and fishing equipment.