

The Maestro of the Far East To gauge his impact on his profession consider this fact: 30,000 graphic designers graduate from Tokyo art schools each year. This flood of talent owes its existence in large part to one man, Yusaku Kamekura, the father of Japanese graphic design, who died earlier this year at the age of 82. Highly acclaimed for more than half a century, Kamekura was not only the most influential designer of his era – the man most responsible for putting a face on Japan as she rose to post-war prominence – but the dominant figure in a field he virtually created. “He set out to make design a profession,” says Shigeo Fukuda, one of many designers practically raised by the master. Kamekura’s influence reached far beyond the drawing board. After early personal success, he set out to raise the level of all Japanese design.

Kamekura founded the first active society of graphic designers and the first agency linking designers and their corporate clients. He introduced Japanese designers to the world. And while there



was no official design consortium, there was surely an unofficial one—with Yusaku Kamekura its undisputed leader. For young designers, his professional blessing was not only important, but often indispensable. “There was no one who didn’t want to meet him, have his blessing, to shake his hand,” says designer Takaaki Bando. “He was like the emperor. He had that aura about him, but he wielded his power unconsciously.”

HIROSHIMA APPEALS

1983



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Kamekura was born in 1915. He took his first paying assignment at 17, when he designed the Japanese edition of Saint Exupery’s *Night Flight*. In 1938, he began working for Yonosuke Natori, laying out NIPPON, a multi-lingual cultural magazine. Natori’s training in Germany influenced Kamekura, who became fascinated with the moderns, and eventually, Bauhaus. He was a fan of Cassandre, Saint Expurey, and Jean Cocteau. Akira Kurosawa, Kenzo Tange, and he made up a trio of great Japanese visual artists of the 20th century.

After the war, Kamekura moved into his prime. With his work in posters and corporate symbols in particular, he ended up defining each age through which he passed. This was especially so in a Japanese context, as many of his posters were for international events which Japan was beginning to participate in, and for Japanese corporations rising

design and art magazine called *Creation*. He presented 144 artists or groups of artists and apparently used the same “feeling” in choosing them. “It didn’t matter whether someone was famous or not,” recalls Masami Kikuchi, an editorial assistant at the magazine and a pupil of Kamekura for five intense years. “He always used to say, ‘Whether old or new, good is good.’”

At international competitions, Kamekura was amused by the extreme efforts western judges made to rationalize their choices. He once told the editor of *Kokoku no Hihyo* (Advertising Critique), “When I look around the room, I can pretty much pick out the work that deserves prizes. But they’ll spend hours huddled in groups of five or six, discussing, I’ll wait, drinking tea. When the votes are in, I discover they’ve made the same choices I have.”

Kamekura often said that design was intuition, yet design for him had to have an object—and a client. “Given com-



in prominence. But the work he did continues to speak to a wider world, feeling misplaced in no venue and no era.

Kamekura was successful at drawing our attention and keeping it. He once wrote that there are three factors that determine an artist’s fate: “talent, effort, and luck.” Asked, he might have concluded that his own fate rested on the same.

By reading his words and conducting interviews with some of those who knew him well, it is possible to narrow it down to something more precise.

“GOOD IS GOOD”: Yusaku Kamekura said this so often that it became his trademark phrase. Last summer the Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art mounted Japan’s first poster exhibition, which featured Kamekura’s work (1953-1996). While touring the show, Kamekura explained, “The only way to know [if design is good] is if it goes, ‘piing!’ Does it cross the invisible line, or not? It’s just a feeling.”

For five years (1989-1993), Kamekura edited a luxurious

plete freedom of the ‘just-make-us-a-poster’ variety,” says Yutaka Mizukami, his assistant for 30 years, “he couldn’t come up with a thing!” Upon reflection, Kamekura’s work always made perfect logical sense.

CAPTURE THE ESSENCE: The Hiroshima Appeals poster of 1983 and the Yamagiwa International Competition for Lighting Fixtures poster of 1968 take two distinct paths, abstract and direct, towards capturing the essence of the object and expressing a message. Both are equally surprising, effective, and memorable. Kamekura remembered the thought process behind the peace poster: “Skeletons and nuclear mushroom clouds are beautiful and frightening. I wondered what I could make that had those qualities, but that you could also hang in a room. I thought of burning butterflies.”

TAKE ACTION, TAKE RESPONSIBILITY: In the introduction to Kamekura’s Nagoya (1997) exhibition catalog, Ikko Tanaka,

(OPENING SPREAD) “I’M HERE,” 1992. BASED ON AN ORIGINAL DESIGN BY OSKAR SCHLEMMER. ■ (PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT) PORTRAIT OF YUSAKU KAMEKURA. ■ (RIGHT) “HIROSHIMA APPEALS,” 1983. ILLUSTRATOR: AKIRA YOKOYAMA. ■ (THIS PAGE, FIRST) POSTER FOR 11TH OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES, 1969. PHOTOGRAPHER:

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one of the master's many design proteges, remembered a moment in his 20s when Kamekura's determination became part of his own psyche. "Don't go kowtowing to the sponsors (clients)," the youth heard Kamekura remark at a gathering in Osaka. "Design is going to open up this world."

Kamekura always had a vision of design playing a larger role in society, business, and the world at large, and, by imagining it, he made it so. In 1951, he helped found the first graphic designer's group, Nissenbi. He hosted the International Design Conference in 1960 and was a trifle ashamed of the level of Japanese design. Convinced that it needed a boost, and funding, Kamekura gathered together the presidents of powerful corporations to sponsor a cooperative house agency: Nippon Design Center (NDC). The companies included were Asahi Beer, Toyota, Nomura Securities, Japan Railways, and Toshiba. After managing the house for two years, instilling structure in the design world and making the organization a place where talent could work and grow, he left to pursue an independent career.

As Shigeo Fukuda remembers, for Kamekura taking action meant taking responsibility. "NDC even put its logo on every piece of advertising, to show that it was responsible for the piece," he says. "There had never been any such practice." Kamekura continued to find a willing audience among the presidential class in Japan. And as he moved into corporate symbols and identities, several great corporations took his advice. Among the companies whose corporate images and direction Kamekura helped shape were NTT (Japan's phone company), Recruit, Nikon, and Yamagiwa.

An exceptional sense of fair play accompanied Kamekura's good taste, and together they triumphed over the often suffocating Japanese preoccupation with age and status. Mizukami remembers the festival days of Nissenbi under Kamekura, where non-commissioned work was called in from students and professionals alike, with equal chances for all. "In those days, there was so much more discussion and communication," Mizukami says. "And if you won the Nissenbi show, your salary would take immediate flight."

DON'T COMPROMISE: Kamekura was sure of himself, and sometimes brusque. But to everyone around him, he represented perfectionism. Masami Kikuchi fondly remembers Kamekura's early morning phone calls about some editorial point that had kept him awake: "Everyone has those times when the deadline looms and

we think, well, this is good enough. He didn't."

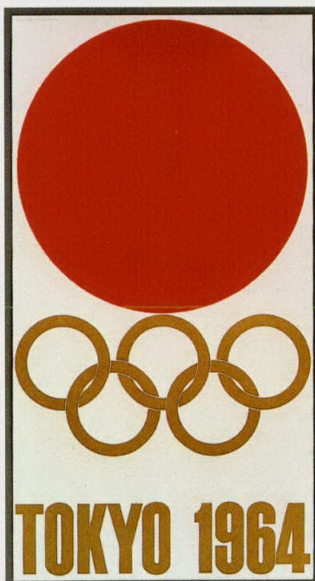
Kamekura never pretended to be an illustrator, Fukuda recalls, but at the same time didn't feel as if he were doing graphic design on the side either. "Kamekura was probably the first person in Japan to set out to design posters as work," Fukuda says. "He felt that graphic design should be treasured."

Kamekura understood that the treasures of design often had to be extracted, and refused to compromise on the end result. The Hiroshima Appeals poster, now a classic, was a disaster right through the third color proof. Mizuguchi was there. "When the poster came off the presses," he says, "it wasn't right. It wasn't a poster. Kamekura wondered what was holding it back. Then he trimmed it, the tiniest bit, slicing through a few butterflies. The whole scene just expanded."

Had artificially blacking out the background been an option in 1964, the first Olympic poster to use a photograph might have been unearthed with a great deal less effort. In a stadium naturally darkened by nightfall, six runners of various events spent hours making staggered false starts toward a line at which a commercial photographer inexperienced in sports photography aimed a telephoto lens. He took 80 exposures at 1/1000th of a second. Only one had the power of an Olympic poster. That those who worked with Kamekura found these forays into the future exhilarating was surely the result of his uncompromising vision.

SEE THE WORLD: Kamekura grew up in the 1920s, with a father he himself described as a

fast liver. Surrounded by art books, he knew the world he wanted to topple by the time he was in junior high school. He saw Cassandre's black-and-white posters in an art magazine and chose his profession. When he discovered Bauhaus, he spent a month's rent on a used book found at a little Tokyo shop and memorized nearly the whole volume. When a German pointed out the beauty of Japanese family crests, he went on to study their history and write a concise and definitive essay on their position in modern design. When he came across Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro*, he bought a laser disk player, determined to introduce this animation masterpiece to Paul Rand. When he saw Michael Jackson perform, he noted the similarity of his poses to those struck in Kabuki plays—and later bemoaned the inferior quality of Madonna's moves. "Kamekura was thrilled with the world," says Masami Kikuchi, who received a unique design education at the master's hand. "He taught me how to see." ■



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KIYOSHI FUJIKAWA. (SECOND) POSTER FOR 11TH OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES, 1970. PHOTOGRAPHER: TAKAYUKI OGAWA. (THIRD, FOURTH) POSTERS FOR 18TH OLYMPIC GAMES, 1962, 1963. PHOTO DIRECTOR: JO MURAKOSHI. PHOTOGRAPHER: OSAMU HAYASAKI. ■ (THIS PAGE) POSTER FOR 18TH OLYMPIC GAMES, 1961.



(THIS PAGE) KAMEKURA'S POSTER FOR EXPO '70, CREATED IN 1969. PHOTOGRAPHER: OSAMU HAYASAKI. ■ (OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT) POSTER FOR YUSAKU KAMEKURA POSTER EXHIBITION, 1996. (OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT) KAMEKURA'S POSTER FOR SYMPOSIUM-4, ECONOMICS AND SKYSCRAPER CITIES, 1994.



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