

SAKURA

Thus far, the cherry blossom has been used in various ways, depending on the times.

During the Meiji era (mid 19th century - early 20th century), the political scene was charged with tensions generated by widening imperialistic incursions by the Western powers and aggression by Japan in other Asian countries. In this atmosphere, there arose a strong awareness of a so-called "Japanese essence" or "Japanese spirit" that traditional "waka" poetry was thought to manifest. Similarly, the cherry blossom, whose petals overlap when they bloom, was given a totalitarian interpretation and adopted as a symbol of the national identity.

From the late 1920s until the end of World War Two, the populace was told that their young sons were going off to war to gallantly sacrifice their lives to protect their families and loved ones. The same narrative linked soldiers whose lives were cut short to the evanescence of the Somei-Yoshino strain of cherry tree blossoms, which fall just a few days after reaching full bloom, in the minds of mourners.

Just before Japan's defeat, a war painting made by a certain artist at the order of the imperial army was rejected by the same upon its completion. One day about 23 years after the war, a project was organized for publication of the many war paintings in a single collection. This collection was to include the aforementioned painting, which had never once been shown to the general public after it was finished. For the publication, the artist reportedly blotted out part of the painting and changed other parts for alignment with the change in outlook on values in postwar Japanese society.

It is said that, beneath the Indian ink used for the blot-out lies a depiction of scattering cherry blossoms.

After the war, the Somei-Yoshino cherry trees planted across the country came to stand for reconstruction and booming economic growth. Today, the 100-yen coin is stamped with an image of cherry blossoms, which have since been used as a symbol of recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake and the pretext for a gala annual gathering hosted by the country's prime minister for his supporters, among other things. Every spring when the blossoms open, places for viewing them attract throngs throughout the country. As this evidences, cherry blossoms are widely loved by the general public as well.

In sum, the cherry blossom has been arbitrarily interpreted to suit the purposes of the times. Just who has used it?

These days, I have been thinking about freedom of expression even more than before. It is desirable for works to be appreciated and freely interpreted by others. But what about works that are created for the benefit or interest of the general public or a specific someone? Is there something lost as a result of an emphasis on the "public good"?

Taking the cherry blossom, which has reflected the state of Japan while being interpreted in ways that changed with the times, as my theme, I intend to ponder the meaning of "expression" and "freedom" in this exhibition.

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