



Yasuo Kuniyoshi

American, born Japan, 1889 - 1953

Cows in Pasture

1923

oil on canvas

overall: 51.12 × 76.52 cm (20 1/8 × 30 1/8 in.)

framed: 24 × 33.94 × 2.19 cm (9 7/16 × 13 3/8 × 7/8 in.)

Inscription: lower center right: Y.Kuniyoshi 23

Corcoran Collection (Gift of George Biddle) 2014.136.94

ENTRY

Yasuo Kuniyoshi's early paintings, prints, and drawings feature odd, humorous, and even disconcerting subjects: frightened-looking babies with animals and anthropomorphic vegetation, for example.[1] When he tackled more conventional motifs, such as still lifes, landscapes, or nudes, he depicted them in a quasi-surrealistic style, from dizzying perspectives, or in odd arrangements with curious props. *Cows in Pasture*, ostensibly a straightforward view of a coastal New England dairy farm, is a prime example of Kuniyoshi's subtle "strangeness," as a critic characterized the artist's early work.[2]

Kuniyoshi's favorite early subject was the cow; the artist estimated he painted some 60 cow pictures during the mid-1920s.[3] His preoccupation with the animal and the gravity with which he treated it earned him the label of satirist, a charge he would later counter:

I wasn't trying to be funny but everyone thought I was. I was painting cows and cows at that time because somehow I felt very

near to the cow. . . . You see, I was born, judging by the Japanese calendar, in a “cow year.” According to legend I believed my fate to be guided, more or less, by the bovine kingdom.[4]

Kuniyoshi’s association with a bovine guardian spirit prompts an autobiographical interpretation of *Cows in Pasture*. The young artist was enjoying a spell of good fortune at this time. He had been given his first solo exhibition in 1922 at the Daniel Gallery in New York, having recently found a patron in the respected painter, critic, and teacher Hamilton Easter Field. In 1919, Field invited Kuniyoshi to attend classes at his art colony in Ogunquit, Maine, a coastal village about 70 miles north of Boston, where Kuniyoshi married Katherine Schmidt, a classmate at the Art Students League.

Kuniyoshi cultivated his infatuation with the cow in Ogunquit. As he wrote to his friend the artist Reginald Marsh in 1922: “Things round here very quiet at present and . . . just [suits] . . . us[.] [W]e started working . . . last week and as usually [here] I begin with a cow[.]”[5] Maine’s “severe landscape,” which Kuniyoshi later reverently called his “God,” provided the setting for *Cows in Pasture*.^[6] Maine was also where Kuniyoshi and his Ogunquit compatriots mined American folk art for the stylistic inspiration evident in *Cows in Pasture*. “Most of the summer colony in Maine last year,” wrote one observer in 1924, “went mad on the subject of American primitives, and . . . the Kuniyoshis stripped all the cupboards bare of primitives in the Maine antique shops.”^[7]

The large scale and flat profiles of Kuniyoshi’s cattle in *Cows in Pasture* recall the kinds of folk art the Ogunquit artists admired, especially 18th- and 19th-century livestock portraits commissioned by proud farmers [fig. 1]. But the expressive eyes of Kuniyoshi’s cows endow these animals with a sentience that is more reminiscent of the benign beasts in Edward Hicks’s allegorical Peaceable Kingdom pictures (see, for example, [fig. 2]). Hicks’s canvases depict the fulfillment of Isaiah’s Old Testament prophecy, in which the calf and the lion live happily together.

Cows in Pasture, though, does not merely mimic a naïve style. Rather, the painting testifies to Kuniyoshi’s attempt to reconcile a complex set of artistic traditions, cultural influences, and personal symbols. The disjunctive scale, peculiar geometries, unstable perspective, and oversize animal characters are reminiscent of recent developments in avant-garde European art. Following the 1913 Armory Show, Kuniyoshi admitted that he “tried . . . radical kind[s] of painting without

understanding [and] imitated [the] worst side of Van Gogh, Cézanne, Gauguin.”[8] Paul Cézanne’s influence is apparent in the geometric emphasis in *Cows in Pasture*, particularly in the accordioned cliff faces, boxy farm buildings, and triangular cows.[9] The work of Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853 - 1890) and Paul Gauguin (French, 1848 - 1903) appears to have been even more compelling to Kuniyoshi; both artists borrowed their expressive line, flat areas of intense color, and dramatic asymmetry from the Japanese art that had surrounded Kuniyoshi when he was younger [fig. 3]. “My tendency,” he said, “was two-dimensional. My inheritance was shape-painting, like *kakemonos* [scroll-painting].”[10]

Kuniyoshi’s artistic circle saw evidence of modernism’s native roots in the formal similarities between European modernism and American folk art and colonial art.[11] Americana was championed as a valid, indigenous source for modern art. This subtext might have resonated more significantly for the Japanese-born Kuniyoshi. Painting reassuring subjects with precedents in early American art enabled him to express his interest in recent European painterly innovations and traditional Japanese graphic techniques without fear of censure or judgment of foreignness. That Kuniyoshi was not completely successful was hinted at by the critic Henry McBride, who contended: “Those unacquainted with the art of Yasuo Kuniyoshi . . . will probably rub their eyes and wonder whether they are in Japan, Maine or Mars.”[12]

Kuniyoshi eventually abandoned the barnyard subjects and what critics saw as the “mischievous humor” of his earlier paintings.[13] By the 1940s his “queer rectangular cows” were replaced with desolate landscapes and still lifes composed of wrecked objects, masks, and semilegible antiwar rhetoric [fig. 4].[14] It is quite possible that this shift occurred in response to the political and social developments of the intervening decades. As a Japanese immigrant, Kuniyoshi was the subject of intense suspicion following Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. He was questioned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and was briefly placed under house arrest, despite being outspokenly prodemocracy, anti-imperialist, and antifascist.[15] He articulated the dire situation in a letter to his friend and the first owner of *Cows in Pasture*, the artist George Biddle (American, 1885 - 1973), on December 11, 1941: “A few short days has changed my status in this country, although I have not changed at all.”[16] It is not difficult to imagine that Kuniyoshi’s “broken, worn, used up . . . rotting” subjects of the 1940s reflect the artist’s personal difficulties, just as his talismanic cows of the 1920s were products of that earlier, happier time.[17] Kuniyoshi, after all, described his creative process as

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“feeling, imagination and intuition mingled with reality [that] creates more than actuality, evokes an inner meaning indicative of one’s experience, time, circumstances and environment. This is reality.”[18]

Adam Greenhalgh

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 H. Call, *Prize Bull*, 1876, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1980.62.3



fig. 2 Edward Hicks, *Peaceable Kingdom*, c. 1834, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1980.62.15



fig. 3 Paul Gauguin, *Haystacks in Brittany*, 1890, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in Memory of Marie N. Harriman, 1972.9.11



fig. 4 Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Headless Horse Who Wants to Jump*, 1945, oil on canvas, Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan

NOTES

- [1] This entry is a revised version of text that was originally published in *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011).
- [2] “Yasuo Kuniyoshi’s Development: Interesting Gathering of His Work Shown at the Daniel Gallery,” *New York Sun*, Feb. 1928, Yasuo Kuniyoshi Papers, reel D176, frame 296, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,

Washington, DC.

- [3] Lloyd Goodrich, *Yasuo Kuniyoshi Retrospective Exhibition* (New York, 1948), 13. A woodblock print of a kneeling heifer was emblazoned on the cover of Kuniyoshi's first solo exhibition catalog, *Paintings and Drawings by Yasuo Kuniyoshi* (New York, [1922]).
- [4] Yasuo Kuniyoshi, "East to West," *Magazine of Art* (Feb. 1940): 75–77.
- [5] Kuniyoshi to Marsh, June 14, 1922, Reginald Marsh Papers, reel D308, frame 38, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- [6] Yasuo Kuniyoshi, "Autobiographical Notes," Aug. 24, 1944, typescript, Kuniyoshi Papers, unmicrofilmed, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
- [7] "Show at Whitney Studio Galleries, 'Early American Art,'" *New York Herald*, Feb. 17, 1924.
- [8] Yasuo Kuniyoshi, "Autobiographical Notes," August 24, 1944, typescript, Kuniyoshi Papers, unmicrofilmed, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. See also Kuniyoshi, "East to West," *Magazine of Art* (Feb. 1940): 74.
- [9] Although Kuniyoshi claimed he "hadn't been influenced by him at all," his totemic bovines recall Marc Chagall's whimsical folkloric imagery. *Cows in Pasture* also brings to mind the simplified geometric style, intense palette, and zoological subjects of Franz Marc's symbolic paintings; Kuniyoshi admitted he was "greatly influenced by the German expressionist group," of which Marc would be considered a member. Lloyd Goodrich, "Notes on Conversation with Yasuo Kuniyoshi," Whitney Museum Papers, reel N670, frame 82, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- [10] Lloyd Goodrich, "Notes on Conversation with Yasuo Kuniyoshi," Whitney Museum Papers, reel N670, frame 68, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. On Kuniyoshi's incorporation of his Japanese heritage into his work, see Gail Levin, "Between Two Worlds: Folk Culture, Identity, and the American Art of Yasuo Kuniyoshi," *Archives of American Art Journal* 43, nos. 3–4 (2003): 2–17.
- [11] Doreen Bolger, "Hamilton Easter Field and His Contribution to American Modernism," *American Art Journal* 20, no. 2 (1988): 94.
- [12] Henry McBride, "Robust Art of Yasuo Kuniyoshi," *New York Herald*, Jan. 3, [1925], clipping, Kuniyoshi Papers, reel D176, frame 167, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- [13] "The World of Art," *New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 15, 1923.
- [14] "Art in Review: Kuniyoshi, in New One-Man Exhibit at Downtown Gallery, Shows Considerable Progress," *New York Times*, Feb. 8, 1933.

- [15] Sara Mazo Kuniyoshi, interview, in Tom Wolf, “The War Years,” in *Yasuo Kuniyoshi* (New York, 1986), n.p. See also ShiPu Wang, “Japan against Japan: U.S. Propaganda and Yasuo Kuniyoshi’s Identity Crisis,” *American Art* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 28–51.
- [16] Kuniyoshi to Biddle, draft, Dec. 11, 1941, Kuniyoshi Papers, unmicrofilmed, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- [17] Yasuo Kuniyoshi, “Autobiographical Notes,” Aug. 24, 1944, typescript, Kuniyoshi Papers, unmicrofilmed, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- [18] Yasuo Kuniyoshi, “Attitude towards Nature; Statement for Ray Berther’s [Bethers’s] Book, *How Paintings Happen* [published, New York, 1951],” Kuniyoshi Papers, unmicrofilmed, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a plain-weave, medium-weight, pre-primed canvas and is lined with a similar weight linen using a wax adhesive. The tacking margins are intact, indicating that the painting is very close to its original dimensions. The stretcher is a modern five-member, expansion bolt replacement. The commercially prepared ground is a grayish off-white.

In general, the paint has been applied as a thin, fluid paste that builds up the composition in a series of multiple layers. Delicate, flickering touches of a small brush are visible in many areas. Although the paint is mostly opaque, in some places, for example the red barn in the upper center, it is sufficiently thin and transparent that the glow of the light-colored ground is visible through the red paint. In some of the rocks and foliage the paint is applied more freely and thickly, with noticeable brushmarks and dabs of low impasto. There are a few places (as in the haystack at left and above and to the right of the red cow) where the artist appears to have deliberately abraded previously applied paint with a knife or other sharp tool and then continued painting.

In reflected light a large design element is visible that is now completely painted out. It appears to be a triangular shape surmounted by an oval in and above the area of the black cow. In infrared examination the painting appears to follow a dark outline probably made with a pencil.[1] There is a drawn shape to the left of the black cow’s head that is not discernible, although it does have some foliage-like

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elements. This shape does not appear in the final painting. Although the shape visible in reflected light (described above) does not appear in infrared, in the x-radiograph it is clear that there was once a figure that seemed to be riding the black cow that is now painted out. In 1974 the picture was treated at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, where it was wax-lined and mounted to a new stretcher. Grime was also removed from the surface and the painting was varnished and retouched. At present, this synthetic varnish applied in 1974 has a somewhat glossy appearance with a slightly hazy surface. It appears that, prior to this varnish application, the painting had been left unvarnished by the artist.[2]

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with a J astronomy filter.
- [2] Lance Mayer prepared a comprehensive technical summary for *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011). A copy of this summary is also available in NGA conservation files.
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PROVENANCE

The artist; consigned to (Downtown Gallery, New York); sold c. 1926 to George Biddle [1885-1973], Croton-on-Hudson, New York; [1] gift 23 June 1964, subject to life estate, to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

[1] Biddle notes that he acquired the painting "from Kuniyoshi directly, who had it at the time with Downtown Gallery; I think about 1926-1928." See Whitney Museum of American Art Artists' Files and Records, 1914-1966, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington: "Kuniyoshi: Oils, 1917-1926 [1948]," reel N688, frames 215 (illus.), 216.

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EXHIBITION HISTORY

1924 Exhibition of American Art, Galerie de la Chambre Syndicale des Beaux-Arts (under the Auspices of Art Patrons of America), Paris, 5 June - 5 July 1924, no. 103, repro.

1924 Exhibition of "Modern" Pictures Representing Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, Expressionist, and Cubist Painters, Union League Club, 8-10 April 1924, no. 21.

1948 Yasuo Kuniyoshi Retrospective Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 27 March - 9 May 1948, no. 14.

1976 The American Genius, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 24 January - 4 April 1976, catalogue without checklist.

1978 The American Landscape Tradition, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 31 January - 31 August 1978, unpublished checklist.

1978 Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, 7 September - 1 October 1978, no. 2.

1981 Animals in American Art: 1880s-1990s, Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, Roslyn, New York, 4 October 1981 - 17 January 1982, no. 93.

1982 Japanese Artists Who Studied in the USA and the American Scene, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, 24 July - 11 November 1982, no. 3, repro.

1985 Henri's Circle, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 20 April - 16 June 1985, unnumbered checklist.

1996 The Shores of a Dream: Yasuo Kuniyoshi's Early Work in America, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth; Portland (Maine) Museum of Art, 7 September 1996 - 30 March 1997, catalogue with no checklist, repro.

2005 Encouraging American Genius: Master Paintings from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 27 August 2005 - 29 April 2007, checklist no. 82.

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2008 Asian/American/Modern Art. Shifting Currents. 1900-1970, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; The Noguchi Museum, Long Island City, 25 October 2008 - 23 August 2009, no. 6, repro.

2008 The American Evolution: A History through Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1 March - 27 July 2008, unpublished checklist.

2013 American Journeys: Visions of Place, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.

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- 1973 Phillips, Dorothy W. *A Catalogue of the Collection of American Paintings in the Corcoran Gallery of Art*. 2 vols. Washington, D.C., 1973: 2:142, repro., 143.
- 1978 Zafran, Eric M. "Kuniyoshi Retrospective." *Bulletin of the Chrysler Museum of Art* 7, no. 9 (September 1978): n.p.
- 1991 Kuniyoshi, Yasuo, and Yoshio Ozawa. *Yasuo Kuniyoshi: Neo, Amerikan, atisuto no kiseki*. Okayama, Japan, 1991: n.p.
- 2000 Cash, Sarah, and Terrie Sultan. *American Treasures of the Corcoran Gallery of Art*. New York, 2000: 180, repro.
- 2007 Bennett, Lennie. "The Coming of Age of American Art [exh. review]." *St. Petersburg Times* (18 February 2007): 8L.
- 2009 Greenhalgh, Adam. "Yasuo Kuniyoshi's *Cows in Pasture*." *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 9, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 15-21.
- 2011 Greenhalgh, Adam. "Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Cows in Pasture*." In *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*. Edited by Sarah Cash. Washington, 2011: 232-233, 281, repro.

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