



THE HIROSHIMA PANELS

Iri Maruki & Toshiko Akamatsu



PANEL FOUR [Detail] : *Rainbow*

PANEL FIVE : *Boys and Girls*

PANEL SEVEN : *Wind*







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by Iri Maruki and Toshiko Akamatsu

1 Ghosts

The people rushed about . . . they held their hands high like ghosts. They fell in despair, wailing bitterly, and one after another sank down.

2 Fire

An enormous flash of light, an explosion, a sudden pressure, a great hot blast . . . then the fire burst out.

3 Water

They wandered about looking for water to drink before dying. Unable to endure their sufferings, the wounded entered the water and were sucked into the depths.

4 Rainbow

Their mouths were parched with thirst and they cried out. Then for a moment an ominous silence fell. Clouds quickly covered the sky, and a heavy rain came down. Unexpectedly, a beautiful rainbow stretched across the sky.

5 Boys and Girls

Countless boys and girls lay dead on the edge of the river. They had been sent to get water to fill up the reservoir in the centre of the city. After the explosion, burnt and wounded, they struggled back to the city.

6 Field, destroyed by an atom bomb

In September, after the bomb, Hiroshima was devastated by a typhoon, and the bodies were washed into the sea. The autumn came. The wind blew over the devastated field.

7 Wind

Everything was destroyed, burnt and in heaps. The people could find no shelter. Nobody came to help them. Only the wind rustled in the bamboo stems.

8 Rescue

A few people who had escaped from the city came to the half-ruined house of Maruki's father, and died there, one after the other. The wounded and starved helped one another through the wasteland.

Foreword

These eight Hiroshima panels have come out of a deep emotion that has been restrained and shaped by the discipline of art. And so they do not merely affect the nerves but awaken basic feelings—pity, love, compassion, and a sense of the oneness of human beings in the face of suffering. Finally, they compel those who see them to vow that such diabolic visitations shall not occur again.

They were painted by a Japanese man and his wife to that end. The story of these two artists waking in the morning to see the death-bomb spread its infernal light over the city is very moving and makes a revealing background to these panels.

But the panels themselves are enough to carry their message to the mind and heart. Their masterly rendering of what was done by one small atom-bomb is a clear warning to all of us that unless the creation of such weapons is solemnly renounced the human race is doomed to an ugly and painful end.

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The Story of the Panels

The atom bomb which fell on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, killed 260,000 people. That is the estimate of the city authorities. The townspeople themselves have never accepted the figure: they are convinced that the total is a good deal higher. Many were killed instantly by blast, falling masonry, shock or burning. Many died in the days and weeks following the explosion, from their burns and injuries and from the delayed effects of radiation. A number were so badly wounded that they were unable to defend themselves against the parasites and worms which ate them alive. The effects of radiation are still claiming victims today – thirteen years after the event.

When the bomb fell it not only exploded upon the bodies of the men and women and little children of Hiroshima. It exploded, too, in the minds of people throughout Japan. Later, as the Western world began to realise what it had done, the bomb had its effects there too. In Japan, among those whose feelings and beliefs were totally transformed by the bomb were Iri Maruki and his wife, Toshiko Akamatsu.

Both are painters – Maruki in the Japanese tradition, Akamatsu in the Western style. From 1937 until 1945 they had been surrealists. The destruction of Hiroshima horrified them as it horrified millions more. They determined to attempt a portrayal of the disaster.

Maruki and Akamatsu worked for four years and made eight hundred sketches before their first 6 ft. x 24 ft. panel was ready. They worked in a small studio where it was impossible to assemble the eight portions of each panel, and were obliged to guess at the final effect that would be produced when the panel was set up. At times they ran out of money and had to do other work to earn enough for paper and ink.

They decided not to paint their panels in oils, partly because oil-painting is a Western medium – 'The bomb was not dropped on the Western people but on the Japanese people: therefore we thought it best to use Japanese materials, since it would remind us more of Japan and the Japanese victims.' They were also hampered by lack of funds, and Japanese rice paper and Indian ink are both cheap and extremely durable. For the panel depicting 'Fire' they wished to use gold paint to fleck the flames. They had to abandon the plan because of the cost, and the picture is executed in black and vermilion only.

The first panel to be completed was 'Ghosts', and the painters described how lack of space obliged them to hang the separate parts of the composition all round the walls of their studio, with the wind shaking the flimsy rice paper until they began to feel that they had conjured up real ghosts – ghosts from the traditional Sarayashiki ghost-play. In this play a girl is killed by her master and lover because she accidentally breaks one of a set of plates belonging to his family. Her ghost, like those of all the oppressed women of feudal Japan, expressed the indignation and anger that women dared not show in their lifetime. 'Unexpectedly,' writes Akamatsu, 'an exact image of such a ghost presented itself to us. The refusal of the dead of Hiroshima to accept their fate – the anger and impatience they must feel – led us to compose the figures in the painting in the form of old Japanese ghosts – an aggregation of congealed resentment, a suffocated and unuttered voice, expressing the flaring indignation that lies buried deep in the heart.'

'Ghosts' was shown in a Tokyo museum in February, 1950. Fearing action by the U.S. Occupation authorities, people at first came to see it singly or in small groups. No one wrote about the picture, or scarcely spoke of it. But each day the attendance grew. The painters were encouraged to continue their labours.

In a very short while the news of this remarkable work had spread all over Tokyo and beyond. The first five panels to be completed were eventually seen by 650,000 people in fifty-one places in Japan, and ten photographic exhibitions of the work have been seen by a further 1,400,000 people. Countless thousands more have seen a film of the panels.

At the exhibitions, people who had been at Hiroshima would react with horrifying intensity to the painters' work. Grim as the panels are, many people declared that they failed to do justice to the full horror of the event. In one panel there is the figure of a baby, lying near a mound of dead and charred bodies. The baby is unharmed. 'Our wish was to draw one baby at least who is innocent-looking, pretty and charming, without even a trace of burns,' Akamatsu told a group of people at the exhibition in Tokyo. 'Our wish was that when peace is regained, this baby may rise to its feet once more and totter along, smiling and pretty.' A young man replied: 'I believe you should have copied the baby as it really was – burned and blackened – because that was reality. Am I wrong? Do you think I am right?'

Akamatsu writes that she answered the young man: 'Yes, you are right. And yet we couldn't do it. Reasoning was no use, our feelings had mastered us.'

At the exhibition in Muroran a woman came to see the pictures with a young boy and girl. 'This girl is the daughter of my younger sister, who was killed in Hiroshima,' she said. 'Her white blood cells are decreasing rapidly.' The woman added that she had long ago decided never to discuss the bombing again. But now, seeing the pictures, she must talk of it. And she stood in front of one of the panels, holding the children by the hand, and told the crowd what happened to herself and her family when the bomb dropped – how she had carried her wounded husband for miles on her back, how the survivors of her family found themselves three days after the explosion, in the countryside, naked, starving and utterly destitute.

'My son here was four years old. A week after the explosion he was still gripping tightly the chopsticks that he had been using at breakfast when the bomb fell. I tried to take the sticks out of his hand but they would not come. So I loosened his cramped fingers one by one, and the sticks came away at last. He had been so shocked.'

In 1953 a Gold Medal bestowed official recognition upon this remarkable work of art, even before all the panels were completed, and millions of people in Japan have come to know it. In technique it is a highly original and successful synthesis of traditional Japanese and Western forms, predominantly Japanese in style, but strongly influenced by European realism. The formal and æsthetic problems that the artists had to solve were immense. When does sheer horror destroy the realism of a work? Can anything as totally inhuman as the atomic bombardment of defenceless civilians be translated into artistic terms? Should the artist depict an unharmed baby where, in reality, there was only a dead, hideously disfigured baby? Showing the dead of Hiroshima as ghosts – a romantic flight of fancy or a powerful expression of reality, rooted in tradition and folk-lore? 'You should have painted the shreds of skin far redder,' they were told by survivors. 'People were vomiting blood. Why did you not show it?' 'The burned faces were even more horrible. Why not paint them as they were?'

During the years of their work on the panels, the artists were haunted by the visions they had conjured up. Repeatedly they tried to introduce a note of life into the painting, and repeatedly they found when they looked at a finished section that it was 'too doleful'. They had to fight against the annihilating, utterly negative character of their subject. They had to find something human in a disaster which may have been man-made, but which was none the less totally inhuman, anti-human, dead.

In grappling with these problems they have created a great work of art which will continue to have its meaning long after the atom and hydrogen bombs have been outlawed by mankind. And it is the shining virtue of these paintings of Iri Maruki and Toshiko Akamatsu that they will have played a most potent part in bringing that about.

Comments on the Panels by English Art Critics

"The Hiroshima Panels are the series drawn by Iri Maruki and Toshiko Akamatsu, a Japanese painter and his wife. Both artists returned to Hiroshima after the explosion of the first atomic bomb. . . . Toshiko Akamatsu was trained in Europe, her husband had never left Japan. The style which is the result of this marriage of tradition is entirely new . . . a new pictorial language . . . equally understandable by the East and by the West. . . . The Hiroshima Panels not only renew our faith in man, they also renew our faith in art as the ultimate means of expressing truth."

Hans Hess, Director of the York Gallery, YORKSHIRE EVENING POST

"Painted in ink on rice-paper . . . the Panels are composed entirely of nude figures, dead and dying. It is extraordinary that such work should avoid sensationalism; but they do . . . a work of passionate, sympathetic imagination."

Stephen Bone, MANCHESTER GUARDIAN

"Suffering, violent though it may be through the large panels, is caught up in a set of heroic rhythms in which the human body retains its central nobility even though disaster has overtaken it." Eric Newton, TIME AND TIDE

"The Hiroshima Panels are worth going miles to see. . . . Man's Inhumanity to man is a recurring theme in art. But a comparison such as inspired and ennobled Goya's 'Disasters of War' is rare indeed . . . works of strangest beauty and imagination."

Neville Wallis, THE OBSERVER

"We believe that these extraordinary panels are the greatest works of art that have come out of either of the World Wars. Judged entirely on æsthetic standards we believe they will in the future stand alongside Goya's 'Disasters of War' as one of the most moving artistic achievements. They are profoundly humane and tragic."

Carel Weight, R.B.A., and Ruskin Spear, A.R.A.

"Their vision has gone beyond revenge or any dogma. . . ." John Berger