

[Book review by Robert L. Peters]

Exquisite Ephemera

Matchibako – *Japanese Matchbook Art of the 20s and 30s*

Maggie Kinser Hohle, Mark Batty Publisher, 2004

ISBN 0-9725636-5-2

Matchibako (matchbooks) is an engaging gem of a book that offers an insightful glimpse into the fast-changing culture of Japan during the early to mid-20th century by means of 42 matchbook designs and accompanying texts. Author Maggie Hohle (a prolific author of books on Japanese culture and design, and a regular contributor to *Graphis* magazine, among others) truly knows her subject matter. She engagingly introduces the reader to the coffeehouse world of stylish *mogos* (modern girls) and *mobos* (modern boys) while also providing insightful perspective on a little-known period of Japanese history – a postwar time of unprecedented prosperity, shifting attitudes (such as the encouragement of individuality), rapid transformation in social customs, broadening outlooks, and a blossoming of consumerism.

The Taisho period in Japan (1912-1926, beginning with the death of the Meiji Emperor and corresponding to the reign of Yoshihito Taisho) saw the introduction of Western culture (jazz, movies, etc.) and material goods from overseas. This was also the beginning of an open-minded fusion of these new styles and influences with traditional Japanese elements, thanks largely to the emergence of an educated middle class with access to new means of communication, and to an influx of international news and media that inspired consumers and artists alike. This liberating effect with its 'changing leisure market' is depicted through the *matchibako* found 'in both the Western style hotels and the sushi bars often located next door' – these matchbooks act as 'tiny posters' expressing the graphism of the era in an avant-garde vocabulary, and are today 'tiny remainders of the period showing the influence of both Cubism and the Bauhaus' as well as demonstrative evidence of the era's simultaneous convergence and divergence of diverse pop cultures. Although few of the featured *matchibako* have to do with smoking or the use of matches, they do advertise the services and products of the 'modern world' with aplomb – coffee shops, night clubs, cafeterias, theatres, department stores, socks, bread, cosmetics, taxis and barbers.

This 5x5-inch accordion-fold book punches well above its weight, and it more than fulfills its promise as a 'delightful collection of images and enjoyment from the other side of the globe.' Maggie Hohle's rich descriptions and the apt interpretations she provides to accompany these exquisite, ephemeral works help us Westerners overcome the contextual foibles and idiosyncrasies that might otherwise be 'lost in translation.' My recommendation: savor *Matchibako* accompanied by *kanzake* (warm sake) and in the company of a cuddly cat (as I did) – or better yet, buy two copies and give one as a charming gift to grace the collection of your favorite graphic designer, Japan-buff, or connoisseur of the Arts Nouveau, Deco and Moderne.

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Robert L. Peters is a graphic designer and the founding principal of the design firm CIRCLE based in Winnipeg, Canada. He is also past president of the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (Icograda), a foreign correspondent for *Communication Arts* magazine, editor of the *GDC Graphic Design Journal*, and author of the book *Worldwide Identity* (Rockport Publishers, for release in October 2005). He is active internationally as a consultant and design strategist, policy advisor, juror and guest lecturer.

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