

## ***ISAMI DOI AND JAPANESE AMERICAN ARTISTS***

### ***IN NEW YORK BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS***

In the decades between the two world wars New York City was a magnet for ambitious artists all over the world, second only to Paris. My paper will look at artists of Asian descent who worked there, with a focus on Isami Doi (1903-1965) who was of Japanese ancestry and who came to the city from his native Hawaii. The artists active in New York included most famously Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Isamu Noguchi. But others less known, such as Toshi Shimizu and Eitaro Ishigaki, were also active there from the 1920s through the 1940s. They sometimes exhibited together as a group, and examining their art reveals how they expressed their feelings about being foreigners in the metropolis.

I have published some of this research in an essay in the anthology, *Asian American Art, A History 1850-1979* (Stanford University Press, 2008) and I am developing it further. I argue that these artists assimilated into the American art scene (most studied with American artists) but also retained Asian references in their work, both in style and in subject matter. In the 1920s they painted scenes of the city, inspired by the dynamism and modernity of New York, and they often supplemented these with views of rural, upstate New York. The art colony in Woodstock drew many of them

for extended visits, and was the scene of their pastoral subjects. Doi studied with artists involved with the Woodstock colony, and made virtuoso prints of Woodstock landscapes as well as of the city, so he fits neatly into this milieu.

Like many of his Japanese colleagues, Doi lived in the area around Union Square, and made art under the governmental auspices of the WPA. He was included in museum shows and exhibited at the Downtown Gallery, which represented Kuniyoshi and other members of the Asian American group. During the Depression artists in New York became politicized, and those of Asian descent were no different, particularly after Japan began its aggression against China, which they protested. I will trace some of these issues, though Doi seems to have kept artistically aloof from direct involvement with them.

Doi and his works from these years have not previously been considered in the context of other Asian artists living and working in New York. It seems appropriate to present my research in Honolulu, as the material adds a new dimension to what we know about the career of an important Hawaiian artist.

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