

Institute for Japanese Studies Lecture Series

# Democracy in Hiroshima (1945-1968): Shikoku Gorō and Art as Method

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4:30-6:00 pm

Hagerty Hall 062 (1775 College Rd)



**Abstract:** During his 2016 visit to Hiroshima, President Obama didn't apologize for the U.S. military's atomic bombing, aware of U.S. discourses of the bomb and of people in Asia who knew Japan's past imperialism and militarism. In contrast, the Peace Museum in Hiroshima has recently removed historical exhibits designed to promote this kind of nuanced understanding of the nuclear age's complex history. When public history thus alters the narrative, the arts can play a crucial role in promoting citizen awareness. As a case study in the challenges to activist art in a democracy like post-1945 Japan, this paper examines the work of Hiroshima-born artist and Imperial Army veteran Shikoku Gorō (1924-2014), who employed the arts effectively as a means to protest nuclear weapons and injustice, to advocate for *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors), and to grapple with his role in Japan's militarist expansionism. His work are enjoying a revival today.

Soon after his repatriation to Occupied Japan in 1949, Shikoku joined a Hiroshima cultural circle focused on poetry and painting. He quickly found himself engaged in fierce debates over the meanings of democracy, what art has to do with politics, and a nuclear arms race that threatened to destroy the world. The concept of art as method in the democratic movements that he had experienced in Soviet POW camps clashed with the notions of art's autonomy in a free market democracy that underpinned the ideological foundations of the Allied Occupation and the postwar Japanese Constitution. In his 1950s-1960s work, Shikoku employed a range of literary and visual idioms appropriate to changing contexts of grassroots activism—the Occupation, Korean War, high growth economy, Vietnam War, and antinuclear movement. But like artists and writers today, he grappled with the problems of how to remain socially engaged in a fluid ideological context, how to reach fellow citizens and mobilize them, and even the question of what is democracy?

**Bio:** Ann Sherif is Professor of East Asian Studies and Japanese at Oberlin College near Cleveland. She is author of *Japan's Cold War: Media, Literature, and the Law* (Columbia UP) and has published widely on post-war Japanese literature, and literary criticism. Sherif is co-director of Oberlin's Luce Initiative on Asia and the Environment (LIASE) grant. Her current research focuses on independent and regional editors and publishers of literature in Japan, 1917-1990.

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