A swarm of enemy soldiers, came out to see me … I guess they wanted to get a look at these funny-looking guys they’d caught. But when I saw them—Blond, silver, black, brown, red haired; blue, green, brown, black eyes; white, black, skin colors of every variety—I was stunned! I realized then that we’d fought against all the peoples of the world. At the same time, I thought, what a funny country America is, all those different kinds of people fighting in the same uniform!

—Kojima Kiyofumi, “In the Enemy’s Hands,” 1986

INTRODUCTION

While no single artistic ideology, style, or subject entirely dominated the Japanese art scene in the 1930s and 40s, the production of campaign-record paintings (sakusen kirokuga) was one of the most “celebrated” tasks endorsed by yōga painters during the Asia-Pacific War. Such paintings were sponsored by the Military Information Bureaus (both Army and Navy) for the purpose of “recording the reality of war accurately … and to permanently preserve [these records], which is, needless to say, important for national security … and as educational materials for our nation.” Between 1938 and 45, more than two hundred artists were sent to the front, where they made sketches, researched sites, and produced works of monumental size, mostly featuring Japan’s military campaigns on the Asian continent and Pacific Islands. While going to the front was surely accompanied by a number of risks, the artists appointed to this mission (hereafter referred to as official war painters) were offered various privileges and rewards. The works were displayed at war-art exhibitions sponsored by the military, and enjoyed an honorary “preview” by the emperor (tenran). Frequently backed by the major newspaper companies (Asahi, in particular), the official war painters always enjoyed significant media coverage, and exhibitions toured not only in mainland Japan, but also in Taiwan and Manchukuo as well. Moreover, when all art materials were under the government’s control due to the serious shortage of resources toward the end of the war, the official war painters were given priority in the allotment of art supplies. All in all, the top-rated official war painters attained a nationwide audience and prestige, official patronage, publicity, and certain economic advantages.

This chapter examines the Japanese male figure as painted and performed by the yōga artists who engaged deeply with the production of campaign-record paintings, with specific focus on Fujita Tsuguharu (1886–1968), the most prolific of the official war painters. Fujita established
himself as a painter in 1920s Paris and traveled extensively through Europe and North and South America to Asia in the 1930s. When Japan was engaged in all-out war from the late 1930s to the early 40s, Fujita eagerly participated in the production of campaign-record paintings and other war efforts. Fourteen campaign-record paintings by Fujita survive today, the largest number made by a single artist. Appointed as a member of the Imperial Art Academy (Teikoku Geijutsuin) in 1941, from 1943 Fujita chaired the Army Art Association (1938–45), the largest quasi-military art collective, and appeared in a number of media to call for his fellows to create art for their nation. He was also chosen to be one of three artists, together with Miyamoto Saburō and Koiso Ryōhei, to portray Emperor Hirohito in military costume in 1943.

As stated in the previous chapter, the creators of campaign-record paintings became the foremost targets of criticism for their close collaboration with the military in the post-1945 years. Fujita, too, was accused of vigorous engagement with the military; this accusation is often cited as the major cause of his departure for Paris in 1949. While campaign-record paintings are without doubt stigmatized as evidence of such collaboration, however, the question of whether these paintings—and Fujita’s rendering of male figures, in particular—functioned fully as propaganda has often been raised. Art historians today generally agree that no equivalents can be found in Japanese wartime visual arts overall, and campaign-record paintings in particular, to Euro-American counterparts such as Nazi Germany’s aestheticized/homoeroticized male figure modeled after Greek ideals, or the hyper-masculine male workers of the Stalinist Soviet Union. As many art historians and critics have claimed, Japanese campaign-record paintings mainly visualized groups of anonymous soldiers, whose physicality often appears rather weak, less confident, or excessively brutal, thus seemingly lacking a clear mark of “manliness” from the standpoint of the contemporaneous Euro-American examples.

The paintings made by Fujita especially in the last two years of the war have inspired numerous discussions over their validity as propaganda and the artist’s underlying intentions. Literally known as shitō-zu (deathly battle pictures), Fujita’s works from 1943 until Japan’s surrender unabashedly feature the vicious suicidal attacks perpetrated by Japanese soldiers on an extremely darkened canvas (figs. 9–11). The art historian Kawata Akihisa describes the Japanese soldier figures in Fujita’s paintings as “ape-like,” displaying a dangerous proximity to the caricatured/de-humanized image of the Japanese ubiquitous in American propaganda of the time. While Tanaka Hisao recollects his unease when he saw Fujita’s Attu Island Gyokusai (1943) during the Asia-Pacific War, as he could not figure out “whether the dead soldiers were Japanese or Americans” (fig. 9). The artist Nomiyama Gyōji (b. 1920), among many others, has gone so far as to say that “anti-war feeling” seems to lie beneath Fujita’s deathly battle pictures.

This chapter revisits Fujita’s male figures by considering their perceived “ambiguity” or “deviancy” from the Euro-American standard for male images in relation to the official war painters’ racial and gender identities. As briefly sketched above, Fujita established himself as an artist in Paris, where he carefully cultivated his artistic identity in order to pursue his career within the Caucasian-centered art community. Through his rich experiences outside his home country, Fujita must have fully acknowledged Japan’s racialized and gendered positioning in the international geopolitical hierarchies. Such acknowledgement, along with strategies cultivated by the artist during his many years as an expatriate, had significant repercussions for the configuration of his “ambiguous” male figures, especially those of “Japanese” “men,” a main theme for Fujita only during the Asia-Pacific War.

As many studies have concluded, the Asia-Pacific War can be characterized as “a race war.” According to John W. Dower, the war was “fueled by racial pride, arrogance, and rage,” and for the “Japanese,” it was envisioned as the final battle against “white” supremacy in order to formulate an