

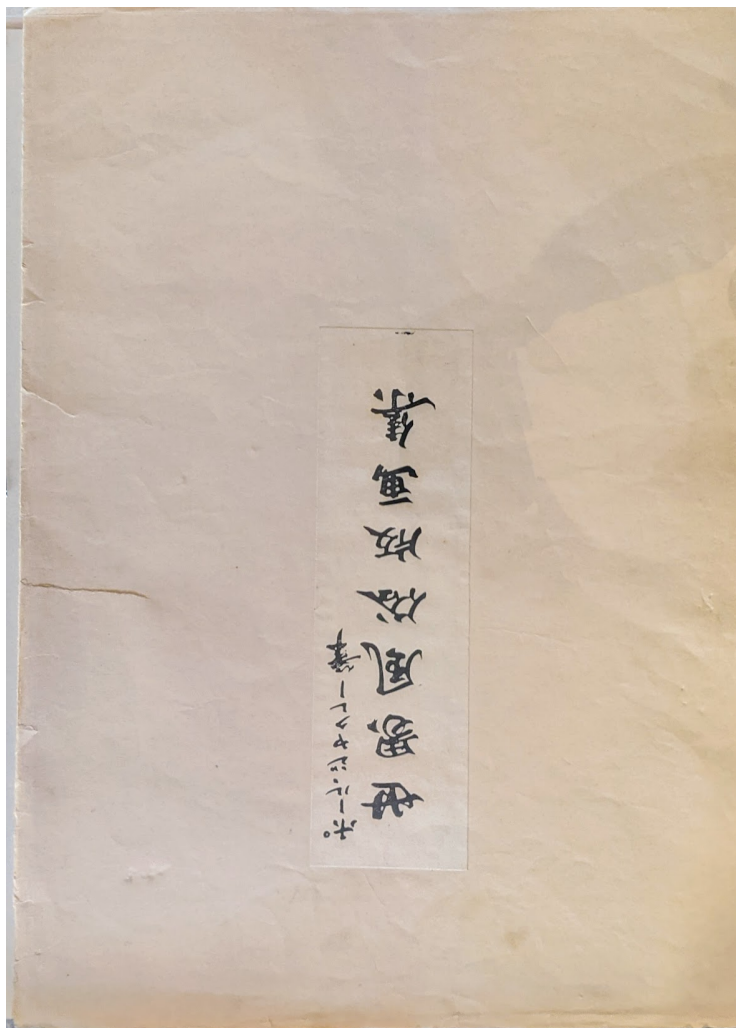
Paul Jacoulet: Outsider Artist



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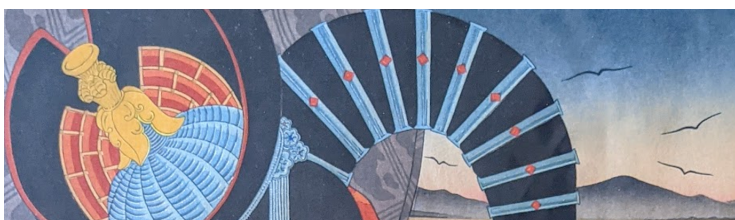
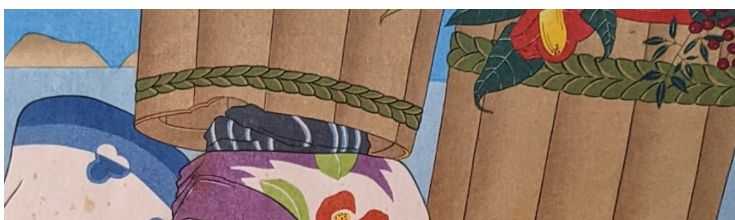
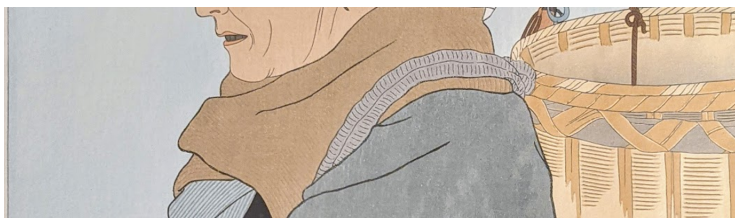
Paul Jacoulet: Outsider Artist

A reconsideration of Japanese Woodcut Art from a Parisian in Japan, 1934 - 1960



Dedication

To the researchers, critics, and gallerists who never let Jacoulet go.



Detail of

*2 Vielle Marchande De Carpes. Ibaraki, Japon, 1934;
55 Fleurs D'Hiver. Oshima, Japon, 1955; and
114 L'Etoile De Cobi. Mongole, 1951.*

Epigraphs

“Normal means lack of imagination and creativity.”

— Jean Dubuffet

“A happy new year to you...in jail!”

— Mr. Potter

“We are not retreating— we are advancing in another direction”

— Douglas MacArthur

Front cover

132 La Fille du Chef. Mogomog, Paul Jacoulet, 1953.

Collection of Mark Boelhouwer / Japanese Outsider
Woodcuts

Back cover

123 Daikoku, Dieu La Richesse Personnifie Par Une

Courtisane Du Shimabara. Kyoto, Japon, Paul Jacoulet,
1952. Collection of Mark Boelhouwer / Japanese

Outsider Woodcuts

Paul Jacoulet: Outsider Artist

A reconsideration of Japanese Woodcut Art from a
Parisian in Japan, 1934 - 1960

By Daniel X. O'Neil with Mark Boelhouwer
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Web: <https://www.japaneseoutsiderwoodcuts.com/>

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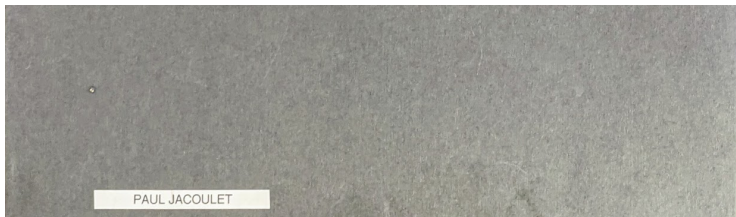
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Preface

Starting in late 2018, I began working as a technology & strategy consultant for my longtime friend Mark Boelhouwer in New York City.

We had long shared obsessive collecting of various things. I booked a trip for work to coincide with the Outsider Art Fair 2019. I got him a ticket and we took the subway to the show.

As we walked around and he became familiar with the modes of Outsider artists— with a focus on the personal story, the lack of formal training, the artists' art world exclusion— he started talking about how one of the artists he collects, Paul Jacoulet, sure sounded like an Outsider artist.

We continued our conversation at [Max Brenner](#), where Mark laid out the basic precepts of this booklet.

As an aside, those trips, and the nighttime walks through the Upper East Side, Midtown, and Lower East Side, were critical to the formation of my theory of [Arte Agora: Art made, sold, or placed in the public way](#), published in May 2019. Outsider, commercial, and street art meet.

This mixing of art and commerce is essential; long may we move.

Introduction

The emergence of Outsider Art as a separate and distinct artistic tradition has been a dominant trend in art criticism over the last 50 years. A new phase in the movement is to re-evaluate historical artists in the context of the Outsider framework.

Many artists who previously were placed into ill-fitting genres and movements can now be seen in the Outsider context, allowing us to understand their work as fully aligned with a distinct international movement. In this spirit, we can reevaluate the work of Paul Jacoulet on a number of criteria.

This slim booklet lays forth the characteristics of Jacoulet that firmly place him in the Outsider tradition. Below is a complete bibliography, but my major sources for divining the criteria for “Outsider” are:

- Roger Cardinal’s 1972 book, “[Outsider Art](#)”
- “[What is Outsider Art?](#)”, an explication of related traditions from Raw Vision magazine
- “[What is Outsider Art?](#)”, an essay published by the Outsider Art Fair

Richard Miles’ canonical index, [The Prints of Paul Jacoulet](#), is cited throughout as source material and numbering for captions. All images are from the collection of Mark Boelhouwer.



Les Petits Voleurs (Droite). Johokuri, Coree, 1959. Jacoulet oversaw this print the year before he died. While he became increasingly ill with ailments, he managed a team of craftspeople with exacting standards. Through wars, economic cycles, and personal tribulations, he never stopped.

Expressive impulse

In his 1972 book, *Outsider Art*, Roger Cardinal wrote:

I believe that a paramount factor in the critical definition of the creative Outsider is that he or she should be possessed of an expressive impulse and should then externalize that impulse in an unmonitored way which defies conventional art-historical contextualization.

Through a tumultuous childhood and the deprivation of a world war, Jacoulet shepherded the creation of 166 prints. In 1935, he, along with his team of carvers and printers, completed 18 exquisite prints from hundreds of blocks.

As his health failed in the years before his death in 1960, he mounted an ambitious project to complete 120 woodblock prints of the disappearing peoples of Asia and the Pacific. His work made him an amateur cultural anthropologist, faithfully documenting the clothing, tattoos, and other markers, essential for the study.

He was also a devoted lepidopterist, collecting hundreds of thousands of insect and butterfly specimens and corresponding regularly with others in the field.

This level of intellectual curiosity and obsessive drive is a common thread among Outsider artists.



88 *L'Homme Accroupi. Chinois, 1947.*

The background fauna is traditional to Ukiyo-e. The direct gaze and realistic detail, along with the mineral sheens he added to the print surface, defy the conventions of either the old (Ukiyo-e) or new (Sōsaku-hanga) woodblock styles.

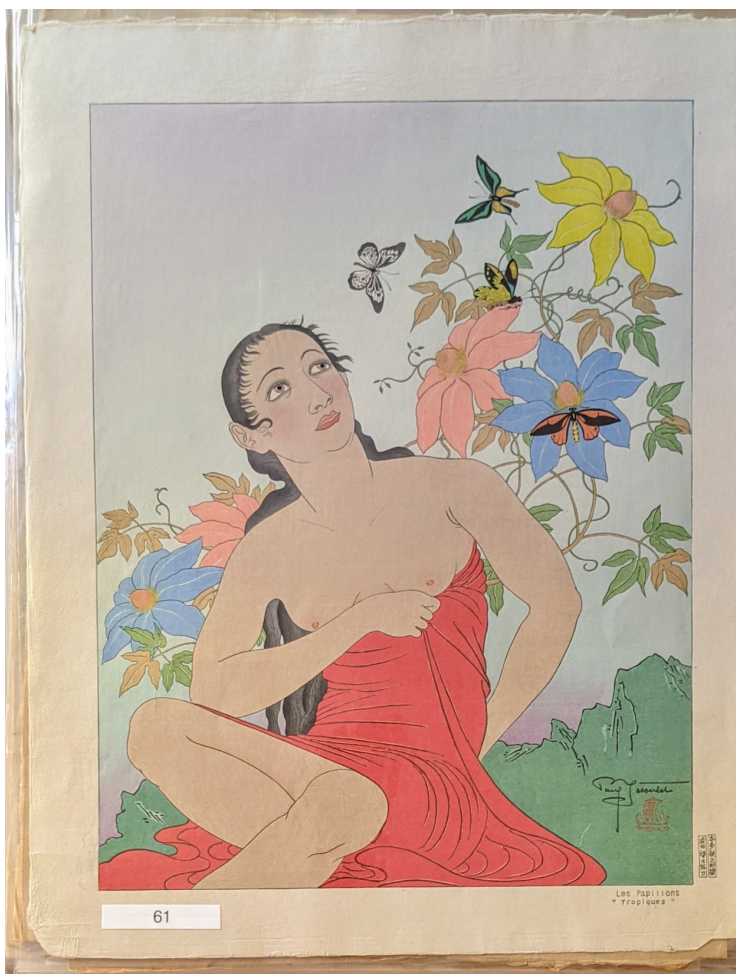
Unconditioned by art trends

In their take on the field of Outsider art, the Outsider Art Fair writes:

Dubuffet and Cardinal were writing primarily about extremely marginalized European artists: psychotics, mediums, and eccentrics. This has caused the common misconception that Outsider Art is essentially pathological, when in fact the central characteristic shared by Outsiders is simply their lack of conditioning by art history or art world trends.

In other words, one can be trained but not conditioned. Jacoulet was schooled in calligraphy like any other child raised in Japan, and this was supplemented by private instruction in languages, painting, and music.

This education accounts for some of his technical precision, but it didn't lead to adherence to the dominant woodblock style of his era, [Sōsaku-hanga](#). The "creative prints" movement stressed the artist as sole creator. Instead, Jacoulet deployed his own style of [Ukiyo-e](#), the out-of-fashion collaborative system where the artist, carver, printer, and publisher all do their parts. This made for less commercial success but greater experimentation in materials, subject matter, pose, and so on.



61 Les Papillons Tropiques, 1939

Miles notes that Coué collected hundreds of thousands of butterflies and they were “never more exactly depicted” than in this print.

No mimicry

In laying out his manifesto on art brut, Jean Dubuffet described works where “mimicry plays little or no part (contrary to the activities of intellectuals).”

A causal interpretation of Jacoulet yields commonalities with traditional Japanese woodblock printing, but as David Kaminsky writes in the Foreword to *The Prints of Paul Jacoulet*, upon encountering examples of his work, “The strongest impression was that it was freshly conceived and not in the least bit imitative”.

His uncommon circumstances— a well-traveled European living in Japan, mostly able to afford to make his own way— made him unbound to the conventions of artists who had to live in the art market, hand-to-block-to-mouth.

Miles puts it this way: “There was something in Jacoulet’s Western perception of the traditional that came out strangely altered, more unsettling than alluring... something in the expression of Jacoulet’s models did not meet with the taste of decorous Japanese accustomed to classical faces and gestures.” This unsettling is a common reaction to Outsider art— Henry Darger’s little girls, clowns drawn by prisoners, the sexualized cartoon characters of Lajuana Lampkins. All of these characters are fine in other contexts, but in the hands of Outsider artists, they chafe.



38 *Le Tabouret De Porcelaine. Mandchoukuo.*

This print combines silver powders, bronze powders, mica, and ground jade powder. As Miles notes, this particular print helped “give Jacoulet a lasting world-wide reputation as the most technically interesting woodblock artist of his century.”

Intense attention to detail

In their essay “What Is Outsider Art?” *Raw Vision* magazine defines a number of terms, including Naive Art, which refers to “untrained artists who depict largely realistic scenes, often in skilled detail, with people, animals, and other aspects of the observed world, sometimes combined with fantasy images.”

In the preface to *The Prints of Paul Jacoulet*, David Kamansky wrote of the “meticulous attention to surface detail, often bordering on the gilded lily, (Jacoulet’s) prints become a unique production assuring him a niche in the history of Western art.”

This surficial attention was legendary. He used precious metals and natural pigments in devising new shadings as well as colored mica, powdered semi-precious stones and small embossing blocks for added texture.

Jacoulet tended toward representing reality rather than fantasy, which is a hallmark of nearly every Outsider artist I admire. In Chicago, Wesley Willis’ precise depictions of skyscrapers, buses, and exact advertisements in his plein air drawings is a classic example. The street life tableaux of Tony "Bright" Davis, the complex made-up worlds of Henry Darger, the topographical codes of Joseph Yoakum, the repeated visages of Peace Prophet. Detail in execution is there.



147

147 JEU Princier. Mongol, 1956

According to Miles, "this print is technically the most complicated" in terms of the number of colors, complexity of overprintings, and metallics. Yet by the mid 1950s his subscription base was down to less than 50 people.

Marginalized contemporaneously

Often critics attempt to affix the Outsider label to anyone who is simply unpopular while they are alive and creating.

Jacoulet's marginalization had many nodes that related to his person: his race, his national origin, his mode of dress. As Christopher Harrity wrote in *Advocate Magazine*, he was openly gay and "his sexual orientation and gender fluidity are clearly reflected in his work."

He was also marginalized based on his own behavior. He devoted his life to a whole series of things that were unpopular in a commercial art context. He collected and indexed butterflies and insects. He used outdated and out-of-style production methods. He worked directly with other marginalized figures: the carvers who were ignored by artists developing the *Sōsaku-hanga* tradition, depicting indigenous people of the Pacific Islands.

He willfully and purposefully did the opposite of what was popular in the established art world but desperately attempted to be popular by appealing to influencers.



L'Attente. Celebe, Manado, 1947.

Miles writes that “Jacoulet thought this image would appeal to occupation troops and their families, with its provocative stare, and colorful costume.”

Relentless self-promotion

I've used some examples of Outsider artists from Chicago to make the case that Jacoulet belongs to the Outsider tradition. My own experience in collecting Outsider art and working directly with artists is where I noticed this last characteristic.

Anyone who ever encountered the great Wesley Willis was directly asked to purchase a CD or art board. Lee Godie was famous for pitching her "Impressionist" paintings to Michigan Avenue strollers. Excluded from the gallery system, they hustled the way they knew how.

Jacoulet's innovative print subscription system, his small-format surimono Christmas Card scheme, his choice of subject matter to appeal to specific audiences— all of this was the work of a marginalized artist devoted to becoming popular.

As Miles' wrote:

...but when Jacoulet dropped illustrious collector's names for effect he usually began with Greta Garbo and Pope Pius the 12th. As often as possible he mentioned the queens of England and Holland, famous generals, and art-conscious movie stars like Joan Fontaine and Edward G Robinson.

Paul Jacoulet deeply wanted to be at the center.



Un Homme De Yap. Ouest Carolines, 1935. Miles notes the signs of borers on the leaves as "typical of Jacoulet's attention to the less than idyllic aspects of the island paradises he loved." The comb and necklaces that indicate caste and rare local resources.

Conclusion

Jacoulet was loose and creative in an extremely rote genre that required blind adherence to a particular methodology.

He was a gay man in a culture that vehemently rejected the notion of homosexuality.

He was a Westerner working in a place that was fighting a monumental war against the West.

Critics through his lifetime and beyond tried to place him in traditions into which he just didn't fit.

Paul Jacoulet was an Outsider artist, toiling under his own tutelage.

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Detail of 108 Vieille Aino Chikabumi, Hokkaido, Japon 1950.



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