

Exhibiting disaster

The Great Kantō Earthquake, 1923

Hannah Gould

In March 2011, people around the world stopped in horror to watch images of a tremendous tsunami making its way up the Japanese coastline, sending oil tankers crashing into cities and decimating homes in its wake. The magnitude 9.0 Tōhoku Earthquake (*Higashi Nihon Daishinsai*), which struck the east coast of Japan on 3 March, triggered a natural and nuclear disaster of a seemingly unprecedented scale. The repercussions of this tragic event are still being felt and debated today.

Japan has a long history of earthquakes. The Kantō region, which encompasses the cities of Tokyo, Yokohama and Kawasaki, is situated in the collision zone of at least four tectonic plates, and is one of the most seismically vulnerable locations on Earth. Despite the scale of recent events, it is the Great Kantō Earthquake (*Kantō Daishinsai*) of 1923 that remains Japan's worst natural disaster, in terms of loss of life and material damage. The magnitude 7.9 earthquake struck the Kantō region, flattening the cities of Tokyo and Yokohama, killing over 120,000 persons and rendering a further 2.5 million homeless.¹ This cataclysmic event sent out far-reaching aftershocks that irrevocably altered both the Tokyo skyline and Japanese society.

Despite its strong claim to being one of the 20th century's worst natural disasters, this historical event remains relatively unknown outside Japan. An exhibition at the Noel Shaw Gallery in the Baillieu Library, titled *Aftershocks: Experiences of Japan's Great Earthquake* (余震：関東大震災が振り動かしたものの), aims to introduce the event to a contemporary Australian audience. This bilingual exhibition showcases images and objects in the university's East Asian Rare Materials Collection, part of Special Collections in the Baillieu Library, to explore how Japan's people experienced and later began to make sense of the disaster. The material, acquired to support research by academics at the University of Melbourne, has never been on public display before. Interpreting disasters such as the 1923 earthquake for the purposes of an exhibition presents particular challenges, namely, how to communicate the scale of the tragedy, making it relevant and meaningful to contemporary foreign audiences, without straying into the grotesque or disaster voyeurism. Through images and stories, the *Aftershocks* exhibition weaves a powerful narrative that pays due respect to the collections and the stories of suffering and survival they tell.

1 September 1923

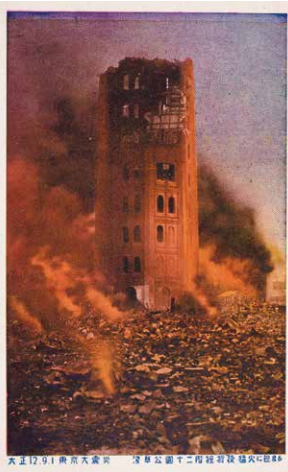
Tokyo in the 1920s was a powerful economic, administrative and political hub and bustling capital city. But at two minutes before noon on 1 September 1923, Tokyo, Yokohama and surrounding towns were violently shaken by the seismic impact of an earthquake originating 60 kilometres south-southwest of Tokyo. The energy produced was equal to the detonation of 400 Hiroshima-sized bombs.² The force of the earthquake severely damaged nearly 70 per cent of all structures in Tokyo, plunging the city's public infrastructure and citizens into chaos. Streets cracked open. Historic buildings, museums and religious sites (including 633 Buddhist temples and 151 Shinto shrines) were destroyed, adding a tragic loss of cultural heritage to the immense loss of human life.³ Their homes razed, many of Tokyo's residents fled to the countryside or sought shelter and emergency aid in the city's remaining parks, temples and shrines. Providing assistance proved difficult, however, as medical facilities and transportation to and from the area had been wrecked. With communications cut off, public utilities not functioning, widespread looting, and vigilante groups roaming the streets, a newly formed Yamamoto Gonnohyōe government declared

A deep fissure opened by the earthquake, Nijū Bridge, Tokyo, c. 1923, postcard, 8.5 × 13.5 cm. East Asian Rare Materials Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. A great number of Tokyo's many bridges were destroyed in the earthquake, which significantly hampered the delivery of vital aid in the aftermath.



martial law throughout Tokyo and surrounding prefectures. By mid-September, more than 50,000 troops had been mobilised across eastern Japan, to restore order, assist with recovery efforts and repair damaged infrastructure.⁴ Military barracks were set up throughout Tokyo to serve as temporary housing and schools. The reconstruction project was a monumental undertaking and would continue for years.

The disaster on 1 September arose from a devastating combination of natural phenomena. When the earthquake struck, it generated a 40 metre-high tsunami, followed soon after by a strong typhoon. As in 2011, the tsunami had a particularly ruinous impact on small fishing villages along the coast. But it was the violent firestorms which broke out across Tokyo immediately after the earthquake that inflicted the greatest damage and captured the imagination of writers and photographers chronicling the disaster. When the earthquake struck, shortly before lunch, many of Tokyo's inhabitants were busy cooking over open-flame stoves, in wooden houses known as *nagaya*, which were built closely together. Fires ignited in nearly 130 different locations almost simultaneously.⁵ Fuelled by ruptured gas lines and ample wood sources, the



Flames engulf a collapsed twelve-storey building in Asakusa Park, c. 1923, postcard, 8.5 × 13.5 cm. East Asian Rare Materials Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. The ryōunkaku building in Asakusa Park was a symbol of Tokyo's modernity and cosmopolitanism before the earthquake.

fires burned over 33 million square metres—more than 18 times the size of the Great Fire of London—and continued for close to three days.⁶

Many of the images of the fires now in the East Asian Rare Materials Collection have been re-coloured in lurid shades of red and orange, and feature dramatic hand-painted flames, to portray the overwhelming terror that the fires inspired. One dramatic image (above) depicts Japan's first Western-style skyscraper, known as *ryōunkaku* or 'cloud-surpassing tower', succumbing to conflagration. The tower, built in 1890 and housing Japan's first electric elevator, lost its top six storeys in the earthquake and was damaged beyond repair by the subsequent firestorms. In another image, captioned 'Refugees flee through a sea of flames' (opposite), hand-painted flames appear perilously close to engulfing women and children escaping the fires. Such collection items provide insight into the devastating psychological and cultural effects on survivors.

The fires combined to produce a fire tornado or 'dragon twist', which demolished the Honjo Clothing Depot, whose fate is one of the more harrowing tales of the 1923 disaster. On the night of 1 September, thousands of people fled to the abandoned factory to take

refuge from the fires. Many thought they had reached safety and set up temporary accommodation, before the fires descended, burning more than 30,000 persons trapped inside. In the aftermath of the earthquake, public memorials and cremations for victims focused on the site of this factory.

A commemorative collection

Commemoration and memory are important motifs in the *Aftershocks* exhibition and in the university's Great Kantō Earthquake collection. The majority of the collection consists of commemorative postcard sets and photobooks produced after the earthquake, many of which are highly idiosyncratic items of memorabilia. The Taisho Era (1912–26) marked the start of photojournalism in Japan, with photography becoming a popular hobby and means of mass communication. Documentary press photographs, first published in newspapers to report the disaster, were subsequently reprinted and sold as commemorative postcards and books. As with the 2011 disaster, although perhaps on a smaller scale and not quite as rapidly, the 1923 earthquake produced a rich visual culture. This visual culture was used by different agents to a variety of

ends: to commemorate the great loss, to manipulate citizens for political purposes, to heroise the acts of individuals, and to humanise the seemingly inexpressible horror.⁷ The reproduction and circulation of images also played an important role in constructing the earthquake as a national tragedy and facilitated the call for international aid. The visual culture of the 1923 earthquake also provides important contemporary information about individuals' experiences of the disaster. Earthquakes themselves are natural phenomena; it is how they are experienced, interpreted and remembered that makes them human disasters. By examining images and documents from the period, we can begin to understand the historical context and lived human experience of the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake.

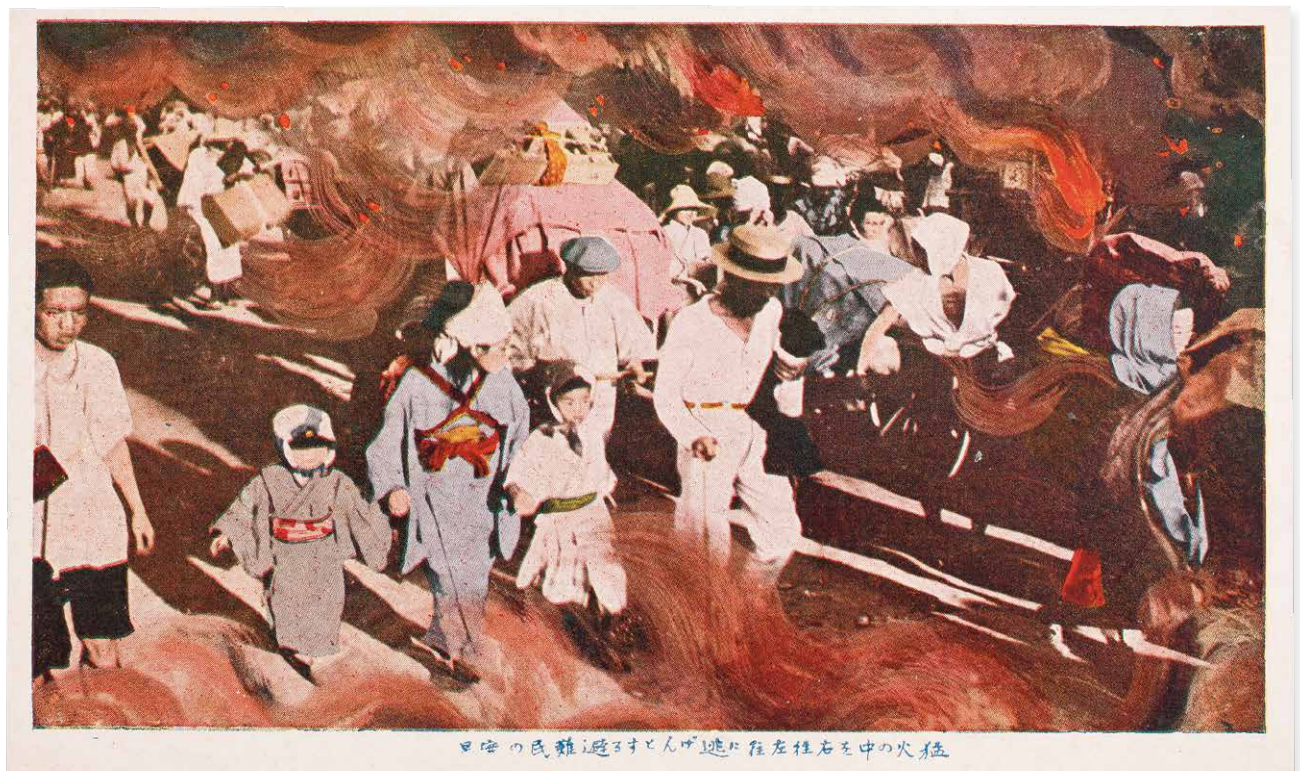
As well as unifying a nation in the wake of tragedy, natural disasters provide a fertile environment for individuals to articulate their agendas for urban, social and political reform. In the aftermath of the 1923 earthquake, many public commentators branded the catastrophe a form of divine punishment (*tenbatsu*) for the perceived decadence of 1920s society, evidenced by the destruction of entertainment districts and modernist

Refugees flee through a sea of flames, c. 1923, postcard, 8.5 × 13.5 cm. East Asian Rare Materials Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

buildings in Tokyo. The exhibition includes several woodblock prints that communicate the longstanding belief in Japanese history that earthquakes are transformative events, capable of expunging moral corruption. In Japanese mythology, catfish (*namazu*) are mythical beings said to cause earthquakes, when not properly guarded by the god of thunder, Kashima. Catfish are

worshipped as *Yonaoshi Daimyoujin* or gods of rectification, who bring about social change and wealth redistribution through acts of great destruction.⁸ In one print, this redistribution power attributed to catfish is made clear, as kimono-clad catfish and newly prosperous construction workers are shown celebrating their gains from the reconstruction of Tokyo's Yoshiwara

red light district, which suffered a particularly tragic fate in the Great Kantō Earthquake. Until its closure in 1958, Yoshiwara was Tokyo's largest and most famous red light district. It was a gated area of the city, where women sex workers would sit in long 'show rooms' facing the street. When fires broke out on the night of 1 September 1923, women fled the brothels, only to be met by their



Yoshiwara red light district burns, c. 1923, postcard, 8.5 × 13.5 cm. East Asian Rare Materials Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.



madams and guards, who prevented their leaving by locking the two gates surrounding Yoshiwara. Desperate to escape, women began to jump into the river, where many drowned. Later, 490 corpses were retrieved from the river by police. Few of the victims were over 20 years of age.⁹

Disasters such as the 1923 earthquake do not affect all people equally. Rather, they tend to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities in society. The earthquake hit the city's poorest residents the hardest, as land in the downtown (*shitamachi*), which had been reclaimed from Tokyo

Bay, liquefied from the force of the earthquake. And just as the earthquake amplified the existing inequalities in Japanese society, the reconstruction process amplified deep-rooted fears about modernity. For many, the Tokyo renewal process presented the perfect opportunity to reconstruct not only Japan's urban landscape, but its moral landscape also.

Communicating disaster

Exhibitions about disasters face a serious problem of how to communicate the overwhelming impact of destruction, particularly

when the event occurred in another country and in the distant past. In order to connect with audiences, in curating the *Aftershocks* exhibition we used narratives, poetry and drawings from individuals who had experienced the disaster in order to bridge this gap. Conversely, displays of the more explicit photojournalism images produced during the period, depicting corpses and mass graves, have been given only limited display, in order to avoid a sense of the grotesque and spectatorship.¹⁰

Children's stories and drawings are some of the most powerful materials in this exhibition, offering the audience a palpable connection with the feelings of those most vulnerable to disaster situations. A drawing and accompanying poem titled 'My sister', by Kuyo Nakamura, an 11-year-old primary school student, is one such striking object (opposite). In the aftermath, teachers encouraged children in makeshift schools to write down their memories of the 1923 earthquake and fires.¹¹ Nakamura's poem is contained in a seven-volume collection written by primary school children who experienced the disaster, titled *Shinsai kinen bunshū* (Chronicles of the disaster), published by the City of Tokyo after the earthquake. It reads:

Did my beloved sister die in the
Tatekawa River?
She still hasn't returned.
If she died in the water, was it
painful?
If she died in the fire, did it burn?
Where is my beloved sister now?
In the water of the Tatekawa
River?
In the dreadful fires?
She is probably crying all alone.¹²

The 1923 earthquake had a particularly devastating effect on children, many of whom lost family members and experienced great scenes of destruction. In the *Aftershocks* exhibition, objects from 1923 appear alongside children's drawings and stories from the 2011 Tōhoku disaster, kindly on loan from the Consulate-General of Japan in Melbourne. The 2011 earthquake triggered a nuclear disaster following the meltdown of three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. In drawings from the 2011 disaster, children from Iitate village in Fukushima Province express their desire to return to the 'greenness' of nature in their village, which was forcibly evacuated due to unsafe radiation levels. Many of the visitors to the *Aftershocks* exhibition will undoubtedly interpret the 1923 disaster through their knowledge of the 2011 earthquake, and there are



many striking resemblances between the visual cultures of both. Both earthquakes generated secondary disasters, such as tsunamis, fires, mudslides and a nuclear meltdown. In both cases, the economic cost and loss of human life were extraordinary and traumatic. And in both, members of Japan's imperial family offered words of solace to the nation's citizens: Crown Prince Hirohito in 1923, and his son, Emperor Akihito, in 2011. Japan's history of earthquakes also serves as a powerful reminder that, despite significant technological advances, humanity remains vulnerable to the powerful forces of nature. This history also demonstrates the extraordinary resilience of the Japanese people in overcoming and rebuilding after disaster.

Exhibition as aftershock

The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 was a transformative event in Japanese history, and a singularly devastating international disaster. It is also an event that continues to create wide-reaching aftershocks, including this exhibition. Exhibitions that tell the horrific story of the earthquake of 1 September 1923 must work hard to deliver a respectful but moving narrative that touches contemporary

audiences. The 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake is only one of the many stories to be told by the East Asian Rare Materials Collection at the University of Melbourne. It is hoped that this exhibition will create its own aftershocks and inspire future exhibitions that use the collection.

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Hannah Gould is a University of Melbourne alumna, currently undertaking a Master's degree in Visual, Material and Museum Anthropology at the University of Oxford. She was guest curator for the *Aftershocks* exhibition.

Aftershocks: Experiences of Japan's Great Earthquake opened on 1 September 2014 and runs to 8 March 2015 at the Noel Shaw Gallery in the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. For details of the program of public talks, see www.library.unimelb.edu.au/aftershocks.

- 1 J. Charles Schencking, '1923 Tokyo as a devastated war and occupation zone: The catastrophe one confronted in post earthquake Japan', *Japanese Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, May 2009, p. 111.
- 2 J. Charles Schencking, 'The Great Kanto Earthquake and the culture of catastrophe and reconstruction in 1920s Japan', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, summer 2008, p. 299.
- 3 Tokyo Municipal Office, *The reconstruction of Tokyo*, Tokyo: Kawaguchi Printing Works,

1993. This work gives detailed statistical information about the scale of the destruction.

- 4 For more information about these issues see Tokusan Kan, *Kantō Daishinsai* (The Great Kantō Earthquake), Tokyo: Chūō Shinsho, 1994; and Michael Weiner, 'Koreans in the aftermath of the Kantō Earthquake of 1923', *Immigrants and Minorities*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1983, pp. 5–32.
- 5 Schencking, 'The Great Kanto Earthquake', p. 300.
- 6 Gennifer Weisenfeld, *Imaging disaster: Tokyo and the visual culture of Japan's Great Earthquake of 1923*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- 7 For a thorough analysis of these issues, see Weisenfeld, *Imaging disaster*.
- 8 The catfish images on display date back to the Ansei Earthquake of 1855, when the tradition of this symbolism in art was established. Catfish were again used in social commentary after the 1923 earthquake to critique self-serving politicians. For more information, see Cornelius Ouwehand, *Namazue: Minzokuteki sōzōryoku no sekai*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1964.
- 9 Joshua Hammer, *Yokohama burning: The deadly 1923 earthquake and fire that helped forge the path to World War II*, New York: Free Press, 2011, pp. 125–6.
- 10 For a more theoretical, in-depth discussion of the problems surrounding disaster exhibitions, museums and collections, see recent work by Anders Ekström, 'Exhibiting disasters: Mediation, historicity and spectatorship', *Media, Culture, Society*, vol. 34, no. 4, May 2012, p. 472.
- 11 For more work on the earthquake's effects on children and the Japanese education system, see Janet Borland, 'Makeshift schools and education in the ruins of Tokyo', *Japanese Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2009, pp. 135–47.
- 12 *Shinsai kinen bunshū*, Tokyo: Baifukan Press, 1924, vol. 4, p. 1. East Asian Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.