

Virtually Priceless Artwork Collection Discovered by Smithsonian Marks a Defining Moment in Saito Kiyoshi's Career

Smithsonian Announces Discovery of Saito's Artworks, Revealing Key Historical Figures in Japan's History

VIRGINIA BEACH, VA, UNITED STATES, April 8, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In 2024, a damaged study by artist Graham Sutherland of former Prime Minister Winston Churchill sold at auction for \$840,000.

In 2019, Robert Rauschenberg's vivid silkscreen Buffalo II (1964), featuring former U.S. President John F. Kennedy, sold for \$88.8 million at Christie's.

These record-breaking sales reflect a growing trend: 20th-century artworks depicting key political figures from the pre- and post-war eras are drawing intense interest from ultra-high-net-worth individuals (UHNWIs) seeking to own iconic pieces of history. As with rare diamonds, the scarcity of historically significant art by world-renowned artists continues to drive up prices, with the ultra-wealthy going to great lengths to acquire such works.

A recent discovery by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Asian Art (NMAA) in Washington, D.C., has added a remarkable new chapter to this narrative. A virtually priceless private collection of original drawings by legendary Japanese artist Kiyoshi Saito (1907–1997) has come to light. These works offer a rare glimpse into Japan's political landscape during a cataclysmic period in world history, capturing the deep expressions and personalities of former prime ministers, first ladies, emperors, generals, princes, and a plenipotentiary who served Japan before, during, and after World War II. The collection also includes rare early drawings of rural Japanese landscapes and villages.

Among the first pieces from this collection to surface publicly is a drawing of former Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, recently gifted to the Smithsonian's NMAA from the Ted M. Miller Saito Kiyoshi Historical Collection of Original Works. The artwork has sparked interest regarding the potential for future donations or the possibility of other pieces entering the public market.

The drawing is especially significant as it highlights the complex and controversial legacy of Kishi, known as "The Monster of the Showa Era." He cosigned the declaration of war against the U.S. and Great Britain alongside Emperor Hirohito, only to later become Prime Minister of Japan and

help rebuild diplomatic relations with the United States. His political journey was turbulent and deeply polarizing, making the artwork historically and culturally invaluable.

Whether the remaining drawings from the private collection will ever be made available for sale remains uncertain. However, given recent auction trends and the value of historical art, such as Rauschenberg's JFK portrait, it's possible that these works could command staggering prices. The prestige associated with acquiring such culturally important pieces is also contributing to their allure among elite collectors.

Kiyoshi Saito is widely recognized as one of Japan's most celebrated modern artists. His early career gained traction in the late 1940s, particularly among American soldiers and servicemen stationed in post-war Japan. Inspired by both Eastern traditions and Western modernism, Saito's style was influenced by artists such as Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, while remaining rooted in the rich heritage of Japanese woodblock printing.

In 1951, his colored woodblocks were published in Time magazine, and in 1968, his print of Prime Minister Eisaku Sato became the first artwork to appear on the magazine's cover. The original print and the four woodblocks used to produce it were later donated by Saito to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

Saito's international acclaim was further solidified when he and fellow artist Tetsuro Komai became the first Japanese artists to win prizes at the São Paulo Art Biennial. He was later invited to the United States by the U.S. State Department and the Asia Foundation to promote cultural diplomacy between the U.S. and Japan through his art.

His rise to fame coincided with global icons such as Marilyn Monroe, who also played a role in post-war cultural diplomacy during her 1954 honeymoon to Japan with baseball legend Joe DiMaggio, visiting U.S. troops and performing in Korea.

At age 74, Saito was awarded the Fourth Class Order of the Sacred Treasure by the Japanese government. In 1995, two years before his passing, he was named a Person of Cultural Merit (Bunka Kōrōsha), one of Japan's highest honors bestowed by the emperor to those who have made outstanding contributions to science and culture.

Today, 28 years after his death, Saito remains one of Japan's most respected artists. The Smithsonian's recent discovery of this private portrait collection adds significant weight to his legacy and presents the possibility of redefining how historical art is valued in the global market. Should these rare pieces ever be offered for sale, experts believe they could not only command record-breaking prices, but also elevate the value of Saito's woodblock prints worldwide.

Throughout his lifetime, Saito generously donated prints and woodblocks to prestigious institutions around the world, including:

- Museum of Modern Art, New York
- National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art
- British Museum
- Cincinnati Art Museum
- Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
- Philadelphia Museum of Art
- Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
- Art Institute of Chicago
- Carnegie Museum of Art
- Indianapolis Museum of Art
- Portland Art Museum, Oregon
- Cleveland Museum of Art
- University of Michigan Museum of Art
- Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art
- Kanagawa Prefectural Museum of Art
- Art Gallery of Greater Victoria
- Art Gallery of New South Wales
- Tōkyō Museum of Japanese Art
- The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

As the world awaits further news about this extraordinary discovery, Saito's influence continues to echo across generations, bridging East and West through the universal language of art.

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