

# Lynn Matsuoka

## Interview by Mark Buckton

Renowned sumo artist Lynn Matsuoka rarely gives full on interviews so here at SFM we count ourselves particularly lucky to be able to bring you an interview with a self made, global leader in sumo art. In the following pages she answers a few questions posed by SFM's Editor-in-Chief, Mark Buckton.

[Lynn Matsuoka photo bonanza](#)

**MB:** Lynn, how did you first get into sumo art?

**LM:** I was captivated by the strong visual images the first time I saw sumo, which was on TV shortly after arriving in Japan in 1973. I immediately found some connections to the inner-sanctum of the sumo world, as I wanted to be 'up close and personal' so to speak, so I could capture this beauty, as I saw it, on paper.

It is interesting that, though this world is quite difficult to access, everyone I spoke to was able to lead me further into the world of sumo, almost as if it was a path I was destined to follow.

I had recent drawings of street musicians in San Francisco and New Orleans, which I showed as samples of my reportage artwork to an important man in sumo at the time. (Thereafter) I was immediately invited to the top 3 stables of that era.

**MB:** Do you have a family background in art?

**LM:** My great-uncle was a famed jewelry designer in Europe and the US, and my father has designed everything from (one of the first) TV sets, to intricate diagnostic equipment, but I don't know if that

relates.

**MB:** What first brought you to Japan?

**LM:** I was invited to be the "New York Fashion Illustrator" on the "Japanese Team" of a major Japanese department store.

**MB:** Please tell us about your first exposure to sumo.

see them sweat, so I could capture those feelings in my drawings. That is when I reached out to people who could help me get closer to the rikishi.

**MB:** Did you have any favorites – as both an artist and a fan - in the early days? How about today?

**LM:** In the early days I really had no favorites. My purpose then, as



*Yokozuna Chiyonofuji and ozeki Wakashimazu sitting among their deshi in the dressing room - Tokyo basho, 1983 - Lynn Matsuoka*

**LM:** As mentioned, I first saw sumo on TV. The next day I went to the Kuramae Kokugikan in Tokyo and tried to get close to the dohyo during (the) makunouchi (bouts). I probably don't have to tell you how that went. I got pushed back in no uncertain terms, by an oyakata (that years later became a friend). So, I took a seat farther back on the first floor, but that just wasn't good enough- I wanted to hear them breathe and

now was to capture their power, grace and beauty in the context of their adherence to the deep Japanese tradition, in drawings and paintings. Any one of them, including the yobidashi and the gyoji, the judges and degata, make great subjects. As I made friends with all these people over the years, I still was objective with my subjects. They are all objects of art to me. (Over time), as my understanding at all levels of this

world developed, I began to see more clearly and understand the people I was involved with. Naturally there were people I did not like too much as well as some I really loved. Literally and figuratively speaking, some were incredibly smart and clever. But, in my work, I have always remained impartial. I have beautiful drawings of people I don't like. The art (aspect) of it is what is important to me.

**MB:** I understand you didn't limit yourself to just sumo while in Japan; that Kabuki was another of your interests? Can you tell us a little bit about this side of your life?

**LM:** (As with sumo) I wanted to work with Kabuki from the beginning but couldn't take the time from my sumo involvement for many years. Then the time came and it was possible to arrange proper blocks of time to dedicate to Kabuki. In 1988 I decided not to go on the domestic jungyo around Japan as I had for many years, but rather to go to kabuki every day for weeks at a time to work there. Also, I had 2 little boys then, who were old enough to come with me to the dressing rooms of the top Kabuki

actors.

Some of the actors also had young sons and my own boys would play with them until it was time for make-up. (The top stars' sons' debut as early as age 2 or 3 in Kabuki). (My boys) Toranosuke and Ryunosuke rolled around the tatami mats for years with actors like (the present Nakamura siblings – sons of world famous Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII) Kantaro and Shichinosuke, while I worked daily with their father. Both my boys studied Nihon Buyo (dance) with Nakamura Shikan's daughter for years (Nakamura Shikan XVII is a Japanese Living National Treasure and father-in-law of Kanzaburo). My younger son actually wanted to become a Kabuki actor, which would have necessitated his being adopted by a top actor. There was much discussion about this.

I worked with Kabuki for about 18 years, as I lived there full time, and plan to work with them again. My collection of work in this field is highly regarded by such people as a former curator of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, but I have rarely exhibited it to date. Some of the collection along with some sumo artwork was even

stolen in the year 2000 – a point now on record with Interpol and the FBI.

**MB:** Do you see any artistic similarities in the sumo / kabuki comparison beyond the obvious 'both being integral parts of Japanese culture?'

**LM:** I would have to think about that for awhile. I used to see both groups as extraordinarily dedicated to their craft and performance and in keeping with strict, traditional ways. The sumo rikishi of today, however, are falling short in this dedication.

Also, the kabuki world is highly educated in the history of their theater and the Japanese classics of course, as they perform them daily. Their (form of) dance and every other movement (they undertake) are controlled and stylized, requiring total self control and peak conditioning. They must coordinate movement with the stylized and perfect voicing applied to their lines. Between acts, they often sit in their dressing room studying lines for the following month's play. They go to dancing lessons at one in the morning, as there is no time during the day / evening to fit it in. I just don't know how they do it but if the rikishi worked with half this dedication, they would blow us away!

**MB:** Japanese sumo art over the centuries has tended to exaggerate the physical form whereas you have stuck to what you / we see. How do you feel when viewing old ukiyo-e or similar forms of local art?

**LM:** I am a reportage artist, which means I usually draw/report what I see. My painting and portraiture is quite literal. For me, appreciating the nishiki-e or ukiyo-e style was an acquired taste. I do appreciate it now for what it is and have collected some beautiful pieces. (That said), I



*Ozeki kanji - one of Lynn's favorite subjects - Musoyama in the montage painting series - Lynn Matsuoka*

don't much appreciate some of the work I see in which the artist has simply copied the style, even a given figure and just put what approximates to a current popular (face) on the work. I have done some paintings influenced by nishiki-e, but I draw them myself and make them original.

**MB:** Do you have a favorite Japanese sumo artist?

**LM:** Not anyone specifically, but I love Nihonga paintings and have always wanted to study this art. I would like to do my sumo and kabuki images in that style.

**MB:** What about 'artist in general' – alive / dead, Japanese / other?

**LM:** I love Edward Hopper and Maxfield Parrish, as well as some not too well known but brilliant landscape artists. I grew up devouring books on the work of Daumier and Lautrec.

A graceful, lilting line that accurately defines the contours of a body or a face is a thrill to see. This is what I work to achieve. Once, in the early 70's, sitting beside the dohyo on a very rural jungyo, freezing even in double layers of gloves and woolen shawls, I captured ozeki Asahikuni on the dohyo, sitting in the sonkyo position in a simple, single line. It was so perfect a line, so perfectly captured him that I felt I could die right there and it would be OK, I had achieved nirvana.

**MB:** In the modern crop of rikishi who do you enjoy putting to paper?

**LM:** Again, almost everyone is a good subject, but I favor the more classic forms, and gravitate toward the Japanese face though the Mongolian rikishi are truly beautiful as well. I do love Hakuho's look and am working on a painting of him at the moment. I know and like Kotooshu and have done some nice drawings of him

but he doesn't have the classic sumo look.

(Past) great (subjects) were Terao, Asanowaka, Mainoumi and Takanohana. More recent favorite objects and subjects of sumo art have been Kaio, Chiyotaikai and Tochiozan. I also have done many drawings of the yobidashi, as I love their costume and the young guys' punk hairstyles, which is an interesting contrast to the kimono.

**MB:** Any of the lower rankers?

**LM:** I sit at practice almost every day when in Japan and draw many of the young, lower ranked rikishi. I can't name all of them now, as I used to (be able to) when I lived there - we know each other and talk, and look at the drawings, and names are never needed. So I don't learn them.

**MB:** And the yokozuna pair of Asashoryu and Hakuho?



*Asashoryu - Lynn Matsuoka*

**LM:** Both Yokozuna are 'powerfully beautiful' and I have done studies of both. Asashoryu's form really looks most like the classic rikishi.

**MB:** In interviewing one so

experienced in things sumo it would be remiss of me to avoid the 'Asa Q' – Will Asashoryu be back or will his much publicized mental woes force him out of the game?

**LM:** I could speak on this for hours, from the experiences I have shared with other rikishi over the years. But, to make it short, I am truly afraid, barring intervention from the outside - IF it is allowed... - that he will not be able to get the help he needs to put all this in perspective AND, at the same time, keep up his physical condition. If he lets his physical stature go it may become impossible to return at the yokozuna level. And, as you know, there is no falling down the ranks for a yokozuna - it is the door. I hope to see him in September... I just hope he is still there (in Japan).

**MB:** (if to return) As an artist, would you then view him differently?

**LM:** As an athlete, it would be interesting to follow what he does next. As a subject of my sumo portfolio, it would be over.

**MB:** On a more personal note, you are often asked what it was like to be married to a Japanese rikishi - one ranked in the makunouchi division.

**LM:** There is too much to say here about that. It is covered in detail over several chapters in my book. Briefly though, we were together for quite a while before it was public knowledge and before actually getting married. That was an opportunity for me to hear all the gossip about "that girl who does sumo drawings" as everyone called me in the 70's. Tora (Iwatora-zeki) would bring home all kinds of stories, like guys talking at the mahjong games about "that girl" being seen going into love hotels with various rikishi. Tora knew that we were home together at night and it was

a lie but he would say nothing, as no one knew then that he even knew me. The secrecy was hard, and frustrating, but also a lot of fun. I also learned a great deal about the workings of the sumo world. Gradually things that I had been observing, I learned to understand.

We divorced after being together over 12 years, and we are good friends now. We live in the same area, close to our 2 sons.

**MB:** Finally, any projects in the works you can share with us? Exhibitions here in Japan or over in the US?

**LM:** Well, the show at the Robyn Buntin Gallery in Honolulu ended last month but they still show a collection of my sumo work.

Another major gallery is now working on putting together a collection of my sumo and Kabuki work, along with some hula pieces and a new subject I have been working on in N.Y. for the past year - the Tattooed Nudes. Parts of these collections can be seen on the websites.



*Sosa - this was painted for the MLB All Stars game program one year ago*

Also, I have just been invited to China to work with the Olympic athletes, and will try to get away for the sumo tournaments. And, to cap it all, a filmmaker has just asked me to collaborate on a feature length movie of the story of

my life in Japan although that is still under discussion.

In terms of literature I am still looking for the right publisher for my 2 books on sumo, and one other - unrelated to the sport.

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