

Keynote speech

Narratives of Japanese Art in European and North American Museums

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Profile

Kenji Yoshida is the Director-General at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, specializing in museum-anthropology. He has been carrying out fieldwork on the expressive culture and cultural heritage of Southern Africa especially in Zambia. He has also been organizing various exhibitions on art and culture by networking art museums and cultural museums. His major exhibitions and publications include:

Discovering of Cultures (Bunka no Hakken, in Japanese) 1999, *Image of Other Cultures* (ed. with John Mack exhibition catalogue) 1997, *Self & Other: Portraits from Asia and Europe* (ed. with Brian Durrans, exhibition catalogue) 2008, *Power of Images: National Museum of Ethnology Collection* (exhibition catalogue) 2014.

The two 'Japanese arts'

When visiting museum and galleries across the world, visitors will often see Japanese art represented by netsuke toggles, swords and ukiyo-e. For Japanese people, though, ukiyo-e only occupies one small corner of Japanese art history, with netsuke hardly mentioned at all.

After Japanese decorative art objects won high acclaim at the Vienna World Exposition of 1873 (Meiji 6), Japan actively promoted the export of these objects for encouragement of a new industry. The import of Western clothing to Japan had led to a decrease in domestic demand for netsuke and inro medicine cases, while the spread of printed materials had rendered ukiyo-e obsolete to a certain extent. As a result, these objects and artifacts were exported overseas in bulk and attracted Europeans. In 1868 (Keio 4), the Meiji government passed the *Ordinance Separating Shinto from Buddhism*. This led to the anti-Buddhist movement, called 'Haibutsu Kishaku'. Buddhist statues and paintings were removed from Buddhist temples across Japan, with many eventually finding their way overseas. Since then, many exhibitions of Japanese art have been organized in the West based on the collections consisted of such objects that have found their way into overseas collections in these ways.

In contrast, the Japanese art history familiar to many Japanese people has its roots in *Histoire de L'Art du Japon* (The History of Art of Japan), a work prepared by the Imperial Museum (Tokyo National Museum's predecessor) to coincide with the exhibition of Japanese artworks at the Paris International Exhibition of 1900 (Meiji 33). This book explained transition of art of Imperial country over the years. With a focus on art related to the Emperor, the book explored the 'treasures' associated with rulers from each period. These artworks in turn were arranged by period, starting from the arrival of Buddhism on Japan's shores and continuing on through the Asuka, Nara, Heian (Konin/Fujiwara), Kamakura, Muromachi, Momoyama and Edo periods. These categories are still

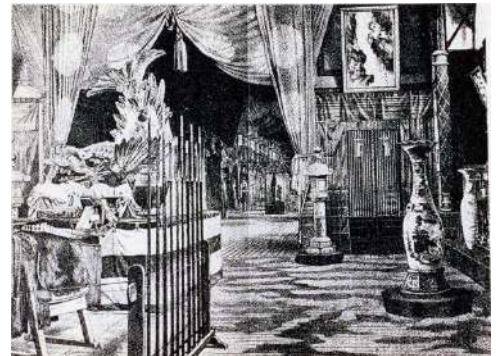


Photo 1: The display of Japanese objects at the Vienna World's Exposition, 1873 (Meiji 6) (from 1897's Proceedings of the Austria Exhibition)

used in more-or-less the same way in the domestic study of Japanese art history today. Japanese people are now used to viewing Japanese art history through the prism of different periods and representative works of each period, but it would be fair to say this conventional view was invented back then in 1900.

So now we have a contrast. On the one hand, we have an image of Japanese art that was built up and presented to the outside world as a means to foster the bulk export of decorative art objects as a new industry. On the other hand, we have a domestic view of Japanese art history that centers around 'treasures of imperial country.' It seems only natural that these two viewpoints would diverge sharply over time.

Japanese art collections in European and American museums

We tend to think that Japanese artworks are handled in the same way as Western artworks and kept in the art museums, but this is not always the case. In particular, 'ancient' artworks created before the Edo period are rarely held by art museums that house Western art. Rather, they are often found in museums or in art museums that specialize in Asian art. In large part, this reflects how the West views itself as different from other cultures. At the same time, in contrast to the catch-all word 'museum,' in Japan we have long used the words '*bijutsukan*' and '*hakubutsukan*' to separate institutions that mainly handled art from those that mainly handled historical artifacts, so perhaps we have taken this distinction for granted and foster the distinction even further.

Exhibitions of Japanese art in Western museums

Ignoring regular exhibits for a moment, if we look at temporary exhibitions of Japanese artwork, we can see that exhibitions of collections of Japanese art housed in the West have indeed tended to focus on ukiyo-e, painting, calligraphy and exported ceramics.

However, the Western view of Japanese art also shifted, particularly after the Second World War, thanks to exhibitions of Japanese 'treasures' held in the West with support from governmental entities, such as the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Japan Foundation. For example, the *Exhibition of Japanese Paintings and Sculpture* toured the Metropolitan Museum of Art and other institutions in the US in 1953. This was mainly organized by Japan's Committee for the Protection of Cultural Properties. It featured 92 masterpieces (including National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties) of Japanese art dating from the 6th to the 19th century, including 77 paintings and 14 examples of sculpture and decorative art objects. This exhibition made more American people, who had tended to regard Japanese art as merely an offshoot of Chinese art, had become aware of the independent development of Japanese art. Exhibitions of important Japanese cultural properties like this would not be possible without the involvement of the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Japan Foundation. In other words, the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Japan Foundation have played a major role in shifting or guiding Western views of Japanese art closer to the view prevailing in Japan.

Two of the most popular overseas exhibitions in recent years were 2013's *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* and 2019's *Manga*, both held at the British Museum. Neither themes had been the main subject of 'art exhibitions' in Japan before then. However, exhibitions of *shunga* were subsequently held at the Eisei Bunko Museum in Tokyo and the Hosomi Museum in Kyoto.

Looking back, in addition to *shunga* and manga, there have been other examples of artists or artworks that have been rediscovered and reappraised in Japan in light of a growing interest overseas. In other words, the views of people living in Japan have been changed by overseas exhibitions on several occasions. The exhibitions of different cultures and works of those held at museums are nothing but where such mutual

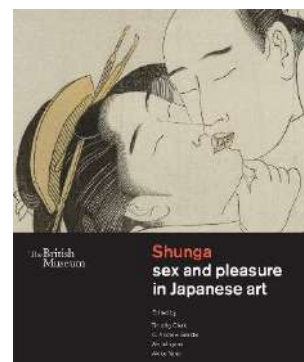


Photo 2: Front page of the *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* catalogue (The British Museum, 2013)

interaction can take place.