

Curating special exhibitions of Japanese arts for an overseas audience

Dr. Khanh Trinh

Curator of Japanese and Korean Art, Museum Rietberg Zurich, Switzerland



Profile

Khanh Trinh earned her doctorate in East Asian Art History from the University of Zurich. Her research interests focus on the social and cultural context of picture-making in eighteenth- and nineteenth century Japan. Prior to her appointment as Curator for Japanese and Korean art at the Museum Rietberg Zurich in 2015, she worked as a curator and lecturer in Japanese art history in Berlin, Tokyo and Sydney. She has curated a number of special exhibitions and contributed as editor and author to their respective publications, including *Rosetsu – Ferocious Brush* (2018); *Theatre of Dreams, Theatre of Play – Nō and Kyōgen in Japan* (2014); *Kamisaka Sekka: Dawn of Modern Japanese Design* (2012); *Hymn to Beauty: The Art of Utamaro* (2010). Presently, she is preparing an exhibition on Japanese narrative arts in European collections.

Regardless their respective areas of expertise and the institution they work for, one of the most challenging but also rewarding tasks that curators encounter in their job is “creating narratives.” In this sense, I fully agree with the one sentence in the symposium’s abstract, which says: “curators create exhibitions that are influenced by their respective cultures and environments.”

Speaking from my own experience as a curator who had worked for different types of museums in diverse continents, I have observed time and again that the narrative of a show is the result of a long process of negotiating and navigating the interests of diverse stakeholders. When the doors to an exhibition are finally opened to the public, the show they are about to see usually no longer reflect the initial ideas or concept of the curator. For there are always a number of factors at play that have a decisive impact on the curatorial approach. To make my point, I would like to present two case studies:

- 1) “Kamisaka Sekka – Dawn of Modern Japanese Design”, on show at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney in 2012, and
- 2) “Rosetsu – Ferocious Brush”, which took place at the Museum Rietberg, Zurich in 2018.

For overseas museums with an encyclopedic collection such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales or the Museum Rietberg, Asian art in general or Japanese art in particular is but a small department in a multi-discipline, multi-cultural organization. Country-specific exhibitions are not the order of the day but can only take place every 4-5 years. As for exhibitions of Japanese art, even though they tend to enjoy high popularity, they are also notorious as being logistically complex and exceedingly costly. Museums exercise therefore extreme caution in choosing a project that can potentially attract large crowd of visitors and consequently warrant at least a financial break-even.

Proposals for topical themes such as Manga and Anime, the art of the samurai, the world of Japanese ghosts or retrospectives of globally acclaimed contemporary artists like Murakami Takashi, Yayoi Kusama, or famous pre-modern masters such as Hokusai and Hiroshige would have no problems to pass the scrutiny of the exhibition committees. However, in order to obtain the museum board's approval to realize monographic surveys on non-mainstream artists like Rosetsu and Sekka, who – though successful in their own time and fairly recognized in the art historical discourse of their own country – are largely unknown outside of Japan, curators have to be persistent and provide strong selling points. In addition, a certain degree of flexibility in

modifying the initial exhibition concept to match budgetary framework, existing display conditions and, most importantly, the taste of the local audience is required.

In concrete terms, for the show on Kamisaka Sekka at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, we have decided to emphasize the design aspect of the artist's work. Sekka was presented as an universal artist who believed that his training in painting served the ultimate aim of producing high quality designs for the decoration of functional objects used in everyday life. In his quest of establishing a distinctive language for modern Japanese design, Sekka found in the abstract, decorative aesthetics of the Rinpa tradition a major source of inspiration.

Exhibitions on Kamisaka Sekka which were shown in Japan and the United States and were forerunners of the Sydney show did not mention the Rinpa tradition as Sekka's artistic heritage since they imply that the informed audience would possess the knowledge to understand the link. For Australian visitors, however, who were less exposed to traditional Japanese art, it was deemed necessary to provide the art historical context of Sekka's stylistic development. Works by Edo period Rinpa artists were therefore included to form the introductory chapter of the show.

Moreover, in response to the interest of the local audience, the connection to contemporary practices was added as another essential component for the exhibition narrative. The third part of the exhibition focused on Rinpa's legacy on contemporary art and design. This section featured the contemporary Japanese artists Yamaguchi Ai and Yamamoto Tarō, the Kyoto-based kimono makers Takao Hiromu and Takao Kenzō, as well as the Japanese-born, Sydney-based fashion designer Akira Isogawa.

The tripartite structure of the narrative is reflected in the organization of the exhibition space. For the works of pre-modern Rinpa artists and of Kamisaka Sekka, which are made of sensitive materials and hence required a conventional presentation in showcases with reduced lighting, the galleries for the display of the permanent Japanese and Chinese collections were used. A few temporary architectural features such as the title wall as well as some semi-solid partitions that mimicked the appearance of the shoji were added to indicate the change from a permanent display to a special exhibition and to evoke the atmosphere of a Japanese interior.

The contemporary works, on the other hand, were displayed in the so-called Upper Asian Gallery. Designed by the renowned Australian architect Richard Johnson, this space was conceived as a 'white cube' that could be modified and newly arranged each time according to the content of a temporary exhibition. By keeping the interventions to the existing structures minimal, the architect designed only low plinths in the shape of origami paper strips on which the contemporary art works were installed. This presentation mode underlined the contemporary flair of the objects and created an interesting contrast to the more "traditional" part of the exhibition on floor below.

The seeds for the exhibition "Rosetsu – Ferocious Brush" were sown in 2015 following the news of a planned complete renovation of the Ōkyo-Rosetsukan at the Zen temple Muryōji in Kushimoto, which houses Rosetsu's *opus magnum*, the set of thirty-two sliding panels produced during his sojourn in the area in 1796-97. The refurbishment of the temple's museum ignited thoughts of an overseas exhibition during the numerous discussions between Reverend Hachida Shōgen, Head Priest of Muryōji and Director of the Ōkyo-Rosetsukan at the time, and Dr. Matthew McKelway, Professor of Japanese Art at Columbia University.

After having approached a number of museums in the United States without receiving a positive response, in 2016, Dr. McKelway proposed the exhibition to the Museum Rietberg in Zurich, an institution with a track record of successful monographic surveys on Indian, Chinese and Japanese painters such as Nainsukh of Guler, Luo Ping, Hasegawa Tōhaku or Gibon Sengai.

In contrast to Sydney, for "Rosetsu" we could rely on the fact that the core audience of the Museum Rietberg are used to exhibitions featuring the work of one single artist as well as to Asian traditional painting, and thus could maintain the concept of a straightforward monographic show. Besides organizing it as the first comprehensive survey on Rosetsu ever shown outside of Japan, we introduced the artist by taking viewers on a journey through Rosetsu's own travels and into his fantastic imagination. Furthermore, by focusing solely on Rosetsu's paintings, the exhibition offered a rare opportunity to explore the worlds of this unique artist and to re-evaluate the preconceived notions of eccentricity, realism, and abstraction in pre-modern Japanese art.

Translating this narrative into the physical space of the 1,000 sqm. large underground main exhibition hall of the Museum Rietberg, designed as a “black box” by the architects Adolf Krischanitz and Alfred Grazioli in 2007, we have organized the works in a loose chronological order in six chapters. Each bears the name of the location where Rosetsu was active at a certain phase of his short but prolific career.

The heart of the exhibition was the re-creation of the layout of the *fusuma* paintings at Muryōji. Conceived as the highlight "art object" within the exhibit, this installation presented an unprecedented opportunity for the audience to view and examine the paintings in their original architectural context. Arranged along the four outer walls, the other sections of the exhibition complemented the works from Muryōji. They offered key works from museums and collections in Japan, Europe and the United States to trace the phases of Rosetsu's life as he pursued his livelihood in Kyoto, Wakayama, Nara, and Hiroshima.

While similar in the basic concept – namely that of re-telling the artistic development of an artist – “Kamisaka Sekka – Dawn of Modern Japanese Design” and “Rosetsu – Ferocious Brush” offered different narratives which were constructed taking into consideration the local museum practices and the interest of the respective target audience. In the case of "Sekka", the interest for a hitherto complete unknown artist could be engendered by emphasizing the design aspect and extending the focus from the work of one artist to explore an entire artistic tradition that is still relevant in today's Japan and abroad.

For “Rosetsu”, the Museum Rietberg built on its audience's knowledge of and predilection for Japanese pre-modern painting and hence could concentrate solely on the work of one single artist. Beyond an aesthetic experience, the faithful reconstruction of the Muryōji's Main Hall provided visitors with an insight in Rosetsu's creative process, furthering hence a deeper understanding and appreciation of his singular artistic position.