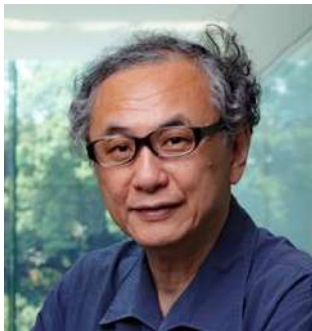


## Keynote Speech

# True grit to absorb other cultures

## Mr. Toyojiro Hida

Director, Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum, Japan



### Profile

Toyoyiro Hida was born in Tokyo in 1950. From 1979 he worked for the Crafts Gallery of the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, and became the President and Dean of Akita University of Art in 2007. Since 2016, he has been the Director of the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum, where he conducts research on decorative arts to illuminate the cultural structures of modern and contemporary Japan. Major exhibitions he organized include *A New Century in European Design* (1997) and *The Domain of the Medium* (1994). He is also the author of *Meiji Period Design Sketches for Export Crafts: A History of Kiriukosho Gwaishia, the First Exporting Manufacturer in Japan* (1987), *The Domain of Craft/Art: "Kogei" as Sentiments Related to Daily Life Sealed Deep Within* (2006), and many other publications.

### 1. Outline

The title of this year's symposium is "Creating a Global Museum Community through the Arts of Japan." This theme has taken on an important meaning during the current global pandemic. Museums across the world are having their activities curtailed in similar ways by COVID-19. We need to face these difficult times together like a community.

My biggest fear is of the current situation leading to a kind of introversion when it comes to art. With international restrictions on movement lasting for several months now, our gaze has turned inwards when it comes to art appreciation. Art is once again becoming parochial and confined to within our respective borders.

In Japan, for example, we have seen several exhibitions and projects that search for the roots of Japanese art in Japan's unique circumstances. In order to avoid treading down the path of "Japanese Art First," we must find the "true grit" to absorb other cultures while not bowing to pressure to conform with the times or with domestic trends.

This kind of situation also occurred in Japan around 100 years ago. The art world at that time was buffeted by two conflicting trends, namely the "inculcation of Western art" and "the self-containment of Japanese art." During this time, several painters studying in Paris began to create works based on subjects from classical Northeast-Asian art. Yasui Sotaro used the European medium of oil paint to depict vessels from the Cizhou

kilns that had been unearthed in modern China, for example. He was convinced that the roots of artistic inspiration lay in the absorption of other cultures.

Museums are charged with conserving cultural heritage. In principle, this mission was already susceptible to the siren calls of nationalism. And then along came COVID-19. Yet now is the time for museums to show true grit by forging international ties while courageously introducing histories and artworks created through the absorption of different cultures. I hope we can share such experiences in this area using the latest digital technology.

## 2. Contents

### “Japanese art” and the art of other cultures

Many people have become more inward-looking during the COVID-19 crisis as they are required to spend more time at home. However, I warn myself not to cling too tightly to illusory notions of “Japan” and “Japanese” art. The roots of “Japanese” art cannot be uncovered by delving solely into the history of Japan. Rather, they were formed through a mutual interaction with other cultures that was transmitted to this archipelago. These other cultures provided the components that created “Japanese” art and they also have the power to expose how our concept of “Japanese” art is a modern myth.

### Japan: A country with an “imported art”

Japan is a country with an “imported art.” For two thousand years, art from China, the Korean peninsula and Western Europe was imported into Japan and “transplanted” into Japanese culture. Within each area, though, art from the center tends to trickle down to the regions to be “consumed” as regional art. This was the case with Japan too. Japan’s importation of overseas art was perhaps too disorderly to be termed a “transplantation.” Rather, you could say it simply occurred as a result of Japanese people consuming the art of other cultures.



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### Compiling a history of “Japanese art”

In the 19th century, though, scholars began to conduct surveys of ancient artworks within Japan and they linked these artworks together to create a history of “Japanese art.” Japanese people began to believe that they had neither transplanted foreign art wholesale along with its cultural background nor consumed this art in a haphazard manner. Rather, they believed they had selectively “digested” this art and made it Japanese. This thinking created a shared illusion of a uniquely “Japanese aesthetic” that acted as a kind of filter when selecting which foreign art to digest and assimilate.

True grit to absorb other cultures

The 1920s saw the emergence of several artists who challenged this way of thinking. They knew this notion of “Japanese art” was a political construct created to unify Japan as a nation state. They found this state-manufactured “Japanese aesthetic” stifling. However, history then took an interesting turn. These artists began to use “foreign art” as a means to criticize the notion of a Japanese aesthetic. They utilized this “foreign art” in novel ways. I call this the “true grit to absorb other cultures.”