

Presentation 1

Presenting Japanese Art in Cross-cultural Milieux at the Seattle Asian Art Museum

Dr. Xiaojin Wu

Curator of Japanese and Korean Art, Seattle Art Museum, USA



Profile

Xiaojin Wu received her PhD in Japanese art history from Princeton University. Dr. Wu currently serves as Atsuhiko & Ina Goodwin Tateuchi Foundation curator of Japanese and Korean art at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) and oversees the Museum's renowned collection of Japanese art as well as its notable holding in Korean art. She has organized several memorable exhibitions at SAM, and devoted most of her energy over the last couple of years to the transformation of the Seattle Asian Art Museum, which reopened in February 2020 after a 2-year renovation. In 2019, in recognition of her work in promoting Japanese art and culture, the Nakasone Peace Institute awarded her a Nakasone Yasuhiro Award.

Presentation

The Seattle Asian Art Museum (SAAM), originally the home of the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) and currently one of SAM's three sites, reopened in February 2020 after a 2-year transformative renovation. As the architects were working to update the building while preserving the 1933 art deco features, the curators also delved into a similar question: how should we reconceptualize our narrative of Asian art for a 21st-century museum? After many discussions with colleagues and local community members, we decided that we should embrace the complexity of Asia, its history, geography and people, and highlight the connections of Asian cultures without overgeneralizing them. With that goal in mind, we took a cross-cultural thematic approach in our collection gallery installation: each gallery presents works from across Asia, often in clusters of meaningful comparisons and contrasts; and each gallery is organized around a theme, one that is central to Asian culture and tradition. In so doing, we torn down the boundaries of both geography and chronology. The collection galleries are in a symmetrical layout. This feature of the physical space led us to two broad frameworks: the south galleries feature religious art, and the north galleries focus more on the material world.

New Meanings of Masterpieces in New Contexts

SAM's Japanese collection has about 3400 works, not very large in quantity, but it includes a fair number of top-quality objects that are across all time periods and mediums. The masterpieces have been on view at various exhibitions, showcasing the history of Japanese art in its specific cultural context. This presentation

shares how these masterpieces are currently presented in a broader context of Asian art.

Titled “Spiritual Journeys,” one gallery presents objects of different Asian religions—Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Shinto—to show the vast range of types of religious art across Asia. The display, however, is not organized by religion, but by common themes such as guardians and guides, heaven and hell. One section is about Buddha’s life. The group of stone, metal and ivory sculptures from China, Japan, Korea, India, and Thailand show crucial moments of historical Buddha Shakyamuni’s life. The sculpture of Prince Shotoku at age two also stands in this section. Shotoku’s biography has many parallels to that of Buddha’s. By placing Shotoku in this section, we intended to have the visitors to understand Shotoku’s important role in Buddhism in Japan.



Installation view of Boundless: Stories of Asian Art, 2020, Seattle Asian Art Museum.

Text and image is a major theme in Asian art, so we organized two galleries around this topic: one gallery in the south wing features the interplay of text and image in religious art, and another gallery in the north wing focuses on poetry, calligraphy, and painting, the three art forms that are most highly regarded in East Asia and the Islamic world. In the North gallery, examples of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Islamic calligraphy are displayed in close proximity to demonstrate the wide range of calligraphy styles. In the center of the gallery displayed another beloved masterpiece in the Seattle collection, the Poem Scroll with Deer. It is a collaboration between two masters Tawaraya Sotatsu and Hon’ami Koetsu. Sotatsu’s deer frolic along with poems from the classic anthology Shin Kokinshu, brushed by Koetsu in the fluid “scattered writing” calligraphy style. It’s a perfect example of poetry, calligraphy, and painting, the three highly regarded art forms in Asia.

A Nihonga screen by Tsuji Kako is featured in the gallery titled “Picturing Nature.” In Tsuji Kako’s own words, this screen expresses a “pure, boundless state of mind like the ocean and waves.” The horizon line is placed unusually high, creating a special visual sense of recession when the viewer looks at it at a distance. When the visitor approaches the screen from the doorway, they would feel as if the waves draw them into the picture. It’s no doubt this Nihonga screen visually is very compelling, but it is not easy to explain to American audience what Nihonga is. Its literal translation, Japanese painting, doesn’t tell us much at all. When the screen displayed next to two literati landscape paintings—one Chinese, and one Japanese by Yosa Buson, the characteristics of Nihonga stand out. We see the color palette, composition, brushwork, texture, light effect, all departed from the traditional landscape painting. And such comparisons help us explain what nihonga is

to the general public.

Interpretive Technology

By using technology to create a smartphone tour and interactives in the gallery, we were able to amplify the interpretive contents. For example, Seattle audience loves the Haniwa Warrior for its distinct look, and all the mystery around how it was used. We convey the art historical information through the brief label displayed inside the case, but there is more information we'd like to share than the label space allows. The general public is particularly interested in how this work came to Seattle. For that, we added a story through the smartphone tour. When the QR code is scanned, a webpage about collecting will share the story about how the Haniwa Warrior at the Tokyo National Museum inspired SAM's founder Richard Fuller to acquire the Seattle one.

In the gallery called "Divine Bodies," we organized a section about mudra. Mudras are essential to the understanding of the meaning of the sculpture, but it is not easy to explain in a few words how to pose the mudra. Our in-house team created an interactive program, where the visitor can match the mudra and learn about the mudra's meaning. This kind of active learning works well with our audience who doesn't have deep knowledge about Japanese or Asian art in general, but are eager to learn.

Evolving Concept of Asian Art

The concept of "Asian art" is ever evolving. Presented in the collection galleries are primarily historical works, but we added a few strategic interventions of contemporary art to help us connect the past with the present. We also made a concerted effort to include Asian-American art in our presentation, so as to expand the scope of Asian art in an American museum. For the inaugural installation, a site-specific work by an Asian-American artist, Kenzan Tsutakawa-Chinn, is prominently featured at the central space of the museum. Tsutakawa-Chinn, as the name suggests, is a third-generation Japanese and Chinese American artist. He created a light sculpture that takes a shape of a canopy, with each unit in a form of a hashtag, or a cross pattern that is often seen in Japanese ikat textile. The light sculpture visually and metaphorically connects to the Black Sun, a sculpture in front of the museum by another Japanese-American artist, Isamu Noguchi.

Talk Session 1

Dr. Xiaojin Wu

Mr. Goto Hisashi (Senior Curator, Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan)

Goto (G): Thank you for your engaging presentation. It was very interesting to hear about the extremely innovative and engaging ways in which you utilize your museum's rich and varied collection to introduce the major themes of Asian art. We had a chance to view your collection at my museum around ten years ago

with the staging of an exhibition entitled *Luminous Jewels: Masterpieces of Asian Art from the Seattle Art Museum*. It was an honor for me to help organize that exhibition. Even Japanese visitors were surprised to see just how many amazing artworks were on display. It was one of the most highly-acclaimed exhibitions we have ever held. Your presentation featured photos of some of the artworks that had so moved me back then. However, your photos presented these works in a variety of different contexts. This made me aware of some captivating aspects that I hadn't noticed before. I realized once again that the way an object is viewed changes significantly according to the display, the meaning attached to it, and the other objects placed around it.

My first question concerns the way you decide upon themes and new perspectives for each exhibition room. I would like to know how you choose these themes. At our museum we also try to find ways to set themes in a manner that transcends time and place, but it is quite hard. Do you think about suitable themes based on the composition of your collection? Or do you choose themes related to Asian art first and then see which objects from your rich collection would fit? Or do you use another method? I hope you can tell us some details about your process.

Xiaojin (X): I have also been asked by curators in the US about how we choose our themes. Simply put, our themes are decided based on the contents of our collections and ideas discussed by our curators. For our recent exhibitions, for example, three curators in charge of Asian art selected some representative works from our collection. They then printed out photos of each object until they had several hundred photos. At the same time, they compiled a list of some of the central themes of Asian art. These themes were written and the photos posted on the wall of our largest exhibition room when it was empty before the recent renewal. The curators then looked for commonalities between the objects. The photos were shifted from one theme to another, with each theme changing depending on the artworks included. It was like putting together a 3D puzzle while considering an overarching narrative. This was how we planned the themes for each exhibition room. We now have around 380 objects on display in our 13 regular exhibition rooms. These represent two thirds of the objects originally selected. There are many artworks that don't fit the themes in the end.

G: Our museum's displays are broadly divided into ancient and modern art, with the two sections displaying around 300 objects in total, so your figure of around 380 objects is a good reference point.

So to paraphrase, you select some key objects and then write a list of possible themes, with the objects allocated to one of the themes. You then work out how to display these objects in the exhibition spaces.

X: It is quite a long process.

G: I feel exhausted just thinking about the work involved! Thank you.

I think it's great how you prepare these kinds of challenging themes for your regular exhibitions, but do you plan a route for visitors to follow to view the objects in a particular order? Or do you let visitors wander around freely and visit the rooms in any order they please?

X : In Japan, if there are not clear instructions, visitors might not know which route to follow. In the US, even if we set a route, most visitors tend not to follow it.

G: That's true.

X: As a countermeasure during the pandemic, supermarkets and so on have clearly set out routes to encourage customers to travel in one direction, but these are usually ignored. We have at least five entrances to the exhibition rooms at our museum. This is so visitors can choose their own route. This is one of the things we consider when planning a display. In other words, each exhibition room has its own separate theme, so it doesn't matter which entrance you use.

G: I see. So when you talked about an order in your presentation, you didn't mean you have a particular order you want objects to be viewed in. Rather, you are happy for visitors to view the objects in any order they so choose. Visitors do not have to see everything – they are free to see some displays on one day and maybe some other displays the next time they visit.

X: Exactly.

G: The situation is completely different at our museum. Our rooms are divided into ancient art and modern art. When visitors come, they often ask what they should see first or what route they should follow. Of course, we tell them they can start anywhere, but we do have some kind of route to follow. However, the spaces at the national museums are arranged in a way that makes it easy for people to visit at any time and start from any room. I think our museum also needs to consider ways to facilitate this kind of free appreciation.

I now want to talk about rotating exhibits. From a conservation standpoint, ancient artworks need to be rotated periodically. How do you rotate exhibits within a given theme? For example, *Calligraphy of Poems from the Shinkokin wakashu on Paper Decorated with Deer* by Tawaraya Sotatsu and Hon'ami Koetsu is a long scroll, so you can show different parts at different times, but when the time comes to store this artwork away again, it must be hard to decide which artwork should replace it. How do you plan these kinds of rotations?

X: As with other US art museums, as a general rule we only display fragile objects like handscrolls or hanging scrolls for six months at a time before storing them away again for two to three years. Rotations are essential, so we are planning the next rotations now. Take the *Calligraphy of Poems from the Shinkokin wakashu on Paper Decorated with Deer*, for example. This is displayed in an exhibition room called "Image and Painting," so the next artwork should also have some connection to poetry, painting and calligraphy. We are currently planning to replace it with the *Illustrated Scroll of the Tale of Genji*. As with the planning mentioned earlier, this process will involve the three curators getting their heads together and deciding which artwork to display next.

G: So you are already at the planning stage, but from the very beginning you planned the themes with the idea of maintaining thematic consistency even after the objects are rotated. That's wonderful.

X: In one room, we consider the relation between religious texts and stories. The displays in this room cannot be rotated often, so we probably change these after two rotations.

G: You can also change themes or run new themes in different rooms to make the fullest use of the works in your collection, right?

The impact of COVID-19 will also become a major theme going forward. We closed our museum for two months during the first outbreak, but we then re-opened while carrying out various countermeasures. There are no major disruptions right now. However, exhibition organizers are in a tricky situation because while they want to plan exhibitions that attract many people, it would be problematic if many people did end up visiting. Your museum had to close not long after reopening following a renewal. Finally, I would like to ask you about the countermeasures you are considering for when you reopen again.

X: We finally opened our doors again after the renewal finished in February last year. Many people visited and we had very high hopes, but we then had to close in March and we still don't know when people will be able to visit again.

G: Have you still no idea when you can reopen?

X: Maybe around April at the earliest. The governor of Washington state has ordered all museums, galleries and zoos to stay closed this spring. We are planning the next themed exhibitions now. We will need to ensure that the regular exhibitions and the special exhibitions don't get too crowded, so we might impose a limit of 200–300 visitors a day.

G: I see. So you will probably reopen when it gets a little warmer and the COVID-19 situation has calmed down a little. I am really looking forward to visiting again as soon as I can, so I hope you can reopen safely and get back to normal without any problems.

X: Thank you.

G: I feel a strong affinity with your museum and I look forward to sharing information and ideas with you going forward. Thank you.

X: Thank you.