

## Presentation 4

# Plum Blossoms Bloom Beautifully after Enduring the Snow – Tokyo National Museum’s Special Exhibitions during the Pandemic

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#### Profile

Inokuma Kaneki graduated from Kwansei Gakuin University Graduate School with an M.A. in the History of Decorative Arts. Before attaining his current position, he worked as Assistant Curator at the Kyushu National Museum and Tokyo National Museum, and as Senior Cultural Properties Specialist at the Agency for Cultural Affairs. His publications include *A Material Cultural History of the Old Japanese Imperial Court* (Chuokoron Bijutsu Shuppan, 2017) and *Annual Rituals in the Illustrated Records of Court Ceremonies* (Tokyo National Museum, 2018). His recent research involves a comparative inspection of the material culture (palaces, furniture, and attire) used in courts across East Asia (Japan, China, South Korea, Vietnam, and the Ryukyu islands) during the early modern period.

#### Presentation

2020 was essentially the year of COVID-19. It was a tough year for the entire world. We had already expected 2020 to be a tough year for Tokyo National Museum (hereinafter, “TNM.”) though. It was supposed to be the year of the Olympics and Paralympics, so TNM had made various plans to accommodate the expected inflow of Japanese and foreign tourists to Tokyo. In total, we had prepared 14 special exhibitions for fiscal 2020 (Japan’s fiscal year runs from April to March). However, ten of these were cancelled or postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Japan recorded its first COVID-19 case on January 15, 2020. TNM took a number of measures as the virus spread, such as providing antiseptic solutions and displaying signs in Japanese, English, Chinese and Korean asking people to wear masks. Events such as gallery talks and lectures were also cancelled and displays with interactive “hands-on” components were also suspended. On February 26, the Japanese prime minister called for all sports and cultural events to be cancelled or postponed for a two-week period. TNM’s special exhibition “Izumo and Yamato: The Birth of Ancient Japan” was subsequently ended ten days earlier than planned, with TNM closing temporarily from February 27. On March 24, it was announced that the Olympics and Paralympics would be postponed until 2021. A state of emergency was then declared in Tokyo and six other metropolitan areas and prefectures on April 7 before being rolled out across the entire country

on April 16. Though not as strict as the lockdowns seen in Europe and the US, the state of emergency required people to practice self-restraint and refrain from any unnecessary journeys outside the home.

During TNM's temporary closure, web meetings were held to discuss the staging of upcoming special exhibitions. Special exhibitions are held with wide-ranging support from within and without the museum, so the agreement of all these supporters was essential for any decisions about suspensions or cancellations. Even though we agreed not to open the exhibitions on the originally-planned dates, opinion was then split about whether to opt for cancellations or postponements, so it was difficult to reach a consensus. Many attendees also said that if the start dates of the exhibitions were pushed back, the end dates should be pushed back too in order to maintain the same number of exhibition days. However, shifting the exhibition periods would have caused several problems. For example, we had received permission to display loaned objects for the periods of the special exhibitions, so we wouldn't be able to unilaterally shift the loan periods without consulting the owners of these objects first. As such, we would need to negotiate changing the loan period for every object. Furthermore, even if the exhibition periods were pushed back, TNM had a number of other exhibitions lined up from 2020 onwards, so we would also need to change the dates of all subsequent exhibitions. In some cases, object loan periods had already been fixed for these future exhibitions too, so any postponements would require years of adjustment going forward. It felt like trying to fit all the pieces together in a complex puzzle. To make matters worse, we didn't know how long the temporary closure would last, with discussions taking place while we analyzed each new piece of breaking news.

The state of emergency was lifted on May 25. After preparing measures to deal with COVID-19, TNM opened its regular exhibitions again on June 2, 96 days after it first closed on February 27. This marked the longest time TNM had been closed since the war. Our COVID-19 countermeasures could be divided into two categories: action by museum staff and requests for visitors. Examples of the former include conducting temperature checks, disinfecting the museum, ensuring adequate ventilation, and ensuring there were no closed spaces, crowded places or close contact within the museum. As for the latter, people with symptoms of illness were asked not to visit the museum, while visitors were requested to wear masks, use alcohol disinfectant, allow each other adequate space to view the exhibits, and refrain from talking, for example.

The venue was then set up for the special exhibition "KIMONO" and all the exhibits were gathered together, apart from a few loan items from the United States. This exhibition traced the history of the kimono



Presentation 4 screenshot

from medieval times to the present day. The exhibition had been set to go at the time of its postponement. The exhibition's curators now contacted the owners of each loaned object again and with their kind agreement the exhibition was finally held over June 30–August 23, two months later than originally planned (April 14–June 7). In order to avoid any close contact, a cap was set on the number of people who could enter each hour. Visitors were also required to book time slots beforehand over the internet and they were encouraged to limit their time in the exhibition to 90 minutes. Furthermore, in recent years the museum has prepared a photography corner in the exhibition space where visitors could snap photos to post on Twitter and so on, but this was also closed to prevent gatherings of people. At the same time, TNM sent out video clips introducing the contents of the exhibition. The resumption of special exhibitions taught me just how much people enjoy appreciating actual artworks and art spaces. Exhibition halls are places to appreciate art, but I realized they also function as social spaces where people can intermingle with others with similar tastes.

COVID-19 has led to several changes in the way we organize special exhibitions. The photography corners and hands-on displays were devised to bring people close to the artworks, so although they are closed for the time being, I hope they will open again at some point. The ways of restricting the number of visitors and so on could be improved, but I think these initiatives have provided a relaxed environment for visitors to appreciate art. Meanwhile, I believe the dispatch of video clips actually serves to rouse interest in seeing the objects in real life. I hope the measures devised during these times of adversity are not merely seen as imperfect or truncated versions of measures employed in normal times. Rather, I hope they lead to new methods that will make the appreciation of art even more relaxing and enjoyable once this crisis passes.

## Talk Session 4

**Mr. Inokuma Kaneki**

**Ms. Sanekata Yoko (Head, Curatorial Board, Sen-Oku Hakukokan Museum, Japan)**

Sanekata (S): One year ago, the human race encountered an unforeseen threat in the form of COVID-19. The pandemic subsequently swept the globe and we have all been struggling since to find ways to deal with the situation. Today's talk examined the impact on special exhibitions, the core of TNM's activities. Mr. Inokuma talked in detail about the initial response, the various adjustments made along the way, the tough decisions that had to be made, and the plans that had to be changed. It was a hard listen at times. A lot of thought and effort went into planning how to transport and display fragile precious objects to show them to many people in Tokyo at special exhibitions such as "Passing on Cultural Heritage: Buddhist Murals and Sculptures of Horyuji." Details of the exhibitions had already been released through various media, but in the end the exhibitions had to be cancelled and the objects sent back before any members of the public had a chance to view them. It was very sad to hear about this. The curators and everyone connected to the exhibitions had worked so hard to ensure these objects could be viewed by many people. It must have been such a blow when the exhibitions were cancelled. I was reminded again that this kind of harsh experience has occurred all over

the world, not just in Japan.

I work at a mid-sized municipal art museum called the Sen-Oku Hakukokan Museum. We have several exhibition rooms, but our collection of Japanese art is mainly displayed in a snug little room around 300 square meters in size. Our displays predominantly feature artworks passed down through the Sumitomo family. Last year, we had to temporarily close for two months. The special exhibition scheduled for this time was postponed indefinitely owing to difficulties in rearranging things with the owners of loaned objects. Instead, we reopened and extended the term of an exhibition of artworks from our own collection. This is how we managed to get by. Though not in great numbers, visitors finally returned when we opened our doors again after two months. It left a deep impression on me when I saw how visitors were now able to appreciate and talk about each artwork at their own leisurely pace.

It was also a chance for me to look again at these familiar objects and see them in a new light. It made me realize once more just how precious our collection is. Nowadays, countless exhibitions are held in Japan and across the world. This may have led us to take encounters with art for granted, but the pandemic experience has reminded us just how special and irreplaceable these encounters actually are. This is perhaps one of the things the COVID-19 crisis has taught us. The comments made about TNM's "Zipangu" exhibition made me realize how art and exotic objects must have appeared during the era when Japan was closed off to the world.

There is a lot I would like to ask you, but I will limit myself to three questions. As you mentioned, the COVID-19 crisis has forced us to make systemic changes and I believe this had led to many realizations.

I would like to ask first about exhibition planning. Do you think the structure or direction of exhibitions will change in any way after the COVID-19 crisis comes to an end? I would like to ask about special exhibitions in particular. Special exhibitions provide valuable opportunities to display precious objects from Japan and around the world under one unified concept. However, TNM also has a huge collection of its own objects and loaned works. The recent "Zipangu" exhibition was a captivating example of an exhibition reformatted to include only objects from TNM's collection. Several people at TNM have mentioned how there are number of fascinating objects in your collection that lie dormant and unstudied. Did you view this exhibition as chance to shine a new light on your collection? I realize there are many issues to discuss, but could you talk briefly about these topics?

Inokuma (I): Thank you. It seems Sen-Oku Hakukokan Museum has faced a similar situation to TNM. I talked about special exhibitions, but the difficulties of trying to reorganize many things is a universal experience not limited to special exhibitions at TNM. I discussed some specific matters, but overall I believe all museums have faced similar circumstances and hardships.

As for your question, the study and research of our collection is carried out under the framework of our

regular exhibitions, though it is sometimes carried out in conjunction with special exhibitions. The work of researchers is often incorporated into small exhibitions. These can become opportunities to introduce new knowledge about our collection. Some researchers have been using the COVID-19 situation as a time to concentrate on research and write papers. In the near future, the fruits of these labors will probably appear within the framework of special exhibitions.

My special exhibitions often feature loaned works. As I discussed earlier, the details of these loans are often arranged years in advance, so it is very difficult to change course suddenly. I think this will become a common theme of discussions from here on. We were recently unable to return some loaned objects within the originally-agreed timeframe. Of course, these objects were looked after carefully and kept safe in the meantime. We also explained the situation to the owners and gained their understanding. Nonetheless, the fact we were unable to fulfil our obligations as planned made me realize that we never know what might happen, so we need to consider things more carefully when borrowing works from overseas or from within Japan.

S: As you mentioned, the results of research are often introduced in the form of exhibitions. When it comes to PR activities aimed at the general public, the spotlight tends to fall on special exhibitions, but I hope other thematic exhibitions and so on also end up attracting the attention of the public going forward. I also look forward to reading the research papers that emerge from here on.

I would like to ask about museum visitors now. When the pandemic is over, we will be faced with what some call a “new normal.” Do you think we will see any changes in the way people appreciate art, for example? And how should museums act? TNM is facing a lot of restrictions at present. Hands-on exhibitions and gallery talks have been suspended, for example, while TNM’s army of volunteers are no longer able to help out. However, I think the reservation system has been a boon for the general public. In the past, people had to form long queues and wait for a while to get into big exhibitions, but these days people are able to get into exhibitions relatively easily just by going to the small trouble of making a reservation.

A further point concerns talking within exhibitions. When I visited exhibitions overseas in the past, it was always wonderful to see people visiting with children, friends or partners and talking passionately about the artworks. In Japan, though, visitors tend to worry about disturbing other people, particularly now with the spread of COVID-19, so there has been a tendency to remain quiet. I know we need to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but how do you think these trends will develop after the pandemic comes to an end?

I: I feel the same way. I always feel awful when I see people queuing in long lines to see popular exhibitions or artworks during hot, cold or rainy days. This kind of situation has eased off a lot with the introduction of a system for booking specific times to visit. This also makes the exhibition experience itself a little more pleasant. However, if we introduce a reservation system, this will set limits on how many people can visit at

one time, so the number of visitors will be capped. We need to consider this kind of thing while thinking about what can be done to make exhibition spaces pleasant and attractive to more people.

As for talking within exhibitions, this is a tricky issue. As I mentioned it earlier, I tended to believe that exhibitions were places where people encounter art. Many visitors also probably thought the same way. However, without really realizing it, people also visit exhibitions to be surrounded by others with similar interests. Even if you go to an exhibition alone, you know you are amongst people with similar passions. Though I never set out to eavesdrop on people's conversations, sometimes I hear someone discussing their impressions of an artwork. This sometimes makes me think that perhaps I have overlooked something, with their comments prompting me to take another look at the artwork in question. I love seeing our visitors talking together. It makes me realize what a worthwhile role we play. And when its one the exhibitions I've helped plan, my ears tend to prick up like Dumbo's! It is partly because I am interested in hearing people's opinions about something I was involved with. Of course, speaking really loudly is not good, but I hope the COVID-19 experience provides us with a chance to think about the role exhibitions play in building social relationships.

S: If you think about it, the same things apply to today's theme of Japanese art. Of course, exhibitions of Japanese art are public events designed to gather many people together in one place, but exhibitions are also designed sometimes to bring people close to the artworks in an intimate setting, as epitomized by exhibitions related to the tea ceremony. There have been three other presentations today. They all made me think about how good it would be to use digital tools to fuse the virtual and real and abolish distances.

I: I agree.

S: Thank you for introducing us to so many interesting examples today. I hope we can all look forward to embarking upon new activities while sharing our concerns and thoughts. Thank you.

I: Thank you all for today.