

Meeting of Japanese Art Specialists

February 10, 2023

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Overview

This year's meeting was held in conjunction with the Tokyo National Museum (TNM)'s 150th anniversary celebrations. The meeting began with a discussion on how academic and other international exchanges between TNM and museums outside of Japan could be expanded. Participants also exchanged opinions on diversity and inclusion, which are major topics at museums across the world, and discussed how to present Japanese art and culture from diverse perspectives.

Location: Held online

Chaired and Moderated by Matsushima Masato (Supervisor of Research, Tokyo National Museum)

Participants: North America: 14; Europe: 14; Asia/Oceania: 3; Japan: 28

Outline

This year's program was limited to an online meeting and an online excursion. The annual symposium was postponed because of other events held in conjunction with TNM's 150th anniversary. The participants joined the meeting remotely from different time zones, which meant that the time was limited, but the meeting was productive and thought-provoking, nonetheless. There were two discussion topics, each introduced in a three-minute presentation.

First Topic: Tokyo National Museum's 150th Anniversary and Future International Exchange

Introduced by Yanagi Ei (Head of International Relations, Tokyo National Museum)

The Tokyo National Museum has established productive relationships with museums outside of Japan through international exhibitions and other projects. TNM received many congratulatory messages from these museums for its 150th anniversary ceremony, many of which expressed high expectations for future cooperation and exchange.

TNM and the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage established the International Exchange Program for Curators of Japanese Art in order to build a strong network of curators of Japanese art through symposiums, meetings, workshops, and other events. During this year's meeting, we explored further possibilities for academic exchange between TNM and museums abroad, and asked participants to share their expectations for TNM.

Participants suggested the following:

- Explore possibilities for collaborative international project, including joint research projects.
- Resume exchange programs that were suspended due to the pandemic.
- Hold art-handling workshops in Japan.
- Create more opportunities for international cooperation, such as international exhibitions, to promote understanding of Japanese art and culture.
- Deepen exchange through face-to-face meetings.

Second Topic: Diversity and Inclusion and Its Impact on Curatorial Work

Introduced by Anne Nishimura Morse (William and Helen Pounds Senior Curator of Japanese Art, Museum of Fine Arts Boston)

In her presentation, Dr. Morse outlined a campaign that was implemented at the MFA Boston to promote diversity and inclusion. The campaign, revealed to the public in the summer of 2022, was built on efforts that had begun over four years earlier. During an early phase, the staff and trustees of the museum developed a strategy for promoting inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility. Dr. Morse defined these four terms as follows:

- Diversity: Honoring differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and age
- Equity: Ensuring access and opportunities for all, particularly the underrepresented
- Inclusion: Welcoming people of diverse backgrounds
- Accessibility: Creating an accessible environment for the physically challenged

Promoting inclusivity in museums has been discussed at the MFA and many other institutions through the following strategies:

- Decolonizing the museum and expanding perspectives beyond those of the dominant cultural group
- Dissolving the canon and no longer privileging works of art by the “old masters”
- Presenting a greater diversity of art and artists
- Including indigenous voices to ensure that indigenous people participate in the curation of their own narratives
- Collaborating with community members in a way that makes the curator a team member rather than the most authoritative voice
- Supporting a new generation of students from diverse backgrounds to pursue careers in museums

Lastly, Dr. Morse noted a number of challenges and questions that the promotion of

diversity and inclusion has posed.

- What will be the role of the curator of Japanese art in today's museum?
- In the context of US museums, how can Asian American art, which is different from Asian art, be presented to the public?
- What can curators do to ensure continued interest in earlier Japanese art when contemporary art is viewed as being more relevant to new audiences?
- What types of social issues can curators address?

These are some of the topics that were discussed during the open discussion that followed the presentation:

- Internships and related hiring and funding issues
- Diversifying staff who are involved in Japanese art
- The benefits of dissolving the canon and diversifying the contents of exhibitions
- Steps that could be taken to promote inclusion at the Tokyo National Museum
- The difficulty of writing labels that are short yet accessible
- The value and popularity of exhibitions based strongly on art historical research