

Distinctive Yet Connected: Displaying Japanese Culture at the British Museum

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Profile

Akiko Yano joined the British Museum in 2015 as a Mitsubishi Corporation Curator, Japanese Collections, in the Department of Asia. She received a PhD in aesthetics (Japanese art history) from Keio University, Tokyo. Her research area is early-modern Japanese painting. Before joining the British Museum, she worked as a AHRB Research Assistant and Leverhulme Research Fellow at SOAS, University of London, and she co-curated and co-authored two special exhibitions at the British Museum and accompanying catalogues: *Kabuki Heroes on the Osaka Stage: 1780-1830* (2005) and *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* (2013). Her most recent curatorial team project was the renewal of the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries in 2018.

Introduction

I would firstly like to raise five questions related to today's theme. I would then like to make a comprehensive contribution to the discussion using examples of how Japanese culture is exhibited at the British Museum.

1. When reconsidering 'Orientalism' and 'Occidentalism' from a modern perspective, what happens if we view this issue from the perspective of how Japanese people understand and view Japanese culture or how they want this culture to be perceived, for example, or if we view this issue as a problem of bidirectional politics?
2. Japanese art history has been established based on the systemized knowledge framework of Western civilization, but can we reframe this history based on the actual state of Japanese or East-Asian art?
3. In the age of globalization, with the relation between culture, borders and nationalities becoming more fluid, more Japanese artists are viewing Japan from an outside perspective, with more non-Japanese artists also creating works based on traditional Japanese 'idioms.' How will 'Japanese art' be defined in the future?
4. Identity has become the source of much debate nowadays. The idea of 'the correct propagation of Japanese culture' has become somewhat antiquated, yet the idea still holds weight in Japan. What is the goal of this concept for Japanese people?
5. The day may be coming when people question the *raison d'être* of cultural institutions like museums. If a museum collection contain artifacts from across the world, are these objects owned by the museum or are they just in the museum's custody. What is the social mission of our economically-squeezed museums?

The British Museum's Japanese collection and exhibitions

Around 6 million people visit the British Museum each year. Less than 25% of these come from the UK. There is a limitless diversity in the relation between exhibits and visitors. Our museum currently stages regular exhibitions in Room 3 and we also stage three types of special exhibitions

The foundation of the British Museum's Japanese Collection was established at the end of the 19th century, but the first Japanese gallery opened in 1990. The regular exhibition rooms have now become the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries. The exhibition format was renewed in 2006, with the regular exhibition now using objects to present an overview of Japanese history from prehistoric times to the present day. Rather than simply displaying the objects in chronological order, the exhibition displays historical artifacts next to modern objects based on certain key themes. This helps people to understand Japanese culture as a living entity. The curation and translation departments discuss the information panels and try to come up with the most effective transmission method. The entire collection can also be viewed from the British Museum's 'Collection Online.'

Room 3 (The Asahi Shimbun Display) focuses on one topic at a time. It often features experimental displays. A recent display used the Brexit issue as the backdrop to a discussion about how Europe is seen through Asian eyes. Another exhibition in 2017 looked at the woodblock print techniques behind ukiyo-e while also explaining the concept of 'mirate' allusions. There have also been hugely popular manga exhibitions in 2009 and 2015, with another special manga exhibition scheduled for early summer 2019.

A recent trend has seen special exhibitions held to display the results of externally-funded international joint-research projects. These include the 'Kabuki Heroes on the Osaka Stage,' 'Shunga' and 'Hokusai' exhibitions. These were all the result of joint research by institutions and researchers from Japan, the UK and other regions. Several years of research can result in challenging special exhibitions. 2013's 'Shunga' exhibition met with some vague unease on the Japanese side with regards to 'the understanding of Japanese culture,' but it ended up being a huge success. It also received a lot of enthusiastic praise within the UK for how it tackled the universal theme of sex from a new angle.

Conclusion

The British Museum is a 'global museum for the whole world.' We operate based on an awareness that our collection belongs to the whole of mankind. From here on, we need to work hard to promote an understanding of the history of the objects in our collection; to diversify the range of narrative perspectives; and to establish effective communication mechanisms between the exhibition curators and visitors. Museums will continue to have a reason for existing if they can play a social role supporting the ideal development of the human intellect while acting as a 'crossroads' and a 'forum' connecting the globe.