

Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Globalism: Japanese Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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Profile

Anne Nishimura Morse is a graduate of Radcliffe College. She received her Masters and Ph.D. degrees from Harvard University. During her thirty-five year tenure at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Dr. Morse has organized many critically acclaimed exhibitions both in the United States and Japan, including the recent *In the Wake: Japanese Photographers Respond to 3-11* and *Takashi Murakami: Lineage of Eccentrics, A Collaboration with Nobuo Tsuji and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*. She currently serves as the co-chair of the Arts Dialogue Committee for the Conference on Cultural and Educational Interchange (CULCON).

Since its founding in 1870 the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston has assumed the mission of an encyclopedic museum—collecting, preserving, and exhibiting art of all areas of the world from all time periods. Due to the breadth and importance of its holdings, from its first years the collections of Japanese art have been one of the Museum's cornerstones and the evolving interpretative presentations of these holdings have had a profound impact upon art historical discourse, both in the West and Japan.

Many of the interpretative models that the Museum of Fine Arts has promoted may now be critiqued historically as a succession of Orientalist and Occidental schemes. Although this forum has challenged institutions to move beyond these constructs of Orientalism and Occidentalism, such approaches remain deeply embedded in museum presentations of Japanese art across the globe, and even in Japan. When the Museum's doors officially opened in 1876 the exhibits, like those of many museums around the world, including the Tokyo National Museum, were arranged following the model of the South Kensington Museum (later renamed the Victorian and Albert Museum). Primacy was given to displays organized by materials and techniques so that the public could be instructed in design and thereby develop local industries. This decorative Orientalist framework constructed by Europeans and Americans looking for an idealized, pre-industrial organization of production, was equally promoted by Japanese governmental and commercial interests. As Japan had embarked upon its unprecedented campaign of modernization and westernization in the name of the newly enthroned Emperor Meiji, Japanese society as a whole was obliged to rethink its identity as mediated by their interpretations of the West. Thus, disentangling Western and on occasion Japanese presentations of Japanese art today from this Orientalist past is not an easy task.

By the 1880s MFA pioneers Edward Sylvester Morse, Ernest Francisco Fenollosa, and William Sturgis Bigelow were vigorous in their support of Japan as a modern industrialized country in the international arena and yet insistent that Westernization and modernization should not obliterate all that they found positive about traditional Japanese culture. Okakura Kakuzō, who came to the Museum of Fine Arts in 1904, positioned himself as the chief spokesman for an Occidental narrative. Okakura asserted that “the

point of view of the scholar in charge of Eastern works ought to be the right one, and that would be the point of view of the East. It would mean a familiarity and sympathy with Eastern philosophy, life, and aims.” Okakura emphasized his credentials by always donning kimono. He had his assistants practice *kyūdō* in the courtyard and offered instruction in ikebana. In this manner he stressed the “authenticity” of his point of view, yet at the same time reinforced the “exotic.”

The 2015 exhibition *Double Impact: The Art of Meiji Japan* at the Tokyo National University of Arts Museum, which was co-organized by a team of MFA and Japanese curators, provided a survey of the production of the Meiji era for both domestic and international audiences and examined the ways in which Japan and the West influenced each other. By casting a wide net and not eliminating categories of works created during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that heretofore had not been part of the established canon of Meiji-era art, the MFA and Japanese team was able to provide a better comprehension about the context for Orientalism and Occidentalism during that period—ideas that are fundamental to understanding it and developing ways to transcend the previous narratives.

A global approach to presentation of works of art is necessarily a collaborative one as we try to negotiate the inter-connections of the modern world and elucidate patterns of inspiration; no individual curator has perspective on the wide range of objects and cultural contexts necessary. The presentation of Japanese contemporary art often devolves into two different types of exhibitions—the local or traditional and the global. In European and American museums works in time-honored formats or techniques, such as ceramics and woodblock prints, are generally the domain of curators of Japanese art; those which have been produced for international galleries are often the domain of curators of contemporary art and photography. This type of bifurcated responsibility risks Orientalizing departments of Japanese art whereby they represent a pre-modern, romantic view of Japan reminiscent of what we have seen in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the same time the presentation of works in the international contemporary mode is often undertaken by curators with little knowledge of Japanese art or ability to read Japanese. Working with colleagues in other departments and disciplines has been helpful in ensuring a multivalent point of view. The 2015 exhibition at the MFA *In the Wake: Japanese Photographers Respond to 3-11* centered on powerful themes of time and memory and place and dislocation grounding in Japanese social and political issues—the purview of the Japanologists. However, the input of our photography curator ensured that the individual works in the exhibition were seen in the context of contemporary photographic discourse. Furthermore, presenting exhibitions of all different types ensures that the complexity of Japan is more apparent to museum visitors.

For those of us who are curators of Japanese art working in a global environment, we are always trying to educate our visitors about Japanese culture. Although none of us want to engage in presentations about samurai, geisha, cherry blossoms, and Mount Fuji that essentialize Japan, we do seek characterizations that can inform. The philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah has written often about the deleterious effects of essentialism: “Identities are associated with bad things, not just intellectual errors but moral disasters.” However, he has also stated: “We should remember they also can be the basis of useful things. . . And national identities, though they involve all kinds of misunderstandings, are also the basis of strands of solidarity that bring countries together to do difficult things.” However, although binary relationships, such as Orientalism and Occidentalism, are often convenient for polemic discussions, they do not encompass the complexities of cultural interactions, complexities that we as curators should constantly be negotiating and renegotiating.