

Meeting of Japanese Art Specialists

February 5 (Fri.), 2021
Online Meeting



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Purpose: This meeting was an opportunity for experienced curators of Japanese art from North America, Europe, and Japan to exchange information and discuss challenges pertaining to their work.

Venue: Held online

Chairperson: Mr. Kawano Kazutaka (Tokyo National Museum)

Facilitator: Ms. Kito Satomi (Tokyo National Museum)

Participants from North America

Dr. Laura Allen (Asian Art Museum of San Francisco)

Dr. Frank Feltens (Freer Gallery of Art)

Dr. Andreas Marks (Minneapolis Institute of Art)

Dr. Anne Nishimura Morse (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

Dr. Rhiannon Paget (The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Florida)

Dr. Aaron Rio (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Mr. Stephen Salel (Honolulu Museum of Art)

Dr. Sinéad Vilbar (The Cleveland Museum of Art)

Dr. Xiaojin Wu (Seattle Art Museum)

Participants from Europe

Dr. Rosina Buckland (The British Museum)

Mr. Menno Fitski (Rijksmuseum)

Dr. Daan Kok (National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden)

Dr. Mary Redfern (Chester Beatty)

Ms. Wibke Schrape (Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg)

Dr. Anna Savelyeva (The State Hermitage Museum)

Dr. Khanh Trinh (Museum Rietberg)

Dr. Ainura Yusupova (The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts)

Ms. Yamada Masami (Victoria & Albert Museum)

Participants from Japan

Mr. Kawano Kazutaka (Tokyo National Museum)

Ms. Kito Satomi (Tokyo National Museum)

Mr. Frank Witkam (Tokyo National Museum)

Ms. Melissa M. Rinne (Kyoto National Museum)

Ms. Mary Lewine (Nara National Museum)

Mr. Shirai Katsuya (Kyushu National Museum)

Ms. Emura Tomoko (Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)

Conference outline

The conference was held online this year due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The meeting was shorter than usual owing to the participation of people in several different time zones. However, with face-to-face meetings difficult due to COVID-19, the event provided a valuable opportunity to exchange information and build networks.

The conference examined two discussion topics. Each topic involved a 3-minute introduction followed by a discussion and exchange of information.

Discussion topic 1: Sustainability and Curatorial Work

Menno Fitski (Rijksmuseum)

Introduction

The Doughnut Model is a method of visualizing the state of the planet. It shows excesses and shortfalls when it comes to environmental problems and social issues. The goal is to get the overall shape as close to a doughnut as possible. The important idea is that the system is linked. The solution in one area may lead to problems in others, so we need to think about the health of the system as a whole.

Nitish Soundalgekar of the Rijksmuseum transformed this model for museum usage. Here we see the results for the Rijksmuseum. The department responsible for planning exhibitions is underperforming due to the large amount of trash produced and also because the tight schedule for exhibition rotations causes stress for a lot of people.

So how should we link this to curatorial work?

One way would be to rethink our local connections. We could invite local people and curators from other departments to participate in our curating while also exploring other museum collections nearby. This could shed new light on local collections, make more of these collections, and find new stories. By improving the use of our collections, we could find new appealing ways to connect to audiences.

Discussion points

- In terms of sustainability and the environment, exhibitions cause considerable damage because they involve a lot of transportation and they produce large amounts of waste.
- An explanation of the current situation in Japan regarding the re-use and recycling of materials: the Tokyo National Museum re-uses special exhibition display cases as much as possible, but not enough recycling is done owing to the need to set up and take down displays in a very short time.
- The pandemic has provided a great opportunity to reconsider the wisdom of holding many large exhibitions. Large exhibitions have been held frequently in order to make profit, but museums could produce displays that are more relevant for local audiences by investing in regular exhibitions.
- Exhibitions have been the major source of revenue, so museums need to rethink their business models.
- Examples of initiatives to improve sustainability: The Victoria and Albert Museum appointed a sustainability manager last year and it is actively engaging with sustainability issues. It has active discussions about

sustainability and it hopes to form policies related to the recycling of display cases and designs.

- Improving the social inclusivity of displays and providing museum staff with more job security are also important for sustainability.

Discussion topic 2:

Improvements made to museum websites/collection search engine for better accessibility.

Yamada Masami (The Victoria and Albert Museum [V&A])

Introduction

The digitization of museum collections has been ongoing for many years, but my interest is in new digitization policies and projects developed recently. While physical access to museums remains restricted due to the ongoing pandemic, online access to data about collections is becoming increasingly important. I would like to ask whether there been any recent discussion within your institutions about making museum websites or collection databases more accessible to users, and think about ways to improve the quality of existing online databases.

The V&A's current online database was originally launched in 2009. After more than 10 years, it looks rather dated. The main issue we identified was the difficulty of browsing our collections and finding related objects or discovering new objects.

The V&A's digital media department has been working on the development of a new search engine called "Explore the Collections." The new design and functions will make it much easier to navigate object searches. We are also introducing a new feature called "You May Also Like." This suggests other objects a user might like based on the object they are searching for.

Discussion points

- The V&A has a digital media team who regularly checks visitor numbers and the countries that people are accessing the website from, for example. More communication with this digital media team would help the curatorial department gain a deeper understanding of user needs while also helping to improve the online databases.
- We do not know whether users of websites or databases are managing to find what they are looking for.
- The data shows that the majority of users come to our websites to search our collections. This gives us a reason to improve our collection websites and increase the amount of content related to objects.
- Examples of initiatives to provide more information to users: Some museums have added blogs, short essays and videos about objects to their databases. Another museum transmits information about its collection using Instagram while telling people they can visit the museum's database to learn more about the objects.
- The pandemic has led to more consciousness in Japan about the need to put more multilingual content online in addition to panels and other content within galleries.

- A large number of databases and online content has been made available or will be made available in the future. The Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties is digitizing its collection of books, for example, while the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden and the Art Research Center at Ritsumeikan University are working on a joint project to release a database of Japanese cultural material.

Though only short, the conference played a very valuable role alongside the international symposium on January 30.

Discussions continued for around 30 minutes after the conference had formally ended, with the event providing an opportunity for specialists to engage in a free exchange of ideas, despite the restrictions imposed by COVID-19.