

**Fall 2023 Arts of Asia Lecture Series**  
**Views from the Other Side**  
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**Meiji Modern: Art and Industry**

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Urban transformation, boundless enthusiasm for new technologies, and rising geopolitical tensions: these circumstances defined Japan's Meiji era (1868–1912) as much as they describe our own. While the changes wrought upheaval and uncertainty, many people, including artists, saw the Meiji period as a time teeming with possibility. Against this backdrop, art emerged as one of Japan's most profitable industries and a singular means of representing the modern nation-state. Artists manipulated traditional mediums and materials to achieve dazzling effects unseen—and unimaginable—in previous epochs.

In Japan and abroad, Meiji art filled international expositions, domestic halls of industry, and private residences. While until recently Meiji art has been neglected or considered derivative, the global vogue for Japanese art during the late nineteenth century reminds us that modern art does not look the same in all places. Meiji art evolved in its own way and according to its own prerogatives in direct conversation with Euro-American trends, including Art Deco.

The so-called “Opening of Japan,” beginning with the arrival of the American Commodore Perry in Edo Harbor in 1853, also had profound implications for the Japanese economy. In addition to sweeping social change, a series of unequal trading treaties with Western nations decimated the economy of the fledgling modern nation state. Against this backdrop, art and the “industrial” or “applied” arts emerged as one of Japan's most important exports, in some years constituting roughly 10% of gross domestic product. A combination of inexpensive labor, displaced artisans (previously in the employ of warlords and samurai), and a wealth of precious materials such as gold and silver, resulted in works of striking complexity and laborious technique. These seminal artworks were often presented at international and domestic exhibitions, often in halls of industry. Given this, the study of these artworks presents a singular and seminal point of intersection between the realities of Meiji Japan – actual, material trade and economic exchange – with the imagined aspirations of the period – expressed in the subjects, size, and technical mastery of the artists of the Meiji Period.

When Americans first began collecting Meiji art, it was considered contemporary art. Many artists were still active and entered into dialogue with collectors, traveling to the United States to share their work, or welcoming foreign visitors to their studios in Japan. Additionally, just as aspects of modernity can be violent and ambivalent, the arts of Meiji Japan are both brilliant and dark. Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–5) initiated a doctrine of imperial expansion, and objects that buttressed the aggressive ideology of empire. Thus, far from limited to surface expression, the arts of Meiji are replete with the complexities and struggles of a rapidly industrializing nation.

**Key Terms / People:**

**Ōkuma Shigenobu** 1838-1922, the second Prime Minister of Japan and founder of Waseda University. Editor of the volume “Fifty Years of New Japan.” Ascended to the rank of Baron.

**Oyatoi Gaikokujin** literally “hired foreigners,” these were foreign employees of the Meiji government who served as advisors in the establishment of all manner of modern and industrial initiatives including the official mint, agricultural systems, plumbing and postal systems, art and music schools, forestry, prison management, and more.

**Edoardo Chiosso** 1833-1898, Italian oil painter who served as a foreign advisor to the Meiji government as an art instructor in Western-style painting at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. An accomplished draughtsman and engraver, he is also responsible for the official portrait of the Meiji Emperor.

**Emperor Meiji** 1852-1912, reigned from 1868-1912. “Meiji” is his posthumous name and also refers to his individual reign (hence: the Meiji Period, 1868-1912). His given name, Mutsuhito, would have been used during this lifetime. Similarly, in death the Empress Haruko is known as the Empress Shoken.

**Cloisonne Enamel / Shippō-yaki** imported to Japan from China and “rediscovered” during the Meiji period, this is a complicated process that involves the fusion of bent wires to a patinated metal base. These wires, bent into the desired design, are filled with a paste made of vitreous enamels (essentially ground glass) and water. The vessel is then fired several times over, with the cloisons (the “cells” of wire) increasingly filled with more and more paste. Finally, the surface is polished using a series of increasingly fine pumice-like stones, resulting in a mirror like finish. Cloisonne quickly became one of Japan’s signature export industries.

**Wireless Enameling / Musen** a Meiji period development, wireless cloisonne is identical to traditional cloisonne except the wires are not fully fused to the metal base, allowing them to be partially or even entirely removed after the application of the vitreous paste. This allows for partial blending of colors and allowed Meiji artists to achieve painterly effects, often directly modeled after Nihonga painters of the period such as Watanabe Seitei.

**Plique a Jour Enameling** Identical to wired enameling except the metallic base is not patinated and is typically made from copper. This therefore allows for the metallic base to be etched away using an acidic solution, resulting in a vessel of pure enamel which allows light to pass through it. This is ideal for lamp globes, for example. Additionally the metal core need not be entirely etched away, meaning only select elements become transparent, in a process known as “partial plique a jour.”

**Moriage** literally “piled” or “heaped,” this refers to the thick layering seen in Japanese painting and decorative arts. In painting, it is often achieved by using gofun, a pigment made of calcified oyster shell, which can be applied very thickly to achieve relief-like effects on paper or silk. During the Meiji Period, moriage enameling is invented: this process allows for enamel to burst forth beyond the surface of the cloisons for three-dimensional effects. Often using hidden or buried cloisons for support, these moriage portions are then carefully polished in the round.