

Arts of Asia Lecture Series Spring 2014
The Culture and Arts of Japan
Sponsored by The Society for Asian Art

**From Art as Technology to the Arts of Longing:
Paintings and Craft Objects in Meiji Japan**
Chelsea Foxwell • April 18, 2014

Periodization

Edo or Tokugawa period (1600-1868): the shogunal era; the early modern period

Meiji period (1868-1912)

Key dates

1850s: The famous Hundred Famous Views of Edo woodblock print series by Hiroshige (1797-1858) is issued.

1850s-60s: Certain powerful daimyo, such as the daimyo of Satsuma, experiment with imported camera equipment.

1850s-1860s: Unequal treaties are negotiated by the US and other countries at gunpoint to “open Japan” to trade and diplomacy with the Western powers.

1862: Japan is indirectly represented at the London International Exhibition by Britain, which now has a consulate in Japan.

1867: The Tokugawa government and the government of the Western domain of Satsuma each have exhibits at the Exposition Universelle in Paris.

1868: The Tokugawa shoguns’ govt. collapses; a coalition of former samurai establish the Westward-oriented Meiji government. They promise to abolish the old status system, to “seek knowledge throughout the world,” and decide all matters by “public discussion.”

1873: The Meiji government participates in the Vienna International Exhibition.

1889: The Meiji constitution is promulgated by the Emperor, defining the rights and obligations of Japanese imperial subjects and setting up a Diet of elected representatives.

1893: Japanese government impresses visitors with a full-size version of the Byōdōin Phoenix Hall (Ho-o-den) at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition.

1895: End of Sino-Japanese war; Qing China is forced to cede Taiwan to the Empire of Japan.

1910: Empire of Japan formally annexes Korea.

Key terms

yōga: “Western painting,” usually referring to oil painting (*abura-e* or *yūsaiga*)

nihonga: The word *nihonga* means simply “Japanese painting” but only began to be used in the 1870s. Initially its meaning was vague, but it soon came to denote painting in “existing [Japanese] materials” in contrast to newly

popular Western oil painting. As such, it represents a new way of thinking about what a (Japanese) painting is and for whom it is made.

bijutsu: The word for “fine art” that was first coined in 1872.

Japonisme: The taste for things Japanese in Europe and America from the 1860s onward. “Japanism.” This whimsical term was coined by the French critic Philippe Burty.

ukiyo-e: “Pictures of the floating world.” Refers to woodblock prints or paintings that depicted the world of transient pleasures (the theater, brothels, and teahouses) in the Edo period.

Before the 1870s, there was no single word to mean “Japanese painting,” just as there was no single word for “art” in the sense that we mean it today.

To say that an artist or group of artists were “influenced” by some other art or artist presumes a strange sort of passivity: Van Gogh, for example, was not just sitting around only to be suddenly “struck” or “influenced” by Japanese woodblock prints. We can replace the word “influenced” (or “inspired by”) with other, more active ways to explain the relationship. For example, Van Gogh admired the bright colors and unexpected vantage points of Japanese prints and incorporated them into his work.

Further reading

Berger, Klaus, *Japonisme in Western Painting from Whistler to Matisse*. Cambridge University Press 1992.

Bryson, Norman. “Westernizing Bodies: Women, Art, and Power in Meiji Yōga,” in *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field* (Honolulu, 2003): 89-118.

Conant, Ellen P., ed. *Challenging Past and Present: the Metamorphosis of Nineteenth-Century Japanese Art*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006.

Conant, Ellen P. and Thomas Rimer, with Steven Owyong. *Nihonga, Transcending the Past : Japanese-Style Painting, 1868-1968*. New York: Weatherhill, 1995.

Foxwell, Chelsea. “Merciful Mother Kannon and its Audiences.” *Art Bulletin* 2010.12.

Earle, Joe. *Splendors of Imperial Japan: Arts of the Meiji Period from the Khalili Collection*. London: Khalili Family Trust, 2002.

Meech, Julia and Gabriel P. Weisberg. *Japonisme Comes to America: The Japanese Impact on the Graphic Arts 1876-1925*. New York: Abrams, 1990.

Satō, Dōshin. *Modern Japanese Art and the Meiji State: The Politics of Beauty*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011.