

[Conference Report]

New Directions in Presenting Japanese Art - Reflections from "New Perspectives on Japanese Art I"

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The "New Perspectives on Japanese Art" seminar, held on December 7, 2023, at Leiden University, exemplifies efforts to challenge and rethink traditional narratives surrounding Japanese art and open up new pathways for sounder representation. Organized by the Heinz Kaempfer Fund and the International Institute for Asian Studies, the seminar aimed to demonstrate that the study of Japanese art is dynamic and integral to global discourse.

One of the major points that emerged during the seminar is the enduring impact of Orientalism on the presentation and perception of Japanese art. Orientalism, as articulated by Edward Said, is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident.'"¹ This distinction has been used by the West since the late 18th century to dominate, restructure, and assert authority over the "Orient." The orientalization of Asian societies not only neglects their significant contributions to shaping Europe but also oversimplifies the complex spatial and temporal realities inherent within these societies. Far from having disappeared, Orientalism is very much alive in the present, taking new forms often perpetuated and reinforced by cultural institutions. The difference in the discourse today is that "it is now a surplus of history rather than a historical lack that defines the state of non-European societies [...] the burden of the past marks a society as 'traditional,' which impedes its ascent to modernity."²

The perception of Japanese art in the global context has been dominated by what is considered "tra-

¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 10.

² Arif Dirlik, 'Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism', *History and Theory* 35, no. 4 (1996): 100.

ditional" art forms, such as *ukiyo-e*, tea ceremonies, and Zen gardens. The phenomenon of Japonisme in the late 19th and early 20th centuries further cemented the Western fascination with traditional Japanese aesthetics, leading to a lingering exoticism that still affects contemporary representations. Exhibitions organized today on Japan outside Japan still tend to reinforce such visions.

Mariko Murata (Kansai University, Osaka), in her keynote presentation "Museum Orientalism Revisited: Can We Truly Deconstruct the Exotic Gaze?" explored how Orientalism has been and is currently perpetrated by museums and cultural institutions, questioning the feasibility of fully deconstructing the exotic gaze applied to Japanese cultural artifacts. The deconstruction is made particularly complex due to the difficulty of making the Japanese public aware of their internalized Western gaze. Japanese art frequently risks being trapped between a "complicit exoticism," where Orientalism and self-Orientalism collaborate, influencing how Japanese art is perceived both within and outside Japan. Self-Orientalism sparked from Japan's strive to define and project its national identity, involving an active participation in exoticizing the country's own culture and presenting it in a stereotyped and oversimplified way.

These representations have a deep-rooted nature. The birth of Japanese art itself is inseparable from orientalizing discourses. Until the Meiji period, the term "bijutsu" did not exist, and new words needed to be introduced to translate the new ideas that spread around that time. Japan's first museum, established in 1882 (now the National Museum of Tokyo), perpetuated an orientalist gaze in the effort to create a distinctive Japanese identity for the newly born nation-state. Wakita Mio (Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna) with an intervention titled "On vision and display: Arts and culture in Meiji Japan" illustrated how Japanese souvenir photography from the Meiji era served as a pivotal tool in shaping perceptions of Japanese culture both domestically and abroad, demonstrating how images could be strategically employed to promote specific narratives of tradition, modernity, and cultural heritage. These images had an enduring impact on global perceptions of Japanese culture.

As Mariko Murata argued, Japanese art is a product of this complicit exoticism, and it is imperative to deconstruct the self-orientalist perspective to achieve true decolonization and eschew essentialization. What emerges is the absolute need for careful contextualization to guarantee a comprehensive understanding of Japanese art. In light of this, Luke Gartlan (University of St Andrews) and Daan Kok (Wereldmuseum Leiden), through their respective presentations "On the business and materials of nineteenth-century Japanese photography" and "How to frame a scroll painting: Changing attitudes in museum practice," provided examples of effective contextualization, highlighting its key role in achieving more precise representations. Enhanced contextualization of exhibited objects not only deepens our comprehension of historical periods but also facilitates the rediscovery of facets lost in their representations beyond Japan. How things have been displayed in the past has often resulted in a superficial and inaccurate display of artworks, generally ignoring the circumstances and conditions that brought about their emergence. Daan Kok's work at the Wereldmuseum Leiden exemplifies progressive approaches. By integrating historical research with contemporary conservation science, the museum has developed new protocols for the care and display of Japanese scrolls. This involves not only technical adjustments but also educational efforts to inform the public about the cultural significance and proper appreciation of these artworks. Past practices often risked damaging the scrolls and failed to respect their original context and purpose, integral to their aesthetic and cultural significance. Now, deeper studies and more attentive methods are opening up new horizons for

more culturally sensitive and technically sound methods of display. This shift is part of a broader movement towards decolonizing museum practices and honoring the integrity of non-Western art forms.

The display outside Japan, of exclusively certain images catering to a vaster audience, perpetrates what has often been defined as the 'myth of Japaneseness,' the result of actively selecting only specific aspects of a culture and essentializing them to create a sense of 'uniqueness' which does not necessarily reflect the rich diversities within a culture. Heritage is ultimately a matter of power and is often instrumentalized as a vehicle of ideological agendas. Appropriating the past has been common practice, especially with the emergence of the nineteenth-century concept of the nation-state. The way the past is visualized is the product of a continuous process of negotiation and rewriting that tries to make it as suitable as possible to the demands of the present. In the process, only certain desirable aspects are selected, while others are ignored and can get lost.³ Cultural essentialism homogenizes individual societies both spatially and temporally, ignoring differences and assigning them common characteristics. However, envisioning cultures as "wholes" de-socializes and de-historicizes societies.

The last illuminating intervention by Minna Valjakka (University of Helsinki), "Transcultural conjunctions: The politics of identifications in contemporary Japanese art" highlighted this aspect. Valjakka presented Japanese contemporary art as a field often overlooked in global contexts, emphasizing the pressures artists face to express their "Japaneseness" in Western art markets. Valjakka discussed the complexities of what it means to be a Japanese artist today, questioning whether there is a specific artistic or aesthetic sensibility that defines this identity. Contemporary Japanese artists often express a wide range of experiences and influences, diverging significantly from more stereotypical images of the 'far Orient.' However, much museum practice today tends to emphasize the aesthetic to nationalize Japanese objects. In contemporary Japanese art, artists sometimes unconsciously cater to the global market's expectations for "Japanese aesthetics," as such themes often find more acceptance in international markets compared to those that delve into contemporary social issues or more abstract expressions.

Nevertheless, some artists actively resist and challenge the reductionist representations of Japaneseness and offer significant counterexamples through their work. Valjakka examines this aspect through the practices of two contemporary artists based in the Netherlands—Nishiko (Kagoshima, 1981) and Miyuki Okuyama (Yamagata, 1973). Nishiko with "The Repairing Earthquake Project." (2011- 2018), speaks of the destruction brought about in the Tohoku region by the earthquake and tsunami of March 2011. After the calamity, Nishiko started collecting and repairing objects from the disaster site, each carrying the scars of the event. Through care, she investigated ways of healing. Her process involved not only physical repair but also emotional and historical restoration. The objects were given second life by finding new homes for them, hence preserving their stories and significance. The project culminated in 2018, amidst Japan's rapid reconstruction, which threatened to erase the disaster's traces. Nishiko has therefore extended her work until Tofino, Canada, where she gathered remnants washing ashore, highlighting the long-term ecological impacts of the tsunami. The artist's work resonates with themes of human tragedy, ecological crisis, and the relentless passage of time, urging a reflection on our shared future.

³ This has been widely discussed in Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006); Rodney Harrison, 'The Politics of Heritage', in *Understanding the Politics of Heritage*, vol. 5 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 154–96; David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country-Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).



Figure 1: Nishiko, 'Repairing Earthquake Project, object t#2011_4', 2012.
Picture: Yuhki Yamamoto, courtesy Nishiko



Figure 2: Nishiko, 'Repairing Earthquake Project', exhibition view Stroom, 2018.
Picture: Ayako Nishibori, courtesy Stroom Den Haag

Miyuki Okuyama, as an expatriate Japanese woman living in the Netherlands, employs documentary photography to explore the theme of fragmented identity and the complexities it brings about. In "Dear Japanese: Children of War" (2012-2017) she captures the stories of children born to Japanese soldiers and Dutch-Indonesian women during the Pacific War in Indonesia and now living in the Netherlands. These individuals embody the intricate interplay of pride, alienation, and guilt associated with their heritage. The subjects' direct gaze into the camera, challenges the viewer to see beyond appearances and grapple with the many emotional and historical layers that compose identity. Okuyama most recent work "Michinoku Homeward: Walking towards the Northeast" (2021), documents instead the artist's personal journey back to her home region in northeastern Japan, a decade after the catastrophic events of 2011. Walking 400 kilometers along an Edo period route, she reflects on the region's history, its destruction, and her connection to it. The journey captures a landscape and a way of life on the brink of disappearance.

Through the examination of Nishiko and Okuyama's varied experiences and artistic expressions, Minna Valjakka demonstrated how contemporary Japanese artists challenge simplistic views of cultural identity. Her analysis encourages a more nuanced understanding of modern Japanese art, one that surpasses the confines of both nationalism and "facile globalism" and advocates instead for a transcultural perspective. In light of this understanding, it can be argued that every culture is inherently hybrid, shaped by ongoing and often historically contingent interactions among diverse elements that constitute what we recognize as "cultures." These interactions continually reshape cultural expressions, highlighting the dynamic and transcultural evolution of societies. For example, as Gartlan emphasized in his examination of 19th-century Japanese photography, it is insufficient to regard this phenomenon merely as an imported practice adopted by Japan upon opening its borders after the extended *Sakoku* period. A thorough awareness of this period requires integrating factors such as advancements in photographic technology, the economic dynamics of the industry, and developments in chemical manufacturing. These elements collectively illuminate the complex conditions that fostered photography's emergence and evolution in Japan.



Miyuki Okuyama,
from the series 'Dear
Japanese | Children of
the War,' (2012-2017).
Picture: Courtesy of
Miyuki Okuyama



Miyuki Okuyama, from
the series 'Michinoku
Homeward: Walking
towards the Northeast"
(2021). Picture: Courtesy
of Miyuki Okuyama

The representation of Japanese art today necessitates improved contextualization to underscore the transcultural conditions that gave rise to specific art forms. As emphasized by Mariko Murata, museum Orientalism comprises three layers: the artworks themselves, their exhibition style, and the spatial context of display. Detailed attention to each layer is crucial for fostering accurate and comprehensive representations of Japanese art. Art institutions should invest in educational programs that contextualize contemporary Japanese art within its socio-political and historical frameworks, utilizing advancements in technology to aid this process. Additionally, embracing diverse curatorial practices is essential. Institutions should strive to incorporate a broader array of Japanese artworks that emphasize diversity and complexity rather than focusing solely on the familiar. It is imperative to avoid falling into the trap of cultural uniqueness, which can create artificial boundaries and lead to internal homogenization. While acclaimed artists like Takashi Murakami may cater to Western expectations with *hyper-Japanese aesthetics*, figures like Nishiko and Okuyama exemplify the unique and multifaceted experiences of Japanese artists based in the Netherlands, resisting easy categorization. Beyond promoting national identities, museums and art institutions should adopt a transcultural approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of cultures and the fluidity of artistic expression.

Initiatives such as the "New Perspectives on Japanese Art" seminar underscore the importance of ongoing dialogue and collaboration in achieving this goal. Through concerted efforts in curatorial practice, education, and cross-cultural exchange, we can ensure that contemporary Japanese art and artists receive the global recognition and equitable representation they deserve. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the broader public may not actively seek such multifaceted representations that are detached from identifiable Japanese aesthetics, which may hinder appreciation and acceptability. Essentially, it cannot be denied that there continues to be a strong preference among audiences for the enchanted and distant East, which stirs dreams of distant travels.

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