Toward the Modernity: Images of Self & Other in East Asian Art Competitions at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

MIURA Atsushi, Professor, University of Tokyo

The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum opened in the Hakata area of Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture, in 1999. In contrast to museums in Tokyo and Japan’s western urban areas near Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe, which feature works of Western and Japanese art, this art museum in Fukuoka was founded as the first museum dedicated to modern and contemporary Asian art. It is worth noting that since it opened, the museum has held Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale that focus on contemporary Asian art in addition to activities through permanent and special exhibitions and various art exchange programs.

In 2014, the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum held an interesting exhibition titled “Toward the Modernity: Images of Self & Other in East Asian Art Competitions.” The art works exhibited were also shown at the Fuchu Art Museum in Tokyo and the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art. This was an excellent project that sought to re-examine government-sponsored art competitions known as Kanten held in the first half of the twentieth century in Japan and Korea, Taiwan, and Northeast China (former Manchuria), three territories under Japanese colonial rule at that time. It also strove to re-examine modern art in these different Asian regions. It was an academic-oriented exhibition that aimed to reconsider the historical significance of East Asian art competitions by calmly and objectively looking back on art that had long been treated as taboo. Rich catalogues were also created, and served as highly valuable materials.

I interviewed Ms. Rawanchaikul Toshiko, a curator at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum who played a leading role in planning and organizing last year’s exhibition, and spoke with her about the art museum and the exhibition.
Interview on Kanten

Miura Atsushi (MA): Today I would like to speak with you about the “Toward the Modernity” exhibition. But before we start, I was wondering if you could briefly introduce the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. My impression is that this art museum is not really known worldwide, so your introduction would also provide the museum with some publicity. This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of the foundation of the museum, right?

Rawanchaikul Toshiko (RT): Yes, it does. The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum opened in March 1999, but it wasn’t built from scratch. It was originally a museum separate from the Fukuoka Art Museum. Since its opening in 1979, the Fukuoka Art Museum has held regular modern and contemporary Asian art exhibitions and built up its collections. In addition, the Fukuoka Art Museum also established a base of empirical knowledge and information on how to organize modern and contemporary Asian art exhibitions and the necessary interpersonal networks. Our museum was founded upon this accumulation of interpersonal networks, art collections, and practical know-how. The fifth Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, which you enjoyed seeing, was also the successor to the Asian Art Exhibition, which the Fukuoka Art Museum held once almost every five years.

MA: So you mean that the Fukuoka Art Museum had already accumulated a base of empirical knowledge on how to organize an Asian art exhibition?

RT: Yes. When the mayor of Fukuoka brought up the idea in the early 1990s of establishing a special facility that exhibited Asian art works, the Fukuoka Art Museum already possessed a collection of nearly 500 works. At that time, the number of the collection pieces was unusually high and the quality was also rich, unlike other collections of modern and contemporary Asian art around the world. The fifth Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, which you enjoyed seeing, was also the successor to the Asian Art Exhibition, which the Fukuoka Art Museum held once almost every five years.

MA: You make it sound like there was no other art museum around the world at that time dedicated to modern and contemporary Asian art. Is that still the case today?

RT: Even today there are still very few museums dedicated to this area of art. This was particularly true in the early 1990s, when there were no museums that dealt with a wide range of modern and contemporary Asian art. After the decision had been made to open the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, we worked to further enrich the variety of our collections. We also focused on Asian art for exhibitions, and made it our mission to convey the recognizably positive points and significance of Asian art. Because
Fukuoka City had been actively promoting Asian art since the 1970s, I think that it was quite natural to try to build an art museum that “focused on something Asian.”

MA: Fukuoka is definitely close to South Korea. It seems you have a sense of obligation as the largest Japanese city located closest to the rest of Asia.

RT: Exactly.

MA: Do you limit yourselves to strictly modern and contemporary Asian art? Were there any other types of art before that?

RT: The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum started by limiting its focus to “only” modern and contemporary Asian art. For Fukuoka City, the Fukuoka Art Museum opened in 1979 and its history department was split off to form the Fukuoka City Museum in 1989. Our museum was separated from the Fukuoka Art Museum ten years later. So regarding a focus on Asia, the Fukuoka City Museum handles the history of exchange, the Fukuoka Art Museum deals with pre- to early-modern art, and the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum specializes in modern and contemporary art. The manner in which the beginning of “modern times” is defined differs by country and region, but the earliest work our museum possesses is one from the end of the eighteenth century.

MA: In terms of regions, how many different regions does your museum cover?

RT: Pakistan is the westernmost country...

MA: So West Asia, by which I mean the world of Islamic culture, is not included?

RT: Our museum does not cover West Asia. This is because of the limitations on curators’ expertise, number of workers, and budgetary restrictions. The northernmost region is Mongolia, and the southeastern-most region is Indonesia. In connection to this, Fukuoka City also hosts the Fukuoka Asian Film Festival every year, and the libraries in the city possess some films from West Asia.

MA: In addition to focusing on East Asia, does your museum also cover Central Asia?

RT: Central Asia is another region our museum is still unable to cover, so for Central and West Asian art, we accept special exhibitions coordinated and organized by newspaper companies and other art museums. Currently, our museum covers East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia.

MA: It’s clear that you have held many exhibitions up until this point. Do you have any major trends you focus on or a set policy?

RT: Our main event is the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale. The purpose of this event is to introduce the new trends in contemporary art in many parts of Asia. We pay particular attention to budding artists. Our curators put a lot of time and effort in scouting out local areas and find rising stars. Funnily enough, these efforts often lead to good ideas for other exhibitions and how to obtain new collections. In that
respect, this is one of the core projects of our museum.

In addition, we organize one or two special exhibitions on Asian art every year, and one small-scale exhibition annually. Through these exhibitions, we not only focus on art but also introduce folk art and popular art rooted in people's daily lives, such as Bangladeshi rickshaw paintings.

**Story behind the “Toward the Modernity” exhibition**

**MA:** Now I’d like to shift our focus to last year’s exhibition. You said that the exhibition focused on modern and contemporary art, particularly post-modern Asian art. Asian art was not necessarily created endogenously, but was influenced by a range of exogenous factors from its initial phases. In that sense, is it appropriate to say that you had no other choice but to hold the exhibition, or basically that you felt compelled to hold it?

**RT:** Yes, that’s right. When our museum was still part of the Fukuoka Art Museum, the museum held an exhibition on modern Southeast Asian art, so after that East and South Asian art became one issue we had to tackle. In particular, modern East Asian art developed in close association with Kanten, government-sponsored art competitions that the Japanese government introduced to the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and Manchuria in Northeast China (hereinafter referred to as Manchuria).

**MA:** So basically these were government-sponsored art exhibitions introduced under Japanese colonial rule?

**RT:** Yes. We felt that as an art museum dedicated to Asia, we could not introduce modern East Asian art without mentioning Kanten.

**MA:** If you did that, you would have ended up skipping a significant period of history.

**RT:** That’s right. At that time, government-sponsored exhibitions were held as the largest and most spectacular form of art promotion, and they were among some of the most significant art exhibitions that laid one of the foundation for modern art in many parts of Asia. We could not introduce modern East Asian art without mentioning these exhibitions.

**MA:** I’m sure you had a hard time handling the art of that time.

**RT:** Yeah, a lot of people said that (laughs), and in truth I did. But as I mentioned earlier, the Fukuoka municipal government has implemented administrative measures with a keen focus on Asia since the 1970s. Both the municipal government and our museum felt that though this is a very delicate issue, it’s something that Fukuoka had an obligation to tackle.

**MA:** Your story makes me feel that the presence of Fukuoka is rather difficult for other regions to understand.

**RT:** That’s right. I’ve heard that things are quite different in other places. I think that Fukuoka built up its cultural foundation for holding such an exhibition over the course of nearly half a century. None of
our museum members objected to the exhibition, but our museum advisor Yasunaga had concerns about whether we would be able to get our hands on works related to the Manchuria Fine Arts Exhibition (“Manten,” established in 1938).

**MA**: Yeah, that’s definitely a concern. But actually, I can’t imagine the exhibition not including many of these collections.

**RT**: Yes. That’s something we need to work on in the future.

### Kanten, studying abroad, and education

**MA**: When I first saw the four city names of Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei and Changchun (the capital of former Manchuria) in the title of the “Toward the Modernity” exhibition, I felt that it viewed Japan from a relative perspective. Random order of the four cities shows that art did not originate in Japan and spread across the rest of Asia, but rather delivered the message that each country had its own form of modern art and that each type was different.

**RT**: You assume correctly. We wanted to avoid presenting the idea that everything started with Japan at all costs. So when we displayed the works at the exhibition, our museum and the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art set it up so that the items from South Korea came first and those from Japan came last. As for names of the cities in the title, we had no other choice but to arrange them in order in which Kanten were established... So we arranged the city names horizontally and did not write Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 in the pictorial record. We paid a lot of attention to trivial things... At any rate, we made sure that people could enjoy seeing the works on display from wherever they liked.

**MA**: It’s true that Kanten originated in Japan, but I thought about the possibility of highlighting the direction of re-examining the modern art of each country through this so-called Kanten filter. But it does involve some aspects of the cultural policy that was implemented during Japan’s colonial era...

**RT**: Yes, of course.

**MA**: Based on this line of reasoning, you can see two aspects, the positives and the negatives. As for the positive, it’s clear that Japan helped Asian countries develop modern art on their own. On the other hand, though, you can also say that Japanese people sent this art system and the supporting judges to control the art in these countries. You can see things from both sides. Now that well over a year has passed since the end of the exhibition, what do you think of these positive and negative aspects?

**RT**: I think that the issue of the judges was the most significant. For example, there were cases in which Japanese painters in Korea and Taiwan won the highest honors, although it was quite apparent that their works were not the best. I think that judges were unfair at times.

**MA**: So you feel it was natural for judges to favor Japanese artists?

**RT**: Yes. For the Korea Fine Arts Exhibition (“Chosen-biten” established in 1922), the calligraphy and
si-jun-zi (The Four Gentlemen) categories were abolished after the tenth exhibition and replaced with the craftwork category. For the Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition (“Tainen/Futen,” established in 1927), traditional art categories such as calligraphy and si-jun-zi were not selected, and works that appeared to be paintings in a literary artist’s style failed to become prize winners. I feel that this shows Japanese organizers and judges controlled the “art” categories and forms of “modern” expression. At the same time, though, there is no doubt that these government-sponsored art exhibitions produced artists who are now regarded to be significant creators of modern art and important works of modern art in South Korea and Taiwan. So in that sense, I see the Kanten as having both a good and bad face

MA: You view this as a kind of historical fact?

RT: Yes, I do. I don’t think that Kanten were entirely good or bad. That’s just the way history is.

MA: We can’t change history now. When I viewed the works displayed at the exhibition, I simply thought “there were many good works of art in Asia.” Although I had had a bad image up until then, I was really impressed by those great pieces.

In addition, as I compared the art from Taiwan, Korea and Manchuria, naturally I noticed that they had different features. I felt that Taiwan was the closest and most sympathetic to Japan. Korea had distinctive features, and I did not really understand Manchuria well.

RT: I found there were many things I did not understand about Manchuria. I wrote “clarifying features” in the pictorial record, but when I arranged them, I had second thoughts, like “Well, what kind of features do these have?” Certainly, local colors had to be used and motifs were so clearly different that I could tell Taiwanese works from Korean works. But for expression, many painters studied art at Japanese schools, including Tokyo Art School, or learned from people who had been to Japan to study art. So I felt there were similarities between the exhibited works.

MA: Do you mean that there were more similarities than differences in these works? Did most of the artists study in Japan?

RT: Many Western-style painters did. So did many Oriental painters in South Korea.

MA: Then, their Japanese teachers visited their countries as judges?

RT: Yes. However, there are also many Taiwanese Oriental painters who have never studied in Japan.

MA: But they took Japanese painting style.

RT: Yes, they did. Some of them learned that style from Japanese painters who were engaged in creative activities in their country.

MA: Did Japanese painters teach in local schools? Or did they give private lessons?

RT: They did both. There were no art schools in South Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria. Students studied
drawing and painting through school education until they were in high school. It was common for those students to continue to receive tutoring lessons from their school teachers after graduation or to study in Japan with a teacher's introduction. There were also many other cases in which students learned painting in private Japanese tutoring schools or developed their painting skill through their interaction with a group of painters.

MA: In connection with your story about sending Japanese judges, the Japanese government also sent Japanese art teachers, right?

RT: Many Japanese painters were sent to Asian regions as art teachers.

MA: So does this mean that the work they did had an impact on both the exhibition system and art education?

RT: Yes.

MA: Then that is why we can see many similar styles and techniques. But the motifs and themes are different.

RT: At that time, Japanese judges were required to highlight their local color and I think that patinters often tried to express their local colors through motifs and themes. When I look at the pictorial records of Chosen-biten and Taiten/Futen, I often find works in which the racial background of the artist and where they lived are unknown. The truth is that not all works involved strong local color, and I want to explore the creative intentions of individual painters with a focus on individual works without paying attention to only local colors.

Inner struggle of Taiwanese female painter Chen Chin

MA: Each painter has his or her unique features, and these features are all different. In this regard, do you think that there will be progress in the study of individual artists and their works?

When I was looking at the works on display at the exhibition, I felt that Taiwanese female painter Chen Chin, whom you’ve mentioned, was a very good painter. “The Women of Shantimen Area” (see illustration) is one of the works in the possession of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, and it was very impressive as one of the significant pieces in the exhibition. The painter was from the intellectual elite class, but this painting depicts native Taiwanese. Why did a painter like Chen choose this motif?

RT: It is a complicated and difficult matter to discuss. At that time, Taiwan was under Japanese colonial rule, so it had to look “underdeveloped” from the perspective of its colonial ruler, Japan. Thus, the picture symbolizes this Japanese point of view by depicting native Taiwanese. In other words, it was just like “exhibiting” native Taiwanese in the Taiwan pavilion at a Japanese-sponsored exposition.

MA: Painters could easily express local color by depicting these kinds of people. But the painter’s social class was modernized, which means that the picture did not necessarily represent local color.
**RT:** Many Japanese painters who lived in Taiwan in those days drew native Taiwanese, but Taiwanese painters, including Chen Chin, did not paint many pictures of native Taiwanese. They did create those kinds of paintings after the war, though.

**MA:** They did not make these kinds of paintings during the colonial era?

**RT:** No, they didn’t, but many Japanese painters did. Chen Chin intentionally chose “very Taiwanese” motifs consistent with the imaginations of Japanese people to win a prize at a Kanten (Bunten or Teiten). For example, at that time, the common image of Taiwan among most Japanese was that of women dressed in Chinese clothing or native Taiwanese. The Shantimen Area, which was included in the title of the painting, had been designated as a model residential area of native Taiwanese to be promoted as a successful case of Japanese colonial rule shortly before the picture was painted.

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**MA:** Just like a representative village of native Taiwanese.

**RT:** Yes. At that time, Chen Chin was an art teacher at a women’s school in Pingtung County, which was rather close to the Shantimen Area. I think she chose the Shantimen Area as a motif with a particular focus on native Taiwanese villages. In Japan, she was regarded as a painter “from a tropical area in which native Taiwanese lived” and was viewed somewhat objectively. But when this objectively viewed
painter displayed a work at an exhibition in Tokyo as a Taiwanese painter, she chose another objective motif by placing herself on the Japanese side. This reveals a very complicated perspective on the part of the artist.

**MA:** She had to be conscious of the Japanese perspective...

**RT:** In those days, native Taiwanese were at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. However, Chen Chin had studied at the Tokyo Women’s Art School, and so I feel that she expressed a Japanese point of view from inside.

**MA:** But the people she depicted look very dignified. She never looked down on them.

**RT:** That’s right. The picture has a tense mood and depicts dignified-looking women, giving an impression that it is quite different from a painting by a Japanese painter who sought to highlight the primitive aspects of native Taiwanese. Chen Chin said she intended to express local beauty through this painting.

**MA:** The picture projects a proud and majestic image. The coloring is beautiful and full of emotion. The composition is also great and requires a high level of skill. She was a student of Kaburaki Kiyokata. I was surprised to discover how well she had mastered his style.

**The case of South Korea**

**MA:** Another impressive work was “Studio” by the Korean painter Chang Woo-soung (see illustration). There are many things to note about this painting, and it really got me thinking about many different things. Did he study in Japan?

**RT:** No, he didn’t. He learned art from a Korean painter named Kim Eun-ho, but he firmly mastered the Japanese style of painting.

“Studio” by Chang Woo-soung (1943), Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art
MA: He wasn’t directly taught art by a Japanese painter? That’s interesting.

RT: I guess that he interacted with Japanese painters on numerous occasions because he is representative of the pro-Japanese Korean painters.

MA: This painting is very modern, although it depicts traditional Korean women. The style of these paintings is very unique. His composition is also interesting. My impression is that this painter thinks of and comes up with many things. Here the female model is looking at a Japanese pictorial magazine...

RT: That’s right. I don’t know the exact details, but one Korean researcher claims that the woman is looking at a page of Japanese paintings. The pictorial magazine itself is modern, but two people in the midst of Japanese-style modernization are sitting looking gloomy. I wonder what the painter intended to convey by that.

MA: I think that naturally some Korean painters were friendly to Japan and others were not. The picture makes me feel that Korean painters had conflicting feelings about Japan. My impression is that Taiwanese painters were more sympathetic to Japan, while Korean painters were not like that.

RT: I know the feeling. But I think that many of the painters who actively displayed works at Chosen-biten were pro-Japanese to some extent.

MA: So do you mean that some Korean painters refused to participate in Chosen-biten?

RT: Yes. Taiwanese painters took part in private group activities, but most of them participated also in Kanten. But a considerable number of Korean painters “refused to display works” or stopped displaying works after taking part several times, if not to stand up to the Kanten. This is something the abstract artists did.

MA: Motivated by anti-Japanese sentiment, huh?

RT: Yes. They disapproved of how paintings were judged and of the system itself. I think that some painters were uncomfortable with the academically oriented style of Kanten because they were pursuing a different direction for art. But I also think the atmosphere of the times did not allow them to directly object to the Japanese government-sponsored Kanten. In addition, some painters were opposed to Kanten, while others found that not entering their works in Kanten would make it really difficult for them to earn a living as a professional artist.

MA: I see. Painters want to be given opportunities to display their works.

RT: The family of the late Korean painter Jung Hyun-woong praised our focus on Chosen-biten to some extent. This is because poverty prevented this painter from going to study abroad. That is why he had a hard time joining groups of painters who conducted group work in private. These groups of painters were mostly in the elite class who had studied in Japan. In the end, it was Kanten that gave everyone an opportunity to exhibit their work. He won the highest honors several times at the Chosen-biten.
MA: It’s a rather difficult issue, isn’t it?

RT: The Kanten were a good testing ground for people who aspired to be professional painters but never had an opportunity to gain a high level of education for economic reasons.

MA: Kanten were open to everyone.

RT: I think so. The family of the late Jung Hyun-woong said that the prize he won was great support for the home economy. However, this does not mean you can uncritically evaluate the Kanten held under Japanese colonial rule and justify Japanese colonialization policy. But I do think this means that the government-sponsored Kanten cannot be dismissed as having no worth.

MA: So you mean that this type of thinking is oversimplified? Some people were saved by these Japanese government-sponsored art exhibitions.

RT: Of course, but I can’t simply acknowledge the Kanten, neither.

MA: You’re right. That situation is something we have a hard time imagining.

The West, Japan, and Asia

MA: We really can’t use the terms “Western-style paintings” and “Japanese-style paintings,” can we?

RT: At that time people used to say “Oriental paintings.”

MA: Yes, Oriental paintings. So do people in different countries call them “Japanese-style paintings,” “Korean-style paintings,” and “Taiwanese-style paintings?”

RT: Now people use the term “Korean-style paintings” in South Korea. Taiwanese say “Gouache painting (Jiao cai hua).” This is because for them the “Orient” pointed to Japan, which is located in the ocean to the east from the perspective of China, which figured prominently in the postwar Nationalist Party-led administration. Thus, Oriental paintings were considered to be Japanese-style paintings. In this context, artists who used to be active in creative work in prewar Taiwan and sought to win prizes at Kanten were accused of “siding with the Japanese colonial government.” But in the face of this criticism, those painters were poor at Mandarin and could not present proper counterarguments. This resulted in the common use of the term “Gouache painting” in place of “Oriental paintings” in the 1960s. Artists of Oriental paintings had a hard time in both South Korea and Taiwan in the postwar era because they were pro-Japanese during the war. I think they also grappled with how to break away from “Oriental” expressions with Japanese characteristics.

MA: Turning our attention to another topic, do you think the relationship between Japan and the rest of Asia is a slight displacement of the relationship between Japan and the West? For example, Western-
style paintings were introduced to Japan from Western countries, and those paintings were then introduced to the rest of Asia. In that sense, people in other Asian countries were subjected to the dual rule of the West and Japan. Although this may be a bit of an exaggeration, culturally speaking it may be true. What do you think of Asia’s awareness of the West? Did Japan matter to the rest of Asia, and how much was the rest of Asia conscious of the West? Were there any painters who went directly over to Europe or the United States to study instead of going to Japan?

**RT:** There were many painters like that on the Chinese continent. Although there were many Chinese painters who went to study in Japan, there were some early Chinese painters from Guangdong and Shanghai who went to study in France, Great Britain, and the United States. In the case of Japanese-ruled Korea and Taiwan, male painters born into rich families went over to study in Western countries after having studied at the Tokyo Art School. For example, the Korean painter Lee Chong-woo went to study in France after having studied in Japan and won a salon prize.

**MA:** Winning a salon prize in France means being recognized as legitimate painter. Japanese painters also aimed to attain that status after Kuroda Seiki and painters in other Asian countries followed suit in the twentieth century...

**RT:** I guess that they hoped to go to France after studying at the Tokyo Art School.

**MA:** But only a few people endowed with good conditions could go that far...

**RT:** And to begin with, only a few people enjoying good conditions could go to Tokyo.

**MA:** So only painters in the upper middle class could do that?

**RT:** That’s right. Those who were not endowed with such good conditions had to study very hard and pretty much on their own... So did the painter I mentioned earlier. Taiwanese painter Kuo Hsueh-Hu, who was a major painter and exhibited at Taiten/Futen, also studied art on his own. He has a very unique style.

**MA:** He was recognized for his ability, wasn’t he? But I think that naturally he intended to add prestige to his art career by going to study in Tokyo.

**RT:** Although Japanese were the judges at both Chosen-biten and Taiten/Futen, a few local people also acted as judges. In the case of Taiwanese, Chen Chin, who we discussed previously, was one of these judges. I think a major reason for this is that she studied Japanese-style painting at the Tokyo Women’s Art School. In addition, a painter named Yen Shui-long also went over and studied in France, and won a salon prize after having studied at the Tokyo Art School. He was appointed as an art competition judge immediately after he returned to his home country. I guess that studying abroad lends prestige to a creative career...

**MA:** So he was appointed as a judge in recognition of part of his career. Perhaps a type of Western influence...
RT: I think so especially for Western-style painting. In addition, works by Western painters were also displayed as reference at the Chosen-biten. Painters seemed to pay keen attention to Gauguin and other artists for both Western-style and Oriental paintings. For example, I think that this Western influence can be observed in the fact that Taiwanese painters chose native Taiwanese as a motif.

MA: Are there any other painters you are really into?

RT: There are many (laughs). I think that Chen Chin and Chang Woo-soung were outstanding, but personally, I also like Lin Yu-shan (see illustration).

MA: His painting style is quite different.

RT: His parents ran a mounting shop, and he was surrounded by traditional paintings while he was a boy. Later on he switched to Japanese-style painting. I like his landscape paintings for their clear touch, but his paintings of animals which make full use of Chinese ink painting techniques are nice and vivid.

Works of Japanese painters

MA: How did you feel about the works of Japanese painters displayed at the recent exhibition?
RT: I think that we selected nice works created by Japanese painters. But we put greater emphasis on combining the exhibition with the Kanten held in Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria while they were under Japanese colonial rule. Thus, we chose painters who were involved in the establishment of the Ministry of Education’s Fine Arts Exhibition (Bunten) and judges of Kanten held under Japanese colonial rule, and focused on their major works or works with Asian-related motifs. In addition, our selection also included works displayed as model paintings at the Chosen-biten.

MA: Do you mean model workers that should be copied by Asian painters?

RT: That’s right. Those model works were displayed as the ideal paintings at the Chosen-biten. As works of reference, Terasaki Kogyo’s “Four Scenes of Mountain Stream” was displayed at the second exhibition and Tsuchida Bakusen’s famous “Korean Bench” was displayed at the twelfth exhibition. Local color was a particular area of attention in judging paintings in the 1930s when this “Korean Bench” depicting two Korean kisaengs was displayed at the Chosen-biten.

The works of Japanese painters were also spectacular, but I felt that the Japanese images of Asia were not as diverse and were rather unbalanced. Local painters chose motifs and expressions rooted in their lives as things that were real and close to them. I felt that those motifs and expressions were even more colorful and freer than the Japanese models. Because I work as a curator at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, I feel like showing more favoritism to Taiwanese and Korean painters than their Japanese counterparts (laughs).

MA: Did you feel that Japanese painters were fixed on a particular subject?

RT: Each individual work was really nice, but when lined up side by side I found them to look stereotyped.

MA: Perhaps they may have stuck to a Japanese perspective of Asia.

RT: Yes. I felt that their perspective was fixed on a particular subject. I think they tried to force this Japanese perspective on Korean and Taiwanese painters. And I also think that local painters considered the exhibition to be the perfect opportunity to seek their identity.

MA: We only know the history of Japan’s modern Western-style paintings and Japanese-style paintings from an insider’s view. But if you re-examine Japanese-style paintings from an Asian point of view, you are likely to discover a new perspective. I think this is also one of the outcomes of the recent exhibition.

Catalogue and reactions to the exhibition

MA: In addition, the exhibition catalogue was really good, and it looked like a lot of hard work went into making it. You sought to provide a tri-lingual catalogue in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. The catalogue also served as a kind of an information guide, and I felt that it will become a basic material for reference in the future.

RT: We had a lot of support and cooperation from Koreans and Taiwanese. Many of the family members
of deceased painters were old, and we wanted to provide a catalogue written in their native languages. It was very difficult to hold an exhibition of this kind, and we were afraid that we would invite criticism no matter which we displayed or set up the exhibits. Placing a significant amount of focus on the entire process leading up to the opening of the exhibition, we spoke a lot with the local people and stressed the importance of two points: drawing up a list of works with which both parties could be happy, and compiling a catalogue that everyone could read in their own language.

MA: What kind of reaction did you get from South Korean and Taiwanese participants in the exhibition?

RT: A Taiwanese magazine gave the exhibition a lot of coverage and presented it as a significant event. Many South Korean experts visited the exhibition and praised us for our hard work. In addition, we received offers for similar events from both South Korea and Taiwan, although in the end these never materialized. This shows the high regard in which they held the exhibition.

MA: You played a central role in making this event happen. I believe they could see you were striving to be neutral. Of course, you can’t be completely neutral.

RT: I always tried to be neutral during my preparation for the event. I was well aware that my role was to prepare the framework of the exhibition, to gather the input and knowledge of South Korean, Taiwanese and Japanese experts, and incorporate this feedback within the exhibition.

MA: In a sense, you are still trying to open up a new path. The results of the recent exhibition did not give you a complete answer. Now it seems you are laying the groundwork, I mean, uncovering the facts.

RT: I think so. Modern art exhibitions have been held in South Korea and Taiwan so far, but none of them fully addressed Kanten and were held separately from each other. There have been many modern art exhibitions in Japan as well, but only a few comprehensive exhibitions that combine Taiwanese and South Korean painters. As long as people hold separate exhibitions, we’ll never be able to get a complete picture of modern art, and will be unable to compare individual works. So I presented the need to put them together on the table, and I thought that might be a kind of starting point.

MA: You really had to put in a lot of effort, including preparation work.

RT: Yes I did. It was a really difficult exhibition. But it was not tough on me, and I didn’t feel that it gave me a hard time.

MA: That’s because you were rewarded with the joy of discovery.

RT: That’s right. I had to handle a large number of hands-on tasks. I really had to be very careful about negotiations, pictorial records, and displays, and there were times I almost gave up halfway.

MA: What inspired you to overcome these difficulties?

RT: Well, even now I’m not really sure what motivated me to move on, but I became seized with the
strong urge to make this event, even if it ended up being a small-scale event... At any rate I didn’t give up halfway anyway (laughs).

The difficulty of conducting a survey on Manten

**MA:** Were there any Chinese members on your team?

**RT:** No. There were difficult problems... The subject of Manten is still taboo. When I asked the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing for information about Manten, they answered that it was a delicate issue and ended the discussion there. China has not conducted any careful surveys and studies of Manchurian art, and I guess that we Japanese are still unable to get into the details of this art.

**MA:** It’s disappointing to think of that because there may be some works and materials still left.

**RT:** Yes. In the postwar era China experienced both a civil war and then the Great Cultural Revolution, so I wonder how many works and materials are still left... Little progress has been made in surveys and research, and it is unclear how much work and material still remain.

**MA:** If there are remaining works and materials, it may provide you with an opportunity for research someday, but that seems unlikely.

**RT:** Ultimately, for the recent exhibition we collected works in Japan created by painters who had participated in Manten in Manchuria before the war, as well as works similar to the ones displayed at Manten. I think these works help you get an idea of what Manten were like. In addition, we were very delighted to discover a work during the exhibition that is almost sure to be the one that Okubo Hajime displayed at a Manten. It was a painting entitled “Atelier,” which was in the possession of the Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama (see illustration). The museum in Wakayama didn’t think the work was related to Manchuria, but a Korean researcher said that the woman depicted in the picture was a Korean in Manchuria... This painting was the only existing work that could be considered to have been displayed at Manten, so we immediately asked the museum in Wakayama to display it at the venue in Hyogo.

**MA:** If Japan-China relations improve and a new era in which we can objectively look back on history comes, remaining works may see the light of day.

**RT:** I think that was also the case
with Korea in the past. Things have changed a lot in the last twenty years.

**MA**: I see. There are subtle differences between Taiwan, South Korea, and China. These pose challenges for the future.

**Triennale**

**MA**: You have another challenge (laughs). The last thing I would like to ask you about is the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale. In this event, Asian artists stay in Fukuoka every third year and create works of art.

**RT**: For the Triennale, the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum makes as great an effort as possible to focus on emerging artists who will be introduced to Japan for the first time, and asks them to display their works. In addition, we invite some of those artists to Fukuoka so that they can create works during their stay and interact with people in the city.

**MA**: What kind of exchange do they have with local citizens?

**RT**: They held workshops for elementary and junior high school students and artist talks.

**MA**: This year marks the fifth time this event was held. How many artists are participating in the event, and how many countries are represented?

**RT**: Thirty-six artists from twenty-one countries and regions are displaying their artwork. We organized a special exhibition titled “New Era of Mongolian Painting” for the latest event, with ten leading painters of contemporary Mongolian art displaying artwork.

**MA**: I've just seen the works of these artists. While these pieces are contemporary Asian art, I feel they can also be classified as global contemporary art. There are many video works. Photos and subculture works are also on display.

**RT**: Yes. But I think that the main subject is rooted in the lives of each artist.

**MA**: The displayed works are related to the artists themselves, the regions where they live, and the local things they pay special attention to. Some works dig deeper into the subject and others are internationally oriented. There are many different types of works. One piece created by a Chinese media artist was particularly impressive. I think he's very good.

**RT**: I think so too. It's a very exquisite work, and he has great technique.

**MA**: But against the background of this piece is a Chinese landscape painting.

**RT**: He studied traditional ink landscape painting when he was a child. He made full use of style in producing his media artwork.
MA: You probably need quite a lot of funding to organize the Triennale.

RT: The primary source of funding for the event comes from the Fukuoka municipal government’s budget. In addition to that, we also obtain support and cooperation from other organizations. But the budget is quite small for an international exhibition. In addition, our museum has only six curators, and is responsible for preparing and organizing special and permanent exhibitions, as well as handling ordinary residence tasks, along with for the Triennale. So in terms of manpower, it’s a lot of hard work holding this event once every three years.

MA: I know the feeling. It’s very hard. But there is no doubt that your continued hard work for last fifteen years has made Fukuoka a center of Asian art. I think that is an unparalleled achievement. I do hope your museum continues to play a leading role in promoting Asian art. I will continue to offer my support and encouragement. Thank you very much for your time today.

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RAWANCHAIKUL Toshiko
Curator, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

MIURA Atsushi, Ph.D.
Professor, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, The University of Tokyo
Born in 1957. Graduated from the University of Tokyo in 1981 and earned his doctorate in Art History from University of Paris IV (Sorbonne) in 1997. His research areas include French painting of the nineteenth century and the artistic relations between France and Japan. Served as Lecturer at the Japan Woman’s University (1990-93) and as Assistant Professor (1993-2006) and Professor (2006- ) at the University of Tokyo. His publications include “Kindai geijutsuka no hyosho – Manet, Fantin-Latour to jukyuseiki no furansu kaiga (The representation of modern artists – Manet, Fantin-Latour to French painting of the nineteenth century (2006), Histoire de peinture entre France et Japon (2009)