



Legacy of “Japonisme 2018” (II): From a Japanese Art Exhibition to a Manga Exhibition at the British Museum

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The gist of my previous blog entry was that, although unknown to what extent the organizers were aware of this, from a historical point of view, the monumental event that was “Japonisme 2018” was an exhibition of Japanese culture that had its roots in the Japan exhibitions at the international expositions of the nineteenth century while also connecting to the national policy of exporting culture in anticipation of a second Japonisme boom.



Prof. Miura Atsushi

I want now to comment on the actual exhibitions with a focus on the art exhibitions, but it is not that I was able to see all the exhibitions. Because I went to France in the third week of December 2018, I missed “FUKAMI: Une plongée dans l'esthétique japonaise” (Hôtel Salomon de Rothschild), “Jakuchu: Le royaume coloré des êtres vivants” (Petit Palais), “Jomon: Naissance de l'art dans le Japon préhistorique” (Maison de la culture du Japon à Paris), and “Foujita: Œuvres d'une vie (1886–1968)” (Maison de la culture du Japon à Paris), among others. Besides “Japon-Japonismes: Objets inspirés, 1867–2018” that I introduced last time, I was also able to see “Trésors de Kyoto: Trois siècles de création Rinpa” (Musée Cernuschi), “Meiji: Splendeurs du Japon impérial (1868–1912)” (Musée national des arts asiatiques Guimet) and “Manga⇄Tokyo” (La Villette).



Fig. 1: “Trésors de Kyoto: Trois siècles de création Rinpa,” Musée Cernuschi, 2018

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It was impressive that the national treasure “Fujin raijin zu” (Wind God and Thunder God) by Tawaraya Sotatsu was on display at the Rinpa exhibition at Musée Cernuschi (Fig. 1), but it was also a good exhibition overall that used excellent artworks to accurately show the changes in splendid decorative beauty, from Hon'ami Koetsu and Sotatsu to Ogata Korin and Kenzan as well as to the painters who inherit the Rinpa tradition from the late Edo period to

modern times. Since it included not only paintings but also calligraphy, pottery, lacquer work, and other genres, it was also good that the explanations of materials and techniques were so thorough. Moreover, the unexpected composition of finishing with a big section about the modern Kamisaka Sekka, who does not receive a great deal of attention in Japan, was something that gave a feeling of what interests the French, who enjoy novel design that works in all aspects of contemporary lifestyle art.

By the way, having a Rinpa exhibition at the same time as a Jomon exhibition was something that reminded me of how the painter Okamoto Taro, who stayed in Paris in the 1930s, reevaluated Japanese art. What Okamoto discussed in his *Nihon no dento* (Japanese Tradition; 1956) was the Jomon, the Rinpa, and the stone culture (garden stepping stones and stone walls), which was an interesting choice that reflected not only Okamoto's own personality but also the sensibilities of an artist who had acquired French values. In that sense, Okamoto's reevaluation of Japanese art had an aspect of Japonisme circulation that passed through France, and "Japonisme 2018" likewise at first glance may have appeared to provide an all-around display of Japanese art, but it very much took into consideration the French image of Japan and French needs. Nonetheless, the Japanese also tried to bring in some freshness, and it was definitely a splendid feat to avoid Hokusai and other ukiyoe woodblock prints, which are all too famous in the West, as examples of Edo-period art, and instead have an exhibition on Ito Jakuchu, who has enjoyed overwhelming popularity and praise in Japan in recent years, at the Petit Palais.

"Meiji: Splendeurs du Japon impérial (1868–1912)" (Fig. 2) was the exhibition where I felt the peculiar French bias the strongest, and I suspect many must have cocked their heads in puzzlement. It is decisive that the center of the exhibition was the Japanese modern pottery collection of Nasser Khalili who lives in London, but that was not all. While contextualizing Meiji Japan as imperial, Westernizing, industrialist, and imperialist, as well as touching on the architecture, painting (Kyosai, etc.), woodblock printing, photography (the Ainu) and such that was received in France, there was a massive display of ceramics, lacquerware, furniture, ornaments, handiwork, and so on and so forth as examples of handicraft for export, which made the contents quite unbalanced. I could have understood the exhibition if it had at least been named "Meiji Crafts" or "Exported Meiji Art," but labeling this a "Meiji" exhibition just confused me.



Fig. 2: "Meiji: Splendeurs du Japon impérial (1868–1912)," Musée national des arts asiatiques Guimet, 2018



Fig. 3: “Manga⇄Tokyo,” La Villette, 2018

Now, what about the staging of “Manga⇄Tokyo” (Fig. 3) in the big hall at La Villette? As symbolized by the annual Japan Expo, France is one of the world’s foremost countries when it comes to receiving Japanese manga and anime. This exhibition welcomed Morikawa Kaichiro (associate professor, School of Global Japanese Studies, Meiji University) as its curator and was prepared in cooperation with the National Art Center in Japan. It was a technological and dynamic plan to create a pseudo-experience with mutual inlaying of images of the real city Tokyo and the fictional megapolis Tokyo (also including Edo as its prehistory) that is depicted in manga, anime, games and *tokusatsu* (live action, special effects) works. It did feel geared toward enthusiasts and Japan-lovers, but it was also interesting as an intellectual exhibition guided by sociological and culture-historical interest.

By the way, the “Manga” exhibition (Fig. 4) that I saw at the British Museum in London in the following year of 2019 was entirely different from the “Manga⇄Tokyo” exhibition at La Villette and persistently framed manga as visual art. It properly conveyed their desire to communicate the appeal and a panorama of manga across a number of themes and topics by creatively arranging the setup to make it informative while not being just a simple introduction. It is groundbreaking for such an authoritative national museum to hold a sub-cultural exhibition, so we have to recognize the massive difference as the French manga exhibition was held at the exhibition site of La Villette and not at the Louvre. The distinction between high and popular art was clear at “Japonisme 2018,” emblematic of which was the display of Nawa Kohei’s gigantic sculpture “Throne” at the Louvre.

These are my impressions of the individual exhibitions at “Japonisme 2018,” but I got the really strong feeling that the “export” of Japanese culture to the West is about to enter the next stage. It is necessary to present it so as to match the other culture, but there is no need for easy compromise or ingratiation. I think it is important to create discord and engender discomfort through contact with a different aesthetic sense and value system. Meaningless mystification is equally problematic, but there is also no need to force it to be easily comprehensible. I hope to see presentations of things that are difficult to understand as they are and the creation of new hybrids through cultural chemical reactions that are neither insisting on oneself only nor being assimilated by the other. More time is needed before we can tell whether “Japonisme 2018” was able to serve as a catalyst for this.



Fig. 4: “Manga,” British Museum, 2019

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