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Kindai bijutsu – The Reception of Western Concepts of Art in Japan around the Year 1900

It is significant that the Japanese term for “art” – bijutsu 美術 – was introduced during the preparations for Japan’s first appearance at a world exhibition (Vienna, 1873). The term was derived from the German words “Kunstgewerbe” (arts and crafts) and “Bildende Kunst” (fine arts). The exact definitions of this newly constructed term, and the decisions on what type of traditions and artifacts should be included or excluded were the subject of controversies based on different cultural values in Japan and Europe. In my thesis, I analyze the complex relations between Japan and Europe in regard to the term art (bijutsu) and the various interpretations of the word and concept during the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The main aim of my research is to investigate the Japanese reception of Western ideas and objects on the development of “modern art” – kindai bijutsu – in Japan.

In Japan, the "Theory of Beauty", summarized under the heading of aesthetics in the West, looks back on a long history as equally rich in tradition. Terms such as *yûgen*, *wabi*, *sabi* or *mono no aware* had been used in pre-modern Japan to express the beauty of things. However, the term *bi*, the equivalent of the western term 'aesthetic', has only been in existence since the mid 1850s when the pursuit of western texts on philosophical aesthetics began. The philosophical framework of modern Japanese aesthetics had its origins in the University of Tokyo, where two foreign professors played an important role in the development of humanism in Japan: The Harvard graduate Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853–1908) taught philosophy and political economy at the Tokyo Imperial University from 1878 to 1890. He was one of the first who presented Hegel’s thoughts systematically in Japan. He provided his students with a hermeneutical tool in order to understand Japanese arts. The other important lecturer was Raphael von Koeber (1848–1923). Koeber’s lectures at the Tokyo Imperial University introduced the philosophy of art in Schopenhauer, Schelling, Wilhelm Windelband and others. Through his lectures a talented group of young Japanese scholars was introduced to a wide range of German philosophers. This resulted in a theoretical foundation for some of the key work on aesthetics in modern Japan.

In this presentation, I would like to present a picture of the study of modern Japanese aesthetics from a historical perspective. In addition, the question will also be pursued as to exactly why the German aesthetics theory fell onto fruitful ground in Japan and how this introduced new ways of looking and interpreting art in Japan.

CV

EDUCATION

University of Zurich

09/2011 onwards Doctoral student at URPP (University Research Priority Program)
„Asia and Europe“
Project title: “*Kindai bijutsu* – The Reception of Western Concepts of Art around the Year 1900”
Founded by: Swiss National Science Foundation

10/2002 - 03/2010 Graduate School (Master of Arts)
Major: East Asian Art History (Prof. Dr. Hans Thomsen)
1st Minor: Japanology (Prof. Dr. Eduard Klopfenstein)
2nd Minor: Sinology (PD Dr. Altenburger)
Master thesis in East Asian Art History. Title: “*Surimono* – Meisterwerke der japanischen Stillleben. Eine Untersuchung anhand der Serie *umazukushi*, eine Sammlung von Pferden, 1822, von Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)“

Dôshisha University Kyôto

04/2005 – 03/2006 Exchange student at Center for Japanese Language and Culture.
Founded by: JASSO

WORK EXPERIENCE

University of Zurich

02/2012 onwards Teaching assignments at the Institute of East Asian Art History
01/2011-08/2011 Assistant position at the Institute of East Asian Art History
10/2007 - 09/2009 Tutoring positions at the East Asian Seminar and the Institute of East Asian Art History

Historical and Ethnological Museum St. Gallen (Switzerland)

01/2012 onwards Curatorial assistant position for a planned exhibition on Japanese art in 2014. Editorial assistance for a museum’s publication on Japanese art
05/2010 – 12/2011 Research fellow: Classification and inventory of Japanese objects in the Museum’s Collection

Rietberg Museum Zurich

07/2012 Catalog contributions for an exhibition on Japanese woodblock prints. (“Schönheit des Augenblicks”, summer 2012)
02/2007 - 06/2009 Museum tour guiding for several special exhibitions

Koller Gallery (Zurich)

01/2008 - 11/2009 Writing catalog entries for Asian objects