

Dr. Elisabeth Scherer

Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf
Institut für Modernes Japan
Universitätsstraße 1
Gebäude 23.02 Ebene 02
40225 Düsseldorf



Elegant, avant-garde, cool: The idea of “Japanese Art”

This presentation discusses how the boundaries of art, of “high” and “low,” “tradition” and “modernity,” have been negotiated in discourses about Japanese art since the 19th century. Around the fin-de-siècle, a network of art dealers, writers, politicians, artists and collectors – both from Japan and the West – participated in defining “Japanese art”. This was often done by highlighting differences, a virtual “separation of East and West”, but in some cases also by processes of creative adaptation and transformation, which eventually contributed to the development of the Western avant-garde.

Since the 1990s, a shift of attention from “traditional” Japanese arts to popular culture is visible in the West, with young people reading Manga, listening to J-Pop and wearing Japanese street fashion. This enthusiasm is shared by the world of “high art”. One central figure is Murakami Takashi, whose strategy it was to establish himself in the Western art world by creating an art form that had a global appeal and was “uniquely Japanese” at the same time. Visual elements as well as marketing mechanisms of Japanese pop culture form the foundation on which his enormous success is built. In his works he deliberately blurs the line between traditional binaries, like high art vs. popular culture or works of art vs. commercial products. The craze for this Japanese “Neo Pop,” however, has not been crafted by some individual, but is part of a complex process of interactions between numerous actors.

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Dr. Elisabeth Scherer is a lecturer at Department of Modern Japanese Studies, Heinrich-Heine University of Düsseldorf. Scherer has studied Japanese Studies and Rhetoric at the University of Tübingen and Dōshisha University (Kyoto). She obtained her PhD in Japanese Studies from Tübingen University in 2010 with a thesis on female ghosts in Japanese cinema and their origins in Japanese traditional arts and folk beliefs. She received dissertation research grants from the federal state of Baden-Württemberg and the German Institute of Japanese Studies in Tokyo. Scherer’s areas of research interest include Japanese popular culture, rituals and religion in contemporary Japan and Gender Studies. Her current research also focuses on the reception of Japanese art and popular culture in the West.