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FEATURED

The Sleuth Discovers Art in Asia—Part II

Art Sleuth by Jean Bundy Dec 12, 2018



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In late November I flew to the AICA-International (art critics) conference in Taipei to read my paper, 'Arctic Environmental Challenges through Virtuality'. In between sessions, I toured several Taiwan art museums. Traveling back to Anchorage, I stopped in Tokyo to take advantage of their major art venues. Of Note: this past week has been very stressful to Anchorage and vicinity as incessant aftershocks, especially at 3am, deprive citizens of sleep. I get it! I hope that this short romp through Asian art provides some diversion, both informative and at times funny.

Asian art was something my art history classes ignored. It was always the last chapter in textbooks, and never assigned. However, art lovers have traveled for centuries to the Orient, absorbing/adopting techniques of the 'other'. Flat shapes and storytelling seen as scroll-landscapes influenced Impressionists from Claude Monet to Mary Cassatt. Japonisme became a decorating style in late nineteenth century Western culture. Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Mikado' satirizes Japan's Edo Period (1603-1868), a time of hierarchical order but also the flowering of much culture.

The Taipei National Palace Museum houses art relocated from mainland China, 1949. This museum with its iconic upsweeping tiled roof has adopted 'exiting the gift shop', selling academic books with tourist schlock. I watched school children in British uniforms: plaid kilts, navy blazers, ushered through exhibits, more interested in playing with their iPhones. Although Mainland Chinese now frequently visit 'The Palace' curious to see what was taken from the mainland, a jade rock fused with a brown rock resembling a slab of bacon was all the rage and had to be viewed after waiting in a long line. The Palace restaurant's 'set menu' offered soup, rice and a compartmentalized tray of various fried and marinated fish, pork and veggies-- Häagan Daz ice cream was everywhere in Taiwan.

Some Palace highlights: a Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Jade bok choy cabbage complete with katydid and locust was once a gift to an emperor symbolizing the purity of his bride-to-be and her future breeding potential. A Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) white porcelain bowl with blue flowers was identical in shape to a Paul Revere bowl. He is credited with this iconic design made in silver: a round bowl with bent rim and small cascading base, often given as a prize. With all the China trade to New England in the late eighteenth century, maybe Revere appropriated this design? An exhibition: 'Pure Offerings of a Myriad of Plants', presented ink and pigment drawings from 960-1875, vibrant as ever. Monitors showed bright copies of the genuine imagery which had to be viewed in semi-darkness. Interest in floral arranging leading to painting specimens began as offerings to Buddha and expanded to becoming a cultivation of

the mind. Much of the works shown demonstrate an understanding of color—greens vibrating against reds, oranges against blues, etc. Many European artists didn't get this concept until Isaac Newton (1643-1727) wrote about 'complementary colors'. Who knows if his scientific discoveries penetrated Asia, or Asians were more astute earlier? Like many pursuits, a passion for flowers was an elite occupation along with burning incense, drinking tea, and hanging paintings, that eventually expanded into the middle classes.

I caught the Taipei Biennial 2018, curators: Mali Wu and Francesco Manacorda, at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. The exhibition: 'Post Nature, A Museum as an Ecosystem', demonstrated that using art venues to portray water shortages, erosion, pollution, and social injustice is becoming popular worldwide. OK: here's the problem. Fine art museums are not designed for aesthetic science projects, at least not yet. Genuine science museums have figured out how to engage the public by minimizing wall verbiage, varying sizes of diagrams, inserting original art, looping videos, and providing abundant seating. This Biennial displayed futuristic housing models, packing crates turned into stair treads, and a walk-in plant terrarium—all good, but the show lacked cohesion, too small for the massive square footage.

One Biennial exhibit: 'On the Deep Wealth of this Nation, Scotland 2018' by Helen and Newton Harrison, imagines Scotland becoming the first entirely self-sufficient nation. While this initially sounds 'nationalistic', closer scrutiny revealed they imagine redistributing Scotland's abundance of water, not only to end in-house droughts, but to acquire surplus for trade. While this is a noble cause, the half dozen wall posters exhibited had all too small photographs, and many paragraphs of way too small print. Another exhibit: 'Scratching Post, 2018' by Alexey Buldakov turned discarded buoys into cat faces, situated on cardboard shelving, that stray cats might use. This piece becomes a metaphor for Houtong, Taiwan, where the coal industry declined in the seventies. People left, abandoning cats. Today Houtong has become a tourist destination, featuring its protected cats, thanks to Peggy Chien who in 2008 used social media to alert people to the feline problem. Another exhibit was a looping video, 'Rubber Man, 2014' by Khvay Samnang who appears as a naked Cambodian drenched in liquid rubber sap. He alludes to changes in indigenous culture as agribusiness takes over Native farming with indifference to wildlife and ancestral spirits.

Over at the National Taiwan University of Education, the photography exhibition 'Parallel Universe of Hsieh Chun-Te' visualized themes about the inner spirit reacting with the outer world, superimposing people and objects upon wild country. Although show themes seemed gossamer, a clown-like androgynous human reflected in a mirror feels like it merges modern and ancient Asian heritages—not always the case.

On the way back to Anchorage, I spent three days in Tokyo tromping through three museums. At the National Museum of Modern Art the show, 'Awakenings, Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s' seemed lackluster resembling imitations of the Mexican Muralists and Depression/WPA projects. One striking piece, from the National Gallery Singapore, was Jim Supangkat's 'Ken Dedes, a half Buddha/half female figure who wears tight jeans that expose her vagina. This 'sacred and sensational' sculpture reminded me of Robert Arneson (1930-1992) who is associated with politicizing classical columns, particularly the San Francisco, Harvey Milk shootings.

In spite of Asia's rich aesthetic heritage, I continued to see a strong fascination with their 'other', especially in Tokyo with its National Museum of Western Art. While the permanent collection of Western art looked like what New York's Metropolitan and Paris' Louvre have deaccessioned, their fall showing of 'Rubens and the Birth of the Baroque' was one of the best exhibitions I'd observed in 2018. Although known as the Flemish master, Rubens (1577-1640) spent 1600-1608 in Italy painting Biblical/classical allegorical themes while absorbing the literary and philosophical culture, and Titian's coloration.

Amusingly, Tokyo's National Museum was showing Duchamp works from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. But Westerners were gravitating to the art from the Edo Period (1603-1868) which depicted beauty adjacent to creepy, along with flowers, the moon, bridges and of course Mt. Fuji motifs. Also popular, Kabuki actors and Sumo wrestlers fetched up on prints like today's rock stars and athletes. European Impressionism is clearly indebted to Edo.

In conclusion, Asian museums were hyper-clean with an abundance of assistance and lots of lockers for stowing gear. I did find the military-uniformed Tokyo guards, who placed their personal possessions in baskets underneath assigned chairs, a bit bossy/daunting. This basket idea fetched up in Tokyo museum cafes, under each table for umbrellas and bags to be stowed while eating a 'set meal'— with soup, rice, and white Jello-esque pudding.

Chinese flower paintings pushed Realism, while Japanese flower prints take viewers to an almost cartoonish space. The Edo Period lives on in Anime and advertising as seen with Japan's Toto toilet ads bragging about their variety of flushes and sprays. While waiting to board my JAL flight back to Los Angeles, passengers of all nationalities giggled at a video of cartoon figures, bare bottomed on potties. Universally 'needing to go' is perhaps the best way to demonstrate Globalism is inevitable.

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