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“Cultural divide: Japanese art in Australia”

Key words

Australian history, Japanese art, Australian public art museums

Abstract

As repositories of cultural history public art museums have, since their inception in Europe during the nineteenth century, embodied the western values associated with ‘high culture’ – that is the Graeco-Roman tradition, and its continuation from the Renaissance onwards. With the legacy of a brutal early history as a penal colony the Western concept of high culture was seen by Australia’s founding fathers to offer the possibility of a redemptive influence on society. Thus, as a demonstration of ‘educational perennialism’, art works drawn from this tradition formed the core of public cultural collections in the civilized society that Australia strove to become. The type of art works are reflected for example in Australian university art history reading lists. On May 25, 1861, at the opening of the Art Room in the State Library of Victoria, the forerunner of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), in their display they sought to reproduce what had been published in Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88). Sydney established an Academy of Art in 1871 and when it later became the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) its classical façade, built between 1896 and 1909, was embedded with the names of artists who created the greatest works of art within the ‘Western canon’ above friezes decorated with bronze reliefs representing the high cultures of Rome, Greece, Assyria and Egypt. The corollary of thus asserting the superiority of certain cultural traditions is that others such as that of Japan were excluded, or at least relegated to a lesser rank.

The history of Australian art collections demonstrates that precedence given to European and especially British art and its contemporary Euro-American manifestation over cultural traditions such as that of Japan has limited understanding through either “cultural exclusion” or by applying insufficient connoisseurship and scholarship to Japanese art collections resulting in a “concealment” of cultural knowledge. This situation may be seen as not relevant to contemporary Australian society but as my analysis will show, in our cultural and educational institutions, ‘High culture’ is still epitomized by the art of Europe and America whereas other cultural traditions such as that of Japan are marginalized. It may also be argued that Australia has engaged with Asia through the promotion of contemporary Asian art but I assert that the internationalization of art has allowed for this inclusion because these works can be discussed in terms of global modern art movements. Their analysis therefore does not necessarily require any specific cultural or linguistic skills and thus opens less room for cross-cultural enrichment. As my examination of the development of Australian public collections of historical Japanese art will reveal the opportunity to develop these skills through focused collections has been lacking.

In this paper, by outlining the history of Australian public collections of historical Japanese art, I will seek to

provide a basis for understanding the extent of cultural enrichment Japanese art collections have provided Australia.

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Gary is an Honorary Research Fellow in The School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, The University of Queensland. He received his doctorate in Art History from the University of Queensland. His recent publications include: “*Sansui-ga*” (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 2014), “Western perspective-Japanese vision” (Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2013), and “Western influences on Japanese landscape painting” (Seoul: Hanyang University, 2011). His recent research interests are in the field of Meiji period woodblock printed frontispieces (*kuchi-e*) in preparation for an exhibition of this subject he is curating at the National Library of Australia.