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Japan at the Exhibition, 1867-1877 : From Representation to Practice

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Japan at the Exhibition, 1867–1877: From Representation to Practice

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1. INTRODUCTION: JAPAN AS OBJECT

One day, in the early summer of 1867, Shibusawa Eiichi found himself in a park in the middle of Paris, watching a crowd of Europeans look at three Japanese geisha. Kane, Sumi, and Sato sat quietly on display in a teahouse made with materials brought over from Japan.

They are very much the object of interest, since not only are they exotically attired, but they are the first Oriental women who have ever come to Europe. The crowd, forbidden to enter the room, jostled with one another and peered at them intently through spyglasses [SHIBUSAWA 1928: 95].

The occasion for this strange exchange of looks was the Paris Exposition Universelle (*bankoku hakurankai*). The Japanese teahouse was one of a number of buildings which had been set up in the park surrounding the main exhibition hall. Here, the strict pedagogy of the official classification gave way to the charms of the imagination and the fantastical. “If in the palace... everything is order and method, the park, on the contrary, however it may be divided according to unvarying principles, presents in its arrangement an unexpectedness which increases its charm” [GUIDE OFFICIEL 1867: 111]. “It is in these spaces, allocated to their country, that the foreign commissions could set up specimens of houses... which gave the park a diverse and picturesque physiognomy, and characterized the customs and civilization of various countries” [COMMISSION IMPÉRIALE 1869: 9].

It is tempting, given accounts like this, to take it for granted that Japan appeared at the exhibition as it did through the crowd’s spyglasses, that is, to imagine that the only place for Japan at the exhibition was as an ethnographic curiosity. Certainly, the main part of the exhibition was not designed to show Japan to its own advantage.

The proudest boast of its organizers was the classification, which allowed a “double grouping of products, by kind of object and by nationality.” Expressed architecturally, this took the form of a massive oval building, divided longitudinally into concentric galleries. Each concentric zone was devoted to objects within a particular class, while each nation occupied a latitudinal section, or slice, cutting through and so comprising all the classes [COMMISSION IMPÉRIALE 1869: 5–7]. This system was designed, above all, to place France, and particularly its emperor, Napoleon III, at the center of a world putting itself on show. France occupied half of the available space, and could provide objects in every class.

Japan, on the other hand, could not. It had been given, as the official bakufu diary noted, only one-hundred-and-twenty-eighth of the available space within the palace — on the same order as Portugal, Greece, and Egypt — which it had to share with China and Siam [SHIBUSAWA 1928: 81]. Since Japanese exhibitors had much to show, Japanese exhibits in fact took up a half of this already cramped space, but were further compromised by the generically “Oriental” display cases designed by a M. Chapon, complete with Moorish Chinese and Indian motifs. The “obscure corridors” and “badly housed exhibits” proved happy hunting grounds for European aesthetes, who praised the Japanese exhibits as being “without doubt the most brilliant and complete exhibition of all the Asian states” [BROMFIELD 1984: 135–137]. Such a discriminating eye, however, was reserved to only a happy few.

In the most public and visible parts of the exhibition Japan was more obvious for being either out of place or absent. In 32 out of 95 classes, Japan had literally nothing to show; in many of the others it could provide only one or two pieces. Above all, in the class devoted to the triumphs of industrial capitalism, Japan could provide no evidence of the machines which stood as the culminating evidence of the evolution of human industry [COMMISSION IMPÉRIALE 1869: 442–461]. Thus, in the imposing Gallery of Machines, in the midst of the technological sublime, a “Japanese kiosk” interrupted the vista of iron machinery. Designed, again in generically “Oriental” style, it housed some “magnificent porcelains sent by the Taicoun,” while outside stood palanquins (*norimono*) and living, breathing bodyguards provided by Satsuma. Again, the Japanese exhibit provoked European commentators to ethnographic observation, noting how the uniform of the bodyguard was “unchanged for centuries,” and how they were prohibited from drawing their swords except in case of war or when they found themselves in a foreign, hostile country [L’EXPOSITION UNIVERSELLE 1867: 234–235]. (This was of course not the case at the exhibition, the reporter concluded, somewhat nervously.)

Ethnography, in practice, became the way to account for such category mistakes. The comparative perspective which the exhibition sought to provide necessarily rested on change over time. Such change, suitably classified, could be exhibited, measured, and evaluated, as progress. Some countries, however, found it impossible to demonstrate any such historical development — their customs and products were “unchanged for centuries” — and so were also resistant to systematic classification. Inasmuch as Japan fell into this group it became part of a more

general category of the unchanging “Orient,” which, noted the official guide, was represented at the exhibition “rather... from an ethnographic point of view than that of science and modern industry” [*GUIDE OFFICIEL* 1867: 102–103].

And the best place to see such ethnographic curiosities was, of course, in the park. The real interest of countries like Japan — for the European observers at the exhibition — was precisely this: not their inability to conform to the exhibition’s classification, but the suggestion that this inability was evidence of a place where the universal laws of progress did not hold, and where the visitor might escape the comprehensive accounting of the west. The Orient thus became the realm of the imagination, its products “marvelous” rather than technically comprehensible, and its exhibits a place for virtual tourism. The park provided a space where countries could create miniaturized versions of themselves, and so allow the visitor to imagine themselves actually in the country in question.

At every turn one meets groups of visitors, exclaiming with happiness: “Let’s go to Japan! Let’s go to China, visit Egypt, tour Italy!” Truly this is possible. At the bend of a path one suddenly finds oneself in front of a miniature state. “What is it? Which country? — Say, it’s the empire of the Mikado, let’s cross the border of the Mikado! Isn’t this charming?” [*L’EXPOSITION UNIVERSELLE* 1867: 363–364]

Thus Japan at the exhibition became part of an undifferentiated East, a place for Europeans to imagine themselves in a land which time forgot, and in which they could escape the demands of their own, newly industrializing civilization. More theoretically, given such ethnographic perspectives, one could argue that the exhibition functioned to produce a feminized Orient, imposing on the east the status of the west’s desired, unassimilable Other, from which there could be no escape. But did it? Much recent work on visual culture has treated sites such as exhibitions in this way; it assumes that the exhibition design realizes a totalizing principle, imposing an ideological uniformity in which it becomes impossible for an exhibit, such as “Japan,” to escape its assigned place or for a visitor to see it otherwise. We need to be careful, however. The reading of a feminized Orient, as always, tells us much more about the one doing the feminizing, or the fantasizing, than about the object of their desire. Gazing at another does not so much serve to fix an object as produce a subject. Seeing Japan in Paris as Other, that is, may have been required for French self-description — self-orientation, perhaps. But this does little to tell us about how the Japanese at the exhibition saw themselves, or about other ways it might have been possible to see Japan. What other possibilities, then, were left for Japan, both as the variable object of a variety of looks, and as a desiring subject of its own?

2. EXHIBITION AS OBJECT LESSON AND INSTITUTIONAL POSSIBILITY

It is clear that voyages to the West, and visits to the exhibition, enabled a radically new way of seeing things for bakufu and other missions during the bakumatsu and early Meiji periods. The diaries of those who went to Europe and America are full of the contrasts which became self-evident once one left Japan. In 1862, Takashima Yūkei bemoaned the low quality of the objects which Alcock had selected to represent Japan. Particularly galling were the paper lanterns and umbrellas, wooden pillows, straw raincoats, and wooden and straw shoes — items made of materials which industrialization had left behind, and so which became visible at the exhibition as category mistakes [MIYANAGA 1989: 78]. Similarly, in 1867, the official bakufu diary noted the general logic and lessons of the exhibition design, a logic which had also been visible during the voyage, in colonial and semi-colonial sites such as Shanghai:

Looking at the differences between the exhibits of the countries, one can ascertain the customs of each country and the intelligence of its people; even in clothing and utensils one can see the gap in ethos and temperament between East and West [SHIBUSAWA 1928: 81–82].

On the Iwakura mission, the visible gap separating Japan and Britain came as an epiphany for Okubo Toshimichi, provoking not only a radical change in personality, but also the institutional synthesis which underwrote the policies of industrial promotion (*shokusan kōgyō*) [SASAKI 1979: 78–86]. Thus it was clear to Japanese visitors that something had to be done if Japan was to overcome this gap and escape permanent consignment to the native enclosure.

On the other hand, at the same time as the exhibition and other similar public spaces were making clear the extent to which Japan lagged behind the industrial nations of the west, they provided models of the institutions which Japan could adopt in order to make up this lag. That is, precisely the forms which revealed Japan as lacking were also the forms which allowed Japan to supplement that lack. In order to understand how this was possible, a different kind of analysis is necessary. Particularly, it seems important to create a space between the exhibition form in general, and the content of any particular exhibition. An exhibition provides a frame within which objects, and ideas, are made visible. Different kinds of frame display different kinds of things. Certainly, the design of the exhibition in Paris sought to impose a frame within which industrial progress would become self-evident; in order to do this, it enforced comparisons between similar products, seen to represent the countries in which they were produced. Within this frame, Japan suffered by comparison. But this does not mean that Japan was always condemned to inadequacy at the exhibition. Indeed, the exhibition became one of the means of making up for perceived inadequacies. In order to see how this was possible, let me

turn to the First Domestic Exhibition for the Promotion of Industry (Naikoku Kangyō Hakurankai), held in Tokyo in 1877.

3. EXHIBITION IN PRACTICE

The most sophisticated observer of European exhibitionary practice, and the architect of the first years of Meiji museum and exhibition policy, was Sano Tsunetami. Sano had been in Paris, on behalf of Saga clan, and in 1872 was put in charge of the Japanese exhibits for the Vienna exhibition of 1873. His report on Vienna, particularly his preface to the section on exhibitions, has become the locus classicus for recent analysis of the meaning and practice of exhibition in early Meiji Japan. One phrase, in particular, has become the critical site for this work. For Sano, exhibitions were simply an elaboration and expansion of the basic principles of the museum, the purpose of which he called “training the eye” (*ganmoku no kyō*) [SANO 1964]. For some, this phrase has suggested that exhibitions may have worked to produce a new regime of the gaze. Borrowing from Foucault, they align the exhibitionary apparatus with other imported institutions, such as prisons, the military, and schools, which serve to “discipline” modern society—to make all parts of that society visible to an impersonal gaze, to instil a new sense of self-consciousness within national subjects, and so to situate them in such a way so that they might be productive for and loyal to the state. The rhetoric here is perhaps familiar, close to the argument mentioned above, that there can only be one place for Japan at the exhibition, and only one way of looking at Japan. To oversimplify this kind of critique, modern institutions, through the gaze, fix national subjects.

There is some license for such an argument. Sano did not have the final word on exhibitions. His proposal formed the blueprint for the government’s policies, but both his timetable and his plans were modified as they were incorporated within higher-level anxieties about the gap separating Japan from the West and so the necessary pace of industrial change. Sano himself had made it clear that exhibitions could be useful to the government’s policy of industrial promotion, and had suggested that government initiative was needed to jumpstart their adoption. However, in being taken up by his boss, Ōkubo Toshimichi, his suggestions became suffused with a sense of national emergency, invoking a crisis which required immediate attention and government direction. The personal investment and evangelical rhetoric of Ōkubo is well-known. In proposing a national exhibition he pointed to the daily degeneration of regional crafts, through ignorance, shortsightedness, or laziness, and called on the government’s “obligation to develop and enlighten” (*kaisei no gimu*) [ŌKUBO 1928]. The tone here is one of national mobilization, and the vision is a total one. Put alongside the concentration of authority within the Naimushō, the establishment of the police, and the suppression of political opposition, it becomes tempting to mark exhibitions as part of the apparatus of an authoritarian state. *Bunmei kaika* and mechanisms of control become two sides of the same coin by which imperial subjects were formed.

Again, though, we need to be careful here, in assuming either that the exhibition was the same as other spaces of social discipline — and thus that there was only one, enforced way of seeing the things on display — or that the exhibition served, or even was intended, to produce national subjects. To take the second point first, the exhibition was intended to promote industry. Indeed, its name proclaimed this. And in order to do so it followed its models in London, Paris, and Vienna. By enabling a comparative analysis between different examples of similar objects, the exhibition allowed visitors to see the differences of quality, manufacture, efficiency, and so understand how they might improve their own production. In order to achieve this, the rules took pains to specify both how exhibitors should display their exhibits, and what visitors should be looking for. But before any of this could happen, however, the officials had to exclude anything that might compromise the comparative pedagogy they intended. Above all, they took pains to ensure that exhibits were seen not as evidence of the gap between Japanese and western industry which had originally motivated the exhibition (and the bureaucratic apparatus which supported it), but rather as models of industrial productivity to which any Japanese craftsmen might aspire.

Thus foreign exhibits were banned. Requests by the Spanish ambassador for a copy of the rules, in order that Spanish exhibitors from the Phillipines might participate, were refused. But without the examples of productivity which such exhibits provided, there would be no incentive for Japanese craftsmen to improve their own technique. And so foreign exhibits were allowed, *as long as they could not be seen as foreign*.

Imported foreign goods are not to be exhibited by private citizens. Foreign goods which can serve as samples for comparison shall be exhibited by officials. (Things produced inside the country which copy foreign goods are not subject to this restriction.) [OKUBO 1876]

The three-step definitional waltz pointed to an attempt to mark off a domestic sphere of industrial transformation directed by the Tokyo bureaucracy, while simultaneously making invisible the distinction between domestic and foreign which both constituted and was constituted by it. Industrial export promotion could only proceed if the imports on which the exports were to be modeled were regulated and domesticated so as not to be seen to come from abroad. In other words, a domestic exhibition could only promote industry if it could not be seen to be national in intent.

While it was therefore possible to exclude visible evidence of the foreign, and so forestall the sense of national inadequacy which it might provoke, it proved more difficult to determine exactly what the space of the exhibition did mean. First, there were earlier, indigenous traditions of display with which both exhibitors and visitors were familiar and on which they could draw in order to understand what they should do at the exhibition. And second, there was a series of contradictions embedded in the aims and structure of the exhibition. The rules stressed that “this exhibition is

about profit,” but on the other hand it could not be a marketplace. Rather it sought to gather into one place, for a fixed period of time, the goods which the market dispersed throughout the country and the world. By classifying these into categories and placing them in cases, it promised to make visible the differences between them and so make predictable which would be more successful in the market. (And by providing such a space, the government hoped to be able to intervene in the market and subordinate its workings to national purposes.) In order for the exhibition to work, in other words, the goods could not leave the buildings. They could be marked as sold, but they should not change hands [ŌKUBO 1876]. And this posed a threat, requiring yet another set of regulations. Since the products could not leave the grounds until the exhibition itself was closed, the visitor might “lose their desire” (*nozomi o ushinahi*) and the seller would have to wait to get their money. To avoid this prospect of the exhibition failing to allow the increased exchange which was its object, the authorities proposed to give exhibitors rent-free land, “outside the exhibition but inside the park,” on which they could build stalls at their own expense and sell the products which they were displaying inside the exhibition enclosure [ŌKUBO 1876].

This concession (these concessions) in turn led the exhibition back to the older forms of display against which it was trying to distinguish itself. These older forms — *bussankai*, *shogakai*, *kaichō*, and *misemono* — had their differences in the Edo period, but they all sought to attract the attention of the viewer by revealing something he or she had not seen before, that is, to solicit their custom and cash by making sure they did not look elsewhere. Thus, in 1877 too, before visitors entered the formal enclosure of the exhibition, they passed through a thoroughly commercial zone, with a jumble of stalls pressing in on them from each side, clamoring for their attention and cash. The official guide to the exhibition tries to draw the visitor’s attention away from this zone, placing it after a highly didactic (and dry) description of the main exhibition [NAIKOKU KANGYŌ HAKURANKAI JIMUKYOKU 1877]. But the fact was, the stalls were among the first things the visitor saw. In newspaper accounts, the presence of the stalls, and the hucksterism and showmanship they generated, recalled to mind the earlier displays. The signboards hanging outside the stalls and the welcoming calls of the salespeople reminded one reporter of the atmosphere at *kaichō* [YOSHIMI 1992: 132].

Again, the officials made a valiant attempt to draw a distinction between these supplementary attractions and the exhibition proper. Once past the stalls, the visitor was met by the imposing main gate of the exhibition, with a set of rules excluding lunatics and the drunk and suggestions on how to inspect the exhibits [NAKAMURA 1877: 4]. Inside the gate, exhibitors had been exhorted only to display those things which would further the purposes of industrial promotion, enabling “daily improvement in agricultural and industrial technique.” Thus “plants, flowers, and minerals” were of expert interest, but antiques, strange fauna, and old paintings were beside the point [ŌKUBO 1876]. But for the exhibitor it was precisely the unusual that would attract attention and renown (which even the officials acknowledged as

the intended motivation for participation in the event); and the reporters found themselves drawn to those exhibits which stood out from the rest and drew attention to themselves, again often by invoking earlier forms of display. The Yomiuri Shinbun lingered on a nine foot long cake modeled on a treasure ship [YOSHIMI 1992: 133] — its contribution to industrial development is doubtful, but its success as spectacle was assured.

My point here is a simple one. However much the bureaucrats might have wanted the exhibition to mean a single thing — to subordinate the exhibitors' display and the visitors' looking to a simple lesson of industrial development — they could not exclude other ways of showing and seeing from the space of the exhibition. What was displayed depended on who was doing the displaying, and what you saw depended on where you were standing, and how you were looking. And however much we might want to think about the exhibition in terms of representation — particularly, a kind of representation which served to produce particular forms of national identity and subjectivity — we are probably better served by acknowledging that representation is highly contingent. Any particular representation necessarily depends on the particular circumstances of its production, and in order to understand this, one has to analyze the various practices which constitute the space in which a representation becomes possible.

4. JAPAN AT THE EXHIBITION

Let me end by suggesting that it is possible to make such an argument even in the context of the Paris exhibition with which I began. In 1867, as I noted above, it is tempting to imagine that there was no way for Japan to be seen other than as an ethnographic curiosity. Architecture and classification provided a system into which Japan did not fit. But this account needs to be complicated. First, the fact that Japan could be seen to be unassimilable to the standardizing, “universal” norms of the West itself provided an opportunity for substantial cultural, economic, and diplomatic capital to be made in the years to come from the fact of Japanese uniqueness. Even in 1867, European aesthetes delighted in the Japanese crafts which allowed them to display their own refined sensibilities; the artistic avant-garde could imagine that woodblock prints might provide a radically new way of seeing [BROMFIELD 1984]. And it was precisely the antiques and curios — the embodiment of Japan's curiousness — that became the primary export good at foreign exhibitions during the early years of Meiji.

Second, within the official classification an exhibit's nationality was subordinate to its function; that is, the system of the exhibition worked to divorce particular objects from their national or ethnic context in order that they might be made available for visual comparison and industrial production. Here, the exhibition displayed the possibilities both for foreign capital in Japan, and for Japan in the world economy. Japan's mineral deposits, and the historical record of silver exports, both attracted comment in the official report — foreshadowing the flood of silver

from the country which bedevilled fiscal policy during the early years of Meiji. The international jury, meanwhile, noted the resistance of Japanese silkworms to the blight then infesting Europe — pointing to a window of opportunity during which Japan might enjoy comparative advantage in at least one sector of industry. Finally, Japanese technical ingenuity and productivity was a continuous source of comment. “We Occidentals still have some lessons to learn from many people whom we seem to despise” [*L’EXPOSITION UNIVERSELLE* 1867: 365]. While the general rhetoric was Orientalist, there was nonetheless a space, visible at the exhibition, for the Orient to enter history.

Finally, the exhibition not only sought to make Japanese resources available to the western view, but also promised to display western technology for global dissemination. That is, modern technology — including the technologies of display — could not be copyrighted; the industrial progress which it enabled could not be denied to any other nation, although much effort would be spent on maintaining the mid-nineteenth-century hierarchies which it first produced. Much effort, too, was needed to understand the technology and assimilate the lessons of progress. In 1867, Japanese efforts were often frustrated. “The steam engine... is a marvel of design and technical achievement. One should be able to grasp its working principles, but to my regret, I lacked sufficient knowledge and, uncomprehending, merely gazed at it as one might at a passing cloud or wisp of smoke...” [SHIBUSAWA 1928: 82]. In 1873, these frustrations resulted in a substantial research party accompanying the official bakufu delegation to Vienna, and the lengthy report to which I referred above. In other words, if Japan was to escape permanent consignment to the native enclosure, it would have to transform itself using western industrial technologies and according to western structures of political and economic practice. On the other hand those technologies and practices were premised on the universal applicability of their principles, and so their accessibility to all comers. Even in Paris, even in 1867, Japan could see a way out of the representational bind in which it found itself, even if this could only lead through the opportunities, and likely ravages, of the practice of development.

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