

Japanese Art Collections in the UK Event

Co-organised by The Japan Foundation and The V&A

In March 2006 the Japan Foundation and the Victoria and Albert Museum co-organised a symposium to investigate the state of Japanese art collections in UK museums. Thirteen curators from around the UK were invited to discuss their collections and issues relating to them.

It has been assessed that in the UK there are over 150 collections of Japanese art. However, many people both in the UK and in Japan have been insufficiently aware that collections exist other than those that are housed in our major national collections such as the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the British Museum.

Certainly these valuable collections deserve much higher visibility and there is a growing need for the public to be made much more aware of where these collections are to be found, what they contain and how they are maintained. With these thoughts in mind the Japan Foundation organised a one-day symposium on 21 March attended by 13 museum professionals from all over the UK, who are in different ways involved in Japanese collections. Obviously, these participants represent only a part of the Japanese collections in the UK, but they belong to those who hold a firm wish and determination to raise awareness of the collections or at least are sincerely concerned about them. Most of them are already members of 'Japanese Art Collection in the UK: JACUK' (Subject Specialist Network for Japanese art) and have devoted their time and energy to tackle issues surrounding the improvement of Japanese art collections. We respect their worthwhile intentions.

The day comprised two parts: presentations and discussion.

Short presentations from each participant during the first half of the symposium provided a detailed introduction and picture of the current state of the Japanese art collection in the respective museums.

The common issues identified during the symposium included a lack of resources, shortage of time, space and money to adequately maintain and expand the Japanese collections and their use. Above all, there is a lack of knowledge of Japanese art. It is quite often the case in regional museums that a curator who is not a Japanese art specialist has to cover substantial areas, including Japan. Whilst expertise from the major institutions such as the V&A is readily available, the prosperity of Japanese art in this country may be in the hands of one individual enthusiastic curator and the ups-and-downs are determined by the policy and politics of each institution, where often Japan is understated in favour of China. The deficiency in creating experts among the younger generation to whom existing expertise can be passed on appears to be one of the major issues to look into for the long-term sustainability of the collections.

In the latter half of the symposium, participants discussed passionately how to raise the profile of Japanese art collections. Tying up with UK education and promoting Japan and Japanese art through schools and universities was seen to be one possible way and setting up an online virtual exhibition to introduce their collection and activities was perceived to be another. The possibility of having a special external body, in addition to the existent JACUK and sharing expertise/resources available from outside UK, which have tended to be limited to the major institutions, were also discussed.

We shall also like to note that a related seminar was held in our conference room on the following day where four speakers from UK museums were invited to demonstrate how their Japanese collections have been valued and how they have been a source of inspiration for their temporary exhibitions, together with an overview of the historical background to the collection of Japanese art in the UK. The complete transcript of the proceedings of the seminar will be available on our website, www.jpf.org.uk

Last but not least, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to Gregory Irvine, Senior Curator at the V&A. Both symposium and seminar would not have been possible without his very valuable help and advice.

The Japan Foundation, London

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To read the full transcript, please see www.jpf.org.uk/research_archive/JACUK_text.pdf