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REVERSE JAPONISME AND THE STRUCTURE
OF MODERN ART IN JAPAN

It was Oscar Wilde who first observed, as early as 1891, that Japan, for the West, was a mere invention, a purely aesthetic fancy.¹ Yet the Orientalization of Japan has also been enacted within. Modern art history lies at the center of this process. As Karatani Kōjin has argued, “‘Japan’ as an aestheticized object was predominantly formed in visual art, in particular by its own discursive practices.”² The post-Enlightenment West constituted itself in opposition to its “primitive” Other, as manifested in, for example, African sculpture and Asian painting. But the internalization of this same dialectic in Japan, coupled with a successful program of modernization based on the European model, resulted in a complex and unstable condition whereby the native Self, conceived in opposition to its Western Other, became at the same time Other to itself. By the time the country defeated Russia in war in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Japanese people had experienced a nearly half-century-long process of defining themselves against the foreign *and* the native. Japan found its own idealized “primitive” (*gen-shi*), antithetical to the modern present—an appropriation of Western Orientalist discourse—in the native (East Asian) past.³ Modern art and modernism as they developed in Japan were shaped by these distinct problematics of Japanese modernity.

In this context it becomes possible to conceive the dialectic of Japan’s modern identity formation as a kind of reverse Japonisme, and of Japanese modern art’s structure and systems as having been fashioned by that dynamic. Through the European discourse of Japonisme, Japanese art—both traditional and contemporary—accrued a certain set of historically and culturally derived values and meanings. For some time the story of the relationship between the so-called traditional arts and European modern painting has been embedded within a larger art historical narrative of the formation of European modern art. But the other half of that story, as yet largely untold, is what happened when Japonisme went home, so to speak—that is, when foreign ideas concerning Japanese art were put to use in Japan in the writing of a national art history and in the creation of a new field of contemporary art. The tensions inherent to reverse Japonisme, and what

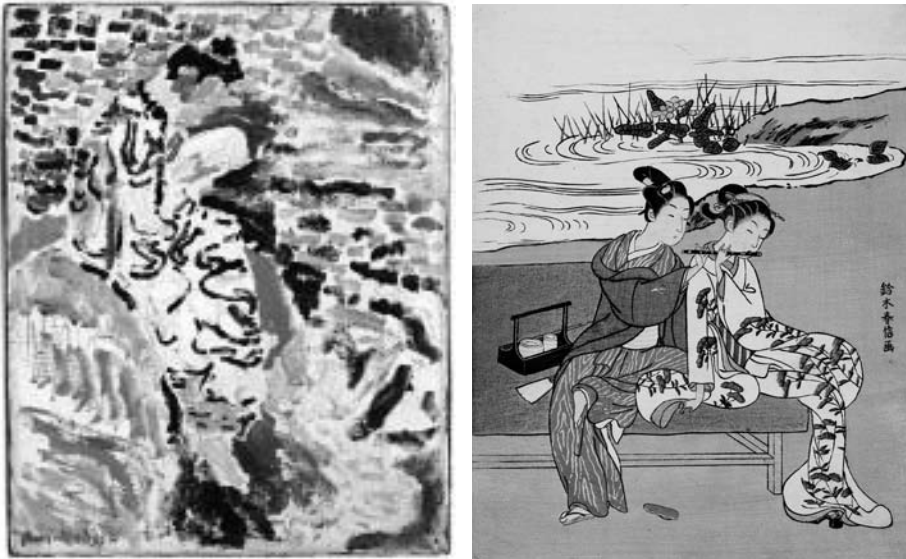


FIGURE 3. (Left) Henri Matisse, *La Japonaise: Woman beside the Water*. Collioure, summer 1905. Oil and pencil on canvas, 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. Purchase and partial anonymous gift. (709.1983) Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2008 Succession H. Matisse/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

FIGURE 4. (Right) Suzuki Harunobu, *Parody of the Romance of the Chinese Emperor Xuanzong and the Lady Yang Guifei*. 1766. Polychrome woodblock print. Yale University Art Gallery, the Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection. Gift of Mrs. William H. Moore

they portended for the development of art both modern and modernist, are the subject of this chapter.⁴

Two paintings, created less than a decade apart and half a world away from one another, serve as an instructive opening to this complex subject. In 1905 Henri Matisse (1869–1954) painted a small work, *La Japonaise: Woman beside the Water* (figure 3), whose kimono-clad subject and emboldened use of unblended, pure color had been inspired by Japanese ukiyo-e prints (figure 4). In 1897 Matisse's contemporary, the Japanese artist Kuroda Seiki (1866–1924), had completed *Lakeside*, a painting also depicting a recognizably Japanese subject but in a manner Kuroda had recently learned from Parisian salon painters (plate 2). To propose that these works inhabit the same discursive field is also to indicate the complex nature of Japonisme as a global phenomenon. In Matisse's case we see a French painter looking to Japanese art for a radical formal language of, in his words, “expressive colours that are not necessarily descriptive colours.” With his “eye . . . unclogged, cleansed by the Japanese [prints],” Matisse interwove graphic, independent strokes of paint into a pulsating web of color-forms that departed markedly from the painterly conventions of the European oil painting tradition.⁵ Kuroda's painting, on the other hand, presents the case of a Japanese artist looking to France, the center of European academic painting as well as of modernist developments repre-

sented by Matisse, and working in a contemporary salon manner that he perceived to be entirely modern.

Both Matisse's and Kuroda's images of a Japanese woman in a waterside setting adopt pictorial conventions associated with historical Japanese painting and ukiyo-e prints—an unmodulated palette, the close cropping of composition, and an emphasis on the picture plane. But they arrive at these from opposite directions and to divergent ends. The Japanese artist's painting is closer to European academic norms in its pictorial recession, anchoring horizon line, and high degree of finish. Aiming toward the very thing that Matisse was moving away from, Kuroda was seeking to establish in his home country an approach to art that conformed to the supposedly “universal” model of the French academy and salon. Subordinating individual brushstrokes to the effect of a coherent and believable space, his canvas embodies what were then the most innovative and modern artistic aspirations in Japan: it is both a “finished” tableau and a carefully wrought example of the new Japanese national school.

We can also observe the selective translation of foreign visual modes in the service of disparate local visions of “modern art” in images by two painters of earlier generations, Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) and Takahashi Yuichi (1828–94) (figures 5 and 6).⁶ For van Gogh, perhaps the most ardent of European Japonistes, ukiyo-e prints were the doorways to an imaginary Japanese artistic utopia. His oil *The Courtesan*, painted in 1887 after (at first, literally traced from) a print by the mid-nineteenth-century designer Keisai Eisen that had been reproduced in *Paris Illustré*, is an experiment in the translation of one visual medium into another. Takahashi's *The Courtesan*, also a work in oils, was painted in 1872, some fifteen years before van Gogh's discovery of ukiyo-e, by an artist of the first generation of modern Japanese oil painters. It represented a new, radical type of portraiture in late nineteenth-century Japan. While van Gogh found in Japanese art a “religion” leading the artist away from “a world of convention” to an intimate rapport with nature, Takahashi found in European oil painting a verisimilistic mode of expression capable of transforming a hackneyed ukiyo-e motif into a probing psychological portrait of the individual.⁷ Neither van Gogh nor Takahashi, when they painted their respective courtesan pictures, had extensive firsthand experience of the foreign art forms that proved to be such decisive influences on their art. Both painters had glimpsed, if only obliquely, new and unknown worlds of experience and expression through the intermediary of the reprographic print—the modern medium par excellence, whose reproductive technologies facilitated the spread of an incipient global modernism and its diverse local manifestations.

While some of the preceding versions of Japonisme may be more familiar to Euro-American audiences than others, it is clear that each operates according to a dialectic structured in terms of geographical, chronological, and stylistic difference. It was this modern dialectic of difference that underlay late nineteenth-century notions connecting art and nation in the context of an art world made international via such institutions as the World's Fair. But if these works by Kuroda and Matisse, and van Gogh and Takahashi, put into play the unstable pairings of East and West and past and present, then this might prompt further questions: how are we best to understand this dialectic as a



FIGURE 5. (Left) Vincent van Gogh, *The Courtesan (After Keisai Eisen)*, 1887, oil on canvas, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

FIGURE 6. (Right) Takahashi Yuichi, *The Courtesan (Bijin—Oiran)*, c. 1872, oil on canvas, Tokyo University of the Arts

global phenomenon? And what might it mean that Japonisme could take place in Japan at all?

Wherever it manifested itself, Japonisme was a constellation of ideas concerning what Japanese art was, is, and could be—part of a larger effort to identify cultural difference in the geopolitical context of late nineteenth-century modernity. It was a product of the mutual “discovery” of the peoples of Japan and Europe and was formed within the framework of Euro-American conceptualizations of art and national identity in the age of imperialism. Though Japonisme was born in Europe, it was not only in the West that it came to define what was unique and particular about the Japanese and their art. The primitivist and Orientalist conceptions of difference that are the basis for Japonisme as we commonly understand it were also appropriated in Japan in a type of self-fashioning that saw its most vigorous manifestation in the visual arts. The reverberations of such thinking took diverse, yet logically consistent, routes during the roughly six decades from the beginning of the Meiji period in 1868 to the end of the succeeding Taishō period in 1926.

The European vogue for Japanese objets d'art and the development of the discourse of Japonisme were a direct result of the increased visibility of Japanese art overseas, thanks to the succession of international expositions that were held between the 1860s and 1910 in London (1862, 1910), Paris (1867, 1878, 1889, 1900), Vienna (1873), Philadelphia (1876), Chicago (1893), St. Louis (1904), and elsewhere. Although critical reaction to Japanese art in these international contexts was varied, it was almost always described in terms that implicitly contrasted it to the mainstream of European art. Most interpretations of Japanese art were related to the concept of the "decorative," an umbrella term that critics often employed when describing the graphic linearity, stylized distortion, pure color, and calligraphic quality they saw distinguishing Japanese art from European. These properties were seen in works across the wide range of Japanese visual and decorative art forms shown to the European and American publics, from ceramics, textiles, and lacquerware to painting, which, with few exceptions, was executed in native media and formats. Emerging within the nineteenth-century discourse of Japonisme in the West, this set of supposedly "unique" characteristics attributed to Japanese art was quickly adopted in Japan as the basis for the history of the national art. Even today the "decorative" remains a standard way of identifying an essential Japanese character that has persisted in art through time despite the marked influences of China and Europe.⁸

But what I am most interested in pursuing in this book is not so much this fascination with difference, which has been the subject of much study, as the presence of a seemingly conflicting urge within the discourse of Japonisme to define Japanese art simultaneously in terms of both difference *and* similarity. The tensions that arose from such thinking were captured in a catalog describing the national art displays at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition:

In the not very distant day when we shall receive envoys and contributions from the inhabitants of Mars . . . to our own international expositions, these exhibits will probably not differ very much more from our own than do those of the Empire of Japan in the present Chicago show. Notwithstanding all the familiarity bred by long acquaintance with these products from beyond the seas, the European or the American who enters these galleries after sufficiently exploring the others, from Chili [*sic*] to Siberia, recognizes at once a new order of things and a new world. . . . This air of having come from somewhere beyond the stars is not diminished by the presence of those inevitable qualities which are common both to the Martians and to ourselves, and which are laboriously brought out by the historians of Japanese art seeking to establish a common humanity.⁹

The text then goes on to enumerate some of the rather unlikely analogies that were being drawn between historical European and Japanese art at this time. It draws parallels, for example, between the Renaissance master Raphael and Kose Kanaoka, who was active in the latter half of the ninth century; between the ninth-century Frenchman Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier and Tosa Mitsunobu, who was active in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; and between the "Augustan age" of Louis XIV and the

Genroku period, 1688–1704. On the basis of such comparisons, which were widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is possible to see Japonisme as an unstable discourse that contained within it the contradictory desires for national differentiation and universal similarity. In this sense it echoed Japan's own complicated discourse of modernity predicated upon its status as a non-Western yet modernized nation.

Let us now revisit the pair of pictures by Kuroda and Matisse. For quite different reasons, each painting occupied a position outside of the mainstream of contemporary art in Paris. Matisse's, shown in the Salon d'Automne's Fauve Room in 1905, was seen as an attack on tradition, with one viewer calling it a "great farce"; Kuroda's, shown at the 1900 Exposition Universelle, also in Paris, was dismissed along with neighboring Japanese oil paintings as "rather clumsy and . . . lacking in taste" and a "pale pastiche of the unaccomplished pictures in our Salons."¹⁰ That these unorthodox pictures by artists who were contemporaries yet hailed from distant corners of the world should overlap in theme and manner may not have aroused the interest of the European observer. But in Japan, the significance of such a coincidence was readily apparent. And it appeared especially momentous to the first generation of oil painters who had trained under Kuroda but later rebelled against the modern institutions of art he helped to establish. While Kuroda hoped to achieve a distinctly Japanese national school of painting by adopting Europe's supposedly "universal" mode of art, a group of younger Japanese artists glimpsed a further possibility within the framework of modernity—that of transcending the false universalism of Western art to achieve a painting that would be truly universal. The historical coincidence they witnessed—that is, of the simultaneous emergence of European Japonisme and the Japanese westernization of local art practices—heralded the epochal coming together of Eastern and Western art, which were commonly held to be the world's major, and historically antithetical, artistic streams. In this utopian vision, the destiny of modern art was clear: all signs pointed to the development of a future art that would cross the great geographical and cultural divide and unite East and West.

The complex field of Japonisme would thus make its mark on the local development of modern art in two distinct yet overlapping phases. Over a period of about fifty years Japan's Japonisme made a transit from the ambition to create a national art based on notions of a unique Japanese identity, to the desire for a cosmopolitan commonality. From the 1870s through the mid-1900s the structure of Japanese modern art and its institutions were shaped largely in response to Japonisme's compulsion toward national and ethnic essentialism. Subsequently, from around 1910 through the 1920s, a younger generation of artists saw in European modern paintings imprinted with the influence of Japanese art, like Matisse's and van Gogh's, the starting point for an art transcending the limitations of national borders. At this time Japonisme's incipient version of a global artistic language became a driving force among oil painters who wished to reenvision their practice on a universal rather than national basis. Perhaps ironically, European Japonisme acted as a catalyst for Japanese painters' attempts to resolve the uneasy relationship between native and foreign, and past and present, which was both the crux of Japonisme thought and the defining problematic of Japanese modern art. The legacy of Japonisme,

which held within it the seemingly contradictory impulses toward nationalism and cosmopolitanism, was twofold: on the one hand it acted as an impetus to the creation of a national modern art practice, while on the other it played a crucial role in the formulation of an indigenous modernism.

MODERN ART: BUILDING A NATIONAL SCHOOL

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries European art provided the ground against which all Japanese art, whether modern or premodern, or in oils or traditional media, came to be defined. This inescapable reality was a direct consequence of Japan's position within the global order and was as true for the apologist of native tradition as for the champion of things foreign. Visions of the future direction of Japanese art, as well as the history of its development from the earliest times forward, were shaped by the dominant forces of the era of modernization in which they were born.

With the Meiji Restoration of 1868, power was transferred from the shogunate to the Meiji emperor, whose new regime initiated the building of a modern nation-state after the Euro-American model. This strategy, which was adopted in order to protect the country from the threats of Western imperialism and colonialism, also meant that Japan must face the European powers on terms not of its own devising, a situation with vital consequences across all fields of endeavor. Already by 1905, not even forty years after the Restoration, Japan's military victory in the Russo-Japanese War offered proof that the overriding goals of the Meiji state—the achievement of modernization and parity with Western nations—had been accomplished. During this remarkably short span of time Japanese society underwent a series of profound and revolutionary transformations in the push to modernize. It was within this context of rapid and often contradictory change and rupture that Japanese modern art was born and eventually institutionalized. And, perhaps most significant for our purposes, the distinctive dynamics and inherent problematics of Japanese modernity gave to the local institution of *bijutsu*, “art,” a structure and character markedly different from those of its European model.

From its inception, Japanese modern art was implicated in a politicized system of international exchange between Japan and her sister nations in Europe and America. The Meiji-period policies guiding the collective drive towards modernization—“civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*) and “rich country, strong military” (*fukoku kyōhei*)—were complementary, so that the arts came to be recognized and valued as an integral component of nation building and an important element of the country's participation in global trade and politics. We can hear echoes of these interrelated concerns in the words of the aesthetician Nishi Amane, who, in an address to the Meiji emperor in 1877, stressed the strategic importance of art and aesthetics to a modern nation:

[A]rt fosters the flourishing of civilization; it elevates the human world into a lofty realm. Naturally, the ministers and officials appointed to legislate laws and govern society must not neglect it. Although it is not the purpose of the fine arts to have a direct

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bearing on policies, they nevertheless are an indirect objective of political tactics. This is why you will not find any example in any country of a sovereign who has not paid attention to this topic. After all, the true purpose of aesthetics does not conflict with the comparable purposes of morality, law, and economics.¹¹

Under such a rationale, the ambition to achieve parity with the West was extended to the creation of a new, and internationally competitive, field of art. In distinction to native precedents, which did not associate notions of the nation or the people as a whole with the visual and decorative arts, the European concept of “art” was adopted and eventually institutionalized as a modern—and national—cultural practice. As Kitazawa Noriaki and Satō Dōshin have made clear, this amounted to the importation of the very concept of fine art itself, as well as the beginnings of state patronage of art making.¹² European-derived attitudes linking art and national identity would drive the state’s (and artists’) fitful attempts to centralize, institutionalize, and in this way modernize art practices in the Meiji period. The development of an official patronage system modeled on the examples of France and England was a crucial part of the government’s agenda for art that would complement its goals in the international arena. Its efforts and policies, though often erratic and circuitous, eventually culminated in the establishment of a national museum (1872), academy (1887), and salon (1907). Through these institutions the government answered the call of painters such as Takahashi Yuichi, who urged that “[a]rt, the criterion of the level of civilization in a country, must be encouraged at every opportunity, especially today when Japan finds it necessary to demonstrate its inviolable national sovereignty and prestige so that she may surpass even the other advanced nations of the world.”¹³

Yet the establishment of this new field of cultural endeavor was chaotic and marked by conflict. Its young institutions were sites for struggle and debate over competing visions of what should constitute the national art, as artists, intellectuals, and government bureaucrats battled to define, adapt, and bend the emerging field to various, often antagonistic, ends. Long unresolved was the question of art’s purpose and nature—whether it was primarily a group of industrial products for export designed to bring in profit to support the cash-strapped government’s modernization programs, or an autonomous cultural field embodying the spiritual character of the nation. It is not surprising, then, that for some time the government’s efforts to promote the development of art were sponsored by two separate ministries, one devoted to trade and industry, the other to education and culture. In 1876, when the Meiji state established its first artistic training facility, the Technical Art School (Kōbu Bijutsu Gakkō), it was under the direction of the Ministry of Industry (Kōbushō). Only surviving six years before its closure, the school was replaced in 1887 by a national academy, the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō), which operated under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (Monbushō). In tandem with this tension between trade and culture was an even greater one between native and foreign modes of practice. For example, the Technical Art School limited its instruction to European painting and sculpture, while, at least initially, the Tokyo School of Fine Arts restricted its instruction to training in East Asian

artistic media. These relations between industry and art, and native and foreign, formed the framework for the structural development of art during the Meiji period.

Naturally the international market for Japanese art—in both economic and culturally symbolic terms—in large part determined the growth of a domestic art practice and system of support at home. From the early 1870s, when the Meiji government first brought its national ambitions to the world stage, it actively participated in the competitive international expositions that were held in major cities around the globe. Such exhibits of painting, sculpture, and decorative arts were shaped in conformity with the prevailing Western classification of art objects and the hierarchical distinction between fine art on the one hand and craft or the decorative arts on the other. In general, applied arts objects or painting in traditional media and formats were most highly praised and purchased abroad; among the Japanese art forms oil painting alone did not find a ready or enthusiastic market. Europeans and Americans wished to find sufficient “Japaneseness” in Japanese modern art; Louis Gonse, for example, praised Kawanabe Gyōsai (also known as Kyōsai), who worked in traditional media, as “purely Japanese in the midst of the general corruption of taste by European influences.”¹⁴ In this regard an influential lecture delivered in 1887 to governmental bureaucrats by Okakura Kakuzō (also known as Tenshin; 1862–1913), an advocate of recognizably “Japanese” painting, is worth quoting at some length:

The nature of art is born out of the characteristics of a race, the climate of the land, and the conditions of social institutions. It cannot be transplanted into a different era, nor can it be used in a different country, since it belongs exclusively to a specific time and people. . . .

If we truly want to produce “pure Western art” in Japan, unless we adopt Western customs in everything, from dyeing our beards and hair purple to making our eyes blue, we will be absolutely unable to acquire their spirit. This would be no different from discarding our national identity. The future civilizations of the whole world will not be dealing with worldly affairs in the same, equal way; they will strive to make this world perfect by preserving the characteristics of each country. . . .

In the future, arts and handicrafts will play the most important role in our country’s foreign trade. Until the present day, the reason why Japan became known to the West was not because of the profundity of its science, nor because of the elaborateness of its machines, nor for its promptness in copying foreign customs and manners. Rather, it was on account of its natural ability to transcend the dust of worldly matters through the spirit of art. . . . But in order for art objects to become widespread in foreign markets, they must have the Japanese elegance. If instead these products are made according to Western forms, no one will take notice of them. . . . I cannot avoid the feeling that insistence on a purely Western style is extremely disadvantageous for Japan. . . .

The business of art is related on a high level to the honor of the empire, and it is associated on a lower level with the ups and downs of trade. Responsibility weighs heavily on you, gentlemen! This duty that all of you must fulfill will grow even heavier in the future.¹⁵

Given such concerns, the art of the past was as much at issue as that of the present in the establishment of a national school of modern art. It is no coincidence that the formulation of an identifiably Japanese artistic tradition and the writing of an art history (both bearing Okakura's indelible imprint) would accompany the growth of the modern nation. When the state had centralized the once heterogeneous artistic field as a means of its self-representation, an account of Japanese art's past as well as a road map for its future were needed, and contemporary art, mediating between the two, became a hotly contested battleground. In this context, the Japanese art world came to be shaped by two complementary yet antagonistic impulses: to identify and preserve a national artistic heritage, and to participate as an equal peer in the international art community centered in Europe. From a geopolitical perspective, the first would assure Japan a position within the order of nations as an autonomous and civilized country with its own proper historical tradition; the second offered proof of Japan's mastery of the modern and its ability to compete with Europe on Western terms. But neither could be profitably neglected.

The question of how practicing artists should navigate these twin concerns was answered with the establishment of two parallel streams of painting. One, *nihonga*, or "Japanese painting," was a modern invention that should be considered an adaptation, not a natural continuation, of premodern modes of painting—in effect, a form of neotraditionalism. The other, *yōga*, "Western painting" or oil painting in European styles, was largely based on the authority of Western tradition. As we shall later see, this dualism, and the effort to transcend it, would prove to be the defining subject of Yorozu Tetsugorō's career. It would be a mistake, however, to say that Japanese artists and theorists who were active prior to that time considered the binary to be a simple one: that is, to say that they equated *nihonga* with the emulation of premodern Japan, or *yōga* with that of the modern West. The situation was much more complicated than that. Indeed, Okakura, a vigorous proponent of *nihonga* who resisted the notion that Western norms and standards for art were universal, described the "paradox" of his country's historical situation to an American audience in 1904 as follows: "New Japan is not merely a restoration, nor is it a transformation. . . . [T]he forces that are building her national consciousness are as much a recovery of ancient modes as an assimilation of the Occidental methods and energy. The conflict which results from these rival activities has often landed us in dilemmas, curious, ridiculous, perhaps painful, to alien eyes. The unexpected ludicrousness of the paradox is there, and sometimes with its *[sic]* cruelty."¹⁶

Nihonga and *yōga*, the two parallel streams of modern Japanese painting that originated and crystallized in the Meiji period, are symptoms of the fundamental paradox of Japanese modernity that Okakura described so vividly. Their existence results from the fact that, as Naoki Sakai has observed, "the discursive object called Japan has presented a heterogeneous instance that could not be easily integrated into the global configuration organized according to the pairing of the modern and premodern."¹⁷ By definition oppositional and mutually exclusive, the two categories of cultural production called *nihonga* and *yōga* are constituted within—and structurally replicate—the irresolvable binaries of East/West, non-modern/modern, and local/universal that undergird the modern paradigm.¹⁸

Various criteria have served to configure nihonga and yōga antithetically within the discourse of modern Japanese art. In the broadest and simplest view, the distinction is one of materials and formats. Yōga encompasses works executed in European media, such as oils on canvas or watercolors on paper, which are generally framed; nihonga uses indigenous media, such as *sumi* (ink) and colors on silk or paper, in traditional formats such as folding screens, fan paintings, album leaves, handscrolls, and hanging scrolls.¹⁹ In principle, nihonga and yōga differ in style and subject matter as well. Although the two modes have exhibited great diversity, nihonga has tended toward techniques and themes identified with Japanese (or East Asian) history and culture, while yōga has tended to exhibit a certain degree of contemporaneity with developments in Europe. These proclivities reflect differences in the traditions and the sources of authority they each claim as their own, although in practice both nihonga and yōga have regularly sought rejuvenation by poaching from the other. Thus talk of the “Japanization” (*ni-honka*) of oil painting (in terms of subject, style, or “spirit”) surfaced, for example, in the 1890s and again in the 1920s and 1930s, a phenomenon that we will look at more closely in the two final chapters. Likewise, in nihonga, the execution of Western-style techniques and themes in traditional media has long been seen as a means for artists to assimilate “modern” elements into a predominantly “traditional,” native mode.

Nevertheless, nihonga and yōga were organized camps that fought to control the direction that Japanese art would take in the modern period. “A great battle is raging among us in the contest for supremacy between Eastern and Western ideals,” Okakura stated in the address he delivered at the 1904 Universal Exposition in St. Louis.²⁰ Naturally, these power struggles surfaced most prominently with the creation of such new official art institutions as the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1887 and the Bunten Salon (Monbushō Bijutsu Tenrankai) in 1907. In fact, yōga was excluded from the curriculum of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts when it first opened; following agitation by Western-style painters, however, a course was established in 1896 under the direction of the oil painter Kuroda Seiki. The inclusion of both modes of painting in the academy bestowed upon them separate but equal status. In effect, this arrangement ultimately served as a solution to the question of which mode would prevail; their rivalry for dominance was finally put to rest with the establishment in 1907 of the national salon, which followed the academy’s pluralistic model. Just as students of Japanese-style and Western-style art learned their trades in separate programs within the same academy, nihonga and yōga artists exhibited in the salon as distinct divisions, each with its own panel of judges.

Notwithstanding the differences between nihonga and yōga, and however deep the divide between their respective partisans, it is important to recognize that in the Meiji period artists agreed on one crucial point: the necessity of developing (as Kuroda phrased it) “a style characteristic of Japan.”²¹ That is, they aspired to a national school of painting that would represent the modern Japanese state to the world and favorably differentiate it from other nations in the international arena. Whether art was to be executed in native media or in oils, nearly everyone concurred that the national painting must be distinguished by the expression of the essential aesthetic, cultural, or racial characteristics of the Japanese people, however these were defined. Nihonga and yōga thus shared the

same goal, even as they advocated divergent means of achieving it. They were both dedicated to resolving the contradictions of Japanese modernity in the aesthetic field. Their challenge, and burden, was to produce an identity for the country that would be linked to both the (native) past and the (universal) present. The nihonga/yōga opposition, then, should be recognized as an artificial dichotomy, albeit one that encapsulates the real complexities and difficulties of inhabiting “Japan” and the “modern” at one and the same time.

OIL PAINTING IN MEIJI JAPAN: FROM THE MODERN TO THE MODERNIST

With the reorganization of the field of art during the Meiji period, the development of Western-style painting—despite numerous obstacles—matched the swift pace of the country’s modernization: it would be only a brief interval between the establishment, in the 1870s, of a practice rooted in the European academic tradition, and the emergence, in the 1910s, of a critical modernism. By the time of the inauguration of the Bunten Salon in 1907, yōga had been transformed under the influence of European aesthetics into a vehicle for the expression of the nation’s highest moral and aesthetic ideals.

When the Technical Art School was founded in 1876, its constitution delineated the school’s two-part purpose: to transplant “the techniques of modern Western art” and to teach students “the theoretical and technical aspects of modern Western art in order to supplement what is lacking in Japanese art and to build up the school to the same level as the best art academies in the West by studying the trends of realism.”²² However, reactionary waves of nationalism beginning in the late 1870s threatened these goals and, indeed, the entire practice of yōga itself. Western-style painting was excluded from governmental painting exhibitions (Naikoku Kaiga Kyōshinkai) in 1882 and 1884, and even from the national academy upon its founding in 1887. Once so promising, yōga’s future destiny had become far from certain. Beginning with the Meiji Art Society (Meiji Bijutsukai), a united front of oil painters established in 1889, several generations of yōga artists worked to safeguard the foreign painting mode from the occasional backlashes against the importation of things European in the Meiji period.²³ On the occasion of its founding, the Meiji Art Society, in response to the government’s discriminatory attitude toward oil painting, declared: “In this new era we are opening our eyes through foreign books, clothing ourselves in Western clothes; it is a season wherein all activities, from government, the military and industry to literature are competing to take their methods from the countries of Europe. At a time like this, is art alone to turn its back upon the modern world, to preserve its ancient methods, and aim at a rejuvenation of times long past?”²⁴

For several decades, the field of yōga faced the daunting task of legitimating their school of painting and ensuring, in an uncertain and volatile cultural climate, the future existence of the imported medium. Eventually, through the efforts of individual painters and the Meiji Art Society and other artists’ organizations, oil painting would come to be

recognized as a valid form of expression within Japanese modern art; its inclusion alongside nihonga as an accepted field of practice in the national salon guaranteed its continued viability in the twentieth century. Some of the cases made for yōga focused on the expressive capabilities of the medium that were perceived to be lacking in its rival, nihonga. But most were premised upon the national rhetoric of “civilization and enlightenment” and thus concentrated on what Western-style painting could contribute to an advanced nation-in-the-making. There was a growing awareness of the medium’s centrality in Western culture and the degree of respect it was accorded. In this vein, Takahashi, the early yōga pioneer, exhorted his fellow painters: “Oil painting does not merely depict the form of things; it reveals their implicit meanings. Hence its power of inspiring the human mind. . . . [I]t is held in high esteem in Western countries, while in our country, to our greatest regret, it still remains utterly ignored. We, therefore, should strive together to elevate the quality of our painting, avoiding the evils of frivolity, and it is our responsibility as pioneers in this art to arouse the public mind through noble works in order to have it at last flourish throughout the country.”²⁵ No matter what the rationale, at bottom yōga’s *raison d’être* was invariably tied to one or both of two related concerns: the authority of the West, and the inevitability of Japan’s entry into the world community. Western-style painting, at least in the Meiji period, could not be pried apart from the Europe that existed in Japan’s cultural imagination.

Following the establishment of the Meiji government in 1868, those artists who wished to paint in the Western style enjoyed ever increasing opportunities for direct contact with the European tradition, both at home and abroad. This was truly revelatory for Japanese artists, who, prior to the Restoration, had been restricted from traveling abroad and forced to glean their limited knowledge of European art almost solely from imported books and prints. Yet in the newly transnational art scene of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Japanese artists, along with their foreign counterparts across the globe, had access to an unprecedented flow of art and information across national borders owing to the proliferation of international expositions, overseas travel, and printed media. Even before the Restoration, in the 1860s, a few artists had taken advantage of the presence in Yokohama of the *Illustrated London News* correspondent Charles Wirgman to learn the rudiments of oil painting. By the mid-1870s a handful of others had ventured overseas.²⁶ Although these artists and those who followed them headed to a variety of art centers, including London, Berlin, Rome, and even New York, the main destination, as one might expect, was Paris. Those Japanese artists fortunate enough to travel abroad on government scholarships studied alongside foreign colleagues in academies and artists’ ateliers, and they showed their works in the salons with some success.²⁷

In Japan the techniques of European painting and engraving had been known and practiced to a limited degree from the sixteenth century.²⁸ But with the establishment in Tokyo of the Technical Art School in 1876 it became possible for the first time to study oil painting with a bona fide European artist of the grand academic tradition. Antonio Fontanesi, an accomplished Italian landscapist with ties to the French Barbizon school, had been lured away from his position at Turin’s academy of art to act as instruc-

tor of drawing and painting at the new Japanese school (figure 7). Under Fontanesi's tutelage, students received an education in the European academic tradition that was tempered by the Italian's sympathy for the Barbizon painters. While instructing his students in the fundamentals of academic painting, he also introduced to them the work of Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot and Jean-François Millet and encouraged them to copy prints by these artists that he had in his possession.²⁹ As a result, the Japanese oil painters who trained under Fontanesi first became acquainted with Western artistic techniques and philosophy through the prism of the Barbizon school's romantic naturalism. Moreover, they had brought to their study of European art their previous training and experience in premodern painting modes, especially *nanga* (also called *bunjinga*), the literati school of ink painting that was popular among the official samurai class. Thus, when Fontanesi lectured on the intimate and sympathetic relationship between the Barbizon school artists and nature, his lessons were described as "highly comprehensible" by his students because they had previously been "exposed to a bit of *nanga*."³⁰ This is an early example of the recognition of certain sympathies between modern European and premodern East Asian approaches to painting, a perception that would develop further within the discourse of Japanese art in the early years of the twentieth century and which would become central to the practice of Yorozu Tetsugorō and other artists in the 1910s and 1920s.

Nonetheless, despite the perceived affinity concerning the perception of nature between *nanga* ink painting and Fontanesi's Barbizon-inspired philosophy, the type of landscape painting that the European master imparted to his Japanese students was fundamentally different from its native premodern correlates in both approach and method (figures 7 and 8). The gulf that artists confronted between indigenous and foreign landscape paradigms was encapsulated in an anecdote recounted by Asai Chū, who would later become one of the most successful of Fontanesi's pupils. Sent to an area within Tokyo to sketch, Asai and his fellow students were unable to find a suitable "landscape" and, perplexed, returned to Fontanesi empty-handed. Their teacher thereupon scolded them for not seeing what lay around them.³¹ Western-style painting introduced not only a novel set of materials and techniques to Japanese art but also a new way of apprehending nature and formulating the object of painting. The power of a work in the new idiom such as Asai's *Fields in Spring* (*Shunpo*, 1888), which was exhibited at the first exhibition of the Meiji Art Society in 1889, lies in a radical subjective realism (figure 9). Its modern means of expression revealed what had not previously been seen in art: the anonymous, carefully observed landscape. Asai rejected the stylistic conventions of traditional modes of landscape painting and the customary conception of landscapes as sites mediated by literature, history, or memory. Although *Fields in Spring* retains the use of symbolic seasonal motifs common to premodern Japanese landscapes (the yellow rape flowers and plum blossoms indicate springtime), they function to underscore rather than contradict the painting's seemingly unmediated character.

Tellingly, *Fields in Spring* is based upon a black-and-white photograph, which was possibly intended for foreign tourists, and Asai's painting resembles the direct and uncontrived view seen through a camera lens.³² In this regard the work is in sympathy with

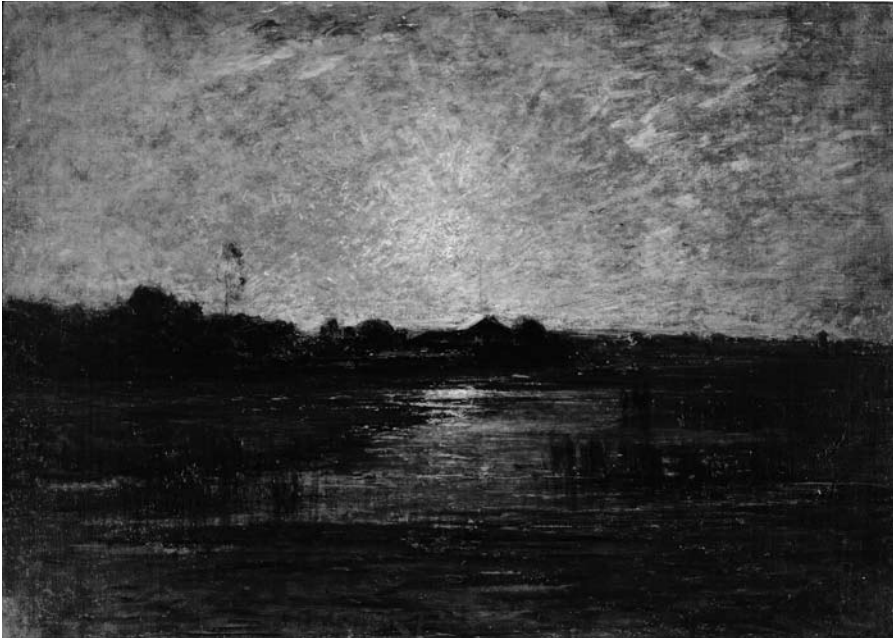


FIGURE 7. (Top) Antonio Fontanesi, *Shinobazu Pond*, 1876–78, oil on canvas, Tokyo National Museum.
Image: TNM Image Archives Source: <http://TnmArchives.jp/>
FIGURE 8. (Bottom) Ike Taiga, *Landscape of the Four Seasons* (*Shikisansuizu*; detail), 18th c., light colors on silk, Kyoto National Museum

Millet's approach: its subject (an unknown landscape peopled with laborers who give it meaning and who, in turn, derive their own identity from it) is conveyed with an impression of absolute truthfulness and immediacy. The painting's truth effect is the function of the apparent transparency of its language—the artist's ability to capture the scene he perceived before him without resorting to inherited formulae. The illusion of truth to nature that the painting produced was something that contemporary neotraditional nihonga painting, for all its stylistic renovations of premodern pictorial modes, was unable to achieve (figure 10).

Despite the innovative character of Asai's naturalism in the context of indigenous painting practices and theories of the 1880s, his approach, which was shared by fellow



FIGURE 9. (Top) Asai Chū, *Fields in Spring (Shunpo)*, 1888, oil on canvas, Tokyo National Museum.
Image: TNM Image Archives Source: <http://TnmArchives.jp/>

FIGURE 10. (Bottom) Hashimoto Gahō, *Autumn Landscape (Shūkei sansui)*, 1885–87, ink and colors on paper, Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan



FIGURE 11. Raphaël Collin, *Floréal*, 1886, oil on canvas, © Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Arras. Photo: Claude Thériez

members of the Meiji Art Society, was soon after discredited as “old school” (*kyūha*). Its prominence was displaced with the sudden arrival of two artists just returned from years of study in France, Kuroda Seiki and his close colleague Kume Keiichirō. They introduced to Japanese oil painting a distinctive manner grounded in contemporary French academic practice and marked by contact with Impressionism.³³

Like many Japanese artists of their generation who journeyed abroad to Paris or one of the other artistic centers of Europe, Kuroda and Kume sought out teachers of prestige and authority—in other words, the salon masters. Eager to meet the European tradition at its source, their decision to receive an academic education, even as French academism came under the attack of a new avant-garde, was a typical one for artists of any nationality. Yet instead of entering the atelier of an established master such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Léon Bonnat, or Jean-Paul Laurens, as other Japanese artists had done before them, Kuroda and Kume had chosen to study at the Académie Colarossi under the now largely forgotten but then young and promising Raphaël Collin.³⁴ In Collin’s classroom they received a proper academic training centering on the depiction of the human figure, in the lineage of Alexandre Cabanel and Adolphe William Bouguereau.³⁵ But Collin’s conservative background was mitigated by his innovations, which included a bright pleinairist palette and compositional devices derived from Japanese ukiyo-e prints, such as an elevated horizon and bird’s eye perspective (figure 11).³⁶

When Kuroda and Kume returned to Tokyo in the early 1890s they became the leaders of a faction that critics dubbed the “new school” in opposition to the “old school” of Asai and the Meiji Art Society. Sharing the relatively bright palette and decorative buoyancy of French salon Impressionism, this new manner also came to be called the “purple



FIGURE 12. Kuroda Seiki, *Maiko*, 1893, oil on canvas, Tokyo National Museum. Image: TNM Image Archives Source: <http://TnmArchives.jp/>

school” (*murasakiba*) for its marked tendency to depict shadows in purple, in contrast to the dark browns and greens typical of the Meiji Art Society’s “resin school” (*yaniha*). The new school claimed a higher order of truth than its “old school” rival—truth to individual perception rather than studied conventions for producing a “realistic” effect. In a description of his method that is applicable to a painting such as *Maiko*, of 1893 (figure 12), Kuroda explained the rationale for the new style:

The old school strives for a degree of accuracy conforming with the rules they have been taught. The old school approaches a landscape with the idea of recording its exact appearance. The new school, however, tries to paint the feelings inspired by the landscape and to capture the changes that occur when the landscape is enveloped in rain or bathed in bright sunlight. It is the same with all their paintings, even those showing the coloring and shading of human faces. Normally, a person's cheeks are pink, his lips red, his forehead and the tip of his nose brownish. When an artist of the old school paints a face, he sticks to this coloring and tries to draw exactly what he sees. With the new school it is different. The artist paints what he feels, and it may turn out that the bridge of the nose, which is usually the lightest part of the face, is painted dark, while the tips of the ears are bright red. The results may give the impression that the artist is being whimsical, but it is not really whimsy.³⁷

The new style was an eclectic one, mixing the Impressionist penchants for painting en plein air and observing the coloristic effects of sunlight with a softened academic naturalism that recalls the works of Collin or Jules Bastien-Lepage. Kume defined the style as one devoted to the depiction of "the delicately nuanced appearances of objects enveloped in diaphanous outdoor light."³⁸ He considered it to be a "second innovation" following upon Impressionism, one that took the achievements of Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and others into account but did not neglect composition and color harmony: "The major artists of Impressionism tried various techniques in order to obtain the effect of glaring sunlight. However, we who studied under Collin endeavored to paint the landscape with a softer tone."³⁹ Thus even when the influence of such progressive French movements as Impressionism was felt in Japan, it was felt only obliquely.

The "new school" might have remained only one of several competing divisions within the larger field of Western-style painting, even with the joint establishment by Kuroda and Kume of a private teaching atelier, the School of Innocence and Directness Toward Nature (Tenshin Dōjō), in 1894, and an exhibiting group, the White Horse Society (Hakubakai), in 1896.⁴⁰ But the "purple school" style soon became the mainstream, and artists affiliated with the White Horse Society came to dominate yōga's place in both the academy and the salon through the 1910s. The first and decisive step in the ascendancy of the "new" or "purple" school was Kuroda's appointment in 1896 to the first directorship of the Western-style painting program at the national academy, the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, where Kume was also named to the faculty. There they taught the nation's most ambitious students in yōga, and their approach quickly became the bedrock of a fledgling Japanese academic style. Like Fontanesi's program at the Technical Art School two decades earlier, the Western-style painting program at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts was based on the European academic model. By transmitting a codified body of skills and shared set of uniform standards, and establishing evaluative criteria for qualitative judgment, the program shouldered the responsibility of raising the standard of Japanese oil painting and bringing it to a level of maturity and sophistication appropriate to the art of a modern nation.

Like Takahashi before him, Kuroda shrewdly raised the esteem with which oil paint-

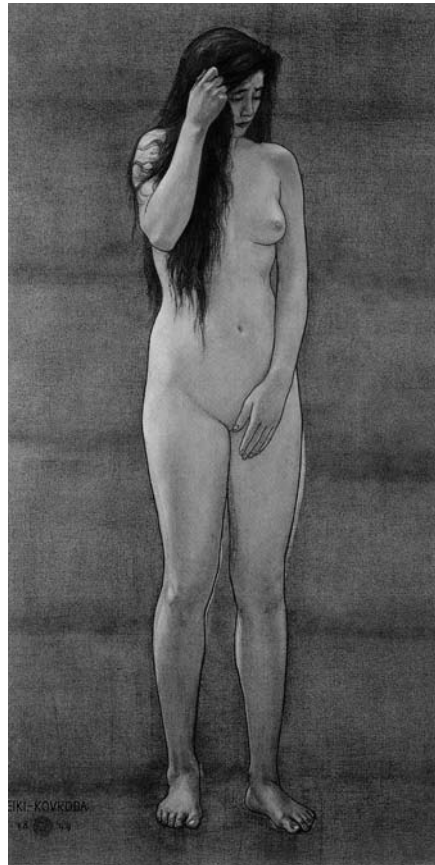
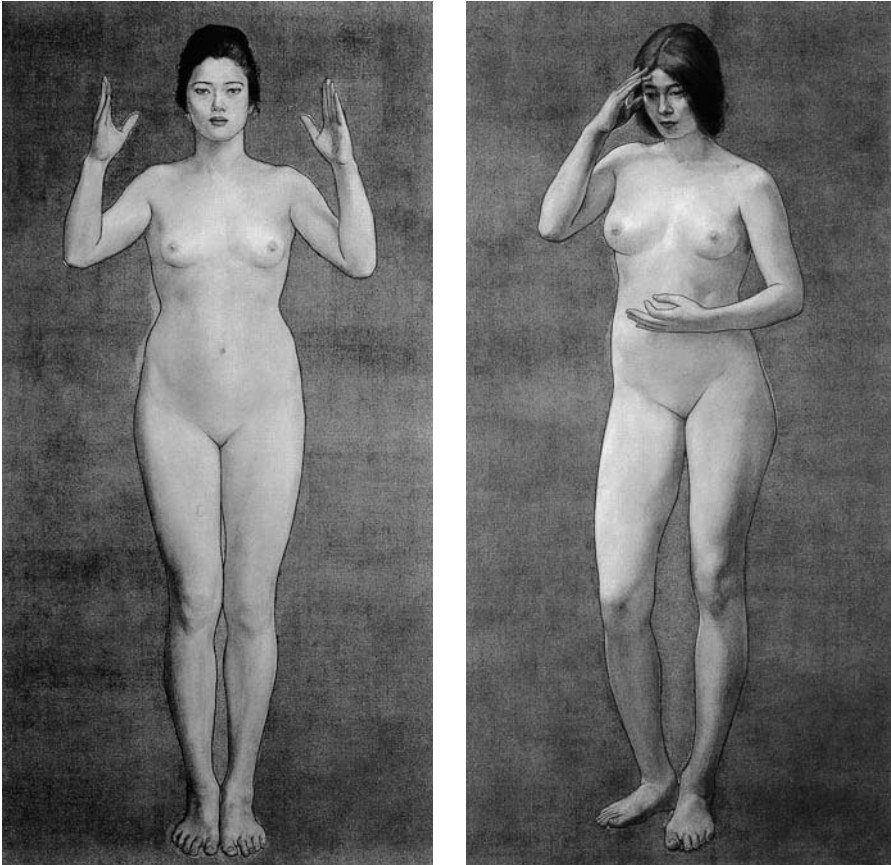


FIGURE 13. Kuroda Seiki, *Wisdom, Impression, Sentiment (Chi, kan, jō)*, 1897–99, National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo. Photo: Shirono Seiji, Department of Research Planning

ing was viewed by closely aligning it with the country's goal of "civilization and enlightenment." One way he did this was by developing an art form that Takashina Shūji has called "idea" or "concept" painting (*kōsōga*), an approach that Kuroda saw as conducive to expressing—and inculcating—the morals and philosophical ideals of a civilized nation.⁴¹ With idea painting the painter's highest ambition was to achieve an allegorical expression of abstract ideas in a fully realized tableau or composition, a form of academic history painting that, in the hands of Kuroda, found its stylistic counterpart in fin de siècle European Symbolism as practiced by artists such as Gustav Klimt. Although idea painting was in line with national directives and enjoyed the impeccable authority of the European artistic tradition, it was not unproblematically received on Japanese soil. One of the mode's chief vehicles was a pictorial genre completely foreign to the history of Japanese art—the nude (*rataiga*). Until the nude's importation in the 1890s, the unclothed human form as a subject for art in Japan had been predominantly limited to religious painting depicting the horrors of the various hells—to which sinners were condemned in the afterlife—or the revolting appearance of corpses in the process of decay.⁴²



Kuroda introduced the European conception of the nude to the general public in 1897 with *Wisdom, Impression, Sentiment* (*Chi, kan, jō*; 1897–99), a triptych of idealized, allegorical female nudes against a gold-leaf ground; the work was later honored with an award at the 1900 Paris Exposition (figure 13).⁴³ But the Japanese public was scandalized by the genre, and officials found it difficult to reconcile the artist's claims for the image's high moral precepts with its blatant bodily aspect. From this time, against much resistance, Kuroda and Kume campaigned to establish the nude as the backbone of Western-style painting, a subject to which I will return in chapter 2.

The most significant innovations of Kuroda's school were not at the level of technique or even of style but of artistic genre and conceptual intent. Under Kuroda's influence, the focus of Western-style painting shifted from the verisimilistic naturalism of an earlier generation to the idealism that would continue with later ones. The proponents of the new academic style that Kuroda put into place envisioned it as an exemplary standard-bearer of culture and civilization, and therefore as embodying the lofty aesthetic ideals and morals undergirding the modern nation. Its importance to the state was underscored

in 1907 with the establishment of the government-sponsored salon, the Bunten, at which time Kuroda was given the helm of the yōga division, and then again in 1910 when he was granted the title Artist of the Imperial Household (*teishitsu gigeiin*), the first such honor bestowed upon a Western-style painter.

The great irony of Japanese Western-style painting is that at the very moment when European academic styles were adopted as the mainstay of the academy in Tokyo, their authority was crumbling in Paris. The first influx of information about antiacademic modernist trends in European art in the closing years of the Meiji period coincided with the reevaluation of the so-called Post-Impressionists in France and their discovery in Great Britain. Like their counterparts in England, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere around the globe, Japanese artists who challenged the status quo sympathized with the various avant-gardes centered in France, from the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists to the Fauves and Cubists. Their interest also extended to the Italian Futurists, who had come to prominence with exhibitions in Paris and London in 1912, and to the German Expressionists, particularly the members of the Blauer Reiter group. The local interpretation of modern art was informed by the writings of foreign critics and historians (especially those from England and Germany), and often employed their critical terminology. Indeed, following the usage of English writers, Expressionism (*hyō-genha*) became the catchall term commonly used to denote both the Post-Impressionists and the international artistic innovations such as Fauvism that were developing under their influence.⁴⁴ Awareness of these movements grew swiftly as Japanese artists and writers ventured abroad in increasing numbers and reported on the latest trends in newspapers and journals of art and literature. But the new artistic tendencies were introduced to Japan almost simultaneously and were generally first encountered without a clear understanding of the logic of their historical progression; thus Futurism, for example, seems to have been known in Japan for some time before Cubism.⁴⁵

The number of Japanese artists who traveled to Europe increased greatly between the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris and the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition in London, which coincided with the influential “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” exhibition. They frequented Europe’s museums, galleries, salons, and private collections. In Paris, for example, Japanese artists joined their counterparts of all nationalities at the Louvre (for copying the masters), the Musée du Luxembourg (to see Gustave Caillebotte’s collection of modern paintings), and the salons (especially the Salon d’Automne and the Salon des Indépendants, which were venues for Cézanne, Gauguin, and van Gogh retrospectives and works by the Fauves and Cubists). These last, groundbreaking exhibitions in Paris, in addition to others in London and elsewhere (such as the Post-Impressionist and Futurist exhibitions), proved to be as consequential for artistic innovation in Japan as they were in Europe.

Just as Kume and Kuroda had acted as conduits for new ideas from Paris in the 1890s, the experiences abroad of a younger generation of Japanese artists in the 1900s proved of lasting consequence in the reception and interpretation of modern European art in the closing years of Meiji. Two artist-critics were of particular note in this regard: Saitō Yori (1885–1959) and Takamura Kōtarō (1883–1956), both oil painters and influential critics

who associated with Yorozu from 1912 as fellow members of the Fusain Society (Fyūzankai). Saitō, whom Yorozu later called “the pioneer of the new art movement in Japan,” returned to Tokyo from France in 1908 and introduced the works of Matisse and Gauguin to his compatriots.⁴⁶ He had viewed Matisse’s paintings at the Salon d’Automne as well as in the modern art collections of the Steins in Paris in 1907. Saitō recounted these formative, indeed life-changing, experiences in a 1912 essay, where he wrote, “It is impossible for me to convey in words the shock I felt upon seeing a Matisse painting. . . . It suddenly shook my sleeping soul awake.”⁴⁷ Takamura, who viewed the Fauvist works at the 1908 Salon d’Automne, likened the experience to “residues of a bitter pleasure, like those that linger after one receives a moxa cauterization.”⁴⁸ He returned in 1909, wondering “how those pigeonlike artists in Japan would react to seeing these paintings,” and published a translation of Matisse’s “Notes of a Painter” within months of its original appearance.⁴⁹ Other artists and critics reported on such important exhibitions as the 1907 Paul Cézanne retrospective at the Salon d’Automne and the 1912 Futurist exhibitions in Paris and London.⁵⁰ Ishii Hakutei, who returned to Japan in 1912, reported on the Fauve, Futurist, and Cubist exhibits he viewed overseas, as well as on Kandinsky and the Blauer Reiter group.⁵¹

Although there was a healthy trade in Japanese art on the European market—mostly premodern prints and paintings, as well as contemporary decorative arts and crafts made for export—few European artworks made their way to Japan until the early 1920s.⁵² From this time onward they were regularly exhibited to much enthusiasm and critical response, but before that time artists with no means of going abroad, like Yorozu, received their information about modern European art primarily from other Japanese artists and through imported and domestic art books and magazines that featured critical texts and images in reproduction. These images, usually in black and white and of poor quality, had an enormous and lasting impact on the development of Japanese modernism. Reproductions were so valuable that they were put on display; exhibitions mounted by the Shirakaba (White Birch) group were occasionally punctuated by the rare original print, drawing, small oil, or sculpture, but they were largely made up of reproductions.⁵³ Reproductions were also available for sale through the group’s influential *Shirakaba* journal, a literary magazine launched in 1910 that became a major venue for debate and discussion over the new art.⁵⁴

During this time of artistic transition the Englishman Bernard Leach, a young potter and printmaker who had moved to Japan in 1909 to study ceramics, befriended many of the younger generation of painters, even joining the antiacademic Fusain Society in 1912. He described for an English-speaking audience the interest in European modern painting shown by his Japanese colleagues:

It is always a matter of curiosity to nine Europeans out of ten that the Japanese should be influenced by European aesthetics, and it is an additional surprise that the most modern work has the greatest influence. Japanese thought is chiefly engaged with problems which have arisen from recent intercourse with the West. New ideas from Europe strike root very easily—so much so that the present movement has been accepted sooner

and more readily in Japan than in America. A few square apples of Cézanne's; the flames of Van Gogh; strange Tahitian women by Gauguin; together with magazine articles were sufficient to sow the seed.⁵⁵

In a close parallel to the excitement expressed by van Gogh and other European artists over their discovery of ukiyo-e, young Japanese artists were thrilled and inspired by seeing these "works determinedly new in their expression."⁵⁶ One of Yorozu's classmates at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts recalled: "In the classroom we sketched formally, but once we got beyond the school gate, it was difficult to control ourselves. We looked forward more than anything else to going to Maruzen or Nakanishiya [bookstores] to tackle the latest foreign books."⁵⁷

Kishida Ryūsei (1891–1929), a colleague (and rival) of Yorozu's who participated in the Fusain Society, first encountered the French avant-garde through reproductions of "many van Goghs, Cézannes, Gauguins, Matisse, etc." shown to him by the Shirakaba member Yanagi Muneyoshi (also known as Sōetsu; 1889–1961). "I was astounded," he recalled. "Looking at the pictures, we groaned in excitement. We would get so excited that we were driven to tears" (figures 14 and 15).⁵⁸ Images by the European Post-Impressionists were so enthusiastically received—not only by artists but by a wide range of philosophers, writers, and other cultural figures concerned with issues of modern selfhood—that according to one critic, "they have been brought into every corner of our country's intellectual world."⁵⁹

The effect of the new European art that reached Japan around 1910 was of a magnitude that may be hard for us to imagine today, extending as it did beyond the art world to the society at large. European art arrived just at the moment of a paradigm shift, when the Meiji-era goal of modernization had been realized and that period's national institutions—including those of art—were beginning to be called into question. The arrival of a new phase of European art was convenient for those who wished to challenge the already feeble authority of the Japanese academy, based as it was on the authority of an earlier generation of European art. The paintings of van Gogh, Matisse, Cézanne, and others in the Post-Impressionist milieu thus became catalysts in Japan for a new understanding of art as a medium of self-expression. Post-Impressionism undermined the authority of the academy style and awakened Yorozu and other young artists to unknown expressive possibilities, much as progressive European artists such as van Gogh and Matisse had discovered new potentials for painting in premodern Japanese prints and paintings. This was not lost on Yorozu and his colleagues. They could not have missed the significance, for example, of Édouard Manet's *Portrait of Émile Zola*, which linked Manet's *Olympia* and Émile Zola, the French critic and defender of modern painting, with a Japanese print and folding screen.⁶⁰

This unique relationship between the Japanese artistic heritage and modern European art would inform the development of a distinct modernism in Japan. Western art was not monolithic, and neither, surmised the young artists who came of age at the end of Meiji, was Japanese art. In fact, they challenged the one uncontested truism of Meiji art—that art was essentially and necessarily a product by and for the country. Looking



FIGURE 14. Paul Cézanne, *Passage de Ste. Victoire* (oil on canvas, c. 1880), as reproduced in black and white in Julius Meier-Graefe, *Paul Cézanne* (Munich, 1910)

beyond the concept of the nation for art's meaning, they began to rethink the relationship between Japanese and European art on terms other than national difference. This was the point of departure for Japanese modernism.

MODERNISM: LIBERATING ART FROM THE NATION

The year 1912 marks the end of the Meiji period and the beginning of the Taishō (1912–26). The historical division is not an arbitrary one.⁶¹ The transition between the two imperial reigns came in the wake of Japan's victory over Russia in 1905 and coincided with the nation's achievement of parity with Europe in industrialization, militarization, and urbanization. This constituted a radical transformation of how the Japanese saw themselves in relation to the West. The rupture between native and foreign that had defined the Meiji period was effectively sutured in what Karatani Kōjin has called the "Taishō discursive space," which was characterized by the coexistence of a cosmopolitan "universalism" and a seemingly contradictory "emphasis on Japanese uniqueness."⁶² It was during the shift from Meiji to Taishō that yōga became fully



FIGURE 15. Vincent van Gogh, *Oliviers Verts*, as reproduced in black and white in *Shirakaba* 3, no. 12 (November 1912)

naturalized as “art,” a phenomenon emblemized by yōga’s institutionalization alongside nihonga in the Bunten Salon. At this point, what we might consider an avant-garde first emerged, and an indigenous modernism—whose starting point was a self-conscious and critical distance from its own various histories, both Eastern and Western—first became possible.⁶³

Modernism in Taishō-period Japanese art was in many respects a response to the “cultural boomerang” of European Japonisme “returning” to Japan.⁶⁴ Ironically, it was by this means that early twentieth-century artists discovered the premodern (pre-bijutsu and pre-yōga) arts of their country that had attracted first the Impressionists and then successive generations of European artists.⁶⁵ The Japanese oil painters who came of age around 1910, like Yorozu, looked at traditional Japanese art much as their Western counterparts did: through the lens of European modernism. Modern European art—which borrowed from such Japanese artistic conventions as the assertion of the flatness of the picture plane and the liberation of pure color and line—underscored the subjective, abstract, and decorative tendencies of the premodern Japanese painting modes it emulated. If, as the French critic Théodore Duret believed, Japanese art showed the Western artist what he had “forgotten” through academic convention—how to see the colors in nature—then modern Western art showed the Japanese artist what he, too, had “forgot-

ten” since the introduction of illusionistic oil painting—how to exploit the formal elements of painting to expressive, not descriptive, ends.⁶⁶ For Japanese artists grappling with the difficulties of practicing both a foreign medium and a foreign mode of representation, the significance of modern European art was twofold. On the one hand, it suggested a radical new conception of modern art and the modern artist predicated on the primacy of the self rather than the nation. On the other, it reassured Japanese artists of the universal legitimacy of their native artistic heritage and, by extension, of their own rightful place within the emerging global tradition of modernism. As the painter and Shirakaba member Arishima Ikuma stated in 1910, “It is a fact that all modern painters have been influenced by Japanese art, so . . . there are certain things about it that are relatively easy for us to understand.”⁶⁷

Encounters with modern European painting played a critical role in the formation of a vision of native, premodern art that was constituted through the mediation of European modernism. Echoing statements by Duret and European critics to the effect that “the Japanese were the first and most perfect of Impressionists,” Japanese artists of all generations found striking “affinities” between modern European styles and a variety of indigenous art modes.⁶⁸ In 1911 the painter Kosugi Misei (also known as Hōan) described the dappled brushwork of the eleventh- and twelfth-century Chinese painters Mi Fu and Mi Youren as an East Asian form of Impressionism. In a similar vein the Tokyo School of Fine Arts professor Nagahara Kōtarō stated that Japanese painting, as epitomized by the fifteenth-century ink painter Sesshū Tōyō, was “an entirely Impressionist art.” He also detected an “East Asian quality” in images by Cézanne, Gauguin, and Puvis de Chavannes.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the academy professor Fujishima Takeji noted the “psychological” similarities between Gauguin, Cézanne, and van Gogh and such Edo-period artists as the scholar-painters Ike Taiga and Yosa Buson, and the so-called eccentric, Soga Shōhaku.⁷⁰ Such comparisons perhaps seemed more persuasive at the time, when European works were known primarily through black-and-white reproductions (see figures 8 and 14, and 15 and 16). Cézanne’s paintings, especially, were perceived as sharing striking affinities with traditional modes of art, such as the literati ink painting tradition of *nanga*, that sought to describe the spirit through form:

Japanese painting is filled with rich feeling, probably because it takes an introspective view of what is apprehended. . . . Before comparing this with Cézanne, one might think that there is a great distance between them, but he is also proceeding from the same starting point. . . . Of course, Cézanne is a Frenchman, and his upbringing is fundamentally different from ours, but we Japanese are probably able to understand his work more effectively and accurately than anyone else. . . . We must acknowledge that the people of our country and the Frenchman Cézanne are very close in artistic expression. The artistic purpose that lies concealed in Oriental painting appears to be the same as that in the art of Cézanne.⁷¹

Arishima similarly discovered in Cézanne’s paintings “some universally shared primitive elements” and compared the abbreviated expression characterizing the French artist’s



FIGURE 16. Yosa Buson, *The Pleasure of Autumn (Gishūzu)*, 1771, one of the *Ten Pleasures (Jūgizu)* images from the album *Ten Pleasures and Ten Conveniences (Jūben jūgi chō)*, ink and light colors on paper, Kawabata Foundation. Image provided by the Museum of Modern Japanese Literature

pictures to Japanese *nanga*.⁷² Such observations marked the appearance, in *yōga* circles, of a universalist framework for cross-cultural artistic comparisons.

Japonisme in modern European art, especially Post-Impressionism, was viewed as evidence of a shared project between East and West: the pursuit of a subjective and universal art predicated on the autonomy of the individual artist. When the *raison d'être* of innovative Western art shifted from a focus on representation (*saigen* or *byōsha*, the faithful depiction of the appearance of the natural world) to self-expression (*jiko hyōgen*, grounded in the autonomous individual's subjective perception of nature), Japanese artists discovered a point of convergence between modern European painting and traditional Japanese modes of art, particularly scholar painting in ink, *nanga*. For Japanese artists and critics, European Japonisme was proof that, after many centuries, in the mod-

ern period the arts of the East and the West had at long last begun to converge. As the critic Nakada Katsunosuke put it in 1913, “Western and Eastern art are drawing together.”⁷³

In this context of convergence, idealist visions were easily born and sustained. Given the reciprocal exchange manifested in Japonisme and the celebration over what was seen as the great meeting of Eastern and Western art, it is not surprising that a young generation of artists began to imagine a day when it would no longer be necessary to bind art to nation. Nor, they conjectured, would Japanese art always have to measure up to standards stipulated externally, by the West. Furthermore, they came to believe, this new field of play was one on which an artist from Japan could occupy a strategic position. Yorozu, in his first statement of his artistic ideas and project, published on New Year’s Day in 1913, wrote: “Maurice Denis argued in a text on Cézanne that ‘Painting oscillates perpetually between invention and imitation.’ I believe that I am in no way walking the same road as [modern European artists]. A senior of mine whom I respect is said to have revealed that since Post-Impressionism developed through the inspiration of Japanese art, it is a reimportation and nothing new to us. Yet, inasmuch as we all inhabit the earth as mankind, I do not wish to draw such a sharp distinction between the East and West.”⁷⁴