

Japan as a “Nation of Culture”



Author Junko Iwabuchi

By Junko Iwabuchi

Before We Begin Our Discussion ...

If we take a look at the Spanish Empire, which had a 400-year history from 1492 to 1898, and was once praised for being the “conqueror of the seven seas” and “the empire on which the sun never sets”, we see that it was at the true height of its power during the “El Siglo de Oro” (“The Golden Century”) when its arts and literature flourished coinciding with the rise and decline of the Spanish Habsburg dynasty. Most art historians say that El Siglo de Oro does not imply precise dates and years, but it is considered not to have lasted for the entire period of the Spanish Empire’s existence.

At the same time, if we look back on Japan’s astonishing postwar reconstruction and growth that was once called “a miracle”, the real peak of it was only around the 20 years between the 1960s and the 1980s. If we look back holistically at world history, we can see that it was not easy for any superpower to prosper continuously and maintain its global influence.

How do countries such as Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Britain, Germany, Italy, and France, all prominent countries throughout world history, manage to maintain their influence as “cultural countries”? One reason is because the museums and art galleries in these countries exhibit to the general public the treasures and artifacts that they have collected from around the world back

when they had enormous power. Seeing these artifacts on display, people instantly absorb and feel the value and scarcity of the collection, imagine what these countries were like back in history, and are overwhelmed. In the same sense, cultural heritage such as galleries, museums, public libraries, palaces and castles all serve as symbolic venues to give people a sense of pride and confidence in their country, even if it is undergoing an economic decline. European nations have skillfully used these historical images to enhance the brand value in fashion and design, have successfully industrialized those values, and continue to acquire revenue from tourists who visit from around the world.

For European nations, because maintaining an image as a cultural nation is directly linked to the competitiveness of fashion, design, hotels and restaurants, economic support mechanisms for young artists are abundant. Nurturing and promoting the next generation “stars” is almost a matter of life and death for these countries, and therefore emphasis is placed on public relations and advertising. Rather than being purely “art for art’s sake”, they can be easier to understand if one looks at these efforts as “stage effects” for industrial development, which are executed strategically by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in the Japanese context. Many postwar Japanese have failed to understand this properly and are under the impression that the European general public, such as in France, possess an understanding of the arts and therefore are “supportive of artists”. But in reality, art is part of the national industrial policy, and as such it is economically logical to endorse programs favorable to artists and concentrate efforts on the development of the next generation artistic human resources, since that translates literally into an investment for the future.

Image of Exotic Japan at World Expos

During the Edo Period (1603-1868), Japan continued its centuries-old closed-door policy to the outside world. It did not rule the “seven seas” as the Western powers had done, nor did it discover new continents and establish colonies. But despite being a small nation in the Far East, Japan had established a reputation overseas as being a nation rich in culture, for its highly meticulous and esthetic screen paintings, porcelain, and lacquerware that were sent overseas from Dejima in Nagasaki; its unique condiments such as *shoyu* (soy sauce) which is recorded in the purchases list of the French royal family; and *ukiyo*e prints, which were casually used as wrapping

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

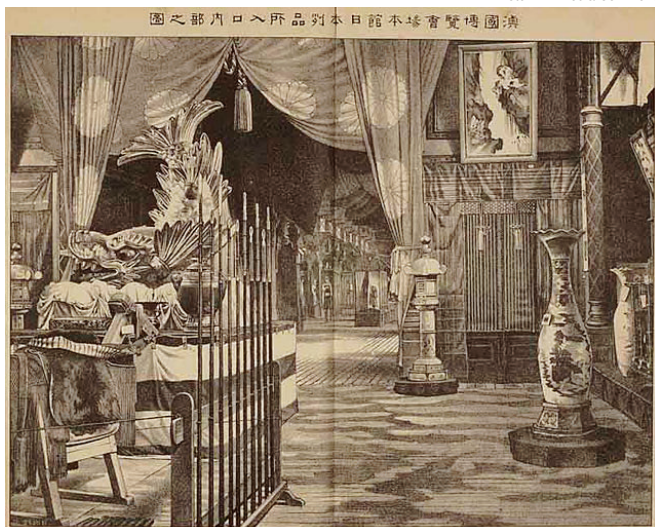


Illustration of the entrance of the Japanese pavilion at the Vienna Expo 1873

Photo: Hiroshi Yamamoto Collection, Makuzu Ware Museum
(宮川香山 眞葛ミュージアム 山本博士コレクション)



Taka-ukibori (sculptural relief) "Vase with a crab" (琅玕釉蟹付花瓶)

paper for exports from Japan such as porcelain. Although the number was not large, Japanese arts and crafts had established Japan's worth in the world, and become part of the collection of prominent royal families across Europe. During the final part of the Edo Period, Sir Rutherford Alcock, the minister at the British Embassy in Japan, displayed his own Japan-related collection at the Second London World Expo in 1862 after the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Amity and Commerce was signed. This triggered Japan (the central government, the Satsuma Domain, and the Saga Domain) to officially join the Second Paris World Exposition in 1867 as an exhibitor, and gave rise to a Japan boom which later came to be known as "Japonisme".

During the Meiji Period (1868-1912), Japan made its debut as a modern nation at the Vienna World Exposition in 1873, and since then Japanese crafts have won many awards at expos in the West and have attracted great interest from people around the world. As a result of the success of the Vienna expo, there was an offer from a British merchant wishing to buy the Japanese exhibit pieces, and in order to export the Japanese arts and crafts the government quickly founded the First Japanese Manufacturing and Trading Company, a half-private, half-government funded company. It took part in the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the United States of America, and achieved great success. In 1877, the company opened a branch store in Manhattan, at 456 Broadway, and imported and sold many Japanese artifacts including *makie* (Japanese lacquered ware sprinkled with gold or silver powder), lacquerware and porcelain, and the following year another branch store was opened in Paris to coincide with the Third Paris World Fair. The company came to be well-known around the world as the underwriters for Japanese art pieces on display at the Paris expo and the Barcelona Universal Exposition in 1888, but political changes led to poor financing and as a result the company dissolved in 1891, and sales of Japanese

Photo: Hiroshi Yamamoto Collection, Makuzu Ware Museum
(宮川香山 眞葛ミュージアム 山本博士コレクション)



Taka-ukibori (sculptural relief) "Vase with doves and flowers" (花ニ鳥細工楽園花瓶)

antiques and crafts were passed on to other companies like Yamanaka & Co., Ltd. which came later into the business.

It is interesting to compare the Japan which supplied the world with its exports of household electrical appliances such as transistor radios and televisions after World War II to the Japan of the Meiji Period which had just been reborn as a modern nation. Meiji Japan not only attracted European royalty and nobility but also charmed the newly wealthy classes in other nations, including America, with exports of porcelain, lacquerware, and *ukiyo*e paintings, and had a great impact on artists around the world; but at the same time Japan was also increasing both its wealth and military power. Moreover, this export drive may have not been the idea of the Meiji-Period Japanese themselves, but of the "hired foreigners" who were brought in so that Japan could acquire the technology and knowledge to compete with the Western powers. They advised Japan that instead of displaying copied items manufactured using Western technology at world expos, Japan would be more highly valued if it were to bring items that represented Japan, the highly skillful authentic Japanese arts and crafts. Government officials acted upon this advice to collect outstanding handicrafts from all over Japan, and also designed the actual display booth to reflect Western tastes, which turned out to be successful. Ironically, it looks like Japan 150 years ago, in the period immediately after opening up to the outside world, was far more diverse, and more dynamic decisions were made compared to now when globalization is called for in all aspects.

Photo: 663highland CC-BY-SA, Wikimedia Commons



Ohara Art Museum in Kurashiki, Okayama Prefecture

Photo: The Mainichi Graphic Dec. 1, 1952. Wikimedia Commons



Shojiro Ishibashi

Philanthropists Who Supported Cultural Promotion & Development

After opening to the outside world, Japan went through a period when artists were not able to study abroad unless they were funded by the government. By the end of the Taisho Period (1912-1926), Japan had seen a rise in various industries across the country, and with the appreciation of the Japanese yen artists were now able to study abroad through private funding. Wealthy industrialists became sponsors and sent talented young artists to Europe. One such industrialist was Magosaburo Ohara (1880-1943) from Kurashiki who founded the Ohara Museum of Art there based largely on his own collection. A Western-style painter, Torajiro Kojima (1881-1929), went to study in Europe for five years from 1908, overlapping with the shift from Meiji to Taisho, and subsequently visited Europe on two further occasions, buying numerous Western paintings on behalf of Ohara which became the core of the museum collection.

The museum opened its doors to the public in 1930 as the first Japanese museum to display Western art and modern art. Japanese society tends to write off art collecting by industrialists as a “hobby”, and since the opening of the museum took place during the Great Depression, Ohara himself had to face strong criticism and opposition from within his company. But Ohara, who had great concern for the well-being of the female factory workers at his textile company, took many epoch-making social welfare measures such as setting up a boarding facility to provide food and a sanitary venue for the female workers, as well as a day-care facility for their young

children. He also considered the museum as carrying out equally “socially important and necessary work” as the Ohara Institute for Social Research and the Kurashiki Central Hospital, which he had established in 1919 and 1923 respectively.

The founder of Bridgestone Corp., Shojiro Ishibashi (1889-1976), was another well-known art collector, especially of modern Japanese paintings from the early Showa Period (1926-1989). He is also known for donating the 10,000-*tsubo* (33,000 square meters) property and a concrete building structure to the Kyushu Medical School (currently the Kurume University Medical School) for use as its school campus. After World War II, he accelerated his purchases of Western paintings and numerous other exquisite art pieces with the intention of displaying them to the general public later on, which he did when he set up the Bridgestone Museum in 1952. In 1955, Ishibashi also donated funds to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to build a Japan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and the following year the Ishibashi Foundation was established and the Ishibashi Culture Center was donated to Kurume city. In 1969, Ishibashi, who was on the board of trustees at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, hired an architect, Yoshiro Taniguchi, personally to build a new facility that was imperative to the museum and donated it to the Japanese government.

After World War II, especially after the 1970s in the so-called “bubble period” between the 1980s and the 1990s, an enormous number of public regional art museums, from city level to prefecture level, were opened across Japan. But they tended to be mocked for being just “box structures” and their collections were poor in

comparison to the grandeur of their exteriors. But it is worth noting that among these numerous art museums, the Ohara Museum and Bridgestone Museum stand out as the two prominent ones which received the most requests from overseas museums to lend their Impressionist paintings. The depth and quality of the collections of these two museums are comparable only to that of the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, and neither of these two museums can be ignored when speaking about Japanese collections of Western paintings or the philanthropic activities of Japanese industrialists.

Other leading Japanese businessmen have contributed to the many unique museums across Japan, either through their art collections or through their concepts. One such businessman was Kaichiro Nezu, who opened the Nezu Museum in 1941 to display his own collection of art work, and another was Keizo Saji, then president of Suntory Ltd., who opened the Suntory Museum in 1961 with the theme of “beauty in everyday lives”. After the burst of the bubble, many industrialists refrained from publically expressing their taste in art or mentioning that they collect art, especially those at publically traded companies who remained quiet in consideration of their shareholders. But in recent years, many young IT and apparel entrepreneurs who have been successful in their new businesses do not hesitate to show a keen interest in collecting art, with some regularly displaying their collections at work for their staff, or setting up a not for profit organization (NPO) to collect art with the future plan of opening an art museum. One such entrepreneur, Yusaku Maezawa, founder of Internet apparel shopping site “Zozo Town” and chairman of the NPO *Gendai Geijutsu Shinko Zaidan* (Modern Art Promotion Foundation), bought a Jean-Michel Basquiat painting for \$57.285 million at a Christies’ auction on May 10, 2016.

When “Power” Becomes “Cultural Existence”

After the burst of the bubble, “the lost 10 years” became “the lost 20 years”, and the young generation that knew the days when the Japanese economy was well-off are now gone. The young generation today grew up during the recession from the moment they were born, and therefore do not have high hopes; they are hesitant to get married or have children, and no matter how much the government reaches out to tell them that “the Japanese economy will recover with Abenomics”, they do not buy cars or houses. There are more elderly people on the streets, and with the news telling of how the number of children keeps declining, people simply cannot be optimistic.

One hope for Japan in such times is to become a nation focusing on tourism, and there is another government-led survival guideline to focus on Japanese culture, both traditional and contemporary. This is something that European nations have been doing for many years, and there is no doubt that it is an important policy for a nation

which has lost its supremacy in both diplomatic and industrial power.

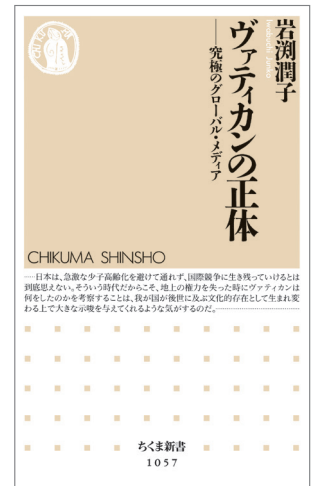
In my publication *The True Vatican - The Ultimate Global Media* (in Japanese, 2014), I shed light on the nature of the so-called Counter-Reformation, which occurred in the 16th century as a Catholic resurgence against the Protestant Reformation. When the Vatican realized it could no longer regain the same degree of power it once had, it went on to put its wealth into building a grand and magnificent church, pouring money into public facilities such as St. Peter’s Square and hiring

the best artist of that time to paint the altarpiece. I take this as an indication of the true nature of the Counter-Reformation. At a time when the pope had served as the “agent of God” with kings of every nation kneeling at his feet, historical (diplomatic) documents were naturally collected at the Vatican, and together with the gifts that visitors from all parts of the world brought, the Vatican had acquired the world’s best collection of books, arts and crafts. When the Vatican saw that modern-day kings no longer listened to the pope and modern science began to threaten theology, it chose to transform itself from an institution of “power” into one of “culture and scholarship” and succeeded in maintaining its existence and its influence in the years that followed.

Owing to the creation of St. Peter’s Basilica and the Vatican Museum, many employment opportunities have been created in that small space. Not only the Vatican, but hotels, restaurants, souvenir stores, buses, taxis, airlines, and airports in Rome can capitalize on the inflow of visitors from all over the world, and the tourism industry continues to boom. At the same time, as the leader of a “religious organization” with global reach, when the pope expresses concerns over humanitarian issues his words are spread worldwide and his influence is still extensive.

In looking to the future, now would be a good time for Japan to move toward becoming a “nation of culture” while it still has the economic capacity to do so. Japan must think about the future by looking back on the great achievements of the Meiji pioneers. **JS**

Photo: Chikumashobo Ltd.



Cover of *The True Vatican – The Ultimate Global Media* by Junko Iwabuchi (Chikuma Shinsho, 2014)

Junko Iwabuchi is chief writer and partner at web media Agrospace, Inc. and adjunct professor at Aoyama Gakuin University. She is a former Helene Rubinstein Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and participated in the Rotary Foundation scholarship program to study in Florence, Italy. She is a frequent contributor to newspapers and magazines in Japan on arts, culture, lifestyle and media.