

editors' reviews

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Jennifer Purtle and Hans Bjarne Thomsen, eds. *Looking Modern: East Asian Visual Culture from Treaty Ports to World War II*. Chicago: Art Media Resources, Inc., 2009. 327pp., 32 color plates, 120 black-and-white illustrations. ISBN:9781588861054 (hbk.). \$50.00.

Looking Modern: East Asian Visual Culture from Treaty Ports to World War II is the first in a new series from the University of Chicago's Center for the Art of East Asia. Originating from two Chicago symposia, this edited volume examines visual culture produced in China and Japan between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, as manifestations of visual modernity and modern visibility. The emphasis here is on visual culture rather than high art for the sake of a broader perspective on both visibility and the visual: the essays in the volume examine "visual dimensions of human endeavor traditionally seen as outside of artistic production in order to encourage exploration of new and understudied materials across disciplinary boundaries."(7)

The China portion of *Looking Modern*, edited by Jennifer Purtle, encompasses essays by Chia-ling Yang, Dorothy Ko, Ellen Johnston Laing, Zaixin Hong, and Delin Lai, plus an additional essay and essay-come-introduction by Purtle herself. It is interesting to note that with only one exception (Purtle on banknote iconography of Beijing's Qing-Republican transition), all of the other essays rely on south China for their sources of visual modernity: Shanghai cinema, painting, photography, picture calendars, and the art market; Suzhou embroidery; and Guangzhou architecture and urban planning. Although this geography of visual modernity is unusually emphasized by the current Expo 2010 Shanghai, it does raise the question of how these authors might feel modernity was (or was not) expressed in northern Chinese visual culture at the time.

The second section of the volume, edited and briefly introduced by Hans Bjarne Thomsen, presents scholarship on modern Japanese visual culture by Susan L. Burns, David L. Howell, Julie Christ Oakes, Barak Kushner, and Hyung Il Pai. Their essays cover a much broader range of subjects than their Chinese counterparts, encompassing medical advertisements, hairstyles, the National Treasure system, *kamishibai* (paper theater), and anthropological photography. But rather than scattering the reader's attention with such a varied mix, the tightly overlapping time periods of these articles present a compelling view of how variably modernity was defined and manipulated in modern Japan.

It is refreshing to have such a range of articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese and Japanese visual culture in a single volume. The authors go far beyond the photography, painting, and woodblock prints so commonly presented as modern East Asian art, reminding us of both the breadth and depth of visual culture during this period. The unexpected latitude of the essay topics in *Looking Modern* keeps the subject of East Asian visual modernity fresh and eloquent, without losing sight of the concrete examples of visual culture on which the volume is founded.

Three recurrent themes stand out across the articles: the commercialization of art and craft,

anxiety over cultural clarity in the face of progress that so often meant “Westernization,” and tension between visual culture and the modernizing force of technology. As China and Japan both experienced increased interaction with the West, it is well known that defining “modernity” created particular struggle and controversy in art and visual culture. To its credit, the essays in *Looking Modern* do not themselves seek to firmly define “modernity” in either China or Japan during this period, but rather to display its diverse manifestations in visual forms. By displaying rather than explicitly defining, the various examples discussed demonstrate the constant evolution of the range of possible definitions. The breadth of cases chosen by the authors indicates very clearly how the meanings of “modernity” seemed to change almost as quickly as they were conceived of, presented to, and consumed by the public.

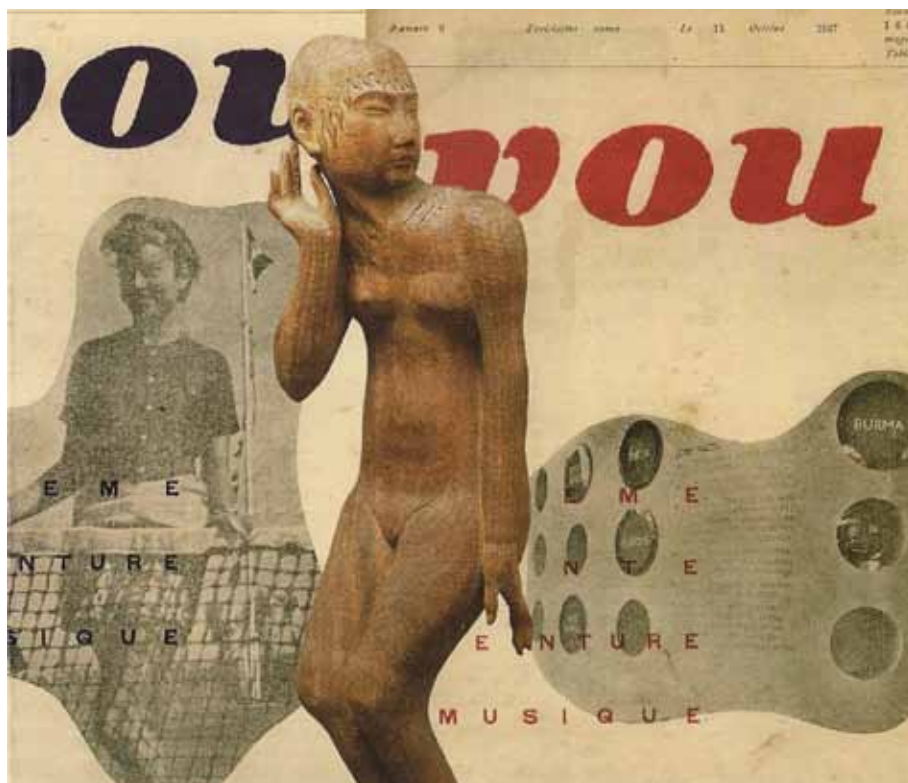
Looking Modern only falls short in one area: regional breadth. After the title’s provocative suggestion that the volume examines East Asian visual culture, the reader might be surprised to find that the articles are rather too neatly divided only between China and Japan. Korean, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese case studies during this turbulent period of change in East Asia would have made for an exceptional comparative volume. But it bears reminding that scholarship on East Asian art and visual culture still focuses predominantly on the two poles of either China or Japan. Unfortunately, therefore, it would seem that the lack of scholarship on broader East Asian visual culture in *Looking Modern* faithfully mirrors the state of the field. Nevertheless, *Looking Modern* persuasively presents a broad and interdisciplinary examination of modernity in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China and Japan that is firmly grounded in under-explored forms of East Asian visual culture. As the first of what will likely be many volumes produced by the University of Chicago’s Center for the Arts of East Asia, *Looking Modern* sets the bar high for future comparative study of modern East Asian visual culture.

Hashimoto Heihachi and Kitasono Katsue

MAJELLA MUNRO

Mie Prefectural Art Museum, Tsu, 7th August - 11th October, and Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, 23rd October - 12th December, 2010.

The poetic work of Kitasono Katsue (1902-1978), who enjoyed an international profile as the pioneer of concrete poetry during the 1960s and 1970s, and whose long-time friendship with Ezra Pound brought both to new prominence within Japan and the English-speaking world, is well known. What is less well known is that during his early life in Mie he studied traditional Buddhist wood carving in collaboration with his brother, the sculptor Hashimoto Heihachi (1897-1935). His encounter with Dadaism in the early 1920s irrevocably altered his career, setting him on the path to becoming one of Japan's most innovative avant-garde poets, but this early work within a more conventional artistic idiom forms an interesting part of his oeuvre which is often neglected, but is now made visible in this new and ground-breaking exhibition.



Hashimoto Heihachi's *Celestial Nymph Playing in the Flower Garden* (1930) and issues of Kitasono Katsue's *VOU*.

Kitasono was a master of several genres, experimenting with Dadaism and Surrealism, innovating his own forms of concrete and plastic poetry, and also producing 'traditional' haiku. This makes him difficult to 'pigeon-hole', but his work is most often discussed in connection to Surrealism, since his editorial activities exerted critical influence on the development of Surrealism in Japan. It is often claimed that Surrealism was incompatible with Japanese culture - specifically, works by Japanese Surrealist painters incorporating motifs from Buddhist devotional painting or Chinese landscape schools are derided as 'nationalistic' and excluded from discussions

of avant-gardism proper on this basis.¹ But, as our understanding of the incorporation of art-historical referents in Surrealism internationally begins to be revised, there is scope for restoring these 'nationalistic' works to their rightful place as extensions of the possible range of avant-garde expression. It was, therefore, extremely valuable to see Kitasono's early work alongside his experimental poetic works, making explicit that the incorporation of 'tradition' in some of his works from the later 1930s and 1940s did not occur under the influence of nationalistic wartime politics, but was instead a consistent feature of his artistic trajectory.

Kitasono's brother Hashimoto has enjoyed less renown, partly due to his early death, and partly to the neglect of 'traditional' artistic forms produced during the early twentieth century in Japan, an output sometimes perceived as anachronistic. A sculptor who trained at the Japan Art Institute and whose preferred medium was wood, Hashimoto was strongly influenced by devotional Buddhist sculpture, particularly works produced at the temples and shrines of Nara, which he studied enthusiastically. Unlike Kitasono, Hashimoto's oeuvre remained more or less consistent and he was not lured by the radicalism of the avant-garde. The juxtaposition of the two brothers' work in this exhibit is interesting not only because it highlights their divergence, but also because it makes newly visible the common ground between two seemingly disparate artistic careers. Kitasono's 'Japanised' Dada and Surrealism and the unfinished surface of Hashimoto's *Cat* (1922), and the all-over patterning of *Celestial Nymph Playing in the Flower Garden* (1930),² which may owe to modernist techniques, have more in common than might immediately be apparent. The two brothers, though taking

different artistic directions, remained close and influenced each other; together, their work presents an overlapping of international modernism and domestic culture. While the influence of domestic art history on Japanese avant-gardism has been only tentatively examined, the reciprocal influence of the avant-garde on 'conventional' expressions is even less well understood. In the current exhibition work by the nihonga painter Tamamura Zennosuke, whose artistic purpose was to innovate a merger of avant-garde and Japanese styles, and who, alongside Kitasono, contributed Dadaist poems to the periodical *Ge Gjmgjgam Prrr Gjmgem*, which he also financed, makes this reciprocity of influence newly visible.

The exhibition as installed at Mie prefectural museum was beautifully and carefully curated. Most worthy of mention is the manner in which the curators have so ably presented Kitasono's poetic work within a forum most germane to the presentation of the visual arts. The visuality of Kitasono's poetry, in both the concrete and plastic poems of the 1960s and 70s and his pre-war typographical experiments, is emphasised by this method of presentation. Many of the Kitasono items on display here come from the collection of John Solt, author of the foremost monographic study of Kitasono, whose collection is unsurpassed in its quality and scope. A Dadaist scrapbook and originals of letters exchanged with Pound are amongst the highlights. This exhibition was nearly twenty years in the making, and the results of this labour certainly show.

Endnotes

1 In the criticism of Yoshihisa Tsuruoka, amongst others, the incorporation of Japanese cultural referents is understood as diluting the radicalism of Surrealism as it developed in France. See Tsuruoka Yoshihisa, *The Discovery of Surrealism*, 1979.

2 The kanji for 'flower garden' are the same as those used to spell Kitasono, making this work a possible tribute from the traditional carver to the avant-garde poet.