

Crafting Beauty in Modern Japan: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Japan Traditional Art Crafts Exhibition.* Nicole Rousmaniere, ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007. 208 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Pontsioen

Published alongside an exhibition of the same name at the British Museum (open July 19, 2007 to October 21, 2007), *Crafting Beauty in Modern Japan* highlights a selection of art crafts submitted to the annual Japan Traditional Art Crafts Exhibition over the past 50 years by members of the Japan Art Craft Association. Presented in large 9 X 11 inch format and replete with over 150 stunning color photographs, the catalogue follows the categories used to organize the Art Crafts Exhibition, with sections on ceramics, textiles, lacquer, metal, wood and bamboo, and “other crafts” (dolls, cut metal foil, and glass). Included in the introductory section are essays by Kenji Kaneko (National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo), the book’s editor Nicole Rousmaniere (Guest Curator and Director of the Sainsbury Institute), and Takeo Uchiyama (National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto).

Kaneko traces the development of “traditional art craft” production and display in Japan by focusing on how difficult it has been, since the rise of modern art craft production in the late Meiji period, to categorize Japanese art crafts given that “the boundaries between art craft and craft industry are not always clear” (p. 10). This is certainly a significant issue, and could have been taken further to consider more closely the contested distinction between art and craft. In the context of modern Western discourse, art as defined by individual expression has tended to take an elevated position in relation to craftsmanship as defined by skilled work (Dormer 1994). This disparity arose in conjunction with the development of a cult of collecting (exemplified in the institution of the museum), as what was valued was the final form of a thing, the artifact, rather than the productive processes and performances that led to its existence. Interestingly, given Japan’s system of Important Intangible Cultural Properties, which recognizes people who possess particular art craft skills (designated “Living National Treasures”), rather than the objects they produce, it can be argued that in Japan greater emphasis is placed on the performance of creation than on the finished product. A consideration of this could have resulted in a more compelling comparative look at art craft production and curatorial practices in Japan and the West, a pertinent topic for this book given the international and collaborative nature of *Crafting Beauty*.

Rousmaniere provides insightful background on art craft traditions in Japan, focusing on the importance of regional expression and 20th century trends. A discussion of how craft skills are transmitted across generations in Japan follows, outlining four case studies which exemplify craft skill acquisition through secret codes passed down from master to apprentice, a family tradition, a more academic route utilizing formal training and knowledge of Japanese art history, and a self-taught approach, respectively. These descriptive accounts are interesting, but might have been expanded upon to include, for example, a discussion of the importance of participation in communities of practice and unobtrusive observation in craft skill acquisition (Lave and

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Wenger, eds. 1991). In this vein, John Singleton notes that among Japanese potters “it is expected that serious learning will proceed unmediated by didactic instruction” (1989:26), a statement that resonates with the examples described by Rousmaniere. By framing the case studies in a wider context, the interesting ways in which skill acquisition among Japanese art craft practitioners seems to challenge conventional Western notions of learning as a cognitive exercise might have been highlighted. Rousmaniere concludes with a discussion of potential future directions for art craft production in Japan, aptly pointing out the multitude of possibilities open to contemporary craft artists who are able to draw on traditional techniques and materials as they explore new forms of expression.

In the final essay, Uchiyama provides a detailed historical delineation of the Japan Traditional Art Crafts Exhibition. This extensive background is bound to be very useful for anyone interested in Japanese art crafts but unfamiliar with Japan’s complex system of Important Intangible Cultural Properties.

In addition to a superb collection of photographs (drawn from a number of sources but seamlessly blended) of works crafted in both traditional and contemporary styles by true master craft artists, many of whom have been designated Living National Treasures in Japan, each section of the catalogue includes an introduction on the history, regional significance, and contemporary practice of each of the six art craft categories. Neophytes to the vast array of Japanese art crafts will be particularly grateful that numerous craft techniques are described with reference to example objects in the catalogue, providing an idea of the range of possible outcomes within particular traditions. Pictured in the final section of the catalogue are several historic objects drawn from the British Museum’s extensive Japan collection. The inclusion of these objects, “carefully chosen to suggest historical resonances with the modern craft objects presented in the rest of the book” (p. 149), demonstrates one of the major strengths of this work: a commitment to highlight the importance of both continuity and change in Japanese art craft practice.

The first of two brief but delightful closing sections includes descriptions of the various craft techniques that led to the creation of the objects in the catalogue. In the second, all of the featured craft artists are pictured alongside short biographies. This kind of background coverage is rare for an exhibition catalogue and the inclusion of these two sections contributes significantly to Rousmaniere’s efforts to “encourage a deeper understanding and appreciation of Japanese art crafts in context” (p. 12).

Rather than being just another attractive exhibition catalogue, *Crafting Beauty* combines gorgeous photographs with informative commentary by both Japanese and Western experts on the trajectory of art craft production in Japan. For this reason, *Crafting Beauty* makes for an interesting and aesthetically satisfying read and will constitute a welcome addition to any coffee table or bookshelf.

References Cited

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