

## Defining “Japanese Art” in America

*Tomoko NAKASHIMA\**

### INTRODUCTION

The American concept of “Japanese art” was ethnologically imagined and commercially created in the nineteenth century. For many Americans at that time, the term “Japanese art” referred to such items as decorative objects, illustrated books and ethnic garments. Then in the twentieth century, as the concept of “Japanese art” became academically established in the US, what had previously been included in “Japanese art” in the American idea was marginalized as bric-a-brac, gradually losing its legitimacy as art. What Americans see presented in their art museums today as “Japanese art” is material that has been primarily collected and displayed by reference to the second, twentieth-century American concept of “Japanese art.” The original American concept has practically disappeared.

Recent studies have demonstrated the fact that the twentieth-century American concept was largely influenced by the Japanese concept of “Japanese art” that originated during the Meiji period.<sup>1</sup> With these studies, it has become possible to inquire further into questions such as how the current concept of “Japanese art” was universalized and naturalized in America, as well as, how “Japanese art” was conceptualized in nineteenth-century-America before the Japanese idea of “Japanese art”

---

Copyright © 2006 Tomoko Nakashima. All rights reserved. This work may be used, with this notice included, for noncommercial purposes. No copies of this work may be distributed, electronically or otherwise, in whole or in part, without permission from the author.

\*Assistant Professor, Tokai University

became gradually dominant in the twentieth century. The latter question I will examine in this paper.

It is now commonly understood among Japanese art historians that the Japanese concepts of “Japanese art” and the Japanese narrative of “Japanese art history” were, paradoxically, created as a national enterprise by implanting and adopting the Western notion of “art” in the Meiji period.<sup>2</sup> In this process, objects that belonged to the emperor and the aristocracy, as well as religious artifacts, were reinterpreted as “authentic art objects” by their reclassification within Western art categories such as painting, sculpture, architecture and the decorative arts, and so on. This procedure paralleled the process of constituting a modern nation-state. The attempt to create a narrative of “Japanese art history” by claiming a national body of fine art to equal that of Western classic art was not articulated in text form until 1900, when the Japanese government published a book, in French, on the occasion of Japanese participation in the Paris International Exhibition. Later this book was translated into Japanese and set the canon of Japanese art.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the comprehensive Japanese concept of “Japanese art” was not available for the American audience until the twentieth century. Nonetheless, this Japanese concept gradually took over from the earlier American idea with the establishment of the transpacific networks promoting Japanese studies that appeared after the end of the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> In the latter half of the twentieth century, these networks first influenced US academia and the acquisition and exhibition policies of American museums, and then started to influence the general public. According to Japanese art historian Yoshiaki Shimizu, this created the situation in which “the Japanese artworks collected and displayed in museums of the United States have been, directly or indirectly, conditioned by the Japanese national policy toward its cultural patrimony before they departed their place of origins. This implies that those works in collections outside Japan carry ready-made labels that convey official Japanese judgments.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Japan was the initiator in creating the twentieth-century American concept of “Japanese art.”

This paper will focus its attention on the often-forgotten, earlier American idea of “Japanese art” that originated in the nineteenth century and was then marginalized and rendered illegitimate in the twentieth century. In so doing, it will first locate the origins of the American conception of Japan as a country of decorative objects. Up until the middle of the nineteenth century, Japanese decorative objects were mostly categorized as ethnological specimens, and then in the last half of the

nineteenth century some of them were promoted as exotic art. This paper will examine how this American process of discovering "Japanese art" in the nineteenth century parallels James Clifford's analysis of the Western process of discovering (African) "primitive" arts of the twentieth century. Clifford states that "the great modernist 'pioneers' are shown promoting formerly despised tribal 'fetishes' or mere ethnographic 'specimens' to the status of high art and in the process discovering new dimensions of their ('our') creative potential." In his definition, this modernism process was intended to constitute "non-Western arts in its own image" and thus as "a going Western concern."<sup>6</sup> This paper will in turn argue that the American discovery of "Japanese art" was also a process that constituted "Japanese art" in its own American image. It can be said that during the nineteenth century Americans took the initiative in creating the American concept of "Japanese art." I would like to suggest, therefore, that at the beginning of the twentieth century, a shift occurred from the American-initiated concept to the Japanese concept, after which the Japanese concept became dominant. At the same time, the primary location of "Japanese art" in the US moved from the spaces of commercial outlets and private residences to academic spaces such as universities and art museums.

The recuperation of the original American definition of Japanese art in the Western art tradition allows for a broader view of the history of Japanese art in America. It renders visible, for example, the similarities between "the Japan craze"<sup>7</sup> of the nineteenth century and the recent "Cool Japan" phenomenon, making it possible to see this twenty-first century American view of Japanese art as the completion of a circle and the reassertion of conceptual initiative. Since the 1990s Japan has become for many Americans better known as the home of Japanese pop culture characters such as Pokemon, Godzilla and Hello Kitty. In fact, the recent American vogue for Japanese cultural products such as *anime*, *manga* and art objects is quite noticeable. Journalist Douglas McGray dubbed this phenomenon Japan's "Gross National Cool," and explained that "Japan's global cultural influence has only grown (since the 1990s)."<sup>8</sup> Since the publication of McGray's article, Japan has often been termed "Cool Japan." It is clear that there are many similarities between what Americans imagined "Japanese art" to be in the last half of the nineteenth century and currently popular Japanese cultural products, more so in fact than there are between either of those two versions of "Japanese art" and what many Americans see as "Japanese art" in American art museums now.

## I. THE ORIGIN OF THE AMERICAN CONCEPTION OF JAPAN AS AN ARTISTIC COUNTRY

It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that information about Japan and the Japanese people became available in American publications, and American people gradually developed their ideas about Japan. Some of the earliest US writings about Japan appeared in geography books. During this period, various geography books were published as the latest scientific knowledge, made possible by the accumulation of information about the non-Western world. The latter half of the eighteenth century was “an era of exploration and scientific study,”<sup>9</sup> and the period between 1770 and 1835 has been called “the age of the exploration narrative”<sup>10</sup> in the West. It has also been noted that during this period “ideologies and stereotypes [of peoples] were in the process of being formed” through the descriptions of numerous travel writings.<sup>11</sup> Mary Louise Pratt also argues that in this era “scientific exploration [became] a focus of intense public interest, and a source of some of the most powerful ideational and ideological apparatuses through which European [and American] citizenries related themselves to other parts of the world.” This kind of “planetary consciousness,” she suggests, was “a basic element constructing modern Eurocentrism.”<sup>12</sup> Within this cultural trend, so widespread in the West, Japan also became the subject of travel writings, and various accounts of Japan were published. These texts were reproduced in various publication forms, including geography books, thereby reaching an even wider audience, and they gradually created the stereotyped image of the Japanese as a people who produced exquisite decorative art works, thus constructing them as an artistic people even before the arrival of Commodore Perry.

### Japan in American geography books

Americans began to publish their own series of geography books soon after they gained independence. These US geography books included not only geographical information about various places or nations but also information about the manners and customs of their people, descriptions which fostered generalized stereotypes. One of the first descriptions of Japanese decorative objects was seen in Jedidiah Morse’s *The American Universal Geography*. In its fifth edition, published in 1805, Morse depicted Japan as a barbarian and pagan yet well-disciplined country and mentioned Japanese lacquer ware as one of Japan’s most famous

products.<sup>13</sup> Morse was a minister of the congregational church in Charlestown, Massachusetts and had published various geography books in America from as early as 1784. Later he came to be called the father of American geography.<sup>14</sup> Within the next few decades, Morse's description of Japan in his geography books gradually developed an impression of the Japanese as highly skillful in decorative art industries. For example, Morse's geography book of 1824 states that the inhabitants of Japan are as "highly civilized as the Chinese, and even excel them in several manufactures, particularly in silk and cotton goods, and in Japan [lacquer] and porcelain ware. . . . The Japanese cultivate literature and the useful arts."<sup>15</sup> The Japanese people are characterized as proficient in useful art skills and their industrial arts perceived as highly developed. This American perception of the Japanese promoted by American geography books remained the same throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Japanese decorative objects collected as ethnological specimens and curios

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, as texts were slowly creating an American perception of Japan as a country of superb decorative objects, actual decorative objects, which had been collected both as ethnological specimens and as curios by Americans who engaged in unofficial trade with Japan, also reinforced this perception. In the years between 1797 and 1809 unofficial trade existed between America and Japan. This trade led to various Japanese objects being brought back home by American sea captains and their crews and exhibited locally as curious objects from Japan.<sup>17</sup>

During the period when there existed unofficial trade between America and Japan, the Dutch merchants were facing difficulty in continuing their trade in Asia due to the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, and so chartered vessels from neutral countries such as the United States in order to continue their annual voyages between Batavia and Nagasaki. One of the American vessels thus engaged in trade with Japan was the *Franklin* headed by Captain James Devereux of Salem. Devereux collected a variety of artistic curiosities in Nagasaki, and upon safely returning to Salem he exhibited these curios in his house.<sup>18</sup> Salem's famous diarist, Reverend William Bentley, recorded this after he visited Devereux's house on June 23, 1800 and saw various Japanese objects. Bentley admired the quality of the Japanese decorative objects such as "the stone tables, tea tables, servers, knife cases, small cabinets," most

of which were lacquered objects. He was also impressed with the luxurious garments made of silk, as well as the excellent quality of Japanese metal-work. Despite his admiration of Japanese decorative objects in their intricacy and exquisiteness, he judged Japanese *ukiyo-e* very poorly, writing that they “were totally destitute of perspective,” and failing to appreciate the unique quality of Japanese pictorial art.<sup>19</sup> Other American seamen, such as Captain William V. Hutchings of the *Massachusetts* from Boston, and Captain Samuel Gardner Derby of the *Margaret* from Salem, also engaged in trade with Japan on behalf of the Dutch East India Company. They both came home with various Japanese decorative objects some of which they donated to the East India Marine Society (now the Peabody Essex Museum) in Salem. Through unofficial trade between America and Japan at the turn of the nineteenth century, various Japanese curios reached America. They were collected both as ethnological specimens and purchased as souvenirs. Among these objects, decorative art objects were the most admired. This reception again reinforced the US conception of Japan as a country of excellent industrial art products.

#### American books on Japan

Through an era of exploration and scientific study, then, countless travel writings were produced, and as Mary Louise Pratt indicates in *Imperial Eyes*, these travel writings produced “the rest of the world” for their readers.<sup>20</sup> During this period, successive travel writings about Japan were also published in Europe.<sup>21</sup> With this accumulating body of texts on Japan, the Western conception of Japan was being gradually formed. These texts were also gathered, classified, edited and reproduced in other publication forms, thus reaching an even wider segment of society. In America, a book wholly devoted to Japan was published in 1841 by Harper and Brothers as one of the hundred volumes selected for their people’s library series. It was entitled *Manners and Customs of the Japanese in the Nineteenth Century* and published anonymously by an English author, Mary Margaret Busk.<sup>22</sup> Busk herself had not been to Japan; however, she made the most of the information about Japan already available in European languages, editing it in the form of a travel account for general readers. Her book must have been very popular in the US as it was reprinted in 1843, 1845, and 1867.<sup>23</sup> One other book on Japan was published in the US before the Commodore Perry expedition arrived in Japan by an English author, Charles Mac Farlane, in 1852.<sup>24</sup>

Both Busk and Mac Farlane made a detailed analysis of Japanese art and art industries. First, Busk commented that the Japanese were an art-loving people and stated that the arts were more advanced in Japan than in China. She pointed out that Japanese fine arts were wholly ignorant in the knowledge of perspective and anatomy, considered to be the most basic and important elements of European fine arts since the Renaissance era. Due to this lack of knowledge, Japanese arts were understood as neither advanced nor civilized in the higher departments such as landscape and figure paintings, sculpture and architecture. Japanese artists were not good at making compositions or creating correct likenesses; however they were considered to have some merit in the close delineation of nature and details, as well as in their use of brilliant and beautiful colors.<sup>25</sup> Mac Farlane shared a similar opinion with Busk. For example, in regard to Japanese portrait painters he mentioned that their attention was "principally directed to accuracy in the details of costume and to the general air; the face is never a likeness," and mentioned the exquisiteness of the delineation of flowers and birds in Japanese paintings.<sup>26</sup> Both Busk's and Mac Farlane's analyses demonstrated that they did not appreciate Japanese pictorial art once it was classified within the higher category of the European art hierarchy; however, they esteemed the decorative arts which they classified into a lower category in the hierarchy. For example, Mac Farlane asserted that there was "but one opinion as to the industry, ingenuity and manual dexterity of the Japanese," and that "arts and manufactures are carried on in every part of the country, and some of them are brought to such a degree of perfection, as even to surpass those of Europe."<sup>27</sup> These narratives about "Japanese art" by Europeans written for American readers had the effect of not only creating the American "domestic subject"<sup>28</sup> but also of marginalizing Japanese art as ethnic art by interpreting Japanese art in terms of the grammar of European art. Yet, at the same time, these writings helped to reinforce the previous American perception of Japan as a country of excellent decorative objects and showed American eyes how to read "Japanese art."

#### An official encounter between the United States and Japan

Before the publication of the official travel narrative of the American expedition to Japan of 1853–1854, headed by Commodore Perry, there were no American narratives about Japan written based on the actual experience of visiting Japan. Therefore, the Americans including Perry

himself saw and imagined Japan through European writings before they came to Japan. In Japan, Perry and his crew confirmed partly if not completely what had been written in European accounts of Japan. For example, when they had an opportunity to exchange gifts officially with the government of Japan, they received gifts that mostly consisted of various handmade decorative objects such as lacquer ware, silk textiles, porcelain, etc.<sup>29</sup> Upon receiving these gifts, one American crew member commented that “every one, the Commodore included remarked on the meager display and the lack of rich brocades and magnificent things always associated with our ideas of Japan.”<sup>30</sup> His comment suggests they had a preconceived notion about Japan as a country of splendid decorative art objects even before they visited Japan. At the same time, by publishing an American text on Japan and commenting about Japanese art, the expedition members also contributed to the reinforcement of the Western interpretation of Japanese art. In *The Narrative of the Expedition*, the official publication of Perry’s expedition, they basically repeated the European way of seeing Japanese art.<sup>31</sup> However, they also generated some new ideas by examining the Japanese pictorial art works they collected in Japan. Professor Peter Paul Duggan, instructor of drawing at the time at the Free Academy of New York,<sup>32</sup> analyzed Japanese pictorial art by examining an illustrated children’s book, stating his opinion that the illustrations were drawn with “a freedom and humorous sense of the grotesque and ludicrous.”<sup>33</sup> Seeing Japanese art as “grotesque” and “humorous” was a new way of reading it in the West. Within the next few decades, however, this view became a primary way of reading Japanese art.

## II. AMERICAN DISCOVERY OF “JAPANESE ART” IN THE SPHERE OF ART

From exotic curios to exotic art

Once the opening of Japan had been achieved, actual Japanese decorative objects began flowing into Western markets in larger quantities. With the European and American interest in Japanese art growing among artists and art critics, an essay about Japanese art was published in America as early as 1868. The center of expertise in “Japanese art” was shifting from travel narrative writers to artists and art critics. This fact also demonstrates that the location of the American concept of “Japanese art” had begun shifting gradually from the sphere of ethnology to that of art.

Around 1870, at least three essays on Japanese art were written and published by Americans: by Russell Sturgis in 1868, and by John La Farge and James Jackson Jarves in 1870. In writing their essays all three shared a similar taste in appreciating Japanese art. These art critics and artists were all followers of John Ruskin's gothic and mediaeval art ideas and were in sympathy with the tradition of Romanticism. Romanticism and the Romantic Movement took a multiplicity of forms in reaction such as seeking their artistic inspiration in the past traditions of the Middle Ages, and in worlds beyond the reach of civilization, and in the contemplation of the "primitive" in the natural world.<sup>34</sup> The three writers also shared an interest in the works of the pre-Raphaelists, Italian primitive art and Japanese art. Although it is hard to imagine now, these were all considered as marginal art forms during the nineteenth century and categorized as either non-academic, primitive or exotic. The Western perception of "primitive civilization" has varied with time, and during the middle of the nineteenth century both Italy and Japan were sometimes included in this category. Mary Louise Pratt argues that "the eighteenth century has been identified as a period in which Northern Europe asserted itself as the center of civilization, claiming the legacy of the Mediterranean as its own. It is not surprising, then, to find German or British accounts of Italy sounding like German or British accounts of Brazil."<sup>35</sup> "Brazil" here could just as easily be "Japan." Anthropologist Shelly Errington further argues that "in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the aesthetic space of marginality and irrationality was occupied by a changing parade of 'grotesque' and 'decorative' items, including Trecento Italian, Polynesian, Archaic Greek, Egyptian, and Japanese."<sup>36</sup> By taking account of these arguments, it can be understood how these American art critics and artists, who were attracted by "grotesque" art works of the Pre-Raphaelite, Italian primitives and gothic architecture which were produced or discovered from the tradition of Romanticism, also discovered Japanese art from the same perspective. Thus, their appreciation of and analysis of Japanese art in their texts was a process of defining Japanese art as a marginal art situated outside the borders of authentic European classic art.

#### The allegory of affinity

The writings of Sturgis, La Farge and Jarves commonly find Japanese art to be new and even modern, something able to inspire contemporary European non-academic/avant-garde artists and their art movements. Sturgis considered Japanese art to contain "so much clear expression of

a kind of thought which we generally suppose modern and occidental,” and he thought it had been “a wonder to all European artists and critics.”<sup>37</sup> These discourses created what James Clifford has referred to as “the allegory of affinity”<sup>38</sup> linking Japanese and modern art works. A similar view can be found in the way in which Picasso, Leger and many other artists of the early twentieth century discovered African art.<sup>39</sup> “Japanese art” came to be regarded as a new source of artistic inspiration at a time when European and American artists were seeking new expressions and ideas in art. In fact, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century Japanese art continued to stimulate various art movements, including Realism and Impressionism, and now this effect as a whole is called *Japonisme*, just as African art inspired Cubism in the early twentieth century. What critics found new and inspiring in Japanese art at that time were its grotesqueness, its realism, its close observation of nature, and its mediaeval and decorative qualities. Mostly on the basis of their observation of Hokusai’s prints, they found it not only grotesque but also odd, ugly, humorous and diabolic. Both Sturgis and Jarves found some similarity between the works of Hokusai and the works of William Blake and Gustave Doré, both famous for their gothic and realist fancies, as well as with Winslow’s Homer’s drawings in terms of their lack of formality.<sup>40</sup> This exemplified the process of how non-Western objects were, according to Clifford, “integrated, recognized as masterpieces, given homes within an anthropological-aesthetic object system” in the West.<sup>41</sup>

Through the texts such as those produced by these three writers, “Japanese art” was marginalized as exotic and different, and this idea was further reinforced by contrasting “Japanese art” with European classic art. Jarves stated that the “Japanese esthetic point of view, feeling, and comprehension is antipodal to the Occidental,” and even though he admitted that the Japanese were a “people possessing remarkable artistic skill,” he concluded that its “theory and practice” were “widely differing from Europeans.”<sup>42</sup> According to Jarves’s interpretation, European artists were good at drawing, modeling and painting with academic skill, but lacked any real appreciation of beauty. On the other hand, Japanese artists “thoroughly enjoy and comprehend the nature of fine art without any technical knowledge of art”<sup>43</sup> La Farge agreed with Jarves on the point that the Japanese artists drew the essence of the subjects instinctively despite the fact they lacked “the feeling for plastic beauty that we inherit from the Greek ancestors.”<sup>44</sup> Long before these writers examined

Japanese art in this way, it was already perceived as lacking in knowledge of perspective and anatomy, as mentioned previously. These concepts created a vague idea of Japanese art as something different. Nonetheless, texts written by American art critics and artists created a more concrete image of Japanese art as odd, grotesque, humorous and even decadent by noting its affinity with the works of contemporary European and American avant-garde artists and by contrasting it with European classic art. James Clifford remarked the same kind of affinity in relation to tribal and modern art. According to Clifford, "tribal and modern artifacts are similar only in that they do not feature the pictorial illusionism or sculptural naturalism that came to dominate Western European art after the Renaissance."<sup>45</sup> The American concept of "Japanese art" of the nineteenth century also recognized that Japanese artifacts did not feature "pictorial illusionism or sculptural naturalism" by reading them as destitute of knowledge of perspective and anatomy. In fact, as Shelly Errington points out, what eventually became "primitive art in the twentieth century was simply grotesque in the nineteenth."<sup>46</sup> This suggests that both Japanese and African art lie in the same line of the history of the Western discovery of non-Western art. During the nineteenth century, both the conceptualization of the American notion of "Japanese art" and the appreciation and interpretation of what was important and beautiful was in the hands of Americans.

The "Japan Craze" in the last quarter of the nineteenth century

The American consumption of exotic or grotesque arts mainly took place in the sphere of the decorative arts. As historian T. J. Jackson Lears has explained, in the post-Civil War American city eclectic ornament bedecked nearly everything in sight, from public buildings to the most ordinary objects in private households. There were "Egyptian gateways on Protestant cemeteries, Greek gods on teapots, Gothic facades on railway stations."<sup>47</sup> This social phenomenon is now understood as the Aesthetic movement which describes a period of prolific artistic activities centered on the decorative arts in the 1870s, 1880s, and early 1890s, and is considered to have played an active role in the transformation of American life at the time.<sup>48</sup> Things Japanese were also enthusiastically consumed in this context. The Aesthetic movement served as the matrix of the "Japan craze" in America, and thus, the "Japan craze" occurred mostly in the sphere of the decorative arts.<sup>49</sup> This naturally led to American appreciation and interpretation of "Japanese art" in that period

being shaped by the assumption that it was exotic art, and to the fact that the US selection of Japanese masterpieces centered on decorative objects. As an article in *the New York Times* in 1877 put it: Japanese art “is often horrible, usually grotesque, never noble or inspiring. . . . But none can deny that the Japanese have delicacy of fancy, a thorough sympathy with a few aspects of nature, a fine sense of humor and an intimate acquaintance with the use of the primitive colors. . . . The Japanese have a soul above household art.”<sup>50</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the two concepts of “Japanese art” that originated separately in Japan and in America encountered each other, they had very few points in common. In 1904, when Tenshin Okakura, with an introduction from William Sturgis Bigelow, was invited to examine the collections of Japanese art in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, he came away with the impression that “the Museum treated Japanese art as a fad or a joke but not seriously.”<sup>51</sup> Okakura was one of the key persons involved in creating the narrative of “Japanese art history” and “Japanese painting” (*Nihon-ga*). To his eyes, the appreciation and interpretation of American “Japanese art” seemed “a fad or joke” when compared to that of the Japanese creation of “Japanese art” as a national enterprise. Okakura’s wish was that “the Museum collection should be developed in a way to make it the representative collection of oriental art in the West”<sup>52</sup> according to the recently created Japanese canon. In the twentieth century, the process by which the Japanese canon permeated throughout American society was also a marginalizing and disparaging process, as objects once appreciated as the major works of Japanese art became reduced to mere bric-a-brac. At the same time, the primary location of Japanese art in American society shifted from the hands of general public to the professionals, and from outside to inside academia. Through this process, “Japanese art” in American society became objects for professionals and connoisseurs during the most of the twentieth century until recently when a new wave of American consumption of Japanese artistic objects such as *manga* and *anime* came into vogue.

### III. “COOL JAPAN” IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By the turn of the twenty-first century, many Japanese art historians located in the United States had begun to express their concern over the extent to which their discipline had been influenced by Japan and the

Japanese academy, as the Japanese conception of "Japanese art" had become increasingly influential in American academia during the twentieth century. In their view, this situation had created a naturalized hierarchy privileging the Japanese over the American academy, and they expressed a felt need to change the present state within their field of study.<sup>53</sup> The story of American and Japanese cultural geopolitics over "Japanese art" still continues in the twenty-first century.

Change has been occurring outside academia as well. At the end of 2003, the *Washington Post* reported that "Japan's role in the world has changed dramatically over the decades, from expansionist military empire in the first half of the twentieth century to economic superpower in the 1980s. . . . The national confidence has been sapped by a thirteen-year economic slump, Japan is reinventing itself—this time as the coolest nation of Earth."<sup>54</sup> Recent American appreciation and consumption of Japanese artifacts has been centered on *otaku* (geek) and juvenile cultural products such as *anime*, *manga*, video games and contemporary art works. In fact, it was estimated that revenue from royalties and sales overseas of these artifacts went up 300 percent between 1992 and 2002, reaching 12.5 billion dollars in 2002,<sup>55</sup> the phenomenon that Douglas McGray dubbed "Gross National Cool" as mentioned previously. These cultural/art objects are highly admired in America for their grotesque, sexualized, or *kawaii* (cute) qualities of exoticism that are thought to inherit the traditional Japanese art essence seen in objects such as *ukiyo-e* prints and decorative art works.<sup>56</sup>

Some US scholars and public organizations began paying attention to these Japanese cultural/art artifacts as they became increasingly popular in America. From February to December 2004, an exhibition entitled "Godzilla Conquers the Globe" was held at Columbia University.<sup>57</sup> In this exhibition, subtitled "From Folk Monsters to Mass Monsters," Gregory M. Pflugfelder exhibited a long line of Japanese "grotesque" and "cute" monstrous creatures, represented in artifacts ranging from the print works of Hokusai and Utagawa Kuniyoshi to modern Godzilla posters and Pokemon cards, as artifacts that rendered the essence of Japanese popular culture. For example, in Pflugfelder's view there is an affinity between Kuniyoshi's *Genjikumo ukiyo-e awase*, which portrayed memorable scenes from the kabuki theater played by famous contemporary actors, and the series of Godzilla movie posters, because both types of objects depict popular visual entertainment of the time in print form and were circulated widely among the general public. On the same

grounds, Pfugfelder also pointed to a link between Hokusai *manga* and present day *manga*, as well as between *obake karuta* (ghost/monster cards) of the Edo period and today's Pokemon cards. In this way, *ukiyo-e* prints, Hokusai *manga* as well as *obake karuta* and *netsuke* are being considered as precursors of today's movie posters, *manga*, Pokemon cards and *anime* figure toys.<sup>58</sup> In October, 2004, a scholarly conference on Godzilla was organized at the University of Kansas to discuss Japanese pop culture, globalization, and US-Japan relations after WWII. And from April to July 2005, an art exhibition entitled "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture" was held at the Japan Society gallery in New York. Exhibited there were *manga*, *anime*, Hello Kitty, Godzilla, and many figure toys as well as art works of Murakami Takashi, among others. In the exhibition catalogue, Murakami saw this Cool Japan phenomenon as a part of a Western process of modernism, arguing that "the art world in the West is searching for the next new theory. This search has reached as far as Asia, a less-Westernized cultural sphere in which Japan, and its capital Tokyo, are receiving the most attention."<sup>59</sup> This means that "Japanese art" is again being regarded as a new source of artistic inspiration in the West in the twenty-first century. Recent American consumption and interpretation of Japanese cultural/art objects may suggest another paradigm change in the American idea of "Japanese art."

#### CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have examined the formation process of the American concept of "Japanese art" in the nineteenth century. Japan was first discovered as a country of exquisite decorative objects through the descriptions of geography books and the collections of "Japanese art" in the first half of the nineteenth century. During this period, "Japanese art" was collected and appreciated as a range of exotic curios mostly in relation to the sphere of ethnology. In the postbellum society, "Japanese art" began to be discussed in artists and art critics' texts and gradually moved over into the sphere of art. Nonetheless, the things imagined as "Japanese art" at that time were fans, lacquers, ceramics, illustrated books and clothing, objects now largely characterized as bric-a-brac. The location of "Japanese art" until the beginning of the twentieth century was, as the Japanese art historian Christine M. E. Guth remarked, fairs and expositions, bazaars and curio shops, and private residences.<sup>60</sup> The consump-

tion and appreciation of "Japanese art" was largely backed by popular interest in Japanese art among the general public. "Japanese art" was both imagined in terms of ethnological specimens and as popular commodities or exotic art in America during the nineteenth century. The conceptualization process was a going American concern. This American concept of "Japanese art" which seemed a fad or a joke to Okakura's eyes in 1904 went on to contribute greatly to creating the Japanese narrative of "Japanese art" as a national enterprise. This Japanese narrative, along with other Japanese modernization in all other fields, was closely linked with the modernizing endeavors of establishing a national identity for Japan. During the twentieth century, co-operative efforts promoting "Japanese art" as fine art in America involving the Japanese government, public organizations and the academy both in the United States and Japan, changed what Americans imagined as "Japanese art" from ethnological specimens and popular commodities to fine classic art. During this process, the primary location of "Japanese art" shifted from commercial outlets and private residences to academic spaces such as universities and museums.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, scholars of the US academy expressed their need for a change in the current paradigm of Japanese art. At the same time, outside the academy, a cultural phenomenon arose with the potential to change the American concept of "Japanese art," the "Cool Japan" phenomenon. Within this phenomenon, once again the appreciation and interpretation of what is important and beautiful, in things such as *manga*, *anime*, and characters such as Godzilla and Hello Kitty, are in the hands of Americans. It does not necessary mean that things imagined as "Japanese art" during the nineteenth century and the twenty-first century are very similar. However, there are more than a few affinities between the two. For example, objects most enthusiastically appreciated both in the "Japan Craze" and in "Cool Japan" are considered as ethnically unique commodities. The primary locations of these objects are commercial outlets and private residences, and they are largely consumed by the general public. It can also be said that in both phases "Japanese art" is regarded as a new source of artistic inspiration, facilitating the discovery of new dimensions of American creative potential. Most of all, in both cases the US-based interpretation and appreciation of "Japanese art" is primarily in the hands of Americans. Examining the future course of the American idea of "Japanese art" is out of the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, when the twentieth-century paradigm of

American “Japanese art” comes under scrutiny in future, it may be worth considering how a very different concept of “Japanese art,” created in the nineteenth century in America, which has now largely dropped out of history, was formed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Yoshiaki Shimizu, “Japan in American Museums: But Which Japan?” *The Art Bulletin*, 83, 1 (March 2001), 123–134; Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawn, “Japanese Art History, 2001: The State and Stakes of Research,” *The Art Bulletin*, 83, 1 (March 2001), 105–122; John Rosenfield, “Japanese Art Studies in America since 1945,” Helen Hardacre ed., *The Postwar Development of Japanese Studies in the United States* (Leiden, Boston and Koln: Brill, 1998), 161–194.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sato Doshin, *Meiji Kokka to Kindai Bijutsu* [Meiji Japan and Modern Art] (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1999); Kitazawa Noriaki, *Kyokai no Bijutsu-shi* [The Art History of Boundaries] (Tokyo: Brucke, 2000); Takagi Hiroshi, *Tennou-sei no Bunkashiteki Kenkyu* [Studies of Modern Emperor Systems as Cultural History] (Tokyo: Koukura shobo, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Sato, *Meiji Kokka*, 124–126; Takagi, *Tennou-sei*, 345–381; Mabuchi Akiko, “1900 nen Paris Bankokuhaku to Histoire de l’Art du Japon wo Megutte,” [1900 Paris Exhibition and *Histoire de l’Art du Japon*] National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo eds., *Kataru Genzai Katarareru Kako* [Narrating Present Narrated Past] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1999), 43–45.

<sup>4</sup> Tomoko Nakashima, “The Formative Years of the Transpacific Networks Promoting Japanese Studies in America,” *Pacific and American Studies*, 4 (March 2004), 111–127.

<sup>5</sup> Shimizu, “Japan in American Museums,” 131.

<sup>6</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), 193, 195.

<sup>7</sup> William Hosley, *The Japan Idea: Art and Life in Victorian America* (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1990), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool,” *Foreign Policy* (May/June 2002), 47.

<sup>9</sup> Catharina Blomberg, *The West’s Encounter with Japanese Civilization 1800–1940* volume 1 (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 7. This series is an anthology of travel writings Westerners wrote about Japan.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson, “General Introduction,” Tim Fulford and Carol Bolton ed., *Travel Explorations and Empires: Writings from the Era of Imperial Expansion 1770–1835* volume 1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2001), xiii. This is another series which is an anthology of travel writings.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writings and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 23, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Jedidiah Morse, *The American Universal Geography*, Part Second fifth edition (Boston: J. T. Buckingham, 1805), 491.

<sup>14</sup> Jedidiah Morse, *Geography Made Easy: Being a Short, but Comprehensive System of That Very Useful and Agreeable science* (New Haven: Meigs, Owen and Dana, 1784). Japan was first described in the following book, Jedidiah Morse, *The American Geography; Or, A View of the Present Situation of the United States of America* ([1789];

New York: Arno Press, 1970), 525. Kamei Shunsuke, "Toyo no Fushigina Kuni, (Jyou)," [Mysterious Country in the East] *Kokusai Bunka* 107 (1963), 13–16.

<sup>15</sup> Jedidiah Morse and Sidney Edwards Morse, *A New System of Geography* Twenty-fourth edition (Boston: Richardson, 1824), 246–7.

<sup>16</sup> See, S. Augustus Mitchell, *A System of Modern Geography* (Philadelphia: E. H. Butler, 1870), 301; S. Augustus Mitchell, *The New Primary Geography* (Philadelphia: E. H. Butler, 1888), 79.

<sup>17</sup> Unofficial American trade with Japan from the period 1797 to 1809, see, Richard Hildreth, *Japan as It Was and Is* (Boston: Philips, Sampson, 1855), 446–9; Shunzo Sakamaki, "Japan and the United States, 1790–1853," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, 18 (1939), 4–11; Hina Hirayama, "'A True Japanese Taste': Construction of Knowledge about Japan in Boston, 1880–1900," (Ph. D. Diss., Boston University, 1999), 38–52; *Worlds Revealed: The Dawn of Japanese and American Exchange* (Tokyo: Edo-Tokyo Museum, 1999), 57–92.

<sup>18</sup> His collection included five *ukiyo-e* prints, various decorative lacquer wares and toy animals which are now housed at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. See, *Worlds Revealed*, 57, 62–92.

<sup>19</sup> *The Diary of William Bentley, D. D., Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts*. Volume two (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1962), 342.

<sup>20</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, n. p.

<sup>21</sup> For example, in 1727 Engelbert Kaempfer's *The History of Japan* was published in London, followed by Carl Peter Thunberg's *Flora Japonica* in 1784, and his travel account of Asia in 1792. Also in 1816 Russian navy captain Vassili Michailovick Golownin published his account of his captivity in Japan. Then the narratives of Izaak Titsingh (1819), G. F. Meijlan (1830), and Hendrick Doeff (1833), who all came to Japan as a members of the Dutch East India Company, were published in Europe, along with German physician Philipp Franz von Siebold's reputed series of books on Japan from 1832 to 1851, in German.

<sup>22</sup> *Manners and Customs of the Japanese in the Nineteenth Century from the Accounts of Recent Dutch Residents in Japan, and from the German Work of Dr. PH. FR. Von Siebold* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841).

<sup>23</sup> These were reprinted as a collection of Harper's the family library series as M. M. Busk ed., *Manners and Customs of the Japanese* (New York: Harper, 1843).

<sup>24</sup> Charles Mac Farlane, *Japan: An Account, Geographical and Historical* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1852), 259.

<sup>25</sup> *Manners and Customs*, 225–6.

<sup>26</sup> Mac Farlane, *Japan*, 327–8.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 259.

<sup>28</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Francis L. Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron* volume 1 ([1856]; New York: AMS Press, 1967), 369.

<sup>30</sup> Rear Admiral George Henry Preble, U. S. N., Boleslaw Szczeniak ed., *The Opening of Japan: A Diary of Discovering in the Far East, 1853–1856* (Norman, Okla: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 146.

<sup>31</sup> Hawks, *Narrative*, 50–1, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Christine Wallace Laidlaw, "The American Reaction to Japanese Art 1853–1876," (Ph. D. diss., New Brunswick Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1996), 12.

<sup>33</sup> Hawks, *Narrative*, 268, 459, 461–463.

<sup>34</sup> Jane Turner ed., *The Dictionary of Art* volume 26 (New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 1996), 735–744.

<sup>35</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 75.

<sup>37</sup> "The Fine Arts of Japan. II.," *The Nation*, 7, 159 (July 16, 1868), 57.

<sup>38</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament*, 196.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 189–196.

<sup>40</sup> "The Fine Arts of Japan. II.," 57; "The Fine Arts of Japan. IV.," *The Nation*, 7, 161 (July 30, 1868), 96–7; James Jackson Jarves, *Art Thoughts* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1870), 223, 226–8; John La Farge, "An Essay on Japanese Art," Raphael Pumpelly, *Across America and Asia* (London: Sampson Low, and Marston, 1870), 199.

<sup>41</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament*, 213.

<sup>42</sup> Jarves, *Art Thoughts*, 221, 223.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 144.

<sup>44</sup> La Farge, "An Essay," 198.

<sup>45</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament*, 192.

<sup>46</sup> Errington, *The Death of Authentic*, 86.

<sup>47</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 33.

<sup>48</sup> *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Rizzoli, 1987).

<sup>49</sup> Hosley, *The Japan Idea*; Tomoko Nakashima, "The Vogue for Things Japanese in the American Aesthetic Movement," *The Komaba Journal of Area Studies* 4 (2000), 157–176; Christine M. E. Guth, *Longfellow's Tattoos: Tourism, Collecting, and Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> "Japanese Art," *New York Times*, February 12, 1877.

<sup>51</sup> Edward Robinson, Conversation with Mr. Okakura, 27 November 1904, Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Cited in Ann Nishimura Morse, "Promoting Authenticity: Okakura Kakuzo and the Japanese Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston," *Okakura Tenshin and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Nagoya: Nagoya/Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1999), 145.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 145.

<sup>53</sup> Rosenfield, "Japanese Art Studies"; Yiengpruksawan, "Japanese Art History 2001"; Shimizu, "Japan in American Museums."

<sup>54</sup> "Japan's Empire of Cool," *Washington Post*, December 27, 2003.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Susan J. Napier, *Anime: From Akira to Princess Mononoke* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 4; "The Giant Cartoon Landing at Rockefeller Center," *New York Times*, August 24, 2003.

<sup>57</sup> This exhibition was held at C. V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University and sponsored by the Donald Keen Center of Japanese Culture and the Weatherhead East Asian Institute.

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ealac/dkc/calendar/godzilla/gozillaexhibition2.html> Internet accessed on February 22, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Takashi Murakami ed., *Little Boy* (New York: Japan Society, 2005), 152.

<sup>60</sup> Guth, *Longfellow's Tattoos*, xviii.