Mitsukoshi Department Store: a Missionary of Civilization, a Taste Cultivator & an Art Entrepreneur in the Early 20th Century

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Abstract

Through closely examining the case of Mitsukoshi department store, the first modern department store in Japan, this paper argues that the birth of the Japanese department stores bears a clear trace to the socio-cultural backdrop of Meiji restoration, an era that can be summarized by the state motto, "civilization and enlightenment". Therefore, unlike its Western counterparts, Japanese department stores are not only commercial institutions but also cultural institutions that function to define modern and cultured life. Part I of this paper will provide an overview of the idea of Japanese department stores as cultural institutions. Then, the paper proceeds to explore the historical and cultural context of Japanese department stores and Mitsukoshi department store, focusing on the concept of department store as a missionary of civilization. Part III will illustrate how Mitsukoshi acted as a taste cultivator for the burgeoning urban middle class, Yamanotezoko, who were the new clientele of Mitsukoshi and eager to legitimate their social status through demonstrating a refined taste. Part IV concentrates on elaborating how Mitsukoshi acted as an art entrepreneur in the land that was new to the idea of fine art and thriving with growing consumer cultures. This paper aims to answer the following question: how did a commercial institution function as a prominent cultural institution in a land that was new to concept of “fine art” and thriving with burgeoning urban middle class?

1. Introduction

Japanese department stores and Western department stores have a very different origin. When department stores sprang up in the major Euro-American cities, it was a special time in Euro-American world; it was the time when the rise of the bourgeoisie enriched and colored the cultural landscape in Europe. Whereas, Japanese department stores could be viewed as the end product of Meiji restoration, an era of Westernization, to showcase the “civilization and enlightenment” of Japan. Therefore, the Japanese discourse surrounding department store bears a clear trace of the socio-cultural logic behind its development. The social history and cultural dimensions inflecting and informing the discourse revolving around Japanese department store are inscribed into Japanese department stores today.

More precisely, the Japanese discourse surrounding department stores has far transcended the idea of department stores as “the cathedral of modern commerce”, a term Émil Zola used to describe social function of department stores in the 19th century (Sapin 2004, 317). In Japan, department stores are not only commercial institutions but also cultural institutions that actively engage in the symbolic production of cultured life. In addition, Japanese department store epitomizes many aspects of modern cultural institutions. They plays a crucial role in the production, exhibition, circulation and consumption of art. As Younjung Oh (2012) remarks “Department stores had a pronounced and lasting impact on art and visual culture in modern Japan”, and Mitsukoshi department store, the first modern department store in Japan, offers us a good example to examine the idea illustrated above (1).
2. Mitsukoshi Department Store: a Missionary of Civilization

Japanese Department Stores in Context

With the rise of the vital bourgeoisie in the mid-19th century, department stores sprang up in the major Euro-American cities, including London, Paris and New York. Department stores were the new social and commercial spaces inscribed with the voluptuous lifestyle of the bourgeoisie. As the French intellectual, Émil Zola, remarked “The department store tends to replace the church. It marches to the religion of the cash desk, of beauty, of coquetry, and fashion” (Tamari 2006, 115). Accordingly, department stores became “the cathedral of modern commerce”, as Émil Zola put it in his 1883 novel Bonheur des Dames (Sapin 2004, 317).

Eventually, the trend reached Japan in the early 20th century, but with a twist. Against the backdrop of Meiji Restoration, an era of Westernization and social reconstruction in Japan, Japanese department stores were established. In response to the nineteenth-century West expansion to Asia, clashes with the intrusive West and the superiority of Western technologies and weaponry, Japan unfolded the Meiji Restoration in 1868, an era characterized with the state motto bunmei kaika, or civilization and enlightenment. Being Western was the synonym for “being modern” back to that time. “To be seen as Western was virtually synonymous with being counted as high and privileged class”, as Youn Jung Oh (2012) illustrates it (342). As it is indicated in the state slogan “datsu a nyu ou”, which literally means “break away from Asian and merge into Europe”, westernization was encouraged in every aspect of daily life, ranging from clothing, dining habit, and housing.

The emergence of Japanese department stores can be situated within the lineage of Westernization movement during the Meiji Restoration. As Youn Jung Oh (2012) notes, “Coincidentally or not, students of Fukuzawa Yukichi, Meiji Japan’s most ardent promoter of Western values and practices, came to work as key personnel for major department stores and carried out a series of modernizing reforms of the stores.” (342-343). Therefore, Japanese department stores can be considered as institutions that instruct the ordinary Japanese how to socialize into the Western ways of consumption and living. Moreover, in many ways, Japanese department stores were also interfaces to modernity. According to Brian Moeran (1998), the Japanese department store was “a dream world where western, and thus bourgeois, culture was on display.” (142). It offered the masses an entrée into the bunka seikatsu, or cultured life (Young 1999, 65). In this regard, department stores in Japan were more like “missionaries of civilization” or “epitome of modern civilization”, rather than “the cathedral of commerce” (Young 1999, 56; Sapin 2004, 317; Oh 2012, 343). Ironically, like the museums, which is a “sign of civilization”, as Andrew McClellan (2008) phrases it, in a land that was aspired to be merged into the Western civilized world, department store was also treated as a sign of civilization(4).

Mitsukoshi Department Store in Historical and Cultural Context

Mitsukoshi is widely considered as the first modern department store in Japan (Moeran 1998; Tamari 2006). The origin of Mitsukoshi department store can be traced back to 1673, when Mitsui Takatoshi opened echigoya, kimono store, in both Kyoto and Edo[1].

Echigoya pioneered in “cash sales at fixed prices”, as its 1683 slogan puts it (Mitsukoshi Ltd. 2005, 16). In 1895, Yoshio Takahashi, a firm believer in Fukuzawa Yukichi’s policy, took over Mitsui Gofukuten, the predecessor of Mitsukoshi department store. Inspired by the visit to Wanamaker’s in Philadelphia[2] during his time studying in the United States, Takahashi abolished the zauri system, “where products are not displayed in the stores but instead are stored at the backs, and clerks bring out the products to the customers upon their request”, as Mitsukoshi defines it, and transformed the whole Nihonbashi store into display area in 1900 (Mitsukoshi Ltd. 2005, 16; Moeran 1998, 145-146). The innovative spirit is descended to
In the December of 1904, Mitsukoshi issued "Department Store Proclamation" to its customers and business partners, and in the beginning of following year, the proclamation was placed as full-page advertisement in several major newspapers, which marked its official conversion from gofukuten, or traditional Japanese drapery to modern department store (Morea 1998, 143; Tamari 2006, 101; Sapin 2003, 15; Mitsukoshi Ltd. 2005, 16). What is worth noting is that in the proclamation, Mitsukoshi first adopted the term depātoento sutoa[3], or a paronym of the English term, department store, written in Katakana syllabary [4]. Since language is the carrier of ideas, an evolving course of a society often pulses with ideas that come with adaptations of new words that had not existed in the society. The adoption of the Western term, depātoento sutoa, signifies Mitsukoshi’s embracement of the western conduct of operations and thus the modern civilization. With the completion of the main building of Nihonbashi main store, which featured a renaissance-style architecture with the first escalators and elevators in Japan, and lions guarded the main entrance modelled on the lions of Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square London in 1914, Mitsukoshi was eventually in line with its Western counterparts (Moeran 1998, 155-156).
Overall, Mitsukoshi department store can be viewed as a product of Meiji Restoration to purvey western sociocultural values. It was a commercial institution inscribed with the state motto “civilization and enlightenment” and actively engaged in the symbolic production of cultured life in the early 20th century.

### 3. Mitsukoshi Department Store: a Taste Cultivator for the New Urban Middle Class, Yamanotezoku

“Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate ( materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is the generative formula of lifestyle, a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of earth of the symbolic sub-spaces…” – Pierre Bourdieu 1984

The New Clientele of Mitsukoshi Department Store: Yamanotezoku

With the dissolution of feudal system and the waning of the “old cultural elites”, such as court nobles and the samurai, at the turn of the 20th century, the burgeoning urban middle class burst onto the scene. The process of industrialization and urbanization, as well as the vitality of the new middle class enriched and diversified the cultural landscape within cities. Mitsukoshi’s transformation from *gofukuten* to the modern department store was undertaken in the midst of the dramatic socio-cultural change back to that time. A privileged few was gradually replaced by the burgeoning urban middle class. As it is indicated in a research by Minami Hiroshi, between 1907 and 1923, the percentage of middle class household significantly increased from three percent to twelve percent [5] (Oh 2014, 354). With high-quality kimono, which as a symbol of wealth, as the major product, feudal lords, merchant capitalists, and aristocracy constituted the core clientele of Mitsukoshi *gofukuten*. One the other hand, situated in a different sociocultural context, Mitsukoshi department store expanded its assortment of merchandise to bags, shoes, umbrellas, cosmetics, stationery, artworks, and a wide variety of imported goods (Moeran 1998, 155; Oh 2014, 353; Mitsukoshi Ltd. 2005, 16-17). Accordingly, the core clientele shifted to the
modern middle class dwelling in the urban area, who were known as Yamanotezoku, or Yamanote people.

Yamanote people was first referred to as the burgeoning urban middle class inhabiting in the Yamanote district [6] which was connected to the Tokyo downtown by the Yamanote line, a commuter rail line starting operation from the late 19th century (Moeran 1998, 152). Later, the term, Yamanotezoku, was widely used to refer to the modern middle class living in Tokyo as well as other cities (Oh 2014, 354). The new urban middle class was comprised of professors, civil servants, bankers, doctors, military officers, social elites working in large trading corporations, and other white-collar workers, who generally supported the Westernizing craze promoted by the state (Oh 2014, 353; Moeran 1998, 151).

Taste: The Conspicuous Marker of Social Position

In the light of the dominant discourse of “fine art”, the autonomy of art is highly valued. Accordingly, one’s aesthetic preferences and taste are supposed to be autonomous as well (Oh 2014, 355; Oh 2012, 345). However, as Pierre Bourdieu (1993) suggests, the production of a legitimate cultural discourse is a symbolic production(35-37). Thus, taste is never innate but concerns “the capacity to discern”, or in Pierre Bourdieu (1984) words, “the capacity to see (voir) is a function of the knowledge (savoir)” (2).

As the rising cultural elites, Yamanote people were willing and eager to embrace novel products and ideas. However, many of them had never socialized in the cultural setting still limited to the purview of the privileged few, and thus were lack of the taste and “cultural competence to indulge their craving for high culture”, as Younjung Oh (2014) elaborates it (351). In a land that vigorously propagated the idea of cultured life, failure to demonstrate and command proper taste and cultural literacy to socialize would possibly lead to the exclusion from the inner circle of cultural nobility. The anxiety of the exclusion is exemplified in Tōkyōgaku (A Study of Tokyo) by Ishikawa Tengai published in 1909, which functioned as a guide to educate the new Tokyoites the importance of commanding proper taste in social settings (Oh 2014, 354). Eventually, “individual taste and the cultivation of culture became vital to the negotiation of one’s social position in this fluid moment of modern Japan”, as Younjung Oh (2014) puts it (354).

Mitsukoshi Department Store: a Taste Cultivator

During the liminal stage between the waning of the “old cultural elites” and the rising of the new social elites who aspired to legitimate their social positions through demonstrating refined taste, the “crack” offered an ideal space for Mitsukoshi department stores to come into play. Mitsukoshi was a prominent cultivator and creator of the taste and the lifestyle catered to yamanotezoku, which termed as Mitsukoshi shumi, or Mitsukoshi taste. For instance, in an article published to announce its establishment of art section in 1907, Mitsukoshi stated, “If there were no art in the world, it would be desolate...if we could not see fine works of art, it would be impossible for us to have shumi…As a gotukuten which deals with designs suggesting new taste, Mitsukoshi cannot neglect fine art and has decided to establish an art section” (Oh 2014, 351). In another marketing campaign to celebrate the grand opening of Imperial Theatre in 1913, Mitsukoshi meticulously adopted the famous slogan “Today the imperial theater, tomorrow Mitsukoshi” to bundle itself with the first Western-style theater in Japan and to rebound to its own cultural prominence.

For Mitsukoshi, constructing the taste and lifestyle which could saturate the fabric of the everyday life of yamanotezoku was a brilliant marketing strategy to “equate shopping with aesthetic sophistication”, as Louise Young(1999) phrases it (66). Furthermore, it was a means to accumulate its cultural capitals, and to consolidate its cultural and aesthetic authority (Oh 2012, 13). Positioning itself as the test setter was a particularly smart strategy, since taste was exactly the major matters of concern for the burgeoning urban middle class. For the urban middle class, shopping in the space surrounded with the aura of the high culture gave them the illusion and perception that they were moving toward the circle of cultural nobility.

Mitsukoshi House Magazine: the Key Interface to Disseminate Mitsukoshi Taste

A series of advertisement with Mitsukoshi’s famous slogan “Today the imperial theater, tomorrow Mitsukoshi” Photo

Courtesy:https://jp.pinterest.com/pin/385268943105576879/
Mitsukoshi also pioneers in publishing the first department store house magazine in Japan. In 1899, it published its first house magazine, *Hanagoromo*, whose content was closely aligned with Mitsukoshi’s strategy to become a taste setter for the burgeoning urban middle class. Therefore, rather than merely focusing on the promotion of the commodities, aesthetic ways of life, fashion trends, academic articles and serialized novels by popular authors were also included (Sapin 2003, 81; Oh 2012, 18). Going through several name changes[7], its house magazine Mitsukoshi reached the circulation of over 50,000 issues in 1911. Moreover, nearly 230 people got involved in the publication of the house magazines, which manifests that Mitsukoshi took it seriously and thus poured energies into it.

Mitsukoshi’s house magazine can be considered as the epitome and the messenger of its brand image and Mitsukoshi taste (Yamamoto 2011, 325). This is the underlying reason why it was also the media that Mitsukoshi chose to make the announcement of its launch of the art section, as it is discussed above. It is the key interface that Mitsukoshi utilized to speak to the public, to disseminate Mitsukoshi taste and to project the image that Mitsukoshi was an authority in cultural production. As Tomoko Tamari (2006) summarizes, "For the upper and middle class they were a material catalog and source of cultural information. For the new middle class, they could be a guide-book for new lifestyles…For people in the provinces they were “the window, through which they could see ideal lifestyles” (111).

4. Mitsukoshi Department Store: an Art Entrepreneur in the Land that Was New to the Idea of “Fine Art” and Thriving with the New Middle Class

Fine Art: an Imported Idea

Mitsukoshi epitomized many aspects of modern art institutions. It played a crucial role in the production, exhibition, circulation and consumption of art in the 20th-century Japan, a land that pulsed with the vitality of booming consumer culture, and that was new to the concept of “fine art” (Oh 2012, 1).

Considering how Japonisme swept Europe and influenced the art scene in Europe from the late 19th century, and how Japanese arts provided a new “pictorial language” and “widen[ed] the culture horizons” for the Impressionist as well as many artists across the Western societies, it may be surprising to learn that the concept of “fine art” actually did not exist in Japan before early 1870s (Edwards & Wood 2012, 56, 65). Japan has a long history of encountering foreign cultures, while being shaped by such external influences. As Sidney Lewis Gulick (1903), a prominent American missionary, described how the Japanese society evolved and is enriched: “It is true that the character of a nation is mainly the outcome of its history itself, for the most part dependent on the environment or the opportunities for progress presented in the course of the time and of the ability of the the race to profit by these in the course of foreign encounterments.” Such trajectory can also be found in the development of the discourse surrounding fine art in Japan. *bijutsu*, which literally means “beautiful technique”, was the Japanese term for fine art[8] (Coaldrake 2013, 177). It was first introduced by the Meiji government in 1872 to prepare for the attendance to the Vienna World’s Fair (Oh 2012, 3). The fair was deemed as a vital international event for the country which adopted a national isolation policy for more than 200 years to rejoin the international community.

The coinage of the term, *bijutsu*, which was translated from the German word “*kunstgewerbe*”, defines “what fine art is”, yet also confines “what fine art could be”. In this regard, *bijutsu*, as a Western thing, imported by the Meiji government to manipulate the discourse revolving “fine art” can be viewed as historically constructed structure to showcase the “civilization and enlightenment “, the mottos characterizing the Meiji Restoration. Furthermore, the import of the concept, “fine art”, as a pre-packaged notion, as well as the establishment of Tokyo School of Fine Art in 1889 and Imperial Museum in 1890 manifest the transplantation of the Western idea of arts to Japan (Oh 2012, 9).
In the land that was new to the idea of fine art, and thus unconsciously ignored the boundary between “autonomous fine art” and “art for utility”, ironically, department stores turned to be the alternative venue for the creation, exhibition, circulation and consumption of art. As Younjug Oh (2012) indicates, “In Japan, the department stores amply demonstrate the contradictions and paradoxes of the modern paradigm within which fine art was created.” (10) Mitsukoshi was the commercial institution that vigorously engaged in establishing its reputation as a cultural institution (Oh 2012, 13). For instance, in 1904, Mitsukoshi held the first art exhibition featuring with Ogata Kōrin’s paintings to promote the “Genroku boom”, which was a core fabric of the Mitsukoshi taste (Oh 2012, 19). In 1907, Mitsukoshi set up art section to display and sell art works of contemporary leading artists. In a kimono advertising campaign in 1907, Mitsukoshi transformed Okada Saburuōsuke’s Western style oil painting “Portrait of a Lady” to a chromolithographic outdoor billboard (Thornton 1989, 7).

Okada Saburōsuke’s Western style oil painting “Portrait of a Lady” in 1907. Photo Courtesy: http://www.zaikei.co.jp/releases/187878/

In 1910, the company hired Sugiura Hisui as the chief designer. In many ways, Mitsukoshi was a bold art entrepreneur in the early 20th century. In the following, this paper will dive deeper two innovative artistic practices, art-directed commercial designs and the establishment of new art section, adopted by Mitsukoshi to elaborate its status as an art entrepreneur.

Art-directed Commercial Designs

In 1910, Mitsukoshi hired Sugiura Hisui to be the chief designer of its newly created *zuanbu*, or design department dedicated to graphic design, which marks “the beginning of art-directed poster design by artists who saw the potential of the medium in the sense pioneered by Jules Cheret, Edward Penfield, Alphonse Mucha, and others”, as Fraser et al (1996) put it (49).

Actually, before the establishment of design department, Mitsukoshi had employed *nihonga* painters to design *bijutsu senshoku*, or art textile[9], since it opened a design studio in 1895 (Sapin 2004, 318). This underscores that, as a commercial institution, Mitsukoshi had been long recognized that incorporating artists in merchandising commodities not only enhanced the monetary values of goods but also imparted immaterial cultural values to the goods (Sapin 2003, 8). In other words, the practice meticulously elevated commercial objects into symbolic objects that embodied symbolic capitals signifying individual’s social position. The practice was later extended to other objects in Mitsukoshi to manipulate and consolidate the discourse about its status as a cultural authority.

Before Sugiura Hisui joined Mitsukoshi as an adviser in 1908, graphic designs were “designs without designers”, as Fraser et al (1996) phrases it (10). They were largely left to the hand of anonymous individuals (Fraser, Heller & Chwast 1996, 10). With the advent of printing technology, such as lithography[10] and chromolithography burst onto the commercial art scene. Accordingly, commercial cultures were revolutionized and artists were provided with new ways to produce and disseminate their works to the public masses. Historically, Japan was a land lack of clear distinction between fine arts and arts for utility. Therefore, when the concepts of Bauhaus, which claimed that art could be beautiful and useful at the same time and thus engaging commercial art practice would not compromise aesthetics and creativity, arrived in Japan, many Japanese artists quickly joined the movement (Thornton 1989, 10).

Design competition was another key method that Mitsukoshi adopted to discover new artists with great potential, to set the trend, and to produce commercial art infused with the aura of high art. For instance, in order to promote the Genroku art, which was a core fabric of the Mitsukoshi taste in the
beginning of 20th century, Mitsukoshi launch a design competitions to create the trend in 1905 (Sapin 2003, 92). *Bijin-ka* poster, or beautiful person poster was a genre that Mitsukoshi led the way in poster design. Therefore, in 1911, Mitsukoshi launched a beautiful person poster contest. Goyo Hashiguchi, a rising graphic designer and an expert in *ukiyo-e*, won the first prize with special money award worth 1,000 yen. The prize-winning work features a serene and elegant woman dressed in kimono. With a 35-separate-run chromolithography process, it was utilized as the advertisement for autumn sale in the same year (Thornton 1989, 7).

In addition, in 1907, in response to establishment of *Monbushō Bijutsu Tenrankai*, or Ministry of Education Art Exhibition (abbreviated as Bunten thereafter), Mitsukoshi set up *shin bijutsu bu*, or new art section to display and sell art works of contemporary leading artist (Oh 2012, 1; Oh 2014, 356). Mitsukoshi became the primary venue for the works of Bunten-winning artists to be widely appreciated and consumed by the public masses. Burgeoning urban middle class was the core clientele for Mitsukoshi’s new art section. They needed artworks to decorate their houses. In addition, in the era when taste is the marker of social status, they were eager to legitimate their social position through tasteful consumption of art (Oh 2014, 351 & 354).

Nonetheless, the urban middle class was lack of cultural literacy and personal connection to purchase artworks. Hence, Mitsukoshi, a commercial institution with great ambition to be the “key agent for the cultural production of the new middle class in Japan”, as Louise Young puts it, turned itself
5. Conclusion

Japan has had a long history of encountering foreign cultures, while being shaped by such external influences. Nonetheless, in Japan, with regard to the trans-cultural process, new elements of knowledge, ideas, or concepts have always served as inspiration and have assimilated into the previous value systems. *Likoto-tori*, which literally means cherry-picking, is the Japanese way of adopting foreign elements. Such trajectory can be found in the development of Japanese department stores as well. They are also the product created from the fabric of Japanese cultures.

Unlike its Western counterparts, Japanese department stores are not only “the cathedral of modern commerce” but a vital site for the symbolic production of cultured life. *Mitsukoshi* is widely considered as the first modern department store in Japan. It epitomizes many aspects of modern art institutions by actively engaging in the production, exhibition, circulation and consumption of aesthetic taste and art. It is a taste cultivator for the burgeoning urban middle class, Yamanotezoku, who were aspired to legitimate their social positions through demonstrating refined taste. Its house magazine was the key interface to Disseminate Mitsukoshi Taste. Moreover, in many aspects, Mitsukoshi was a bold art entrepreneur. By adopting art-directed commercial designs and establishing new art section that catered to the new middle class, it further consolidated its status a cultural authority who was able to manipulate the discourse surrounding the symbolic production of culture.

Footnotes:

[1] Edo is the old name of present day Tokyo. In Edo period (1603 AD to 1868 AD), Japan experienced unprecedented economic growing and urbanization. It was also a golden age for leisure activities, such as theater.

[2] It is one of the first department stores in the United States.

[3] Before the adoption of the term *depatoento sutoa*, *hyakkaten*, which literally means “hundred goods stores” was widely used to refer to stores like Mitsukoshi.

[4] *Katakana* is one of the three constituents of the Japanese writing system designed to loaned words of foreign origins.

[5] According to the same research, the percentage of middle class household was higher in urban area, where department stores were.

[6] Yamanote district is also known as the “high city” in Tokyo, mainly populated by intellectuals. One the other hand, the rest of the district in Tokyo was known as “low city”, or *shitamachi*, the older district of Tokyo where the traditional architectures remain and *Edokko*, or the children of Edo, live.

[7] From 1903 to 1907, it was titled as *Jikō*. In 1980, the title was changed to *Mitsukoshi Times*. In 1911, the title was changed again. *Mitsukoshi* became the new title.

[8] According to Kimi Coaldrake (2013), “Before the invention of bijutsu, art was referred to generically as *gigei*” in Japan (179).

[9] According to Julia Elizabeth Sapin (2003), textiles were not only the core products of Mitsukoshi *gofukuten*, the precursor of Mitsukoshi department store, but also the one of Japan’s primary exports, counted for more than 50% of its exports before WWI (72). Considering the commercial interest, there was great impetus to promote the product visibility through refined designs.

[10] The first lithograph company was established in Tokyo in 1872.

References:


A Case Study of Mitsukoshi Department Store: An Art Entrepreneur in the Early 20th Century

by YinYing

Research Question: How does a commercial institution such as Mitsukoshi Department function as an art entrepreneur in a land that was new to the concept of “fine art” and thrived with emergent urban culture in the early 20th century?

Western Thing: Japanese “Fine Art” in Context

- *bijutsu*, the Japanese word for fine art, was first introduced by the Meiji government in 1872 to participate in Vienna World’s Fair (Oh 2012, 3). The import of the concept, “fine art”, as a pre-packaged notion, as well as the establishment of Tokyo School of Fine Art in 1889 and Imperial Museum in 1890 manifest the transplantation of the Western idea of arts to Japan (Oh 2012, 9).

- *bijutsu*, as a Western thing, imported by the Meiji government to manipulate the discourse revolving “fine art” can be viewed as historically constructed structure to showcase the “civilization and enlightenment “, the mottos characterizing the Meiji Restoration (Beasley 1972, 1-2).
Department stores as “missionaries of civilization”

In the 1883 novel Bonheue des Dames by Emile Zola, department stores was described as “the cathedral of modern commerce”. However, in Japan, department stores are more like “missionaries of civilization” or “epitome of modern civilization”, rather than “the cathedral of consumption”. (Young 1999, 56; Sapin 2004, 317; Oh 2012, 343) According to Brian Moeran, the Japanese department store was “a dream world where western, and thus bourgeois, culture was on display.” (Moeran 1998, 142) As such, department stores in Japan can be viewed as the products of Meiji Restoration to demonstrate the “civilization and enlightenment” of Japan and to define modern life.

Department Stores as Cultural Institutions

Japanese department stores epitomize many aspects of modern art institutions. They play a crucial role in the production, exhibition, circulation and consumption of art (Oh 2012, 1).

The Case of Mitsukoshi Department Store: In 1904, Mitsukoshi held the first art exhibition featuring with Ogata Kōrin’s paintings (Oh 2012, 19). In 1907, in response to establishment of Monbushō Bijutsu Tenrankai (Ministry of Education Art Exhibition, abbreviated as Bunten), which further reinforced privileged status of “fine art” defined by the state (Oh 2012, 1&11), Mitsukoshi set up galleries to display and sell art works of contemporary leading artist. In a kimono advertising campaign in the late 1900s, Mitsukoshi incorporated Okada Saburōsuke’s work to create poster. In 1910, the company hired Sugiura Hisui as chief designer. In addition, the company also published house magazine which not only promoted the goods in the stores but also intended to popularize the knowledge of art and literature (Chiaki 1998, 43).

Cultural Capital: Through engaging with artistic practices, department stores accumulated cultural capitals, and consolidated their cultural and aesthetic authority (Oh 2012, 13).

Speak to the Mass: Artworks Produced in Mitsukoshi Department Store from the 1900s to 1920s

Art-directed commercial art design: In 1910, the company hired Sugiura Hisui to be the chief designer, which marks “the beginning of art-directed poster design by artists who saw the potential of the medium in the sense pioneered by Jules Cheret, Edward Penfield, Alphonse Mucha, and others.”, as Fraser et al (1996) put it (49).
Alternative Exhibition Venue for the avant-garde artists: Instead of embracing the idea of the autonomy of art and emphasizing that art should be separated from everyday life, the avant-garde artists of the 1920s in Japan challenged the ideas of “institutionalized discourse of art” and focused on “art’s social utility” (Edwards & Wood 2012, 25; Oh 2012, 265). Thus, avant-garde artists such as Murayama Tomoyoshi, the leader of Mavo, embraced the material reality of everyday experiences, scenarios, and lives (Oh 2012, 239). However, ironically, since avant-garde artists aligned with department stores in terms of the desire to speak to the mass society, department stores turned to be an alternative institution for avant-garde artists to disseminate their works (Oh 2012, 259-262).

Bibliography so far


Lens-based Culture

– YinYing Chen

“Photography, accordingly, depends not only on its technology or the way it ‘looks’ but also upon our historical, cultural and psychic investment in it as a way of seeing and knowing”

-Liz Wells

The history of photography can be traced back to as early as the 1820s, when the French inventor, Joseph Niepce first realized the dream to capture an image permanently. However, it was not until Louis Daguerre introduced the daguerreotyped image to the public in 1839 that the photography really gained popularity among the public (Buckingham 2004, 8). The medium of daguerreotyped images are copper plates coated with silver, and the images were fragile. In addition, the image-producing process was extremely complicated and unreliable. Therefore, in contrast to our perception of photographer today, “a photographer in the 1840s was more like a laboratory chemist than an artist”, as Alan Buckingham (2004) notes it (9).

Given the nature of daguerreotyped photography illustrated above, the pictures were often perceived as "mirrors with memory", which were carefully protected and decorated in frames and cases (Buckingham 2004, 9). Then, the exposure time became shorter, and the images became more detailed and sharper. With the launch of Kodak’s Box Brownie in early 1900s, camera became more affordable, and before WWII photos ultimately turned to be mass-produced objects (Buckingham 2004, 18).
In the discourses surrounded photography before 1940s, there is a significant shift from “scarcity” to “mass”, which also signifies the dramatic socio-cultural change of the time. In the earlier age of photography, photographs represented the symbol of social status, which were used to demonstrate the luxurious lifestyle of the affluent (Buckingham 2004). As Victorian studio sprang up in the urban areas, mass-producing photography was boomed as well. The subjects of photography were mostly private subjects, with portrait at the kernel of early photography. It is intriguing that, as an interface for personal purpose, photos of that time reflects the ideology of modernity, which values private subjects found in the voluptuous life of the bourgeoisie over religious or allegorical themes of the ancient time. Entering the 20th century, photos gradually traversed the realm of the private, and the commodification of photos accelerated. Photos were incorporated to newspapers and magazines. The age of image-based culture we live in now was thus unveiled.

The prevalence of color photos from the 1970s then again reshape our ways of seeing and knowing (Wells 2015, 70). In addition, with the popularity of affordable color printing, photography, television and movies from the 1970s, visual elements becomes more and more important and turns to be main focus in our culture. Brightened up with colors, photos hence can capture a fleeting moment or a historical event more completely. The camera participates in our major life events from the moment we are born, including birthdays, commencements, anniversaries and so on and so forth. Furthermore, the camera also act as a historian to record the essence of cultures. For instance, in the picture shown below, the Taiwanese photographer, Shen Chao-Liang documents the dazzling “transformer-style” stage trucks for all kinds of performance in front of the temples, a culture that is dying in Taiwan.

![A photo from the “Stage Series” (2006-2011) by Taiwanese photographer Shen Chao-Liang.](image)

Furthermore, in the major historical events since 1970s, the camera acts as a crucial witness in war-torn areas, civil right movements, crises, tragedies and disaster stricken regions (Wells 2015, 65). More than words, a nice shot of photo can travels thousands mile away to deliver a story in a much more powerful way. In this regard, photographs as well as photgraphers (photojournalists in particular) get more and more involved in the construction of the history and our worldview (Wells 2015, 68). It is intriguing to thinks about how our perceived reality is actually filtered under other’s lens, because as Liz Wells (2015) suggests it “Photography affords us a position, an identity, a sense of power.” (70)
Less than 200 years after the invention of photography, digital images saturate the fabric of our everyday life. The smartphone makes the images ubiquitous and mobile, and it creates new social rituals, such as taking appetizing food photos before enjoying them (Lister 2013, 2). Unlike non-digital photos, digital images are rendered into binary codes and thus do not have to exist in fixed or tangible forms. Moreover, they are often networked. Therefore, a digital image can easily travel from a medium to another medium, and a platform to another platform.

The discourse centered around digital images are paradoxical in many ways. They are massively produced and widely circulated, while the picture takers often claim the pictures are personal and genuine. They are consumed as fast food, but we often hail them as the interfaces to demonstrate our styles. When browsing through photo-sharing platforms, we are swamped by the overproduction of photos to show off tempting foods, vacations to foreign countries, fancy clothes, museum visits and the luxurious lifestyle. Photo-sharing platforms turn to be a battlefield for attention. The repetitions of clichés, which are often the best attention grabbers, manifests "photography as mass ornament", as it is illustrated by Siegried Kracauer (Lister 2013, 9). Look at my own photo archive, unsurprisingly, many of them are also the repetitions of clichés and stereotyped performances. This says a lot about how we are conditioned to our lens-based culture.
Our perception as well as conception of art and all forms of cultural expression is shaped by the context we live in. What is worth noting is that the context includes the past, or as Caroline Bynum (1995) elaborates it, "we are, at least in part, the heirs of many earlier discourse." (30) A theory of media and mediation offers us a framework to unveil and interpret the underlying meanings and implications embedded in all forms of cultural expressions which would otherwise be ignored or taken for granted.

Benjamin lived in a time of dramatic transformation and turbulence. The process of industrialization, urbanization and commercialization radically changes the cultural landscape as well as the notion of art. With the advent and accordingly the prevalence of photography and lithography, technological reproduction of artworks turned to be a norm and fundamentally change the relation of the masses to art (Benjamin 2008, 264). Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's posters, which adopted lithographic technique to encapsulate the pulse of the *belle époque* and can be deemed as the mass-produced objects, are good examples of such products of the time.

Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Era of its Technological Reproducibility* projects his anxiety of the decay of aura and authenticity, as technology penetrated the works of art. It is also a reflection of the state of being in his time. While the works of art have been reproducible for a long time, Benjamin is concerned about the destructiveness of technological reproduction to true art which at core relies on authenticity, or the unique existence, and the aura of original works to preserve the quintessence of artworks. As he puts it, "In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now often work of art-its unique existence in a particular place." (Benjamin 2008, 253) In this regard, he implies that true art should be organism rather than mechanism, because in the process of technological reproduction, the sense experience that a interface aim to transfer is
destroyed as an artwork is totally decontextualized and isolated from the special context that give it narratives, values and “life”.

What is interesting is that issues that Benjamin dealt with are actually not unique to his time. For instance, back to the 18th century, William Blake, a skilled reproductive engraver, criticized the system of reproduction in art, or artistic machine, as a form of technology, is destructive to humanity and true art. From the Renaissance, with the development of picture reproduction, technology and economy intermediated between the artists and the audience. He noted that under the technological and commercial pressure, a rational division of labor was introduced to picture reproduction, which caused the separation of conception/content and execution/form in art (Eaves 1977). The idea is very similar to Benjamin’s.

One the other hand, the idea of double logic of remediation, or “our culture’s contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy”, as Richard Grusin (1999) puts it, offer us another lens to look at the cultural expression in the media-saturated society (5). To achieve the illusion of “liveness”, immediacy should be invisible and natural (Grusin 1999, 9, 23). Therefore, any trace of mediation should be minimized and accordingly the ultimate goal of immediacy is “interfaceless” interface (Grusin 1999, 5, 23). The idea of immediacy reminds me of a rising form of artistic experiment- the immersive art, which aims to melt down the boundary between artworks, the exhibition space and the viewers.

Immersion art transforms the relationship between viewers and artworks by removing the interface between artworks and viewers, and integrating viewers as a part of the artistic expression. It enables the audience to immerse in a sensual experience that is continuous and without rupture, which is exactly what transparent immediacy tries to accomplish.

Hypermediacy is the other key feature of the media-saturated culture we live in. Hypermediacy is about using media of multiplicity and heterogeneity to deliver experiences. I think Nam June Paik’s Electronic Super Highway, which combines fifty-one programmed videos, TV screens, neon tubing to reflect on American culture’s obsession with mass media manifests the idea of hypermediacy.
Toulouse-Lautrec: La Belle Époque

By: Jordan Levy, Wanyu Zhang, & Yinying Chen

“A professional model is like a stuffed owl. These girls are alive.”

-Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Toulouse-Lautrec's time was special; it was the “Belle Époque”—the 'Golden Age' of Paris. As Walter Benjamin put it, “Paris [was] the capital of the nineteenth century” (Edwards & Wood 2012, 39). The renovation of Paris by Haussmann, the commodification, the new social classes, the individuals who came from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, and the evolving social relations transformed Paris into “the extraordinary cocktail of the modernity” (Edwards & Wood 2012, 51). The rise of the vitality of the bourgeoisie enriched and diversified the cultural landscape within the city. Conversely, this was also the time when modern printmaking burst onto the art scene, revolutionizing commercial cultures and providing artists with new ways to produce and disseminate their works to the public masses.

Unlike the formalists who valued the autonomy of art and emphasized their belief that art should be separated from everyday life, Toulouse-Lautrec’s works were designed to be immersive in nature and to create dialogues with the experiences, scenarios, and daily lives of their viewers (Edwards & Wood 2012, 25). In this regard, his works were a medium to “fix the unrecognized modern beauty,” as Edwards and Woods (2012) illustrate (48). Therefore, Toulouse-Lautrec’s works often depicted commercial culture, which was exactly what the New York School tried to escape from. With the advent of modern lithography, new dichotomies of expressional form were made possible; Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters are art as well as advertisements. As the interface for commercial purpose, Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters often encapsulate the voluptuous life of the bourgeoisie, with prostitutes and dancehall performers as the featured characters in his art. Despite his often caricature-ized subjects, his posters are elevated to the realm of high art (Michael 2000). In this sense, as an artist, through his works, Toulouse-Lautrec bridged high and low cultures, while facilitating interchange between different social classes.
In addition, with the advent of new bourgeoisie and modernity, the cultural discourse which was originally dominated by the representational convention of Rome and European Renaissance civilization, Toulouse-Lautrec and his contemporaries desired to part with some of the “orthodox works of the past” by establishing a different artistic norms (Bourdieu & Johnson 1993, 31). Paris was a fertile ground for such new convention to grow and prosper due to its cosmopolitan culture and its world-facing nature of modernity (Edwards & Wood 2012, 65). This is where the Oriental, particularly Japan, a country which adopted a national isolation policy for more than 200 years and was forced to re-open itself in 1866 by the Americans, came into play. From the mid 18th century, Japonisme swept Europe and influenced the ‘artworld’ in Europe by offering a new “pictorial language” and by “widening the culture horizons” for the Impressionist as well as for Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters (Edwards & Wood 2012, 56 & 65). The flatness, the unmodulated areas of color, and the juxtapositions of foreground and background in Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters reflect the distinguishing characteristic of Japanese woodblock prints (Edwards & Wood 2012, 53). Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters capture the pulse of city as well as the new artistic language of its time, and when viewing his works, viewers do feel as if “the worldness of the modernity leaks through” (Edwards & Wood 2012, 65).

In many ways, Toulouse-Lautrec was, himself, an interface to modernism. Modernism pushed the cultural norms for depictions of color contrast, texture, and value (Frascina et. al. 1982, 6). The technique of lithography made adding many colors to a work difficult when compared to classical artists simply painting colors of their choosing onto their canvas. Lautrec’s posters were created by layering several different plates of individual colors over each other until the final version of the poster was complete with every desired color (Phillip’s Collection lithography video). As such, the colors on the final posters appear very uniform and flat. This technique was cumbersome, but served to add to the uniqueness of each poster, as the possibility for slightly differing colors per plate produced posters that were not identical. In addition, the Phillip’s Collection had the unique opportunity to display partially-finished, or alternately-colored versions of famous Lautrec posters. Because the technique of lithography was novel during Lautrec’s productive artistic period, he was able to pave the way for a high standard of artistic lithography for future artists.

Similar to the flatness of the printed colors, Lautrec’s posters also portray a flatness of space. The posters lack an accurate depiction of three-dimensional space so they appear singularly-planned. This flatness is in keeping with the modernism movement, as modernism has “abandoned the representation of the kind of space that recognizable, three-dimensional objects can inhabit” (Frascina et. al. 1982, 6). This ‘flat’ style is also reminiscent of the Japanese style of painting (Edwards & Wood 2012, 53). Because Lautrec’s posters share a stylistic aesthetic with Japanese art (as compared on many labels within the Phillip’s Collection exhibit), Lautrec’s modernism “develops out of the past” (Frascina et. al. 1982). The idea that modernism is entirely revolutionary and unaffected by works of art preceding its period is an inaccurate representation of the period’s stylistic influences. “Every old Master has had his own modernity” (Frascina et. al. 1982, 24). Modernism is at its core, very ephemeral and fleeting (Frascina et. al. 1982, 23). While some may believe that the ‘flatness’ Lautrec’s posters are well known for is an original, modern style, it is actually a continuation of the Japanese aesthetic, reinforcing the notion that modernism is never truly modern or lasting.

One aspect of Toulouse-Lautrec’s body of work that was truly modern for his time was the placement and purpose of his art. Many of Lautrec’s pieces were intended to be viewed as outdoor advertisements for nightlife establishments or vocal/dance performances. As such, the posters were large in size, printed on a thick paper (instead of the more traditional choice of canvas), and often frameless (during their time. Today, Lautrec’s art is displayed in frames coinciding with the period of modernism). The open-air exhibition of Lautrec’s posters meant that his art was exposed to a variety of social classes; the public placement meant that people of high and low cultures alike could enjoy them equally. But what serves to separate Lautrec’s works from today’s modern advertisements? Should we consider the McDonald’s poster along the highway as art as well? This dilemma is solved by the establishment of the ‘artworld’ as a whole. Modern works cannot be “seen as art without the introduction of the notion of [an] ‘artworld,’ which, in turn, requires “an atmosphere of artistic theory [and] a knowledge of the history of art” (Hans van Maanen 2009, 18-19). We can appreciate Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters today due to the rich history and knowledge of the ‘artworld.’
One result from the creation and acceptance of the 'artworld' is valuation of modern works. Because the 'artworld' is widely accepted and appreciated, works of art are assigned monetary values far beyond the cumulation of the prices of materials required for completion (Bourdieu & Nice 1980). For instance, a print by Toulouse-Lautrec can be found listed for $35,000-45,000 at auction today (artnet.com). Modern works of art such as Lautrec’s posters are economically valued at such high prices because of their cultural capital. Individuals familiar with the 'artworld' can use their knowledge about artists to covet their pieces, driving prices higher and higher. As such, the artist is the individual who originally gives their piece value (economic or otherwise), but it is individuals operating within the 'artworld' (such as dealers, collectors, curators, auctioneers, etc.) who continually raise and reassign that original value (Bourdieu & Nice 1980). Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters are a prime example of the ever-changing valuation, economic or cultural, associated with artworks made familiar by the existence of the ‘artworld.’

**SOURCES:**

6. Phillip's Collection Lithography video
9. All images from class trip credited to Wanyu Zhang

This entry was posted in *Week 8* on *March 11, 2017* by *Yinying Chen*. 

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**Through signs, we construct meanings.- YinYing**

— YinYing Chen

“*It is that the word or sign that man uses is the man himself. For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, prove that man is a sign: so that every thought is an external sign, proves that man is an external sign.*” — Charles. Peirce (Innis 1985, 2)

The artwork that I choose to explore and apply the concepts we have exposed to so far is an oil painting titled as “Hidden Island” by Lien Chen-Hsing,
a Taiwanese artist. I saw his solo exhibition “Desolate Magic” in Yu-Hsiu Museum of Art last month, when I was back to Taiwan for winter break. Among the works shown in the exhibition, this piece stood out to me. It seems surreal, but as standing in front of the work, some sort of deep emotion linked to my known world was stirred. Therefore, for the post this week, I decide to look into the work to contemplate how signs, networks, and the viewer (in this case, myself) could interplay to construct the meanings of this work.


To tear the layers aways, the title of the exhibition “Desolate Magic” is a good point to start with. The meanings of the two words seem to contradict each other. “Desolate” denotes the feeling of dismal emptiness, whereas “magic” gives the feelings of joy and hope. The odd combination of the terms is a sign, since from the title viewers can infer that the theme of the exhibition embodies some sort of inconsistent elements. In other words, from the inference patterns, viewers, as the sign-cognizing agents, are able to extract some meanings out of it, which may not be totally comprehensive though (Irvine 2017, 1). Nonetheless, it is still a sign, which may be categorized as both an index (the title directs something beyond itself) and a symbol (the meanings of the two words are inherently conjunctured to the symbol-using minds of the interpretants), because as Pierce puts it ”a sign is something by knowing which we know something more.” (Irvine 2017, 2) What’s worth noting is that a quote, which says “I hope to stroll the island and gaze upon it with sheer sensibility”, from a novel by We Heh, a Taiwanese writer, is paralleled with the title of the exhibition. This quote enrich the perceptible structure in which the title is positioned.

Then, moving to the artwork label, the following information related to the artwork is illustrated: the title, the year, the materials used and the size. No other description or information of the artwork is provided. It is intriguing to consider why the information provided by label is kept as simple as possible. The less information is offered in linguistic message, the wider the margin is left for our mind to explore the underlying meanings and messages. As Barthes indicates, linguistic messages are the shackles that can stifle the polysemy of images, or in his words, “text has thus a repressive value.” (Barthes 1988, 157)

Turning to the painting, the whale covered with moss (it may be viewed as a strange whale-shaped island, depending on the interpretants) is the object that is used again and again in different works in this exhibition, which probably can be conceived as a crucial token that links to the bigger material-representational structure. Imbuing the ruins with vitality through flourishing plants is the unique “prototype” of his works. In the regard, although the works in the exhibition are all self-containers that have their own narratives, they are all connected to the story and the main idea, overdevelopment and the natural environment, that the painter tries to convey through the interface of paintings (Lator 2011, 6).

Zooming out to the viewer, myself, who was emotionally moved by the peaceful coexistence of the ruins abandoned by human beings and the thriving new lives depicted, and lamented for the selfishness of the human beings who just walked away after depleting the resources, I am wondering if the work can resonate the viewers from different cultural backgrounds, who do not grow up with the stories of the mining villages that rise and fall with gold and the withering fishing villages. The absence of representamen makes the object un-perceptible and cripples Peirce’s triadic model of sign. To me, many ruins shown in his works are immediately identifiable, because they are icons that resemble the scenes that I am familiar with, while they may not be iconic to many people. As Dr. Irvine elaborates it, “Human thought is based on signs in symbol systems, each of which have a structure of material/perceptible and cognitive/logical relations that unfold dynamically in situated human-experienced moments of time.” (Irvine, 14) With different material/perceptible structure, the vessel of the works can carry very different interpretations and meanings.
References:


Mitsukoshi Department Store: a Missionary of Civilization, a Taste Cultivator & an Art Entrepreneur in the Early 20th Century

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PROFESSOR & ADMINISTRATOR

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CREATIVE COMMONS