

KHANH TRINH (ED.), *LOVE, FIGHT, FEAST. THE MULTIFACETED WORLD OF JAPANESE NARRATIVE ART*

Zurich: Museum Rietberg and Scheidegger & Spiess 2021, 366 pages with 299 color and 6 b/w ill., ISBN 978-3-03942-024-7.



Reviewed by
Kristopher W. Kersey

In the fall of 2021, the Museum Rietberg (Zurich, Switzerland) presented the special exhibition *Love, Fight, Feast: The Multifaceted World of Japanese Narrative Art*. Four years in the making, the exhibition assembled more than a hundred works from thirty-five European museums and private collections. The rich variety of media included is itself noteworthy: textiles, painted clamshells, a palanquin, hanging scrolls, handscrolls, woodblock prints, moveable-type manuscripts, screens, lacquerware, sword guards, printed and accordion-bound books, a writing box, albums, and fan paintings – all collectively spanning some seven centuries. This extraordinary undertaking was curated by a team of specialists: Khanh Trinh (Curator of Japanese Art, Museum Rietberg, Zurich), Melanie Trede (Professor, Histories of Japanese Art, Heidelberg University), and Estelle Bauer (Professor of Japanese Studies, Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO), Paris). Unfortunately, however, the groundbreaking exhibition coincided with the ongoing global health crisis, thus many – myself included – were unable to attend. Much to their credit, the Rietberg organized a robust and productive online program, including a video tour of the exhibition, installation views, three “curator’s favorites” videos, as well as a day-long symposium, the full video of which was posted

online.¹ In addition, the museum published a lavishly illustrated and thoroughly researched catalogue – in English and German editions – the former of which is the subject of this review. The impressive catalogue goes far beyond the purview of an exhibition record. Within its pages, the authors pull off the seemingly impossible in that they adeptly speak to both specialist and general audiences. Scholarly rigorous and extensively annotated, the volume represents an important new contribution to scholarship on Japanese art history in any language.

Of its many intended impacts, two stand out. First, *Love, Fight, Feast* brings critical attention to Japanese art objects in European collections, which are often understudied in comparison to their Japanese and North American counterparts. This has to do, as the authors explain, with the nature of the items collected, the dispersal of these collections into non-specialist museums, and the lack of a full accounting for the present state of European collections of Japanese art.² Second – and more critically – the catalogue and exhibition advocate for a radical shift in the way in which Japanese narrative art is discussed, not only in Europe or in European languages, but indeed across the entire field. As for this later point, one has to understand that scholarship on Japanese art history often leans heavily on technical terms (e.g., *monogatari-e*, *gunki-e*, *engi-e*, etc.) that are so focused that they risk preventing one from seeing “narrative” as a common problem linking all these genres. Moreover, these specialist categories also deter those outside the field from interfacing with Japanese narrative art. As an alternative, the catalogue advocates for scholars to embrace the larger umbrella category of “narrative art”, which Trinh defines therein as follows: “all images that accompany a literary text, either as a sequence of images or a single illustration that can directly or indirectly reference a tale. Moreover, the term encompasses painting as well as woodblock prints and three-dimensional objects [...]”³ Hence the wide array of materials included in the exhibition. Note also that many of the objects included were not, until quite recently, considered “art”; they found their way into European ethnological and ethnographic collections, thus divorcing them from those objects more readily accepted as artworks in the early twentieth century: scrolls, paintings, books, sculpture, calligraphy, and woodblock prints.

The authors achieve this reframing of narrative art through a carefully choreographed series of five essays. The first, by Trinh,

¹
Exhibition Museum Rietberg: *Liebe, Kriege, Festlichkeiten. Narrative Kunst aus Japan* (10 September – 5 December 2021).

²
For the most comprehensive attempt to date, see the five-volume series, edited by Josef Kreiner, under the title *Japanese Collections in European Museums*, published from 2003 to 2016 by Bier'sche Verlagsanstalt.

³
Love, Fight, Feast, 62.

introduces the wide variety of media that comprise the category of narrative art in Japanese contexts. As the essay demonstrates, narrative art is a robust field of scholarship and a frequent subject of exhibitions in Japan, yet the category receives far less attention abroad. Trinh not only argues for greater awareness, but also for a shift in the way in which narrative art is studied: “the approach to Japanese narrative art has either been to focus on one medium (e.g., paintings or prints), or, if including a selection of diverse media, on one tale.”⁴ By contrast, she argues, *Love, Fight, Feast* brings various media and genres together under the larger framework of what Trinh terms “narrative objects.”⁵ As she stresses in conclusion, “narrative images are not simply pictorializations.”⁶ This might seem an obvious point, but Trinh here argues against a longstanding scholarly habit of “reading” images as if they were a visual language, merely subsidiary iterations of a “source text”.

In the second essay, Bauer surveys four “aesthetic strategies” that artists used to manipulate pictorial narrative: architecture, human figures, time and space, and topography. The essay teaches its readers the visual literacy needed to approach the genre. Her primary focus is the handscroll format, which is only natural considering that this medium has long been considered one of the most spectacular formats for the manipulation of narrative in world art history, given its unboundedness lengthwise and interactive engagement. The essay prepares the reader to analyze the images to come: to see how architecture frames meaningful units, to pay attention to the placement of figures, and to notice the advanced techniques such as the use of clouds for temporal and spatial transitions (which Bauer likens to cinematic fades).

Bauer’s essay opens with a well-documented thirteenth-century episode wherein a female poet petitioned the shogun with the grievance that two female painters had made errors in their depiction of *The Tale of Genji* by not adhering to the correct version of the text. The painters counter that images are made in reference to preexisting images and are not simply illustrations of textual discourse. The following essay, by Sebastian Balmes, moderates the two sides, so to speak. The essay begins with an analysis of the early twelfth-century *Tale of Genji Scrolls* and a seventeenth-century set of the *Tales of Ise*. The primary thesis in the first two sections is that bodies and faces were relatively insignificant (in visual terms) in premodern Japan, a claim Balmes defends by drawing links between grammatical and deictic ambiguities in the Japanese language, sartorial consistencies in the *Ise* scrolls, the role-based nature of social

4

Ibid., 19.

5

Ibid., 21.

6

Ibid., 23.

identity, and painterly physiognomic conventions.⁷ Thereafter the essay shifts to an analysis of the *Rajōmon* scrolls, wherein Balmes demonstrates how text and image work in concert to move the narrative forward. In closing, he demonstrates compellingly how the pictures in *The Tale of Monkeys* are indispensable to the narrative, filling in details not found in the textual passages. Through detailed examples, the essay provides a clear introduction to the complexities of bridging narratology, philology, and art history.

Trede's essay, which follows, provides the historiographical background that makes the critical stakes of the catalogue and the exhibition clear. For those outside the sub-field, this may sound strange, but there is a longstanding tendency in Japanese art history to treat "narrative art" as if it were something proper to "classical" and "medieval" Japan (ca. 700–1600 CE), while glossing over the narrative (and Buddhist) arts of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. As a corrective, Trede directs attention to the rich and dynamic world of seventeenth-century narrative art. The period saw the "Christian century" (ca. 1540–1640), the rise of woodblock printing, the publication of popular illustrated tales (*otogizōshi*), the emergence of a merchant class, the publication of eminent calligraphic traces, the first published histories of art, the mass production of handscrolls, and the shifting sociological value of narrative art as a type of luxury status symbol. Covering much ground, the compact essay makes a strong case for scholars to engage with the seventeenth-century (and later) pictorial works, such as one often finds in numerous European collections.

If Trede's essay brings the reader into early modernity, the final essay by Jaqueline Berndt takes the discussion into the twenty-first century through an analysis of narrative flow in *manga*. This is a contentious issue since many scholars and popular authors alike are keen to link medieval narrative to *manga*, yet as Berndt notes, the two diverge dramatically in "media and materiality such as print and painting, monochromy and polychromy, typography and calligraphy".⁸ Nor does "manga literacy" prepare the reader to see the earlier works.⁹ Berndt traces the history of how *manga* has been framed vis-à-vis other narrative art media such as handscrolls, photo sequences, cinema, or the newly emergent media of web-toons. She moves away from formalist approaches and advocates for "a concept that considers materiality in line with the agency of readers and their expectations toward media-specific conventions of storytelling".¹⁰ Ultimately, Berndt argues that it is an immersive

7

Ibid., 35–37.

8

Ibid., 51.

9

Ibid.

10

Ibid., 52.

type of “flow” that most defines manga in contrast to the other media.

Following the opening essays are the individual catalogue entries, which are uniformly thorough and richly footnoted. Here the authors were joined by fourteen additional specialists whose generous texts contextualize the objects and set the stage for future research. The entries are divided into eight thematic sections, each of which begins with a short essay. The sections proceed in a logical sequence, beginning with “A Panorama of Japanese Narrative Art”, before proceeding with “The Power of Faith”, which focuses on religious art. The three sections thereafter each address one canonical narrative tale: *The Ise Stories*, *The Tale of Genji*, and *The Tale of Heike*. Section six shifts the focus to two early-modern narratives: *Shuten Dōji* and its spinoff *Rajōmon*. The catalogue then concludes with sections on China in the Japanese imaginary followed by another on parody and entertainment. Following the entries is a supplemental section that provides short biographies for twelve early collectors whose acquisitions formed the bases of several European museums’ Japanese collections.

Exhibiting and reproducing narrative art brings with it certain challenges. Most obviously, one must recount the narrative such that those unfamiliar can understand the scenes they are beholding. One might provide a précis or digest version, if the focus is on one tale, but since the authors have chosen to move through so many narratives, this would have been far too burdensome. Instead, the catalogue entries skillfully provide just enough context for readers to understand the reproduced sections without getting bogged down in the full narratives. Another challenge of publishing on Japanese narrative artworks is that the scale of depiction can often be quite minute and exacting, making it a challenge to reproduce. As a brilliant solution, the full-page images that punctuate the sections often feature extreme close-ups of objects such that one can see the brushwork in a scroll or the individual pieces of gold in *maki-e* lacquer. Paintings in scroll format, in particular, are famously difficult to reproduce in codex, however the publication includes four luxurious fold-outs to give overviews of the following handscrolls: *Zenzai Dōji’s Pilgrimage in Fifty-Five Stations*, *The Tale of Ōeyama*, Kano Sansetsu’s *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, and *The Poetry Contest of the Twelve Animals*.

If there were one object that summarized the exhibition, it would be a pair of six-panel folding screens in the collection of the Musée départemental des Arts asiatiques (Nice). This eighteenth-century object serves as an apt cover image for the catalogue, since it displays nearly six dozen codices and scrolls, painted in *trompe l’oeil* and strewn across a golden background. The screens seem almost like a prefiguration of the current exhibition, as they reveal a fascination, some three centuries earlier, with making the diverse and multi-media nature of narrative art in Japan into a subject of display. Indeed, in the exhibition, the curators showcased this piece as a sort of anchor.

All in all, I find little room for criticism. Despite comprising 366 pages of thick, low-gloss paper, the price point was kept low enough to make this volume readily acquirable by libraries and individuals. One imagines that much new research will follow on the heels of this catalogue, now that such important but understudied works have been so eloquently introduced and lavishly reproduced. One thing missing perhaps is a record of the innovative use of technology in the exhibition itself, such as how one was allowed to scroll virtually through long handscrolls (thus mimicking a more historically accurate experience). Yet Trinh has published elsewhere a thoughtful retrospective essay, which I highly recommend, on the ways in which technology was incorporated into the exhibition (in addition to many other design considerations).¹¹ Hopefully some of these innovative uses of technology will inspire future exhibitions of Japanese art to adopt similar practices.

From the perspective of an educator, the catalogue's succinct but impactful essays lend themselves well to classroom use. It will join my syllabus alongside the catalogues of two recent exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: *Storytelling in Japanese Art*, which looked at narratives in scroll format, and *The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated*, which went deep into the vast media universe that has emerged in response to Japan's most famous and monumental tale.¹² Needless to say, I found the catalogue to be an overwhelming success and a major contribution to Japanese art history. I anticipate that it will inspire much future scholarship on the multivalent and diverse media that constitute pictorial narrative in Japanese art.

¹¹

Khanh Trinh, Im besten Licht erscheinen lassen. Zur Szenographie und Didaktik der Sonderausstellung „Liebe, Kriege, Festlichkeiten“, in: *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift* 43, Spring 2022, 7–17.

¹²

Masako Watanabe, *Storytelling in Japanese Art*, New York 2011; John T. Carpenter and Melissa McCormick (eds.), with Monica Bincsik and Kyoko Kinoshita, *The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated*, New York 2018.