

Information on Japanese Religions

Scholars' Day: Storytelling in Japanese Art

Radu Leca

On 12 March 2012, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York hosted a Scholars' Day in conjunction with the exhibition *Storytelling in Japanese Art*. This one-day event took the form of presentations within the exhibition galleries by distinguished Japanese scholars on themes related to the artworks on view. These were supplemented by moderated discussions and viewings of the exhibition galleries. In the audience were scholars from Japan and East Coast universities, and curators from Japanese museums.

The morning session began with welcome remarks by John Carpenter, who encouraged all present to make the most of this special event. Hiroshi Onishi then talked about the characteristics of the formats in which the 'Great Woven Cap' (Taishokan) narrative was illustrated in late medieval and early modern Japan. The next talk by Shōko Ōta focused on the 'Illustrated Sutra of the Miracles of Kannon' in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The speaker focused on the interplay between Kannon's dual iconography (as a religious icon sitting on a lotus pedestal and as a dynamic standing figure) and the dual location (this world and the celestial realm) depicted throughout the handscroll.

Of interest for readers of this *Newsletter* will be issues approached by Michio Yonekura in his talk on the depiction of a white horse left of the Nachi waterfall in medieval works such as 'The Illustrated Biography of the Priest Ippen' (*Ippen Hijiri-e*) and Kumano mandalas. Yonekura suggested a connection to the *Valāhasa jāta*ka illustrated in medieval sutra sleeve illustrations such as those analysed in Ōta's talk. In this story, Kannon appears in the form of a white horse to save men stranded on an island inhabited by demonic women. Since Nachi was believed to be the sacred space of Kannon, Yonekura proposed that the white horse functioned as a visual icon of the Kannon cult for fishermen and sailors in Kumano Bay.

This dense series of talks was followed by viewings of the galleries and lively discussions in front of the artworks.

The afternoon session started with a joint presentation by Naoko Kojima and Toru Takahashi, on the illustrated versions of the 'Tale of the Bamboo Cutter' (*Taketori Monogatari*), which only started to be produced in the seventeenth century. The speakers focused on visualizations of the liminal elements within the tale, both the protagonist Kaguyahime and Mount Fuji being points of contact between the mortal and immortal realms. The renewed popularity of the illustrated tale in the seventeenth century might be due to its association with the correspondingly liminal state of the bride through its use as a heirloom item.

Midori Sano talked about illustrations of the 'Tale of Genji' across various formats. Sano focused on the creative role of copying, exemplified by unexpected dia-



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Detail: Kanō Ryūsetsu Hidenobu, *Genji monogatari* ('The Tale of Genji'); a pair of handscroll paintings

Japan, Early Edo period, late 17th-early 18th century AD

Height: 373.000 mm (both scrolls) Length: 23194.000 mm (first

scroll) Length: 23194.000 mm (first scroll)

Gift of Mrs James Martin White

Asia JA JP ADD306-7 (1949.10-8.014.1-2)

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logue lines added by painters within the illustrations. The authorship of these seventeenth century versions of ancient tales has been largely unknown, but the next talk by Tōru Ishikawa revealed recently discovered information on producers of illustrated scrolls such as Asakura Jūken and a rare female author, Isome Tsuna.

Masako Watanabe, curator of the exhibition and moderator of the event, concluded the afternoon session with a talk on tales of animals and ghosts. Watanabe provided an authoritative historical overview of the iconography of non-humans in Japanese narrative art, starting with 'The Handscroll of Frolicking Animals' (*Chōju giga*) and 'Battles of Twelve Animals' (*Jūnirui gassen*), and following the evolution and iconographical changes up to Shibata Zeshin's 'Ibaraki Demon' at the end of the early modern period. This concluding talk placed early modern works, around which previous talks had gravitated, into a larger historical context, while underlining the wide range and significance of the exhibition.

The talks were rounded with another session of viewings throughout the galleries, with animated collective discussions in front of the artworks and interventions from audience members, who included Abe Yasurō and Haruo Shirane.

This was a rare opportunity for scholars and curators to exchange information and approaches in the presence of the artworks themselves. A theme that permeated the encounter was the importance of formats both for the style of the artworks and for the insights that they allow into the modes of image production across different periods. What emerged was a rich picture of the versatility of visual narrative in Japan, along with an innovative model of engaging with the content of an exhibition.

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