



Monika HINKEL¹

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8145-9777>

Review of *Meiji Modern: Fifty Years of New Japan* by Chelsea Foxwell and Bradley M. Bailey, Japanese Art Society of America, Yale University Press, 2023, 272 pages.

In the catalogue *Meiji Modern: Fifty Years of New Japan*, authors Chelsea Foxwell, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago and Bradley M. Bailey, Curator of Asian Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, examine the transformative period of Japan's Meiji era (1868–1912). They focus on the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity across the spheres of art, industry and society. This catalogue accompanied an exhibition of the same title, which was shown at the Asia Society, New York, the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, between October 2023 and September 2024. The exhibition was presented by the Japanese Art Society of America in celebration of its 50th Anniversary².

The book *Meiji Modern* not only focuses on the years of the Meiji period but also discusses Japan's gradual opening during the Edo period's final years, as indicated by the subtitle *Fifty Years of New Japan*.

The authors establish the context with two introductory essays. The first, "Toward Synchronicity: Meiji Art in Transition" by Chelsea Foxwell, explores Meiji art and export wares, the economics of Meiji craft objects and innovations in printmaking. Foxwell also highlights the role and impact of Japan's participation in international exhibitions and fairs, shedding light on how artistic standards and values became increasingly aligned and how artistic traditions gained recognition among patrons in Japan and America.

¹ Monika Hinkel is the Convenor of the Arts of Japan and Korea module of the SOAS-Alphawood Postgraduate Diploma in Asian Art at SOAS, University of London. Her main research interest is Japanese Woodblock Prints, especially prints of the Meiji period and contemporary interpretations of *ukiyo-e*. She has published widely on aspects of Japanese art. She was the curator of the 2024 special exhibition *Yoshida: Three Generations of Japanese Printmaking*, at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London. E-mail: mh105@soas.ac.uk.

² Asia Society, New York (3 October 2023–7 January 2024), the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago (21 March–9 June 2024) and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (7 July–15 September 2024). The Japanese Art Society of America (JASA) organised the show in collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts Houston to celebrate its 50th Anniversary.

This is complemented by Bradley Bailey's contribution, "On Industry and Industriousness: The Fine Art of Meiji Period Technique". Bailey illustrates the significance of decorative and applied arts within the government's *shokusan kōgyō* ('promotion of industry and manufacturing') policy, which aimed to showcase Japan's industrialisation. In his discussion of ceramics, cloisonne, lacquerware, metalwork and silk weaving, Bailey provides insights into their production and the workshops involved. He also introduces foreign visitors who came to observe the artisans in their workshops and reflects on the interactions and dialogues that took place between enthusiasts and collectors of Japanese contemporary art during that era.

The catalogue section is organised into five thematic areas: *Crafting a Modern State*; *Navigating Changing Seas*; *Fashioning the Self*; *Making History, Enshrining Myth*; and *Cultivating a Modern Aesthetic*. These five themes are accompanied by succinct introductory essays and are richly illustrated with 197 artworks that include woodblock prints, paintings, lacquerware, enamel, textiles, embroidery, metalwork, and ceramics. These objects collectively examine the artistic developments of the era through a multidisciplinary perspective, encompassing art history, cultural studies, and socio-historical analysis.

Crafting a Modern State introduces Japan's opening to the outside world and the emergence of a new Japanese identity as a modern nation-state. The visibility of the Meiji Emperor, the imperial family, and dignitaries in Western clothing is illustrated through woodblock prints, photographs and lithographs. The impact of foreign individuals invited to Japan and the establishment of new international connections is highlighted through examples of Western-style architecture and modes of transportation. The role of arts and crafts as an industry and a diplomatic tool for the burgeoning Meiji state is also emphasised. Both art and craftsmanship played crucial roles in shaping the emperor's image and attracting foreign investment, aligning with the government's strategy to promote new industries.

Navigating Changing Seas investigates the enduring importance of the sea as a protector, a source of sustenance and an artistic inspiration for Japan. It illustrates the sea's role in connecting Japan to the broader world and vice versa. Prints depicting the arrival of Commodore Perry's black ships in the 1850s alongside representations of the newly established Imperial Navy during the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars highlight the evolving importance of the sea for Japan, transforming it into a symbol of protection and ambition. Three metalworks associated with the narrative of the magical

jewel that controls the tides showcase the remarkable craftsmanship of Meiji-era metalwork. Additionally, the nostalgic imagery of fishing and water-related myths links Japan's ancient sovereignty with its modern aspirations. *Fashioning the Self* reflects on two concepts of self: the public persona, which emphasises appearance and behaviour, and the private self, which reflects personal emotions. Government initiatives aimed at presenting a modern society influenced this self-presentation during this period. New Meiji laws provided individuals with greater freedom than the rigid status system of the Edo period (1603–1868), sparking changes in fashion. In the 1870s and 1880s, Western formal wear, such as suits and trousers, became fashionable, while women's court attire adapted from European styles, with the Empress exclusively donning Western dress after 1886. Coded dress for women, like *hakama* pants worn over a kimono, signified factory employment or academic status. The rise in silk production and the emergence of department stores allowed ordinary people to embrace a more cosmopolitan style, accessorising traditional clothing with Western items, like umbrellas or shawls. This section also emphasises the evolving gender roles of this era of unprecedented social freedom for women, featuring a series of woodblock-printed illustrations from women's magazines.

In *Making History, Enshrining Myth*, several themes from history, mythology, and religion — particularly Buddhism and Shinto — are explored in a manner that offers new perspectives. These themes held significant importance before the Meiji period, and Japanese artists and patrons recognised the appeal they held for Euro-American buyers. This appreciation was essential for educating the public and fostering a sense of national unity. By portraying historical events and figures, artists conveyed familiar narratives with greater realism. Subjects such as dragons and demons gained popularity, drawing in both foreign and domestic audiences captivated by the supernatural. Through this, Japanese artists expressed their modernity while delving into historical and mythical themes. A notable example is the rare two-sided painted screen by Noguchi Shōhin (1847–1917), one of the few female painters from the Meiji period. This work exemplifies the deliberate reinterpretation and re-articulation of past themes during this era. Traditional visual motifs played vital social and political roles, educating the public, promoting a shared national identity and creating new myths.

The final section, *Cultivating a Modern Aesthetic*, focuses on traditional themes of flora and fauna, which remain the most popular motifs among international audiences. This interest spurred a rise in the production of nature-themed items for export, serving as a form of diplomatic soft power

while also providing a lucrative way to sustain the industry. Furthermore, it shaped Western perceptions and definitions of “Asian tradition”, establishing precedents for the cultural and geopolitical relations — and tensions — that continue to evolve today. This section features several significant painted screens that had not been publicly displayed for over a century, as well as a ceramic piece by the renowned potter Hazan Itaya (1872–1963), a pioneer in Japanese studio ceramics. This vessel, the only known work by the artist in North America and one of just a few outside Japan, was acquired directly from the artist by the collector and philanthropist Henry Walters (1848–1931) in 1915.

The selected works serve as case studies to explore how Japanese artists and artisans adapted to, resisted or synthesised the forces of modernisation. In the catalogue entries, the two main authors are supported by five additional contributors. Rather than merely treating these objects as aesthetic artefacts, the authors contextualise them within the broader cultural, economic, and political dynamics of the Meiji era. The nearly two hundred objects, borrowed from over seventy public and private collections across America, showcase both export wares and items produced for the domestic market. Some of these pieces were exhibited at international fairs and subsequently acquired by foreign collectors.

Foxwell and Bailey seek to dismantle monolithic narratives surrounding modernisation, promoting a nuanced understanding of how Japan’s visual culture navigated the dual imperatives of embracing Western influences while preserving native traditions. They examine Japan’s response to a shifting artistic landscape, reflecting the tensions between preservation and innovation.

Another strength of the book is its exploration of material culture. By analysing objects such as Meiji cloisonne, ceramics and textiles, the authors challenge the assumption that modernisation required a total abandonment of craft traditions. Instead, they demonstrate how these crafts were recontextualised as symbols of national identity, often produced for international audiences eager for “exotic” Japanese goods. The authors underscore the creative adaptations of traditional forms in a modern context and discuss the intriguing interactions between Japanese artists and the public with the outside world.

The authors present a balanced perspective on the complexities of the Meiji era. They refrain from romanticising the past as an idyllic representation of an “authentic” Japan, nor do they depict modernisation as solely a disruptive force. Their analysis of the dual-track approach — seeking modernisation

for external recognition and traditionalism for internal cohesion — is particularly compelling.

Although the book primarily focuses on art objects from American collections, which may be viewed as a limitation, it nevertheless offers intriguing insights into early American collectors and their collections of Meiji arts and crafts.

To enhance the understanding of the evolution of discussed objects and themes within one section, a chronological arrangement of the entries would have been beneficial. Such an organisation would effectively highlight shifts and changes, aligning more closely with the introductory text of each section.

Meiji Modern serves as an invaluable resource for scholars and students of Japanese art history, providing fresh perspectives on a crucial historical period. Its interdisciplinary approach effectively connects art history with broader socio-historical discourses, making it a model for future studies and exhibitions centred on modernity and cultural transformation.

Moreover, the book contributes to the ongoing re-evaluation of “modernity” as a Western-centric concept. By showcasing the unique trajectory of the Meiji era, Foxwell and Bailey challenge the notion that modernisation must adhere to a singular, Euro-American model. This reframing is especially pertinent in today’s globalised academic landscape, where there is a growing interest in plural modernities.

Meiji Modern: Fifty Years of New Japan is a well-researched and beautifully produced volume that vividly captures the vibrancy and complexity of the Meiji era. It provides a substantial contribution to the fields of Japanese studies and modern Japanese art history. Both specialists and general readers will undoubtedly find much to appreciate in this exploration of how Japan’s artists and craftspeople adeptly navigated the challenges and opportunities presented by a rapidly evolving world. This publication represents a noteworthy scholarly achievement, offering a richly contextualised examination of Japan’s modernisation and the visual and material culture that emerged in response to this significant historical transformation.