



Noriko Aso, *Public Properties: Museums in Imperial Japan*

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IN THIS WORK, Noriko Aso provides a succinct and well-researched account of the conceptual reasons and the legal avenues through which the Japanese state exerted concerted control over the formation of an “exhibitionary culture” (4), the centerpiece of which was a network of state-sponsored museums. Neatly knitting together Japanese- and English-language scholarship in the fields of museum studies, Japanese imperial history, and colonial studies, Aso’s work should also be of interest to scholars in the fields of sociology and ethnology, insofar as it “foreground[s] the public nature of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japanese museums ... as sites specifically designed to call imperial publics into existence” (2). More specifically, the book “juxtaposes central-government museums with colonial and privately established museums to explore elasticity, expansiveness, and divisions in the creation of imperial publics, whose definition and redefinition in relation to the Japanese state were ongoing” (3). In short, Aso’s study pursues questions pertaining to what it meant to be “Japanese,” at least in state conceptions of that term, between roughly 1870 and 1945.

Aso builds on Satō Dōshin’s pioneering studies of the government’s role in establishing museums in the Meiji period, and on Alice Tseng’s examinations of museums as a site of imperial self-representation in the early twentieth century, to argue that the various governmental organs responsible for establishing museums served as a site for “constructing a state exhibitionary complex” (23). Within the broad field of museum studies, most investigations of “publicness” (in the Habermasian sense of a bourgeois “public sphere” of individual self-determination) focus on either the formation of museum communities or the ways in which museums have helped to shape public memory of historical events. Charting new territory, Aso attends instead to the legal frameworks through which the Japanese state exerted control over the public culture of visual display. While she notes the “host of reworked and invented terms that emerged [in twentieth-century Japan] for rethinking relations between those who governed and those who were governed,” including *ōyake/kō* (“the public”), *kōkyō* (“the public sphere”), *jinmin*, *shūsho*, *hitobito*, *tami/min*, *minshū* (all glossed as “the people”), *kokumin* (“national subjects”),

and *taishū* (“the masses”), unfortunately this tangled web of interconnected words never gets clearly demarcated. Aso’s first chapter (“Stating the Public”) allows the terms to remain fuzzy, asserting that all the “change and growth in government museums” from the 1870s onward was unified “by the goal of calling into being, nationalizing, and ordering a modern Japanese viewing public” (15). While she does not pin down a specific definition of the “public,” Aso does provide a fascinating account of how the concept of the museum in Japan, responding to Euro-American practices of display in international expositions, shifted their focus away from display of the freakish (*misemono*) or sacred (*kaichō*) to a focus first on natural science and industry, and then to art and art history. She usefully charts the shifting institutional mandates of the National Museum as responsibility for its direction moved from the Ministry of Education (Monbushō) to the Council of State (Dajōkan) to the Home Ministry (Naimushō), the Executive Office of Exhibitions (Hakurankai jimukyoku), the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce (Nōshōmushō), and ultimately to the Imperial Household Ministry (Kunaishō), where responsibility lay until defeat in 1945.

Having laid out her conceptual framework, Aso then moves to four chapter-long case studies. Chapter 2 considers “the reclassification and restructuring of government museums as imperial possessions, the scripting of a national aesthetic-heritage narrative anchored in the imperial museums, and the emergence of a coherent legislative framework for heritage conservation and administration” (63). The chapter provides a compelling account of the political and legislative maneuvering behind the now-familiar classification system for important national properties (*jūyō bunkazai*) and national treasures (*kokuhō*). Aso shows that this national canon originated in a government “fishing expedition” to troll through temple and shrine treasure houses, claiming their material goods in the name of a national cultural heritage (65).

Chapter 3 turns to the colonial scene to excavate museums founded in Taiwan and Korea that, Aso maintains, gave “rise to variant visions of Japanese imperial identity” (96) in which the raw material resources of the colonies were connected, via natural sciences and industrial displays, to Japanese manufacturers and consumers. Aso’s account places museum (re)construction firmly in the framework of other assimilation (*dōka*) policies, “which on an administrative level included the extension of Japanese (*naichi*) legal structures and categories to its outer territories (*gaichi*)” (101).

In chapter 4, Aso explores three privately envisioned museums, each of which sought to construct a “public” (both in the practical sense of admission-paying visitors and in the broader, visionary sense of a populist entity) at odds to the national-imperial paradigm. In locating the Ōhara Museum of Art in remote Kurashiki, Ōhara Mogasaburō challenged “the assumption that aesthetic artifacts of national significance belonged in Tokyo rather than the periphery” (129). With his minutely planned, but not fully executed, Folk Museum of Economic History, Shibusawa Keizō identified not a geographical point of variance but a class-based one insofar as its founder sought to elucidate a “sense of ‘public ethics’ (*kōkyō rinri*) that explicitly looked at gaps in the state system” and “championed a form of economic democracy (*keizaiteki minshushugi*)” (138, 139). Finally, Yanagi Muneyoshi’s Japan Folk Crafts Museum, in Aso’s critical evaluation, drew attention to the agrarian underpinnings of imperial grandiosity: if “the nation of ‘Japan’ was created by the Meiji

state, [and] then retroactively naturalized by extending it back in time for over two millennia,” then the Japan Folk Crafts Museum “claimed to find a folk who were always already embodying a utopian lifestyle” in the form of rural farmers (153).

In a wonderfully fluid chapter (“Consuming Publics,” chapter 5), Aso provides an account of how department stores came to serve as alternative sites for aesthetic display in twentieth century Japan, thus “encroach[ing] on the educational territory of museums, setting aside spaces for exhibits of art and historical objects not for sale as the stores positioned themselves as cultural authorities” (170). With their palatial architecture, glass display cases, and browsing-friendly floor plans, “department stores,” writes Aso, “seemed like yearlong exhibitions” (173), constructing an “elegant maze of desire” navigated with equal ease by women and men, with children in tow (182). Though for a time department stores such as Daimaru, Takashimaya, and Mitsukoshi served as “forums for works that the state could not or would not display” (191), by the late 1930s the state had claimed retail spaces, too, as loci to service military needs.

While chapters 2 through 5 rehearse museum history from the 1870s to 1945, the epilogue considers the place of museums in postwar Japan and the role of aesthetics in promoting Japan as a “peaceful ‘culture nation’ (*bunka kokka*), salvaging an imperial-era aesthetic canon that would still be administered from the center, but now in the name of the people” (203–204). Department stores, partnered with newspaper corporations, have proven to be one of the big winners, reclaiming a prominent role during the Occupation and afterward as cultural power brokers, while private museums, though artistically robust, continue to struggle financially. Aso concludes that, throughout the long twentieth century, museums functioned as a place where “the boundary lines between Japanese state and society were drawn, and blurred, in different ways by different agents,” a conversation which is still “ongoing” (222).

Aso has provided an excellent, and much-needed, history of exhibition spaces and practices in twentieth-century imperial Japan. This study fills an important gap in English-language museum studies scholarship and will be useful reading for scholars of Japanese history, twentieth-century visual culture, and colonial studies. Any of the case studies (chapters 2–5) would stand alone as reading for undergraduate courses, and the book as a whole would be well-suited for graduate students, particularly when paired with YOUNG (1999), CHING (2001), or TANSMAN (2009).

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