

BIJUTSUSHI

Journal of Japan Art History Society

181, Vol. 66, No. 1, 2016, pp. 36–54

HAYASHI, Michiko. Japanese National Treasures at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition, and the Japanese Temples and Their Treasures

This paper discusses the role of national treasures, and the importance of the catalogue *Japanese Temples and Their Treasures*, in the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910, a particularly notable bi-national exhibition during the heyday of international exhibitions. The event, held in London, was the last international exposition in the Meiji era and, effectively, a “Japan Fair in London,” prepared under the leadership of the Meiji government. The mission that the Meiji government gave to the office in charge of the Japan-British Exhibition was to promote the image of Japan as a “first-class nation” equal to the West European powers, and to bolster the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902. To this end, the highlights of the exhibition were antiquities in the Fine Art section, which included items registered as national treasures.

Initially, the Committee for the Preservation of Ancient Temples and Shrines, overseen by the Japanese Department of the Interior (*naimushō*), opposed the use of precious national treasures for overseas exhibitions. A discussion ensued on the relative merits of archiving versus exhibiting of cultural properties, a debate which continues to this day. The curators went to London with works from the Imperial Museum, to supervise the installation of the fragile exhibits. The manner in which they handled Japanese art provided useful insights for British curatorial staff and visitors to the exhibition.

A refined display in a spacious pavilion was created for the exhibition, and, due to the fact that it only represented two countries, the show differed from earlier international exhibitions that took place during the Meiji era. An opposition became apparent between the goals of exhibition/loan and conservation, indicative of the distinct objectives of the different ministries. The Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, for example, was responsible for the promotion of new industries, while, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed foreign negotiations. By contrast, the Japanese Department of the Interior was responsible for the protection of cultural properties.

The catalogue of the exhibition, *Japanese Temples and Their Treasures*, published by the Japanese Department, gave a strong impression that Japanese traditions could be traced uninterruptedly back to ancient times. It was also nominally considered the second ‘official’ Japanese art history, following the *Histoire de l’art du Japon*, which was produced for the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900. *Japanese Temples and Their Treasures* became a key text for research on Japanese art in Europe, as it became available for display, sale or donation through the promotion of the publishing house Shimbi Shoin. The catalogue was also the last work in which Okakura Kakuzō discussed Japanese art history as a component of East Asian art.

With these points in mind, the Japan-British Exhibition can be considered as an important event in the history of art, and the history of international exhibitions.

THE JAPAN ART HISTORY SOCIETY

October 2016

All rights Reserved, Copyright © The Japan Art History Society