



## THE POETICS OF EXHIBITION IN JAPANESE CULTURE<sup>1</sup>

Masao Yamaguchi

All of us already have the experience of being confronted with exposition. Toy shops, for example, may have been one of the first spaces of exhibition many of us encountered. These fascinating spaces provoke us with thousands of objects that stimulate the imagination. Ordinary shops, too, tend to be spaces for exhibition, although we are not usually aware of their effects, which can vary over time and from culture to culture. A consideration of the booths of the fairground throws into relief the deliberate nature of exhibition we see in shops. Usually the fairground booths are built in a space that is ordinarily empty. The appearance of built objects in this type of space signals a transmutation in the flow of time and in the continuity of ordinary space. The act of transformation that occurs in the fairground brings to overt consciousness the exhibiting frame that organizes the display of goods in shops.

When shopkeepers became aware of how goods could be exhibited, they started to use windows as a kind of showcase, foregrounding certain objects so as to seduce people into buying a wide range of goods. The shop window becomes a theater for merchandising in much the same way as a circus parade displays a portion of the main show in order to provoke onlookers into attending the entire performance being put on inside the circus tent. The rise of the great department stores in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the store become an exhibition space for commercial goods.

A similar array of intentional exhibitions constitutes a major part of Japanese life, not only in highly stylized settings such as court life or theater but also in the contexts of

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<sup>1</sup> KARP, Ivan; LAVINE, Steven D. (1991). *Exhibiting cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display*. Washington; London: Smithsonian Institution Press. 57-67.





everyday life, such as in shops and homes. One of the techniques with which Japanese accentuate the hidden aspects of objects in both everyday life and artistic contexts is called *mitate*. *Mitate* is, in a sense, the art of citation. When an object is displayed on ceremonial occasions, for example, a classical reference – one familiar to anyone knowledgeable about history or the classics – is assigned to that object so that the immediate object merges with the object that is being referred to. One well-known example of *mitate* is in an episode described in a collection of short essays called *Makura no soshi* (Pillow-Book), written by Sei Shonagon, a court lady of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. In this episode a princess asks her ladies-in-waiting what name they would give a scene of a snow-covered mound in a garden. One of them immediately replies, “The snow on Mount Koro in China” (Koro is the mountain well known in the classics for the beauty of its scenery after a snowfall). The image of the snow-covered mound was given a mythological dimension by associating it with a well-known image from the Chinese classics. *Mitate*, then, is the technique used to associate objects of ordinary life with mythological or classical images familiar to all literate people.

Japanese use *mitate* to extend the image of an object. By so doing they transcend the constraints of time. *Yama*, for example, is a popular word in the Japanese vocabulary of the imagination. The word *yama* originally denoted mountain, but became associated with and assimilated to the place where deities reside. In this way *yama* took on the sense of a mediating space between humans and gods. A physical representation of *yama* can be either a small mound of sand or a cart with a stage on it that is carried by participants in a festival procession.

Other kinds of *yama* – that is, other kinds of spaces that mediate between humans and gods – have nothing to do with mountains and are not named after the word for mountain, but still represent gods and are thought to carry the message of gods. In every Japanese house of traditional style there is a space called *tokonoma*, where decorated objects are shown. *Tokonoma* functions as a kind of space of exhibitions in daily life and





domestic settings. Usually an arrangement of flowers is shown against the wall, with a picture scroll hung behind it. Each family changes the scroll according to the passing of the seasons and the varying arrangements of flowers. The idea of *yama* can also be found in objects placed on the roofs of traditional houses. In certain parts of Japan, such objects mark a particular part of the house as sacred space. As another example, samurai casques (helmets) were topped with decorations that certain scholars describe as a kind of *yama*.

The concept of *yama* is noticeable in the performing arts. In *kabuki* of the Tokugawa period (from the beginning of the seventeenth century until the middle of the nineteenth century), a huge picture was hung over the entryway. This is thought to have been the devise whereby divine dynamism was mediated in the space of performance. The highly decorated clothes that actors wore are thought to have been yet another expression of *yama*. It was explicitly understood that it was the clothes that performed, rather than the actors themselves. Theater was a kind of showcase for the traces of gods, who showed their presence in the form of decorated clothes. Actors were the machinery of the gestural movement. The meaning of the clothes emerges clearly in an example from northeastern Japan. Each house in the region possesses one small figurine, called *osira-sama*. Once a year a shaman, called *itako*, visits the house and puts new clothes on the figurine. The clothing is changed annually because it absorbs the polluted elements of the house; a special ritual enables the *osira-sama* clothing to be disposed of safely. In this examples, as in the examples from *kabuki*, the spirits of gods are incorporated in the clothes themselves, not in the *osira-sama* figurine or the body of the actor. Figurines and actors are merely the objects that support the clothing, which is the real manifestation of gods.

Another example of the mediating role of clothing can be found in the folk theater performances called *yamabushi-kagura*, also in northeastern Japan. Family members who buy new clothes (especially those to be used in a daughter's marriage) ask *yamabushi-kagura* performers to wear the newly bought clothes so that the spirits of gods are





absorbed into them. New clothes contain strange and dangerous forces that must be blocked from harming the people who wear them. A similar motive can be seen in the custom of manufacturers entrusting new styles of kimonos to strolling female performers: dangerous effects are blocked through the mobile exhibition of the new styles. Similar reasons account for the Japanese custom of drying washed clothes in the open. These examples are all kinds of exhibition in everyday life, and demonstrate that the art of exposition has been long established in various forms as a significant means of communication in Japanese society.

By way of contrast, let us consider the way that self-conscious exposition developed in the West during the nineteenth century. In 1867 Louis Napoleon organized the Paris Exposition for the purpose of impressing the world with the stability of his government. The objects in the exposition became the heroes of this new type of festival, in which objects of everyday life were divorced from the contexts to which they originally belonged. Through exhibition these objects acquired new levels of significance as emblems of the power of the régime that organized the space of exposition.

Exhibitions in public spaces in European cultures more or less limited themselves to the display of objects. The space called the “museum” refused from the very beginning to admit the smells and sounds of everyday life. Until the 1867 exposition the experiences and scenes of everyday life had been excluded from pictorial space, which tended to portray ceremonies and scenes from classical mythology. The Paris Exposition encouraged the display of everyday objects in a manner similar to the display of high art in order to demonstrate the wide distribution of social wealth in the newly established society as it contrasted to the ancien régime. Via the exposition, the new régime was able to express contemporary feelings about objects and lives. The result was that objects originally meant for sale as commodities were elevated to the status of “art” by being associated (through the mode in which they were displayed) with paintings and sculpture that





portray a mythical world. In a sense, this is the converse of Japanese exhibiting practices, in which unseen realities are authorized through their manifestations in objects.

Of course, commodities in their original contexts were not meant to be artistic value. They turn into a kind of simulacrum of life once they are taken out of the flow of life, and acquire a kind of autonomy at the cost of their position in relation to everyday life. However, at least they start to be appreciated as art objects.

In England a similar process can be seen in the movement started by William Morris to find positive artistic value in crafts, which also promoted the independence of commodities from their initial contexts. One of its consequences was the Art Deco style, manifested in its most extreme form at the 1932 World Expo in Chicago. Art Deco went so far as to turn the objects of everyday life into a style for its own sake.

When things are taken out of everyday life, they are regrouped and renamed. The act of display thus involves the process of classification and presupposes naming. Museum collections were originally based on such an undertaking. In its initial stage, the museum was the space of display for collected and classified objects, and, naturally, was charged with the ideology of the sponsor who made the display possible. The Louvre provides an example: its origins are mainly in the collection of Louis XIV, and it was intended to show how the world was ordered around the France of the Bourbon dynasty. As another example, the political processions of Tudor England, under the artistic direction of Inigo Jones, took place in spaces in which artistic objects had been put together temporarily to meet the political needs of the time and reinforce the images of power<sup>2</sup>. In short, public displays are one of the means used to produce the meanings that are characteristic of an age. Exposition and museum are comparable in this regard.

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<sup>2</sup> *The King's Arcadia: Inigo Jones and the Stewart Court: A Quarter-Century Exhibition at the Banqueting House, Whitehall* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1973).





An object, as we have noted, begins to reveal a somewhat different meaning when it is drawn out of its original context and put into a setting that evokes the totality part of its defining frame. The latent meaning that is implicit and unnoticed when an object is in its everyday context becomes manifest in display. The act of collection involves processes of making latent meaning manifest. Display, therefore, is the artistic creation of new sensitivities toward the world.

The classical style of display fixes an object in a certain space, which is arranged according to overtly known systems through which the world is classified. In art museums and cultural-history museums, objects are generally arranged according to their place in the historical succession of time. The relationships of objects in time are transposed into a spatial context, and that regrouping is imprinted in the memory of visitors. This transformative capacity of museums, their ability to function as machines for turning time into space, enables them to be used as an apparatus of social memory. The parallel with systems of totemic classification, whereby human groups are classed with natural species, should be obvious. Lévi-Strauss<sup>3</sup> showed totemism to be a system for classifying natural and social objects. We can extend his analysis and argue that totemism is an imaginary museum in which objects are mental, not physical.

Museums are only a special instance of a more general cultural and cognitive whereby objects acquire their meanings through association with knowing rather than sensing. Frances Yates showed in her *Art of Memory*<sup>4</sup> that there exist alternative methods of display that can function as means for the transmission of knowledge. One of her examples is drawn from theater. Theaters in the Renaissance period were built in terms of Neoplatonic systems of thought. They were mirrors designed to reflect the system of the universe: elements of their architecture and the actions that occurred inside them

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<sup>3</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemisme aujourd'hui* (Paris: PVF, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).





acquired meaning by representing the total system of the universe. According to Yates, this way of knowing the world is even extended to the way monuments are placed in urban squares and plazas as the means of completing the cosmological structure of urban space. Anthropologists have long noticed how, in other cultures, villages may be constructed according to cosmological schemes. They have taken interest in the ways that a culture's spatial concepts are manifested, for example, the way a village can be constructed on the basis of concepts of mythical topography. In these forms of construction, in ways of building things and placing objects, even in much modern architecture, the visible is merely a clue to the invisible<sup>5</sup>.

This last observation shows us that the Japanese material described in the beginning of the article is a culturally specific and highly elaborate instance of the more general tendency of cultures to display the invisible through the visible ordering of objects. In what follows, I discuss Japanese semantics and practices related to objects in order to demonstrate how a thoroughgoing theatrical worldview can organize even the appropriation of aspects of the material world.

The concept of object in Japanese is expressed by the word *mono*. Originally *mono* referred to the roots an object had in both the visible and invisible dimensions of the world. Only in recent times has the word *mono* come to be understood in a purely materialistic sense. *Mono* therefore used to be the expression of organic existence, in contrast to the modern definition of *mono* as something made of inorganic material.

Objects (inanimate *mono*) connect the visible elements that constitute the surroundings of an individual with the invisible totality of the world. In contrast to the practices of the shaman-priest, this connection is nowadays typically achieved through display. The influence of *mono* results from the places in which objects are found and

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<sup>5</sup> See James W. Fernandes, *Fang Architectonics* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1977), and T. O. Beidelman, *Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).





from the ways they are used. Mono connotes not a single existence, but rather plural existences constituted by virtue of their connection with other things. Mono has two faces, as I have noted above: an aspect amenable to classification and description, and another that easily escapes the analytical approach. The second aspect is usually understood as a random or chaotic element, like noise. Noise resists the classified order, and is considered to be evidence of entropy in most cultural systems. However, this seemingly random and chaotic phenomenon is actually the point at which a new system makes its first appearance.

Once again, the Japanese material I have discussed here is but a culturally specific instance of a more general process: the making, breaking, and remaking of systems of classification. We define the first appearance of a new system of meaning as “noise” because we do not know how to classify such a system. As an example, librarians are often confronted with the problem of classifying new types of books. New territories of subjects and topics are amalgamations of what cannot be placed in existing arrays. These new topics appear as total chaos when they are taking shape. However, there are people who take chaotic phenomena as manifestations of things hitherto unknown, perceiving them as a kind of syndrome. The same can be said of display. Acts of display do not necessarily cover territories that are well explained and easily classifiable. They involve an intellectual venture into that which is inexplicable and incapable of classification in order to search for new types of order. One of the senses of the word cabinet denotes the space in which unclassifiable things are kept for the while (e.g., the cabinet of Dr. Caligari). In Europe the first museums were derived Renaissance cabinets of curiosities. The cabinet is an apt metaphor for the first act of classification. Sorting things follows the act of sweeping them up. Sorting is the act of bringing order to personal space in order to establish cosmic order at large.

So far I have been discussing Japanese representation of immobile objects. However, objects are often represented in processions. In Japan, processions is called *neri*







(snake-going), and processions used to be a very familiar scene on streets of traditional cities. Festive processions were called *furyu* in Japanese. *Furyu* is associated with certain kinds of festivals exhibiting strong associations with the cult of the dead. In a word, *furyu* has a spirit similar to that of the baroque. It is not a radical novelty in reference to the objects used in the festival. It can shown in the drawing on the huge lantern or in the masked dance.

Spirits of *furyu* supplied the art of representation in Japan with an essential vision. As an example, a cooked meal or cakes were one of the most important elements constituting the altar of classical temples in traditional Japan. The celebration of *Matara* in the Temple *Motsu* in *Hiraizumi* is a good examples. During this celebration cakes are displayed on a small carrier shaped like three mountains surrounded by a paper called the cloud. A performance called “In Praise of the Cakes” is carried out. This mound of cakes is modeled after *Mt. Meru*, the center of the world in Japanese cosmology.

The fabrication of something that is modeled after a primordial object is called *tsukuri* (Figure 4-1). For example, the arrangement of raw fish on a plate is called *o-tsukuri* (*o* is an honorable prefix) and means the arrangement of slices of raw fish in the shape of *Mt. Meru*. *Tsukuri* is a device used to associate something in immediate view with the primordial things of distant part. This returns us to the beginning of this paper, for the very act connecting is termed *mitate* by the Japanese.





Fig. 4-1. A platform in the shape of an island of furyu. On the back of a tortoise (which represents a cosmic island) are a crane, a pine tree, a Japanese apricot, and daffodils. From Masakatsu Gunji, *Furyu no zuzosho*, copyright 1987 Sanseido Press, Tokyo.

Mitate is something close to the idea of a simulacrum, a concept made popular by Jean Baudrillard<sup>6</sup>. Mitate is always a pseudo-object. In kabuki, everything is a simulacrum of what has been extant for a very long time. However, primordial things, in turn, are simulacra of what belongs to gods. It is understood that Japanese gods do not appreciate true things; they do not accept things that are not fabricated by means of a device (shuko). One must add something to that which already exists in order to present it to gods or to show it in public. The art of flower arrangement (ikebana) originated in the tradition of furyu, and was meant to astonish gods with its ingenuity. It is the adding of something different – an act of eccentricity.

Mitate, in its original sense, was an exposition presented to the gods. The word mitate is itself composed of two words: mi (to see) and tate (to stand, to arrange). Mitate

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Por une critique de l'économie politique Du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

objects were often accompanied by *iitate* (ii, “to say”). *litate* is the narrative text that accompanies the *mitate*. Kabuki is explained by Masakatsu Gunji as having originated in *mitate* accompanied with *iitate* (or *tsurane*, a stylized form of discourse found in kabuki)<sup>7</sup>.

Figure 4-2 shows an acrobatic performance in which an actor dramatizes the well-known historical event in which a three-year-old emperor was rescued, along with a sacred royal sword, when he was about to perish in the sea during the final battle of the twelfth-century civil war. In Figure 4-2 one can see the way in which the historical event is transformed in the theater into the shape of a mountain. This seems to have been the ideal of exposition: sacred reality is manifested through the mediation of history, mythological topography, performance, and exhibition of objects.



Fig. 4-2. A celebrated actor of the Tokugawa period dramatizing a well-known historical event in which Tomomori Taira rescues the infant emperor, Antoku, and a sacred royal sword, using the point of an anchor. From Masakatsu Gunji, *Furyu no zuzoshi*, copyright 1987 by Sanseido Press, Tokyo.

<sup>7</sup> Masakatsu Gunji, *Furyu no zuzoshi* (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1987).



The Japanese are often accused of aping Western technology, and sometimes do not seem overly offended by that accusation. One of the reasons for this may be that they think of imitation as following the tradition of *tsukuri*. In the middle of nineteenth century, the Japanese believed the Western world to be something like a utopia presided over by gods. In the spirit of *mitate* the Japanese decided to transplant the constituent elements of the Western world into their own country. The force of tradition was largely responsible for the success of this endeavor. The Japanese attitude toward things is aptly expressed in the work of Baudrillard, the semiotician who started to use the word *simulacrum* not necessarily in a negative sense, denoting the fake, but as a description of a positive process. In this paper this sense of *simulacrum* is considered to be something like a rhetoric that turns the invisible into the visible.

Japanese myth contains several accounts of fake gods encountering real gods. In general, it seems to have been believed that the pseudogods appeared in the world first, and then were followed by the real ones. Sometimes fake things are thought to appear to be more real than the real gods themselves. Japanese myth may be able to teach us a contemporary lesson. The dialectics of the real and the fake seem to be one of the most provocative aspects of the art of representation today. All exhibitions suffer from the condition of being fake. However, they acquire the status of the authentic when they are placed into a theatrical context. The art of representation in Japanese tradition shows this process of theatricalization clearly and self-consciously.

