



SMART MUSEUM OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Meiji Modern: Fifty Years of New Japan

March 21–June 9, 2024 | Public opening reception Thursday, March 21, 6–8 pm

Landmark exhibition charts Japan's unique engagement with modernity through an extraordinary selection of objects in American collections



The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago presents a fresh look at the art of Japan's Meiji era (1868–1912), four remarkable decades that propelled the country into the modern era. ***Meiji Modern: Fifty Years of New Japan*** (March 21–June 9, 2024) features more than 130 artworks—including paintings, prints, photographs, sculptural works, and objects in various media, such as enamel, lacquer, embroidery, and textiles—that reveal a complex period of radical cultural, technological, and political change that played out in an age of intense global competition.

“Although the changes brought by the Meiji era were difficult and chaotic, many Japanese people, including artists, saw it as a time of new possibilities, global exchange, and social reform. Our exhibition captures the excitement and ambivalence of the modern experience,” said exhibition co-curator **Chelsea Foxwell**, Associate Professor of Art History, East Asian Languages and Civilizations, and the College, and Director of the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Chicago.



The exhibition draws from many of the finest examples of Meiji artwork in American collections—nearly fifty collections total, both public and private. American purchasers acquired a number of the objects directly from the artists shortly after their making. “For that reason,” says Foxwell, “this exhibition also commemorates the US-Japan relationship through art and reflects the history of American collecting.” Organized around Japanese motifs such as the sea and nature, Buddhist deities, and mythical animals, *Meiji Modern* highlights these themes as they are transformed with the introduction of newly imported techniques, materials, and audiences.

“With *Meiji Modern*, we are able to bring many extraordinary objects and stories together within a single exhibition, in a way that provides an illuminating portrayal of Meiji art within a wider global context. Backed by rigorous research, the exhibition explores interconnected themes that encompass geopolitics, commerce, artistic and technical innovation, and questions of identity and self-fashioning. The Smart is honored to partner with the Japanese Art Society of America to present this exhibition in Chicago, and to reflect together with our entire community of scholars, students, artists, and visitors on the ways in which the issues that defined the Meiji era still resonate today,” said **Vanja V. Malloy**, Dana Feitler Director of the Smart Museum of Art.

Meiji Modern commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the **Japanese Art Society of America** and is co-curated by Foxwell and **Bradley Bailey**, the Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Curator of Asian Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Following its presentation in Chicago, the exhibition will travel to The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, from July 30 to September 15, 2024. It was previously presented at the Asia Society Museum in New York, from October 3, 2023 to January 7, 2024.

The Smart celebrates the opening of *Meiji Modern* in Chicago with a free public reception on **Thursday, March 21, from 6–8 pm.**

About the exhibition

Urban transformation, boundless enthusiasm for new technologies, and rising geopolitical tensions: these circumstances defined Japan's Meiji era (1868–1912) as much as they describe our own.

Against this backdrop, art emerged as one of Japan's most profitable industries and a singular means of representing the modern nation-state. Artists manipulated traditional mediums and materials to achieve dazzling effects unseen—and unimaginable—in previous epochs.



In Japan and abroad, Meiji art filled international expositions (including the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago) domestic halls of industry, and private residences. While until recently Meiji art was neglected or considered derivative, the global vogue for Japanese art during the late nineteenth century reminds us that modern art does not look the same in all places. Meiji art evolved in its own way and according to its own prerogatives in direct conversation with Euro-American trends, including Art Deco.

The exhibition is organized into five thematic sections that encompass works in a variety of media: **Crafting a Modern State** highlights the process of opening up to the outside world and the orchestration of a Meiji monarchy in which visual and material culture played a central diplomatic role.



Navigating Changing Seas shows the enduring cultural importance of the ocean, as well as its status as a means of connection to the world outside of Japan, initially with the arrival of foreign black ships but later with the Japanese navy.

Fashioning the Self examines evolving gender roles while also considering the abolition of the Tokugawa status system, the Meiji bureaucracy and titles, and Japanese identity as a nonwhite, modern nation-state.

Making History, Enshrining Myth examines the life of folklore, religion, history, and myth in the Meiji era. By 1900 Japanese interlocutors already emphasized the notion, often repeated today,

that their nation had incorporated modern, Western technology without losing its cultural identity. The works utilize new strategies to present centuries-old narratives and beliefs, underscoring how the notion of an unchanging tradition is itself a by-product of modernity.

Finally, **Cultivating a Modern Aesthetic** contemplates the prominent role of plant and animal life in Meiji art in an age in which observation-based realism gradually gave way to abstraction.

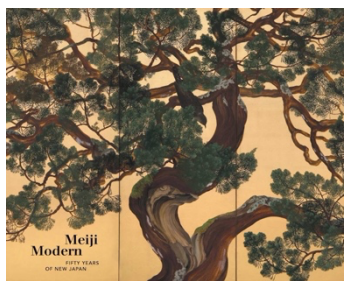
The more than 130 objects featured in the exhibition are drawn from private and public collections across the United States, including the Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Art Institute of Chicago; Cleveland Museum of Art; The Field Museum; Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Mead Art Museum, Amherst College; Minneapolis Institute of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Portland Museum of Art; The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art; Saint Louis Art Museum; San Antonio Museum of Art; Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon; Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago; Syracuse University Art Museum; The Walters Art Museum; and the Yale University Art Gallery.

Related public programs

In conjunction with the exhibition, the University of Chicago's **Center for East Asian Studies** (CEAS) will host a multi-day symposium on Meiji art and visual culture, May 3–4, 2024. Other planned public programs include a salon series investigating the built environment, geopolitics, fashion, and other themes in the Meiji era; monthly family day art-making workshops; and rakugo storytelling, experimental music, and taiko drumming performances. A complete schedule of programs will be posted online at smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/calendar.

Related courses

At the University of Chicago, co-curator Chelsea Foxwell is teaching an art history seminar in winter quarter, “The Long Nineteenth Century in Japanese Art,” that will engage UChicago students in the design and preparation of texts for the exhibition. While the exhibition is on view, Art History PhD candidate Minori Egashira will teach an undergraduate course, “Meiji Modern: Reassessing Common Narratives of Japanese Art,” that will use the exhibition extensively as a classroom space and focus of study.



Exhibition catalogue

Meiji Modern: Fifty Years of New Japan

by Chelsea Foxwell and Bradley M. Bailey

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue that takes a fresh look at the art of Japan's Meiji era (1868–1912), through a vivid selection of approximately 175 objects drawn from early public and private collections across the United States, including newly discovered prints, photographs, textiles, paintings, and craft objects.

\$60. Hardcover, 272 Pages, 11.30 × 9.25 in, 275 color illustrations. Published by the Japanese Art Society of America, distributed by Yale University Press.

About JASA

The [Japanese Art Society of America](#) (JASA) promotes the study and appreciation of Japanese art. Founded in 1973 as the Ukiyo-e Society of America by collectors of Japanese prints, JASA's mission has expanded to include related fields of Japanese art. Through its annual lectures, seminars and other events, the Society provides a dynamic forum in which members can exchange ideas and experiences with experts about traditional and contemporary arts of Japan.

About the Smart Museum of Art

The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago is a site for rigorous inquiry and exchange that encourages the examination of complex issues through the lens of art objects and artistic practice. Through strong community and scholarly partnerships, the Museum incorporates diverse ideas, identities, and experiences into its exhibitions and collections, academic initiatives, and public programming. The Smart Museum will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2024. Admission is always free.

Support

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Image credits

Toyohara Chikanobu (1838–1912), *Young Girl under a Parasol*, from the series *True Beauty*, 1897. Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e), 13 7/8 × 9 3/4 in. (36.6 × 24.8 cm). Collection of David Liberton. Photograph by Richard P. Goodbody

Kawade Shibatarō (1856–1921), vase with design of peacock feathers, ca. 1900. Cloisonné enamel with silver mounts and wires, 13 3/8 × 5 1/4 × 5 1/4 in. (33.97 × 13.34 × 13.34 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift from the Japanese Cloisonné Enamels Collection of Donald K. Gerber and Sueann E. Sherry, M.2010.197.3. Photography © Museum Associates/LACMA.

Watanabe Nobukazu (1872–1944), *Bronze Statue of Saigō Takamori in Ueno Park, Tokyo*, 1899. Ukiyo-e woodblock-printed vertical ōban triptych, ink and color on paper, overall: 14 1/2 × 28 in. (36.8 × 71.1 cm), each sheet: 14 1/2 × 9 3/4 in. (36.8 × 24.8 cm). Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon, Eugene, Gift of Irwin Lavenberg, The Lavenberg Collection of Japanese Prints, 2021:36.453a–c.

Hattori Tadasaburō (d. 1939), lamp globe with phoenix, ca. 1910. Plique-à-jour enamels, height: 5 in. (12.7 cm), diameter: 4 3/4 in. (12.2 cm). Private collection. Image Courtesy Orientations Gallery.

Hashiguchi Goyō (1880–1921), *This Beauty (Kono bijin) Poster for Mitsukoshi*, 1911. Color lithograph, 42 × 29 5/8 in. (106.8 × 75.2 cm). Darrel C. Karl Collection. Photograph by Alex Jamison.

Smart Museum of Art

The University of Chicago
5550 S. Greenwood Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637
smartmuseum.uchicago.edu

Press contact:

C.J. Lind, 773.702.0176, cjlind@uchicago.edu