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On: 28 November 2011, At: 08:33

Publisher: Routledge

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International Journal of Heritage Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjhs20>

The empty museum: Western cultures and the artistic field in modern Japan, by Masaaki Morishita

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Available online: 22 Nov 2011

To cite this article: Louise Tythacott (2011): The empty museum: Western cultures and the artistic field in modern Japan, by Masaaki Morishita, International Journal of Heritage Studies, DOI:10.1080/13527258.2011.621368

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2011.621368>



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BOOK REVIEW

The empty museum: Western cultures and the artistic field in modern Japan, by Masaaki Morishita, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, 149 pp., 16 images, £50.00 (hardback), ISBN 9-780-7546-4954-0

Masaaki Morishita's *The empty museum: Western cultures and the artistic field in modern Japan* is an important contribution to the expanding field of museum studies. It examines the way in which the idea of the museum was introduced into Japan in the late nineteenth century, during a time when the country was opening up to the West. Museums may have been Western imports, argues Morishita, but they took on specific forms and structures in Japan. In particular, Morishita explores the concept of the 'empty museum', which emerged in the twentieth century – a compelling idea so antithetical to the Western notion of this institution as a place to hold and preserve collections of objects. The book does not problematise the concept of the 'empty museum', but rather examines the conditions that resulted in the establishment of art museums without permanent collections.

After a chapter that discusses theoretical approaches – Bourdieu's Field Theory and transculturation – the book turns to developments in Japanese art in the late nineteenth century. It documents how Japanese objects were reclassified at this time as a result of influences from the West: painting and calligraphy, for example, had not previously been described in terms of artists, dates or nationalities. By the 1880s, a survey of treasures kept in temples served to demystify Buddhist artefacts, documenting them as 'art' according to date, origin and artist. The book demonstrates, however, that this was no simple process of assimilation: rather, there was a complex intertwining and contestation of both Western modes of categorisation and pre-existing forms.

Morishita's analysis of the specific characteristics of traditional Japanese schools of art – the *iemoto* system – is especially important. Here, the undisputed power and authority of a master was based on a lineage, or pedigree, of previous masters and schools. No attempts were made to surpass the skills and style of a master, for a challenge was considered a betrayal. Hierarchies and entrenched power structures were also at play in the choice of art objects selected at exhibitions, as masters always chose the work of their disciples. Morishita's text highlights how these art groups monopolised the artistic field in Japan until the Second World War, manipulating museums, such as the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, for their own purposes: the emptiness of museums, according to Morishita, was precisely what the art groups wanted, for they required spaces for their temporary displays. Morishita contends that the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum was the first 'empty museum'. Opened in 1926, it was constructed in a Western style – a red brick building with neo-classical columns. However, it was without permanent collections or curatorial staff and instead relied on temporary exhibitions from the art groups.

The Japanese museum landscape changed substantially in the post-war period. The Kanagawa Prefectural Museum of Modern art is singled out as a focus in Chapter 5 as indicative of the shifting culture. Established in 1951, it was the first regional public art museum after the Second World War, the first Museum of Modern Art in Japan, as well as the first museum ‘of the curator, by the curator, for the curator’ (p.82). The emergence of the professional curator, in particular, is addressed in this chapter. Curators were only recognised by Japanese museum law in 1951 and, as newly sanctioned officials, they were able, in theory, to rival the power of the art groups in determining the displays in museums. While curators were keen to organise art works into historical sequences, art groups had different agendas and arrangements. The book documents the tensions between the Western art historical perspectives of curators and the more ‘static’ views of the masters of the *iemoto* schools – and the resultant struggles for domination in Japanese art museums are eloquently exposed.

The final chapters focus on the continuing conflicts between artists and curators. The text identifies the power relations between these very different agents, and the incessant struggles over ‘what is art, who are the artists, which works are ranked as more important and valuable than others, and who are entitled to make such decisions’ (p.104). The fact that many museums in Japan today still have both a permanent gallery and a rental gallery reflects these historic divisions.

While the *iemoto* system and the art group-curator conflicts are discussed in some detail, there are a number of other areas that might have been addressed. A deeper analysis of the role and status of curators in the Japanese museum world would have been useful. It is not clear how much autonomy curators had in producing their art exhibitions. What were the relationships between curators and directors for example? Interviews with key museum professionals have been useful in supporting the arguments, though more in depth explanations of staffing structures at the different museums would have provided a clearer sense of the hierarchies. Terms such as ‘avant-garde’ and ‘modernism’ might have been examined in the Japanese context. The book could have told us more about the styles and content of the art groups’ paintings and the permanent collections of the art galleries: there are illustrations of museums throughout, but no images of individual works by members of art groups. A glossary of the various Japanese terms would also have been helpful.

This is an important and original study of the development of Japanese art museums and the complex interchange of Western ideas and Japanese artistic culture. Morishita constructs a detailed picture of the history of Japanese art museums, and his book succeeds in documenting exceptionally well how such museums reflect particular historic and cultural practices. The key argument that Japan did not simply assimilate the museological forms from the West, but instead adopted them to fit pre-existing artistic cultures, is a compelling one. This book adds significantly to the literature on museology from non-Western perspectives, and will be of interest to students of museology, art history, history, sociology, cultural studies, as well as Japanese and Asian studies.

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