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On April 15, 1893, the Japan Weekly Mail reported the sad fate of one of the more spectacular works of art to be exhibited by Japan at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago that year. It was an imposing enamel triptych—a censer and two vases—that stood over eight feet high, “the most colossal examples of cloisonné enamel ever seen”, made even more imposing by their magnificently carved bases of keyaki wood. Suzuki Shōemon, the leading artist of the Nagoya School, had taken four years to make them, and they had been “specially viewed and approved” by the emperor himself for inclusion in the exhibition. Though very highly regarded among Japanese, these exhibits had been rejected from the Fine Arts section and relegated to the Hall of Manufactures. The reason, according to the Japan Weekly Mail, was the political allegory of their design, which, as we will see, was a statement of Japan as leader of Asia and protector of Korea. “It is hard to wed politics with art”, it observed. Perhaps so, but the aim of this paper is to show just what a determined attempt the organisers of the Japanese exhibition made to put art in the service of politics at the Columbian Exposition.

The Mail might also have mentioned, for example, that the contentious design had been conceived by Shioda Shin 塩田真, the Special Counselor for Arts of the Imperial Commission to the Exposition, and that the informative pieces on the various categories of art exhibited. Brinkley’s essays were published in F. Brinkley, Japan: Its History, Arts, and Literature, (Boston: J B Millet Co, 1901–2). See Ellen Conant, “Captain Frank Brinkley Resurrected,” in Treasures of Imperial Japan, vol. 1, Selected Essays [Meiji notakara: Ronbun hen] The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Japanese Decorative Art, ed. Oliver Impey and Malcolm Fairley (London: The Kibo Foundation, 1995), pp.124–5, for the most recent assessment of Brinkley’s career as publisher, and more importantly, his previously overlooked expertise as collector of quality art in Meiji Japan. Japan Weekly Mail, 15 April 1893, p.453. Ibid.


Their manufacture was undertaken by Mr Shirozayemon Suzuki, of Yokohama, with the co-operation of Mr Seizayemon Tsunekawa, at Nagoya. The original design was painted by Mr Kanpo Araki, of Tokyo, and the black ink sketch on the copper was made by Kiosai Oda, of Nagoya. The men directly in charge of making the vases were Gisaburo Tsukamoto and Kihioye Hayashi of Toshima ... The bronze American eagle was made by Yukimune Sugiyuru, of Tokyo.
political intent of the triptych—which might otherwise have passed for yet another extravagantly decorative depiction on the familiar theme of seasonal change—was widely known, described in the official catalogue and in many of the fair’s contemporary publications. It was only the most overt statement in an exhibition that was suffused with politics. Principal among these was Japan’s bid to revise its treaties with western nations, which was perceived at least in part to depend on establishing that Japan, a non-western country, was “civilized”. Proving this was the stated intent of the Japanese Imperial Commission which took a strong stance in organising the exhibition. The article begins by looking at the political rhetoric of the cloisonné triptych and its statement of Japan’s changing vision of itself in the world. It then considers the broader context of the Japanese project at Chicago, the political imperatives of the Exposition, and the various semiotic and strategic functions of Japanese art at this event. The triptych is exemplary in this too. Its production encapsulated the ideal of Meiji modernity, an Asian modernity that confidently took knowledge from the West—or anywhere else “throughout the world” as the Meiji Charter oath directed—and used it to create new artistic forms that surpassed anything made before. It was a material statement of the ideal espoused by Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三, director of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Tōkyō Bijutsu Gakko 東京美術学校) who was also deeply involved in the exhibition since the School was responsible for producing much of the art on display at Chicago. Japanese art—the expression of the Japanese spirit—when combined with western technology, would create a higher culture in both East and West.

While we might see the politics of art referred to above as a modern manifestation of the strategic use of art familiar from recent studies of the warlord period, the Mail’s report directs us to a further arena of contest. Japanese art had been exhibited in many earlier international expositions, but it had never before appeared in the Fine Art category. At Chicago, the exhibition of Japanese art challenged western assumptions that determined the conditions within which non-western art would be presented and received. Among these, as the controversy over placing the triptych illustrates, were what might be accepted as art, and what objects, however spectacular, unique or skilfully made, belonged instead in “Manufactures”, or even “Ethnography”. The Mail’s report quoted above was published before the Exposition opened in May 1893. It carried better news the following year. The triptych was eventually displayed in the Fine Arts exhibit if only with the caveat that “the art exhibit of Japan differs, of course, from that of other countries.”


7 I have in mind here studies of warlord art such as Karen Gerhart, Eyes of Power (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999); Carolyn Wheelwright, “A Visualization of Eitoku’s Lost Paintings at Azuchi Castle,” in Warlords, Artists and Commoners: Japan in the Sixteenth Century, ed. George Elison and Bardwell L. Smith (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1981), pp.87–112. Very little art or ornament, it seems, was simply decorative.

8 In spite of their prevalence in western collections of Japanese art in the United States at the time, such as those of Fenollosa and Freer, the only Buddha images on display were in the Ethnography section.

9 Cameron, History of the World’s Columbian Exposition, p.98.
Birds, Flowers and International Relations

What then was the message of the design? One vase showed two eagles on its face, and a bevy of birds sweeping across a field of ice and snow in hasty flight on its reverse. The second was adorned with a dragon among clouds; its reverse, a design of plover circling over waves. The centrepiece, the censer, featured a group of barnyard fowl looking up to the rising sun; on the back is a cherry tree in full blossom. As the Mail explained, the eagles signified Russia, “the autocrat of the North”, and the birds sweeping across the snow expressed the threat of Russian expansion into the Far East, presaging “winter for every region upon which they swoop”. (The Trans-Siberian Railway that would give Russia rapid, all-weather access to China and Korea had been started in 1891. Plans to build it would have been announced some time earlier.) The dragon on the other vase symbolized China. The summer clouds suggest that it “is travelling towards autumn and the death of the year when the plover’s call will be the only sound to break the silence of moon-light by the sea shore”. The barnyard fowl of the censer are emblems of Korea, looking up to the rising sun of Japan. The cherry tree in full blossom typified spring, “the season of gladness and general revival”—not in this case the ephemeral nature of all things—with the “sun of Japan rising amid spring hazes, heralding a summer of lusty growth and luxurious blossom”. The handles of the censer are shaped like chrysanthemums, the imperial insignia, and “folds of brocade suggesting the Imperial Court of Japan, depend from them”. The necks of all three pieces were decorated with a design of stripes and maple leaf shaped stars, interwoven with the Paulownia Imperialis, chrysanthemum flowers and vine scroll, suggesting the alliance of Japan and North America; an American eagle perched on a chrysanthemum, surmounts the lid of the censer.

“The motive of all this is self-evident,” says the Mail: Russia swooping down upon Korea finds her aggressive designs thwarted by China and Japan, while the Stars and Stripes wave their protecting folds over all; the American eagle spreads its wings above a scene where Korea, rescued and reviving on the threshold of spring, passes into the sunshine and bloom of Japan’s early summer; the national flags of the United States and her Oriental friend intertwine everywhere overhead.

The overarching message of the exhibit is the change in Japan’s relationship with China, and consequently in its view of its place in the world. “Nippon” no longer simply denoted Japan’s geographical position East of China—the source of the sun—but signified the land of new beginnings. The power of China had waned. Japan, no longer a satellite to China (Chugoku), literally the “central kingdom”, was assuming a position as leader of Asia in an international arena, allied with the United States.

10 This vase is now in the Nasser D. Khalili collection of Japanese Decorative Art. See plate 74 of Treasures of Imperial Japan: Enamels, which is devoted to the Foundation’s spectacular collection of cloisonné. Khalili comments on the “technical excellence and striking design” of the vase. “The huge vase [172 cm high] inspires pure awe” and “shows the same attention to detail as Faberge work” (p.10). I am most grateful to the Khalili Foundation for supplying the image of the vase (Figure 1) and for their permission to publish it.

11 The censer is in the collection of Hirose Atsushi. It was a major exhibit in The Tokyo National Museum exhibition commemorating the 2004 World Exposition in Aichi, Japan: Arts of East and West from World Expositions, 1855-1990: Paris, Vienna and Chicago. It appears on p.95. Mr Hirose’s collection is exhibited by the Shosenkyo Ropeway Cloisonné Art Museum in Kōfu, Yamanashi, Japan. I have not yet located the second vase, but understand that it was exhibited alone at the California Mid Winter Fair, San Francisco, 1894. Since such items were for sale, it may be in an American collection.


13 As Stefan Tanaka points out in his book Japan’s Orient: Rendering Pasts into History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), there was even a move in Japan at this time to change the designation from chūgoku to shina, a domesticated version of the English/international term, “China.”
against an imperialist Russia. The cloisonné triptych, a product of Meiji art revival and its nationalist aspirations, bigger and more elaborate than any cloisonné produced in Japan in the past—in part because of introduced western technology—mapped and foreshadowed a new balance of power in East Asia.

The events allegorically prefigured in enamel were to come to pass not long after the Exposition. Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894–5 and thereby gained control of the Korean and Liaotung peninsulas, which did indeed thwart Russia’s designs on the territory, at least temporarily.14 As part of the indemnity arrangement Japan acquired Formosa and the Pescadores, the start of its imperial expansion, and in 1902 Japan became an ally of Britain. The train of related events culminated in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, in which Japan became the first Asian nation to defeat a western power, firmly establishing itself as a model of non-western modernity, and inspiration for non-western states under colonial domination.15 Although Korean historical sources do not present it in the beneficent terms suggested by the censer, Japan was to take control of Korea. It became a protectorate of Japan in 1905, and a full colony in 1910.16

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14 The Triple Alliance of Russia, France and Germany forced Japan to relinquish Liaotung. The area was subsequently leased to Russia.
15 Michael Laffan, “Mustafa and the Mikado: A Francophile Egyptian’s Turn to Meiji Japan,” *Japanese Studies* 19:3 (1999): 269–86, shows the impact of Japan’s success in Egypt; Vicente L. Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000) describes admiration for Meiji Japan as model of Asian modernity in the Philippines. Okakura Kakuzō, the Director of the Tokyo Art School which produced much of the art at Chicago (see below) was to instigate strong links with Indian cultural nationalists.
in their efforts to shake off British rule. The number of East Asians who came to study in Japan at this time is well known.

Korea was under Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945. Korea had very little presence at the Exposition. Cameron, *History of the World’s Columbian Exposition* describes Korea as “this least known of all semi-civilizations on earth ... the seat of one of the most despotic governments in existence” (p. 294). Cameron’s authority on Korea is, however, dubious. The ruler, he tells us, is “Chula-long-korn”, an apparent confusion with the king who ruled Siam from 1868–1910.
Though the exhibit was initially deemed too political to be art, exhibitions are intrinsically political and the Columbian Exposition more so than most. For the American hosts, it was the celebration of the 400th anniversary of European incursion, an announcement of America’s coming of age, a new world challenge to Europe as the United States became an international power, poised to embark on its Pacific expansion to fulfill its “Manifest Destiny” to carry the Protestant revelation and the society that grew from it, westward around the world. The World’s Columbian Exposition was consciously organised to present an “object lesson” in Social Darwinism displaying the position of the peoples of the world in a hierarchy of race and civilization, culminating in the White City display of North American achievement. For Japan, by this time well into the reform, industrialization, and modernisation of the Meiji regime, the reality of western dominance—and of American imperial ambition—was focused in the “unequal treaties” imposed upon it by western countries three decades earlier, and by the perception that the long overdue modification of the treaties depended on demonstrating that Japanese civilization was “equal” to that of the West. A primary project for Japan at the fair was to challenge western presuppositions of cultural superiority and protest the lowly position assigned to it as an Asian nation in the hierarchy of evolutionary development. Japan needed to distance itself from negative western assumptions of being “Oriental”. The project therefore involved Japan’s neighbours, particularly China and Korea, since repositioning Japan in the hierarchy of nations demanded a negotiation of its identity between Asia and the West. This was, of course, to happen alongside and in partnership with the usual object of such events—the promotion of trade and commerce.

The Japanese Government greeted the opportunity to participate in the Chicago Exposition with enthusiasm, and though facing difficult budget decisions, voted to commit “whatever sum was necessary for the purpose”. Japan had, by this time, participated in many international expositions in Europe, America and Australia and was fully aware of the benefits of such an investment, both in the economic terms of stimulating trade and developing new markets, and in the opportunity such events offered to influence public opinion in its favour. Each of the earlier ventures had been a success in promoting trade, particularly in ceramics, silks and other art industries, and in winning admiration and public support. Though connoisseurs in Japan criticised the inferior quality of much export production, there was a growing appreciation of Japanese art in the West, and even some imitation. At Chicago, the French exhibited a screen in “the Japanese style”. Expensive Japanese-inspired ceramics manufactured in Copenhagen were on sale. The most spectacular response had
been when the American public, impressed by the Japanese exhibition at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, campaigned for the refund of the $750,000 indemnity paid to the United States after pro-Restoration samurai fired on an American ship in 1863.24 By the time of the Chicago Exposition, art and art industries were well established as ambassadors for the nation; they were proof that it was “civilized”.

**Nationalism in Meiji Art Revival**

The art on display at Chicago was very largely the product of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, founded in 1889, with Okakura Kakuzō (Tenshin, 1863–1913) as director. The School’s origins might be traced to its founders’ experiences of international expositions. In 1873, Sano Tsunetami佐野常民, organiser of Japan’s exhibit at the Vienna Exposition, recognised the high quality of Japanese products by international standards, and on his return organised for the collection, display and study of Japanese art.25 In 1878, Kuki Ryuichi九鬼隆一, then Vice Minister for Education, went to the Paris Exposition to observe developments in art and education. He returned impressed by the depth of knowledge and interest in Japanese art and civilization in the West, and by the importance that France attached to French art and cultural heritage. He, like Sano, was convinced of the need for Japan to stimulate interest in its own artistic heritage as a source of national pride and international esteem.26 Sano and Kuki, among others, many of whom had also first-hand experience of international expositions, were to establish the Dragon Pond Society (Ryūchikai 龍池会) in 1879, a society “to promote the unique art of Japan and continue to propagate its quality throughout the world”.27 It was here in 1882 that Ernest Fenollosa, the young American employed to teach philosophy at the Tokyo Imperial University, presented his famous plea for the preservation of Japanese art, providing western endorsement for Kuki’s project—a not insignificant factor in Japan at that time—a western voice speaking for the movement in the vocabulary of western aesthetics.28 Kuki, Fenollosa and Okakura were to spend the next decade working together in cataloguing Japan’s art heritage and promoting the revival of Japanese art. Kuki was appointed director of the Tokyo National Museum in 1888, and thereby became a chief juror and vice-director of future expositions, including Chicago. Kuki and Okakura played a major part in determining the nature and contents of the exhibition of art; their nationalist objectives were clearly articulated.29

The Tokyo School of Fine Arts was founded at the peak of reaction against the earlier decades of indiscriminate adoption of things western that was encouraged by the government promotion of “Civilization and Enlightenment” (bunmei kaika 文明開化). While schools taught western-


Ernest Fenollosa, Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art, 2 vols, (London: William Heinemann, 1913); and, Okakura, Ideals of the East, and passim.

Okakura, Ideals of the East, p.230. John M. Rosenfield’s insight into Japanese-style painting (nihonga) confirms this technical freedom. The Japaneseness of nihonga exists in the Confucian sense of decorum in handling subject matter, traditional formats (hanging scrolls, screens, hand scrolls, albums), traditional materials, and in such things as the preference to work sitting on tatami rather than standing at an easel. As long as they remained within certain strict boundaries of decorum of style and subject matter, Nihonga painters were free to experiment and innovate widely.

**The Treaty Issue**

As Japan's Minister in Washington, Tateno Gōzō 建野郷三, explained, Japan welcomed the chance to exhibit at the Columbian Exposition as an opportunity to show the world that now, 25 years into the modernisation of the Meiji period, Japan was worthy of "full recognition in the family of nations". Tateno explicitly referred to the "unequal" treaties, as an "unnecessary and incumbering vision of the past" that was deeply resented in Japan. The treaties, which had been signed under duress by the Shogunate in the late 1850s, followed the model of treaties that western powers imposed on colonial states, and therefore placed inappropriate restraints on Japan's judicial and economic sovereignty. Perhaps more significantly at this stage of Japan's development, they also burdened Japan with a status inferior to that of the "civilized" nations of the world. Equal treaties, such as European nations negotiated with each other, were as much a mark of a modern state as political, social, and economic reorganization. Revision was essential to the recognition that Japan had "attained a position worthy of respect and confidence of other nations".

By the 1890s, the powers concerned generally recognized that the treaties should be revised, in part because Meiji reforms had brought Japanese institutions into line with those of the West, but also because of Japan's strategic location in the face of Russia's expansion into East Asia, exemplified in the early 1890s by the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway. By 1893, the discussion between the Japanese Government and the treaty powers was essentially a matter of negotiating details. But attempts at revision in 1881 and 1889 had been thwarted by domestic opposition to what were perceived to be humiliating concessions. Japanese had travelled abroad extensively in the decades since the imposition of the treaties and were well aware that countries in Europe no larger or better developed than Japan "preserved their own national identity, took pride in the preservation of their individual languages and culture and coexisted as equals". Anything less than revision on terms of equality was unacceptable and would be detrimental to Japan's future:

Now that Japan is emerging in the world for the first time, her present and future status will be determined by treaty revision. If we tolerate interference we will be classed with Turkey and Egypt.

Japan's participation at the Columbian Exposition was shaped by this determination to exhibit the equality of its civilization, its progress and modernity—in distinctively Japanese terms—as a public relations supplement to the long-term, intense diplomatic negotiations to revise the treaties. The presentation of a modern, technologically aware Japan was therefore accompanied by a very strong statement of the continuing...
vitality and high achievement of a distinctive Japanese culture. It was a project totally in accord with the ideals of Sano, Kuki and others of the Meiji art revival, and also with the invitation from US President Benjamin Harrison:

I do hereby invite all nations of the earth to take part ... sending such exhibits to the World's Columbian Exposition as will most fitly and fully illustrate their resources, their industries, and their progress in civilization.  

Managing the Exhibit

The Imperial Commission that managed the art exhibition at Chicago was under the overall direction of Mutsu Munemitsu 陸奥宗光 (1844–97), initially in his role as Minister of Agriculture and Commerce, and from August 1892, as Foreign Minister. Treaty revision had been an overriding concern for Mutsu for years, and as he announced in the Japan Weekly Mail in October 1891, no Japanese exhibit would be permitted unless authorised by the Commission to ensure that only articles “truly Japanese” would be displayed. The Columbian Exposition was arranged in twelve departments and Japan competed strongly in each of them. As Neil Harris observed, part of the exercise was to normalize the presence of Japan alongside France, Italy, Germany and Russia. Japan displayed in sixteen venues. It occupied 40,000 square feet in the Hall of Manufactures, 2,850 square feet in the Fine Arts Palace, and spaces in the very important Women’s Building second only to the United States itself. If the catalogue floor plans are more or less to scale, the area allocated to Japan on the ground floor was comparable to that of Italy, Spain, Belgium and Austria, but unlike these countries, Japan also had space upstairs, alongside the California, Cincinatti and Kentucky rooms, Assembly Hall and the Model American Kitchen. The Women’s Building offered another opportunity to exhibit Japanese art, as did the very popular retail outlet, the Japanese Bazaar on the Midway Plaisance, which sold things Japanese at prices from a few pence to thousands of dollars. Art exhibits were first vetted at Prefecture level, and then selected by the commission, but as discussed below, they were not confined to the Palace of Fine Arts, but distributed throughout almost all departments, and put to use in the most unlikely situations.

The Japanese Pavilion: Establishing the Project

A main site for the exhibition of art was the Japanese Pavilion (Hōōden 凤凰殿 literally “Phoenix Pavilion”) a building in traditional style situated
in a much sought-after position on the Wooded Isle at the centre of the Exposition site. The island was originally planned to be left as a nature reserve, a contrast to mark the material achievements of the White City, the collection of United States official buildings clustered around the artificial lagoons and canals of the landscaped site. Japan won the right to this prized position after intense and expensive negotiations that involved an undertaking to construct a permanent building worth $100,000, and to make it a gift to the people of the United States. At least one room was to be reserved for a display of Japanese works of art open to the public where the Japanese Government intended to maintain a rotating exhibition.44

The site was most significant since it distanced Japan from the Asian and developing countries that were situated on the Midway Plaisance, where ethnographic exhibits among sideshows and amusements sanctioned the American view of the non-white world as barbaric and childlike.45 Set apart as it was, but within the central concourse of the fair—the White City—it reflected Japan’s image of itself in the world as an independent and unique nation, demanding recognition for what it had achieved. By building on the island, Japan not only avoided the racial stereotyping of the Midway, but was placed on the main concourse, the representation of modern achievement.

The Japanese Pavilion was designed as a statement of the sophistication and elegance of Japanese civilization from a period 400 years before the European discovery of the Americas until the present. The building itself was as much an exhibit as the artworks that it contained. Inspired by the Phoenix Hall (Hōōdo 鳳凰堂), of the eleventh century Temple of Non-discrimination (Byōdōin 平等院) at Uji 宇治市, south of Kyoto, it

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44 Japan Weekly Mail, 30 January 1892. An article headed “Oriental Generosity,” The Illustrated Worlds’ Fair, April 1892 (p.200), gives $60,000 for the cost of the building and $10,000 for the garden, and suggests the responsibility for upkeep was undertaken by the South Park Committee. Christine Guth records that the idea of exhibiting high quality Japanese art works as a means of winning respect for Japan’s civilization was also brought up by Meiji Japanese collector Masuda Takashi 益田孝. While initially not pleased that so much of Japan’s artistic heritage was being bought up and shipped overseas by foreigners, he recognised the value of having Charles Freer’s magnificent collection housed in the national capital and available for public display. He planned a major exhibition with Theodore Roosevelt, but the scheme fell through, as Guth observes, for, much the same reasons that still plague organizers of international exhibitions: insufficient funds to cover insurance, handling, and lectures (Art, Tea, and Industry: Masuda Takashi and the Misai Circle, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, pp.180-1.)

45 See Rydell, All the World’s a Fair. I have written at greater length on the Hōōden and its sitting in Snodgrass, Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West, ch.1.
In his introductory essay to World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 Revisited, 19th Century Japanese Art Shown in Chicago, U.S.A. (Umi o watatta Meiji no bijutsu: saiken! 1993-nen Shikago Koron-busu Sekai Hakurankai: 1997.4.3-5.11) (Tokyo: Tokyo Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, 1997), Furuta Ryō 古田stairs describes the nationwide call for exhibits. Nevertheless, work by members of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts predominated, and among them, those who had the distinction of being appointed to the Imperial Household list (Teishitsu Gigei'in 帝室芸芸院). Many were teachers at the school.


Ibid. “National” is his term and is emphasized in the original.

Rosenfield, “Nihonga,” writes on the importance of “Heianism” in the work of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Following the kōbōgaku studies of the Tokugawa period, the eleventh-century novel, Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari 源氏物語) by Murasaki Shikibu was regarded as “the unique expression of Japanese sensibility”, p.177. This wing established the antiquity of Japanese civilization, the state of Japanese culture 400 years before Columbus arrived in the Americas. The south wing was in the Ashikaga 足利 period (1392–1573), style reproducing rooms from the Silver Pavilion (Ginkakuji 銀閣寺) built in Kyoto in 1497. One room was a library; the other furnished for the tea ceremony. Together they showed “the part played by Buddhism in restoring the tranquil state of mind to the people”. The Ashikaga period was characterized by its refined taste. Paintings by the iconic Japanese landscape artist Sesshū 雪舟 (1420–1506)—a contemporary of Columbus—were prominently displayed. The central section was a replica of rooms from Edo 江戸 castle at the height of Tokugawa power, and represented Japanese culture at the time of the intrusion of the American fleet under Commodore Perry and the subsequent imposition of the unequal treaties. Reference to the treaties and Japan’s expectation of favourable renewal was explicitly made at the dedication of the building.

While Japanese may have been willing to concede that America had hastened their entry into industrial modernity, these rooms challenged any notion that the United States had brought civilization to barbarians. Japan had been “cultured” centuries before America was even an idea...
in western minds, was at a high peak of cultural refinement as the New World was being discovered, and unlike its continental mentors of earlier times, continued to be so to the present with no decay, decadence, or loss of spirit.
The ability of the Meiji Japanese artists to recreate the art of earlier epochs for the Japanese Pavilion was an essential part of the message of the exhibition of Japanese art at Chicago—but only a part of it. Meiji art was modern and progressive, the product of a Japanese spirit making use of the latest technical knowledge. The cloisonné triptych was exemplary.

Whatever misgivings the writer in the Mail expressed about the polluting influence of politics on art, he sees the three great cloisonné pieces as "technical triumphs", even though, as he explains, they are largely a modern invention. The art of enamel work was not unknown in Japan in earlier times, but until the Meiji art revival it played a "pleasing but subsidiary role" in metal work; producing nothing that could compare with Chinese work using the same techniques.

But during the past decade Japan has made such strides that her enamels have left their Chinese predecessors at an immeasurable distance and stand easily at the head of everything of the kind the world has ever seen.52 There were, when Frank Brinkley wrote, three distinct schools of enamellers: the Old School of Kyoto,53 the Monochromatic School of Nagoya,54 and the radical work of Namikawa Sōsuke 涛川惣助 who developed a technique to conceal or remove the copper cloisons (wire "dikes" braised onto the base metal) at a certain stage of manufacture.55 The point is that in a period of about ten years, the decade of the revival of "traditional" Japanese art that began in the early 1880s, Japanese enamellers had successfully challenged China's superiority in the field, making works larger, more complicated, and more brilliantly coloured than anything that China had ever produced. They not only surpassed China, but pushed the boundaries of the technique to create new artistic forms. By applying imported modern technology, Japanese artists had overcome production constraints to produce perfect monochrome surfaces ("where can the minutest technical blemish be discovered"), and pieces on a much greater scale than ever before. They had then challenged the very basis of the technique—the use of cloisons to control the placement of colour—creating the wireless (musen 無線) enamel forms such as had never been known before, in Japan or on the continent.56 They were deservedly prize-winning pieces in a competition where, in keeping the epoch's concern for scientific development, awards were given for progress in technique.57

A similar process had taken place in other arts, most notably in ceramics. In the Meiji artistic revival, Japanese potters not only resuscitated the techniques of Japan's tradition, but produced certain forms that had never been part of the local repertoire. Seifū Yohei 清風与平 for example,
devoted himself to mastering several of the arts of the Sung potters, as seen in three of his pieces exhibited at Chicago—two white celadon vases and a vermilion censer with fine gold decoration. Though in the opinion of the Mail, he had yet to achieve the sublime heights of the Sung masters in this most highly esteemed medium of celadon wares, “he works with great patience and steadily growing skill to place himself in close touch with the technical excellence and chaste canons of the past.” That is, China’s past, not Japan’s. Higuchi Haruzane 樋口治実 took the challenge of Chinese supremacy even further. In a development entirely new to Japan, he recreated the Chinese “grains of rice” porcelain, in which a decorative pattern is carved out of the paste so that the space, when filled with glaze, appears translucent. His work, says the Mail, surpasses anything that modern China produces and though not yet quite perfect he essays more than the Chinese master ever attempted, his pierced designs being much more elaborate and his pieces more imposing ... not content with a mere outline transparency to depict the plum blossom, he adds the veining and stamens of the petal.

His glazes too, surpass the green-tinged imperfection of inferior recent Chinese work, showing instead the clean whiteness and softness of surface of the Qianlong prototype of the eighteenth century. This potter of Meiji Japan equals classical Chinese achievement in terms of quality and, does it on a much grander scale. There is an echo here of Denton J. Snider’s boast that the classically inspired buildings of the White City at the Columbian Exposition demonstrated America’s ability to master the colossal, to present the same sense of order and harmony admired in classical Greece on a much greater scale. It was clear evidence, he wrote, of the superiority of America, a “truly limit transcending country”. The new nations—Japan and the United States—marked their modernity in terms of the aesthetics of the old, but in forms made possible by new technology. The vast size of the White City buildings was made possible by steel engineering; the refinement of Meiji ceramics and cloisonné by new dyes and production techniques.

One of the factors not mentioned by the Mail is the part played by the West in the revival of Japanese arts. The story of the revival of cloisonné begins in 1833 when Kaji Tsunekichi 桟塚常吉 (1803–83), from a village near Nagoya, began to study European cloisonné imported from Holland. But the great advances came after 1867, when the Japanese Government employed the German chemist Gottfried Wagener (1831–92) to assist in bringing modern production techniques to the Japanese art industries, particularly to cloisonné and ceramics. Under his direction, Meiji cloisonné artists developed transparent enamels (jōmei shippō 透明七宝) which enabled the underwater effects showing wave patterns in a gold or silver base (tsuiki jippō 錫記七宝), and other innovations such as low relief (mortage

68 See Figure 5. Though it shows only one pot, which is neither distinctly a “teapot” or “coffee pot” in shape, it is possible that there were two and that one has since been lost. The caption is: “Two white porcelain coffee serving sets”. Alternately, the unhappy shapes may be a statement. The cups are in the pro-
Japanese fine art: ceramics in forms that were never part of the Japanese repertoire (all have handles), created in a technique that no Japanese potter had used until the 1880s. These were objects made in Meiji Japan, designed for western domestic rituals, using techniques resurrected from Qianlong-era China.

The simplest explanation for the decision to demonstrate such a miraculous mastery of porcelain technique in a tea set is the desire to make the goods more saleable in a western market. Expositions were, after all, great trade fairs. As early as the Vienna Exposition Japan's stated objectives were to impress foreign countries with the quality of Japanese products; win their recognition; learn about western art and industry from their exhibits; and develop export industries by learning about foreign products and of foreign demand for Japanese goods. 69 Japan had achieved considerable regard through its participation in earlier expositions in Europe and America and had established a lucrative market in exporting antiques and most particularly modern decorative wares. Trade between Japan and the United States in 1893 already exceeded 44 million in Mexican silver dollars, 75 per cent of which was in exports from Japan. 70 Indeed, the profits from Japan's exports to the United States were crucial in balancing the deficit with Britain incurred through the purchase of railway equipment, steam engines, steamships and naval vessels. 71 With such strong trading relationships, and because of the imperatives of the project to revise the treaties, issues of national prestige and identity could be given precedence at Chicago, though commerce was by no means overlooked. The call for participation the Imperial Commission sent out to artists specified that things should be characteristically Japanese, but it also called for objects for western consumption. Shapes could be modified provided the object did not lose its "Japanese character''. 72 Higuchi produced a tea set that signified modern Japan's participation in an international market.

A rather different mode of accommodation is apparent in the display of the highly acclaimed painting of a tiger by Kishi Chikudo, which was mounted on a three-leaf screen (the two outer leaves simply framing the central one) rather than as a hanging scroll, to make it more suitable for a western interior. 73 As the Mail comments, "The screen will fit perfectly into the corner of a parlour and will be as striking a piece of furniture as any dilettante can expect to find". 74 Though the Mail's comment suggests a commercial incentive, this painting, like many of the Japanese exhibits, was quite literally shaped by the need to adapt to western categories of art.

Namikawa Sōsuke's image of Mount Fuji produced in "cloisonless cloisonné" or "wireless" (muse'n) technique, and framed to define it as a "picture" is another spectacular example of this accommodation. 75 No less so are the framed plaques produced using Japanese metal techniques that might traditionally have been found on small objects like nail hides, water
CLASSIFICATION.

DEPARTMENT K.—FINE ARTS.

GROUP 139. SCULPTURE.

Class 820. Figures and groups in marble; casts from original works by modern artists; models and monumental decorations.
Class 821. Bas-reliefs in marble and bronze.
Class 822. Figures and groups in bronze.
Class 823. Bronzes from cire perdue.

GROUP 140. PAINTINGS IN OIL.

GROUP 141. PAINTINGS IN WATER COLORS.

GROUP 142. PAINTINGS ON IVORY, ON ENAMEL, ON METAL, ON PORCELAIN OR OTHER WARES; FRESCO PAINTING ON WALLS.

GROUP 143. ENGRAVINGS AND ETCHINGS: PRINTS.

GROUP 144. CHALK, CHARCOAL, PASTEL AND OTHER DRAWINGS.

GROUP 145. ANTIQUE AND MODERN CARVINGS; ENGRAVINGS IN MEDALLIONS OR IN GEMS; CAMEOS, INTAGLIOS.

GROUP 146. EXHIBITS FROM PRIVATE COLLECTIONS.

Loan Collection of Foreign Works from Private Galleries in the United States.

From Groups 139-145.

Figure 6

Classification scheme for Department K, Fine Arts, Revised Catalogue, Department of Fine Arts with Index of Exhibitors, Department of Publicity and Promotion, World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago W.B. Conkey Company, 1893.

The Japanese term for Fine Art (bijutsu 美術) was prompted by the classificatory requirements of participation in the Vienna International Exposition of 1873. Japan adopted the concept and created the term, but did not exhibit in the category until 1893 because what could be accepted as Fine Art in the late nineteenth century was nevertheless based on rather limited western assumptions. The categories under Department K in the General Regulations were: Pictorial (see Figure 6). Paintings in droppers, incense burners, or vases, here deployed in the production of even more “pictures”. Makie 播き鬚 lacquer, more usually seen in boxes, writing sets and the like, was also used this way—one hanging was actually labelled “Landscape, after Sesshu”. If the artistic techniques in which Japan excelled were to be recognised, they needed to be produced in forms that could be accommodated within western categories of “art”, a category defined in opposition to “craft”. The official catalogue and the illustrations in books from the fair are quite explicit that objects for use belonged in the Hall of Manufactures; Fine Art existed for its own sake, with no function other than to be looked at and admired. A box was craft; a picture, art.

76 1893 Revisited, plates 74-9. The Chicago exhibition was not the first time such innovations had been seen. The recent exhibition, Arts of East and West from World Exhibitions includes similar show pieces from the Vienna exhibition. See, for example, the porcelain panel Mount Fuji in underglaze blue (Arts of East and West, p.027, Image 1-46). It is 62.5cms x 94cms and dated 1873. Other large “wall hangings” of porcelain and makie lacquer from the 1870s, included in the exhibition are reproduced in Arts of East and West, pp.048-049.

77 1893 Revisited, plates 41 and 42. No.42, “Enoshima Island”, is a huge showpiece 80 x 92cms. Exhibits 43 and 44 show the more traditional application.

78 See the call for exhibits in the General Regulations. “Department H, Manufactures” lists useful things organised by material, technique or function, pp.33-9, reproduced here as Figure 6.

EXHIBITING MEIJI MODERNITY

oil; paintings in water-colour), Plastic (sculptures in marble, sculptures in bronze) and Decorative (basically etchings, engravings, and paintings on various materials). A browse through the catalogue confirms that the exhibitions from everywhere but Japan were encompassed by the six major categories. The cloisonné triptych would without doubt have been quite at home among the ornate, technically brilliant and expensive objects European nations displayed in the Hall of Manufactures. The Fine Arts galleries—apart from Japan's—contained nothing but floor-to-ceiling exhibits of framed paintings in oils and watercolours, and floor displays of sculptures on pedestals. The Japanese Commission petitioned for a relaxation of the classifications to exhibit in the Palace of Fine Arts at Chicago, and a compromise was evidently reached. Simply being allowed to exhibit in this department was, however, not enough. As Furuta comments, pictures were framed in a manner so as to place them on a level footing with the European works with which they were in competition. Fine art production was a measure of civilization, and to establish Japan's claim in this it needed to win in open, international competition, and was prepared to make compromises to do so. Nevertheless, as the contemporary commentator William E. Cameron observed after several pages of rapturous descriptions of European offerings, the Japanese art exhibit was "different".

The difference derived from the need to demonstrate Japan's artistic accomplishments by taking prizes in fine art using techniques and media that the West associated with crafts, the manufacture of useful things. Cameron mentions in particular a piece of tapestry representing the "Gate of Nikko during a festival", which showed hundreds of figures and took four years to complete. This was the most highly acclaimed of the several large tapestries Japan exhibited, in which a technique traditionally reserved for obi, the long narrow kimono sash, was used for the first time in textiles large enough to rival the proportions of Gobelin-type tapestries of Europe. Other textile techniques associated with making kimono were also pushed beyond their familiar form and function. The pictorial possibility of yūzen dyeing was presented in a six-panel screen of flowers and birds. Excellence in embroidery was displayed in a four-fold screen depicting a peacock. The result was a new genre of Japanese art that quickly became established among western consumers as representative of Japanese tradition, authenticated as Japanese and assumed to be "traditional" by its difference from anything produced in the West.

What then did western audiences make of the Kyoto brocade, with a small all-over pattern of traditional Japanese musical instruments, simply labelled "cloth for western garment"? While this might appear simply to be export ware, we should bear in mind that by this time many Japanese women of rank—such as the empress herself—wore western-style...
The design of the fabric is hybrid. While the motif is recognizably Japanese, it is disposed in the manner of a western floral pattern. It is unmistakably different from kimono or obi design. For a striking example of *yōfuku*, see Lady Nabeshima's dress, c. 1881, catalogue 134 in *Japan and Britain: An Aesthetic Dialogue 1850–1930*, ed. Tomoko Sato and Toshio Watanabe (London: Lund Humphries, 1991), p.36.

Western style—selectively used when the occasion was appropriate—was intrinsic to Meiji élite culture.

China in the Japan Exhibit

It is impossible to escape the presence of China in Japanese art, as the cloisonné triptych and the "revived" porcelains of Meiji show. Japan's modernity had to be negotiated against China—the past it was distancing itself from, marking its modernity against—as much as against the West, the measure of contemporary achievement. It should be no surprise then, that in spite of Mutsu's direction that all exhibits be "truly Japanese", there were several paintings identified in the catalogue of the 1997 exhibition as "Chinese". Furuta observes this and comments that copying China seems to be of less importance than establishing that Japan was not simply imitating the West. The persistence of the themes of comparison against China, of outdoing China—and the care with which pieces were selected—suggests the more deliberate statement (following the ideology of Fenollosa and Okakura mentioned above), namely that China, too, was part of Meiji art heritage. The fusion is well illustrated by the prize-winning landscape painting by Hashimoto Gahō 橋本雅邦. It shows a classical Chinese theme of mountains in mist, but it is executed in chiaroscuro. Hashimoto (1835–1908) was Japan's leading artist at the time and a teacher at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. He, like many of his colleagues, worked in a "third space" as the *Mail* suggests in its criticism of this painting:

Hashimoto has a tendency to assimilate European models and his work constantly challenges criticism from a standpoint unfamiliar to the Japanese, while the Oriental connoisseur is perplexed by it, feeling uncertain whether to judge it wholly by his own canons or to estimate it by ideals which the painter himself seems anxious to eschew. A sketch by the Japanese artist, Kubota Beisen 久保田栄信, sent to Chicago by a newspaper to report the event, shows two Chinese visitors to the fair—marked by their traditional dress and long queues. They are shown peering through the window of the Japanese Fine Arts exhibition, reminding us that China was also part of the audience for Japan's renegotiation of its place in the world. In another of his illustrations, two gentlemen—a Chinese and a Korean, again dressed in their respective traditional garments for certain occasions. This was part of Meiji modernity, and a striking feature of the empress's formal gowns, for example, is the effort that had gone into using recognizably Japanese motifs on the fabrics. They were Japanese textiles for western-style clothing (*yōfuku* 洋服) an expression of Meiji modernity demonstrating the persistence of skill, technique and design motif, but transformed as required for the new society and its localised manifestation of international fashion. Western style—selectively used when the occasion was appropriate—was intrinsic to Meiji élite culture.
costumes—are given a central place looking into the bustling retail outlet of the Japanese Bazaar. The flags of Japan and the United States are entwined above the entrance.92

92 I am grateful to Scott Johnson for bringing these to my attention and providing the image from his collection.

**Civilization and Enlightenment in the Departments**

Japanese art found its way into a number of curious places beyond the official art venues. In Department L, Liberal Art, Group 147 (Hygiene), for example, Japan offered two exhibits. The first was a set of photographs and description of a "disinfector" from the Interior Department, Public
Sanitary Bureau; the second a scale model of “Tennōji Temple Tower, by Yuga Seibei of Osaka, the first Buddhist monastery in Japan, built in AD 593 by Shōtoku Taishi”. Shōtoku Taishi is credited with establishing the Buddhist polity in Japan and in the Meiji period was revered as a local equivalent of the Indian King Aśoka, who was at that time enjoying immense prestige in the West as a great humanist ruler. Following the dictates of Buddhist philanthropy, the monastery had included a library and hospital. The odd placement of the model here suggests it was a bid for Japanese precedence in this area of democratic civilisation, the health, welfare and education of the people.

In the Transportation Department, along with information on Japan’s application of the latest technology in its extensive new railway system—models of cantilevered bridges, methods of coping with steep inclines, the newly installed lighthouse system, developed to improve shipping, and a baby carriage—we find “a pleasure boat such as had been used in the Fujiwara period (eleventh century) by the feudal lords on the lakes in their gardens”. The boat, named Hōōmaru after the phoenix bird on its figure head, was moored on the lagoon below the Japanese Pavilion, signaling the refined pleasures of early Japanese court life. A model of Yasaka Tower, by Niwa Keisuke of Kyoto, appeared as a reminder of Japan’s long history of civilization and past achievement in the section on precision instruments and architecture. We are reminded of Japan’s long artistic heritage even among the options for fans that might be made to order in the commercial ventures of the fair. In Department H. Manufactures, Group 106, class 667, there is a fan “said to be made by the wife of Taira no Atsumori (1169-84), to present it to the Buddha, to pray for the happiness of her husband”, and one that had belonged to the Emperor Gosakuranamachi 後桜町 (1763–1813). The catalogue assured prospective buyers that construction could be improved for export.

The greatest concentration of Japanese art beyond the Japanese Pavilion and the Palace of Fine Art was in the Women’s Building. The Women’s Building was an ideological high point of the Exposition at this time when attitudes to women were a particular measure of modernity, and educated and liberated women were a chief sign of a nation’s civilisation and enlightenment. As the official guide to the exhibit put it, “The World’s Columbian Exposition has afforded an unprecedented opportunity to present to the world a justification of her claim to be placed on complete equality with man”. The building was designed by America’s first female architect, and Japan had a presence on both floors. The main exhibit was a set of rooms furnished by women of the court, which showed Japanese antiques in an élite domestic setting. Maude Elliott, editor of the official handbook on the pavilion, described it with enthusiasm: “rainbow hued garments with wonderful embroideries” hung

93 Ives, Official Catalogue, pp.89-91.
95 The Hōōmaru is depicted in Kubota Beisen’s sketch of the Hōōden, contrasted or perhaps compared with a Venetian gondola paddling past.
upon a screen and “lacquered coffers of every size and shape tied with silk cords of different colours”; “a multitude of fine inlaid boxes stand upon the ground near the mirror”. The exquisite objects were for her a metaphor for Japanese society as a whole, a society where “good manners rise to the dignity of a high art”; where “courtesy, gentleness, sympathy are cultivated with the same care and skill as this joyous, painstaking people put into everything they do”.

Chief among the exhibits in the upstairs space was an enshrined portrait of Sei Shonagon (965–c. 1010), accompanied by a panel describing this “learned Japanese woman who served the Empress Sada Ko in the tenth century of the Christian era” and offering translations from her famous Pillow Book, a collection of sophisticated and elegantly written observations on court life in the Heian period, a time when social position demanded of both men and women, a knowledge of the Chinese classics, the ability to write elegant poetry and to field classical allusions in verse at short notice. The message of this exhibit was that even a thousand years ago Japanese women had been highly educated and exquisitely refined. The rooms, furnished and decorated with antiques from the personal collections of the Empress and noblewomen, reinforced the message. What impressed Maude Elliot most, however, was that the Empress and the women of the court had displayed such initiative and organizational skills in funding, directing and overseeing the display. Japanese women were practical and capable. It is clear from her observations that the art in the Japanese exhibit of the Women’s Building had been successful in its public relations exercise. The refinement of the art objects reflected the civilized character of the Japanese people, and the emancipation of its women, at least amongst its élite.

**The Merit of Progress**

The exhibition of Japanese fine art was, as we have seen, Japan’s bid for recognition as a civilized country in a context where a country could not be considered civilized unless it produced fine art. Its success would be measured in open competition. At the Columbian fine art exhibition, however, the organizers did not award ranked prizes, but following the general theme of progress and improvement, presenting medals and certificates of merit to works that demonstrated progress in their field of endeavour. This fitted well with the Meiji nationalist principle of seeking Japan’s contribution to the modern world in its traditional culture. As described above, the Meiji art revival was not simply a matter of reviving lost or moribund practices, but of developing upon the past, taking what was usable of the old as the basis of the new; creating new Japanese forms from Chinese precedents, and not hesitating to take advantage of
technological developments—even those of the West—in this "revival". As Bancroft puts it, the awards were not competitive as such, but were given for "independent and essential excellence ... denoting improvement in the condition of the art presented". Awards constituted a record of progress. They were distributed, he says, "liberally but not excessively", about 1 in 11 over all. Japan therefore did very well. Of the 50 paintings submitted, 17 received awards, as did 12 of the 27 metal work entries. The 13 entries under carving took 6 medals, as did 8 out of 18 in lacquer, 9 out of 17 textiles, and 2 of 6 cloisonné exhibits. As the Mail reported,

Lovers of Japan may well be satisfied with its showing at the Exposition. In most that goes to decorate and beautify, the chief places in the awards have steadily been given to Japan and Germany. Japan has proved itself one of the foremost rivals among nations in some of the highest departments of human activity.

By winning prizes—and it did—Japan was exalted not only for being among the best, but for being among the most progressive.

**Commerce and Civilization**

At Chicago, Japan exhibited in the Fine Art Department for the first time, but the commercial opportunities of previous events were certainly not overlooked. This is very clear in the extraordinary fusion of fine art and practicality evident in Higuchi Haruzane's coffee set. Such opportunities also appear to be the motivation behind a curious booklet published for the occasion, *Details of the Industrial Specimens exposed at the World's Columbian Exposition* by the Bureau of Commerce and Industry, Department of Agriculture and Commerce, Japan, which describes the technique of manufacture for the various types of exhibit. It runs to 21 pages in total and seems designed to explain the value of the objects as much as anything. As it says of the collection of gold lacquer (*nashi* 藻地), exhibited in Department H, Group 90, class 567:

> There are many varieties and the difference in price is also great. At one sight the appearance being almost alike, and in transaction it is sometimes indiscriminately dealt with, causing disadvantages to both sides.

A table presents a comparison of costs per unit for a variety of types. Enamel features here too. The pamphlet describes the sixteen stages of manufacturing cloisonné, and lists the range of colours offered, explains why it is so expensive and why prices vary enormously. The rest of the book lists prices of varieties of gold and silver thread (pp.5–12); specimens of ornamental cord knots (pp.12–4); fans to be used in ceremonies; fans for home use; fans for export; specimens of figured leathers; specimens of metallic nettings; and joints in wood. The pamphlet underscores the
defining feature of works exhibited in the Hall of Manufactures: they were trade specimens and could be made to order. Japan sold over one million dollars worth of goods—an amount comparable with England, France and Austria. The Bazaar on the Midway Plaisance, though not part of the Commission’s activities, was very profitable, and played a significant part in bringing things Japanese to the American public, and creating a vogue for them.

Exhibiting Modernity

The exhibition of Japanese art at the Columbian Exposition was, we are told, strictly controlled by the Imperial Commission to ensure that only art that was truly Japanese would be on display. The aim was to distance the exhibition from the trade goods of previous fairs, many of which were made specifically for an overseas market, and consequently had little or no Japanese precedent and were not “to Japanese taste”. While there is no reason to doubt the strong hand of the commission, forces mediating the production in the Meiji context, and the selection of specific objects for competitive display, produced an exhibition that had equally tenuous links with tradition even if it was “truly Japanese” in the sense that it represented the very best of the Meiji art revival.

One consequence of the emphasis on exhibiting Meiji modernity through this art was that audiences unfamiliar with Japanese art of earlier periods assumed the contemporary work to be representative of a long tradition. Unaware of the distinctive achievement of Meiji art, they welcomed its hybrid products as “typical”. This perception was reinforced and institutionalised by the sale and movement of Exposition pieces into western gallery collections where they continue to influence design. Though the project of unsettling western art categories may have had some success, western art historians continue to privilege traditional-style Japanese painting (nihonga 日本画) in the consideration of Meiji art, suggesting a perpetuation of the superiority of painting in western art hierarchies. Japan’s great achievements in decorative art have been honoured in places like London’s Victoria and Albert Museum, founded by Henry Cole with the express aim of exhibiting,

the practical application of design in the graceful arrangement of forms, and the harmonious combinations of colours for the benefit of manufactures, artisans, and the public in general.

This was context in which they could be admired for qualities beyond the criteria of “art”. They are only now starting to be given the attention they deserve.

We should not forget however, that the art revival and the challenge to
western categories were both part of a larger project: establishing Japan's position as an independent nation among world powers. The exhibition at Chicago was a modern application of a long tradition of using art objects strategically and semiotically, in this case to convey messages of Japan's long-standing and long-sophisticated civilization, its priority over the West in areas ranging from engineering to humanitarian and philanthropic works and even the emancipation of women. The cloisonné triptych, which we were told was specifically made for the event, deserves a final word in this respect.

The design legitimated the idea of establishing Korea as a Japanese protectorate. In the late nineteenth century, the time of the exhibition, possession of colonies was a mark of a modern nation. Japan's annexation of Korea would establish its position as a modern power just as much as its representative government, its systems of communication, mass education and industrialisation. An article in Arena in 1895, strategically placed to reach "intelligent thinking people," just as the triptych was, would present very much the same ideas as a post Sino-Japanese war apologetic. Japan was "compelled by the dictates of humanity" to "unsheath her sword" when China violated the Tianjin treaty by despatching troops to Korea. Is it simply a coincidence that the exhibition of Japan in Chicago was under the direction of Mutsu Munemitsu, then Minister of Agriculture and Commerce, who, as Foreign Minister, would send Japan into war in Korea in 1894?

It was success at war—the Japanese defeat of China in 1894—that finally brought western recognition of Japan's world status. As an American writer lamented in December 1894:

As a gentle, peaceful, honest and honourable nation, Christians would have none of her except as a semi-contemptuous field of mission work . . . . As a slayer, as a fighter, she has brought all Christian nations to her side with hats off, and a surprised "By Jove, she's great. She has won our respect. She must henceforth be reckoned with as a nation."