The “Contemporary Art Museum” in Japan: A Study on the Role and Function of this Cultural Institution in Today’s Urban Society

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Introduction

If art museums were considered a function existing in the urban fabric in the same manner as markets, train stations, theaters, parks, universities, offices, etc. are, one would see the constant adaptations and adjustments of these urban buildings and spaces over different periods. It is inevitable for art museums to resist the changing course of time. Such changes eventually become significant evidences of Japan’s history of art and culture, and of the progression of its society, economy and politics, including its architectural developments.

Architect Arata Isozaki classifies the historical changes of museums into three generations. “The Pantheon style museums in the first generation focus mainly on collection and preservation, while the second generation art museums are modern museums where white cubical space carries out main functionality in exhibiting different genre of art. Contemporary museums in the third generation are site-specific, which integrate artworks into the museum’s architectural space” (Fudo 2011, 2).

Yuko Hasegawa (2004, 78-79), chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, divides the evolution of art museums into four different generations. She wrote:

Art museums have changed with the times. In Japan, the first generation of museums built in the postwar period up to the 1960s focused on the function of preservation. The second generation, in the 1960s and 1970s, emphasized display and presentation. In the 1980s and after, a third generation appeared with an emphasis on visitor participation, learning experiences, and hospitality to visitors. Facilities were established for workshops, concerts and performances. Amenities such as cafes, restaurant, and shops were provided for the people who were spending more time in the museum, taking advantage of the many programs it offered. Since the 1990s, a fourth generation of museums has appeared in response to the greater influence of information in society, the trend toward globalization, and the demand for lifetime education. They give viewers a more active role and provide them with greater opportunities for personal growth and self-realization.

It is noticeable how the architect Arata Isozaki categorizes the generations of art museums according to their architectural styles, while Yuko Hasegawa classifies art museums by their functionalities and social roles. The researcher, meanwhile, incorporates the insights of the two experts in the classification of art museums proposed in this research. This research is the result of a one-year fieldtrip, during which the researcher traveled to art museums in the different cities of Japan to explore and analyze the urban contexts surrounding the museums, their administration systems, as well as their architectural aspects.

The methodology chosen for this research included in-depth interviews with artists, architects, curators, and art museum directors in Japan. The researcher also participated in several academic seminars including art and architectural exhibitions. The events were recorded in the form of a digital video for further study and analysis for this research.

The First Generation Art Museum

After the Second World War, Japan attempted to reconstruct the nation from the debris of destruction through the developments that looked toward several Western models, ranging from the education system and industrial technology, to art museums, which were then an emerging cultural unit inspired by the West. It was the era when the first generation of art museums in Japan was conceived with the main roles of collecting and preserving several genres of art.

Junzo Sakakura designed the Museum of Modern Art in Kamakura in 1951. The museum marks a prominent milestone in Japan’s modern architectural history and is considered Japan’s first museum of modern art. The country’s first National Museum of
Art was initially founded under the administration of the Ministry of Education. The Japanese Government back then bought the building from Nikkatsu Corporation and assigned the architect Kunio Maekawa to be responsible for the renovation.¹

Not long after, Le Corbusier designed The National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, which opened in 1959. Its spiral circulation plan resonates with Le Corbusier’s desire for the museum to be able to expand in the future when the collection grows larger. The original collection exhibited in the museum was Kojiro Matsukata’s personal collection. Such contribution exemplifies the way art collectors transfer their personal collections to public art organizations, a practice that later became more common in the Japanese art culture scene. The art pieces exhibited in art museums during this period were mostly paintings and sculptures.²

This was also the period when collections of western art from different eras were gradually compiled in different art museums. For instance, the National Museum of Western Art exhibited a collection of artworks from the 14th to the 19th centuries, while the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo mounted Japan’s notable artworks by both Japanese and international artists from the 20th century, or the modern era.


The second-generation movement emphasized exhibition and presentation more. During this time, art museums began to emerge in the different provinces of the country, instead of clustering in several venues in Tokyo. It was during this period when the 1970 Expo in Osaka manifested the majesty and early development of Modern Japanese architecture that started to break away from the influence of Western architecture, particularly that of Le Corbusier. This era’s generation of architects, among them, Kunio Maekawa and Junzo Sakakura, projected such differentiation distinctively.
In the early 70s, Arata Isozaki, the new generation architect of that time, became widely recognized through many of his important architectural creations such as The Kitakyushu City Museum of Art, Fukuoka and The Museum of Modern Art, Gunma (finished in 1974). Kisho Kurokawa, another important architect from the same generation, designed the Saitama Prefectural Museum of Modern Art (finished in 1982).

The works produced during this period took the first step into the realm of late Modernism where geometric forms were not distinctively visible. Instead, the architecture played with the diversity of form and space, which seemed to allow the Japanese architects to conceptualize and crystallize their own architectural notion and identity.

The Third Generation Art Museum (1980-1990)

This decade marked the time when art museums grew substantially both in terms of size and function. Theaters, concert halls, and workshop areas were the popular add-ons that allowed viewers to have a more collective experience in museums. Since the venues were getting bigger physically, areas such as a café and a restaurant were put in, mainly to accommodate the viewers so that they could spend more time in the museums.

This period can, more or less, be considered as the Renaissance of art museum construction due to the massive financial injection art museums enjoyed from the country’s bubble economy. Japan entered the realm of architectural transformation, stepping into the third generation with the rise of influential architects of the era, particularly the renowned protégés of Kenzo Tange: Kisho Kurokawa, Fumihiko Maki, Arata Isozaki, Yoshio Taniguchi, etc. These architects had had the chance to work on several art museum projects, both in and outside Japan, since the early days of their profession back in the 70s. But it was the 80s that was considered the true golden era of this group of architects.

In an interview, Professor Hiroyuki Suzuki (2010), a prominent architectural historian of Japanese Architecture, notably the Modern era, explained the nature of the social movements that were influencing Japanese architecture at the time. In 1969, university students in Japan were actively participating in the political movement that called for several changes in Japanese society then. Professor Suzuki was a student at Tokyo University where the architectural movement emphasized the search for the manner by which to initiate massive residential projects, in response to the expansion of the urban fabric and the increasing population. Nonetheless, when Japan developed into a country of better-quality living, which was the result of its post-war economic revival and advanced technology, Japanese architecture veered toward a more individual direction. Such change can be seen in the abundant births of architecture conceived in the 80s and the early 90s—the times when Japan’s bubble economy reached its highest capacity prior to the explosion that led the country to economic recession.
It comes as no surprise to see renowned architects of the 80s create their own architectural theories and use these to conceptualize their own designs. It was also during this period when the Post-Modern Movement started to emerge, and many art museums were created without sufficient supporting factors that could enhance future sustainable operation, and address the museum’s lack of a suitable architectural program and administration strategy. Given that many art museum organizations had to face massive maintenance costs, the art museum buildings were unable to function as properly as expected. While the architects from the third generation were swamped with large-scale public building projects, the fourth generation ones who had never studied under the Japanese or Western education system, among them Tadao Ando and the Tokyo University educated Toyo Ito, played increasingly significant parts. This group of architects would later assume an important role in the local architectural scene, specifically from the post-90s until the present.

One of the interesting art museums built during this period was the Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art (1991) designed by Yoshio Taniguchi, the modernist architect whose works were known for their rather simple, humble, and serene architectural expression. Interviews with several curators showed how most of them admired and agreed that Yoshio Taniguchi’s design exemplifies the architectural program of a museum that is highly flexible, making it very convenient to facilitate different forms of installations and presentations.

The Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art (MIMOCA) is located in a small town of Magurame. The functionality of the building is designed to interestingly connect itself to the city fabric. The huge staircase is at the side of the building, allowing viewers to access different areas of the building, such as the restaurant and the library, without having to buy a ticket to enter the exhibition area of the museum. The distinctive development of MIMOCA as an art museum is its ability to incorporate extra functionality, such as the public library, into the building. The large ground in front of the museum is mostly used for exhibiting sculpture pieces; however, the area also has opened public access. In 1991, wrote:

"The main point of Taniguchi’s design is his creative intention to create a building that enhances the viewer’s desire to go to the museum, but in the meantime, the architecture must not disturb or distract the viewer’s interests from the artworks exhibiting inside of the museum. This explains the simplicity of his architecture, which is a simple looking box that doesn’t have any gaudy decorative architectural composition or flashy building’s surface." 4

Architecturally speaking, Taniguchi’s design can be classified as belonging to the Second Generation art museums, which basically have a white-cube space suitable for artworks from the Modern art era. The accessibility the architect creates for the general public to use certain spaces in the museum without having to see the exhibitions was developed from this generation of art museums. However, when considering the administration system and time of construction, MIMOCA can be classified as a Third Generation art museum.
The early 90s was when Installation art and Conceptual art became more influential, resulting in the museum’s readjustment of exhibition space due to the changing process of artistic creations. Artists did not just work in their studios and install their works in museums anymore. On several occasions, they began to incorporate museums into their artistic projections.

One of the interesting museum projects from the late 80s is the Yokohama Museum of Art, which began to operate in 1989. The museum was designed by master architect Kenzo Tange. Globally renowned and one of the most influential architects in Japan, he was known for his work in stadiums and urban planning projects in the 60s and the 70s.

The Yokohama Museum of Art can be classified as a Second Generation art museum for its emphases on the exhibition and preservation of artworks with a strong “institution” image. It projects a great deal of contrast with other museums conceived during the time of transformation, when art museums were beginning to adjust and adapt themselves. Several museums had then opened up their spaces for more public access, connecting the museums to the city fabric and communicating with a general public more than they used to.
Opened in this particular period was the small art museum, the Watari-um Museum of Contemporary Art, with Mario Botta as architect. This private, family-operated museum had the Watari family in charge of administration. Koichi Watari, the director and second-generation successor of the museum, provides an interesting point of view. In an interview on how the Watari-um is operated, he said, “I organize the exhibitions that I find interesting, be it art or architecture. We don’t really mind whether the contents we choose to exhibit are popular or not. I discuss what I want to do with my colleagues and family, and then we make the final decision”. The museum has hosted several art and architectural exhibitions of many world-class artists and architects such as Joseph Beuys, Henry Darger, Jean Fabre, Federico Herrero, Mike Kelley, Barry McGee, and Nam June Paik, to name a few.

Mario Botta designed the architecture of the Watari-um Museum of Contemporary Art by emphasizing symmetrical forms, while the installation of surface materials and the structure were designed in response to the symmetrical shape of the building. It was a challenging task, considering the triangular shape of the land that made it even harder for Botto to execute his signature symmetrical architecture.

The Watari-um Museum of Contemporary Art is considered another important piece of architecture of the Post-Modern Era. Designed by foreign architects, it is also a great example of how a small private organization can manage to operate and function as a successful art museum, without having to depend on government support. Watari-um still organizes interesting exhibitions of several artists and architects continually.5

The Fourth Generation Art Museums (1990-2000)

The Fourth Generation Art Museums were constructed during the age of information and globalization. It was the period when viewers were able to access information and began to extend their artistic understanding in the form of long-term studies. Through art, viewers became capable of understanding themselves more under different social roles, be this political, gender, or culture. For their part, art museums were adapted and extended to encompass several other forms and genres.

Despite the economic recession, the construction of art museums in Japan continued. Some of the private ones had to close down after less than two decades of operation. In interviews, curators and directors of several state-funded and provincially-funded art museums revealed that their budgets were cut down by 10 percent for 10 consecutive years, while many art museums were required to prove to the general public that their organizations were spending the taxpayer’s money properly and efficiently.

In the late 20th century, a distinctive example of an art museum conceived with a site-specific program in Japan was an art project initiated by the group called Benesse Art Site Naoshima. This was originated by Soichiro Fujutake, the chairman of Benesse Holdings, Inc. and the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation. Soichiro Fujutake came up with the idea to build an art museum on Naoshima Island. His aim was for the museum to function not only as a venue for exhibiting artworks, but also to serve as a tool that would expand the conventional frame of art museums, by taking the art out of the museum context. The project offered new alternatives and directions for artistic presentations, where nature, art, and architecture were integrated.
The Benesse Art project was founded in 1988, while the first museum of the island, the Benesse House Museum, was finished in 1992 with Tadao Ando in charge of the architectural direction. The museum has hosted a personal collection of Soichiro Fukutake that included the works of several internationally renowned artists ranging from Gerhard Richter, Donald Judd, Nam June Paik, Robert Rauschenberg, David Hockney, to Andy Warhol, etc. The interior space of the museum was specifically allocated for the installation of each artwork, while the balance between the artworks and the architecture was creatively controlled. 6

The museum’s architectural style and the presentation of exhibitions are not entirely different from those of other museums from the Second Generation. Nonetheless, the location and the hotel facility, which have been incorporated as part of the program, differentiate the Benesse House Museum from other art museum projects. In the meantime, Tadao Ando’s architecture does not exactly exhibit any distinctive evidence of its attempt to create specific interactions between the architecture and the artworks.

In 1998, the Benesse Art Site, Naoshima launched The Art House Project in Honmura district by renovating several old traditional houses that were to serve as exhibition venues for site-specific Installation art pieces. Tatsuo Miyajima was the first artist to ever join the project, which was followed by many other similar installation art projects. The project did not only intend to restore and preserve the old, traditional Japanese wooded houses, but also interwove local history with the contemporariness of the artworks. Some of the works were installed next to the district’s religious place, causing the artists to reinterpret their artistic creations under an entirely new surrounding context and environment, quite different from the artistic process taking place in the conventional white cube-like space in a museum properly designed by an architect.
In 2004, Tadao Ando designed the Chichu Art Museum that hosts the works of three legendary artists: Claude Monet, James Turrell, and Walter De Maria. The majority of the building is located underground, beneath the grass hill. The architecture was designed to emphasize each space where each art piece is installed. For instance, the room where Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies* is exhibited is laid with small white mosaic pieces that accentuate the painting, to make it even more vivaciously distinctive.

Although concrete is the common material used in most of Ando’s designs, the architect adjusted his own architectural language to suit the presence of the artworks to the Chichu Art Museum. The circulation is controlled by limiting the number of viewers for each visiting round, while noise making is prohibited when entering the exhibition space. These measures protect the art viewing atmosphere from any disturbance. To illustrate, the museum allows only one viewer at a time to see James Turrell’s works.

Viewers who walk into the museum go through a series of empty spaces in the different areas of the museum before reaching the artworks. The clash between the artworks and the architecture that takes place inside the Chichu Art Museum rigorously draws out the contemporariness of Claude Monet’s Impressionist paintings.

In 2008, the Inujima Art Project Seirensho made its debut on the island of Inujima (Okayama Prefecture) with the Art Museum Seirensho as the first phase to open for operation in April. The museum was renovated from the old copper refinery closed down in 1929 after only 10 years of operation. The renovation of the old factory, which was a testament to Japan’s industrial modernization, was creatively undertaken by the environmentalist architect, Hiroshi Sambuichi.

The specialty of this museum was the way the architect designed the building to embrace the sea breeze, so as to cool down the museum during summer. On the other hand, natural sunlight was incorporated into the building to generate warmth during winter. Both ends were achieved without use of any electrical power. Wastewater in the museum, meanwhile, is put through treatment and later used to water plants.

The Art Museum Seirensho is another successful example of how the renovation of a deserted building can result in an impressive architectural creation of great aesthetic values and environmentally friendly functionalities. Installed in the building are Yukinori Yanagi’s artworks, in which the artist brings in doors, windows, and plug sockets from the house of the famous Japanese writer Yukio Mishima and reinstall them within the space of the museum. Yukio Mishima is one of the most significant Japanese writers who critiqued the changes that transpired in Japanese society during the modernization period.

Art Museum Seirensho interweaves the contemporariness of the present to the days of Japan’s industrial modernization by bringing back the old factory and the deceased writer to life, thereby allowing people of the later generations to appreciate and understand the presence of the past.
Not long after, in 2010, to be exact, the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation opened the Teshima Art Museum. The museum that covers 2,334 square meters is situated on the hill overlooking a panoramic sea view. This small museum only exhibits the works of the female artist Rei Naito, a natural observer who picks up on natural phenomena what most people tend to overlook, and visualizes them into intriguing artworks, among them her delicate, barely visible sculpture that transforms the “wind” into an intriguing visual perception.

The Teshima Art Museum is a collaboration of Rei Naito and the architect Ryue Nishizawa. The artist's decision to present water and different natural phenomena involving water has resulted in the liquid-like shaped architecture. Reinforced concrete is not used to create a normal beam structure, but to form a concrete shell structure. The construction process is begun by piling up the earth to create massive curvy hill masses onto which the concrete is poured, covering entire earth hills. After the concrete is set, the earth is dug out, creating massive voids, which become the interior spaces of the museum.

Once at the museum, the viewers are guided to walk through the designated path before entering the exhibition space where Rei Naito’s works are installed. The exhibition area is filled with water droplets that move around in different directions as a result of the specially coated floor. When rainwater comes down, the viewers are able to see the natural, real-time movements of water and wind. Massive openings architecturally and artistically enhance the building to embrace every natural presence—from the wind, the rain, sunshine, and snow, to the birds and insects.

Several projects initiated by the Naoshima Fukutaka Art Museum foundation manifest the attempts to create new programs in the art museums of the early 21st century. Such attempts include the dispersion of museums from the high-density urban fabric to different venues in the rural areas surrounded by beautiful nature. They also include the design and construction of architecture that accommodate only one specific artistic creation. This has resulted in a more collaborative process between architecture and art, not to mention consideration for creating environmentally friendly architecture. Art museums
have become tourist attractions that aim for viewers to spend more time visiting them. That artworks are located in different parts of the island explains the presence of additional facilities such as the Benesse House hotel, thereat.

Community wise, the arrival of artworks, architecture, and tourists on Naoshima Island enlivens the small island village and rejuvenates the spirits of its 3,307 residents, who are mostly senior citizens. In the meantime, young people have increasingly begun to settle on the island, starting tourism businesses that range from restaurants and hotels, to cafés. Statistics also show how the number of tourists visiting the island has grown continually since 2005.

While all sorts of activities and projects that incorporate the involvement of the local community have helped stimulate collective contributions and the participation of community members, the Foundation has revived the activities that the islanders used to undertake by making them part of people’s everyday lives once more. For instance, starting 2006, the ongoing Naoshima Rice-Growing Project resuscitated the rice-growing activity, which had been absent from the local community since the 70s. Another interesting project was the Honmura Noren Project initiated in 2001 by the artist Yuko Kano. The project reintroduced the use of noren (short cloth curtains hung in the entrance to Japanese shops) after Kano, the dyeing expert, made noren for the 14 houses in Honmura district, thus leading to the birth of the Honmura Noren Project committee advocated by Benesse.

21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa

From 2004 to August 2011, the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art Kanazawa proved its overwhelming success, attracting over 10 million tourists to the museum and the city of Kanazawa. Before it reached this glorious stage, the museum had been the subject of comprehensive planning, a process that took over nine years to accomplish. In 1995, the project was initiated with the establishment of the Urban Core District Preparation Scheme Committee, a joint committee consisting of the Ishikawa Prefecture and Kanazawa City. In 1996, the Citizens Forum was held to discuss the art museum scheme before the board of special advisors (17 members) and general advisors (4 members), appointed to draft general art museum plans in 1997. Another Citizens Forum was held in July-August 1997. In 1999 Kazuyo Sejima and Associates + SANAA was selected as the project’s architectural designer.

In 2000, the museum began its artwork collecting and, not long after, in May of the same year, the name “21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa” was proposed to the General Standing Committee. The first official meeting of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, the Kanazawa Steering Committee, and the Preparatory Committee was held in 2002. In 2003, the citizen’s observations of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa construction site took place 10 times. In July 2004, the design of museum staff uniforms by Miyake Design Studio was made public. The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa finally opened for operation in October 2004.

The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa is situated in the center of Kanazawa City. Through its transparent glass walls, one can see the activities going on inside the building, as well as the linkage between the museum’s interior and exterior spaces. The circular plan of the building creates a sense of connectedness between the architecture and the city, for it embraces the cityscape from all directions, surrounded by the city’s three main roads.7

Under the collaboration of the architects, artists, and curators, the exhibition area is divided into 14 galleries, resulting in the more flexible adjustment of space that can accommodate various forms of artworks, with the main corridor connecting all the galleries to each other. This particular planning allows the viewers to step out of the galleries if they want to rest their eyes, or to easily leave the exhibition areas should they wish to, for any reason whatsoever.

Here, the flow that museum visitors follow is different from that in other museums, in general, for it allows viewers to choose their own, without having to follow particular sequences, the way it is done in most art museums. Visitors can also walk around the museum without having to enter the exhibition areas if they do not want to. The architects came up with this alternative to expose viewers to new art-viewing experiences whenever they come over. Even after visiting hours when the exhibition area is closed, the people may use the exterior space of the museum until 22.00, as this is accessible via the four entrances located along the museum’s different ends.8
As for the administration, the museum has been advocating several educational programs that would urge museumgoers to have more interactive artistic experiences. This has resulted in the birth of many projects, such as an art project with a one-year exhibition duration, that sees qualified candidates helping artists in the work and installation processes. By allowing viewers to be part of the artistic creation process, the project enhances the viewer’s interactive experience with the artists.

Akimoto Yuji, the former director of the Chichu Art Museum and the current director of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, shares some of his thoughts on the budget issue pertaining to the museum,

Despite having over one million visitors every year, our budget has been cut down by 10% every year, as well. The ticket sales of our museum do not generate that much income compared to the Naoshima Fukutaka Art Museum Foundation that can generate six to seven times more revenue from their ticket sales. Having said that, both museums cannot depend entirely on entrance fees to pay for all their expenses. Take a look at a private museum like the Benesse Art Site Naoshima: the project receives financial support from the Naoshima Fukutaka Art Museum Foundation. On the other hand, the 21st Century Museum has the city of Kanazawa as its main supporter.

Akimoto discusses the issue concerning the general public’s understanding and attitude towards “contemporary art”, and the common perception that contemporary art is “too incomprehensible”.

To understand contemporary art takes time. But it is not that hard. What we are trying to do is create educational programs that focus mainly on students. We work closely with several elementary schools in Kanazawa that have over 5,000 students under their responsibility; we offer them the chance to come to our museum. These kids learn to be familiar with the very foundation of contemporary art and when they grow up, they will become the people who have a basic understanding of contemporary art. It is they who will become the viewers and important supporters of our museum in the future.
Contemporary Art and Art Museums of the Early 21st Century in Japan: The Overall Picture

Within the overlapping period from the late 20th century to the early 21st century, several art museums emerged in the different cities of Japan, while some museums incorporated the term “contemporary” into their names. Nonetheless, the understanding and appreciation of contemporary art remain limited to a small group of people. Based on recorded statistics, the exhibitions with the highest number of viewers are often those of famous Impressionist artists and other artistic legends such as Picasso and Van Gogh. For instance, Claude Monet’s exhibition held at the National Art Centre, Tokyo from April to July of 2007 had viewers totaling 704,420, while other contemporary art exhibitions held in the same museum averaged only 30,000. This was so despite the fact that the durations of both were the same: three months. Such phenomenon is evident in almost every principal art museum in every big city of Japan.

In a 2010 interview, Minami Yusuke (2010), the Chief Curator of the National Art Centre, shared her opinions on the matter,

Massive media corporations in Japan have a great deal of influence on big art museums. They choose popular artworks and promote the exhibitions through the media they have in their hands, which explains the overwhelming number of viewers. The media-sponsored exhibitions often feature works from the Classic or Impressionist era, mostly because they are easier to understand compared to works from the contemporary art genre, which require a considerable amount of interpretation and comprehension from the viewers. In addition, the administration system for the organization of this type of exhibition usually demands a great deal of preparation and investment, which consequentially costs a lot of money. These exhibitions bear a resemblance to concert touring with a showing scheduled in big name museums around the country, while they realize profits from ticket sales.”

Japanese art museums were no exception to this new political structure. A perusal of art museums founded era by era since World War II reveals that the early museums took to collecting both Japanese and foreign art pieces along with historical evidences, displayed them in a coherent manner, and sought to explain the artistic influence that the outside world brought to Japan, and Japan to the outside world. Most art museums in Japan were founded by the government; therefore, the main art museums of the state were located in major cities such as Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka, where the country’s masterpiece collections of each era were stored.

Given Japan’s decentralized political system, the prefectural museums of art within each city received a locally allocated budget to maintain their sites. During the 1980s and 1990s, a large number of these museums were founded in each city. They focused on constructing hardware or buildings, and purchasing manifesting a gap in understanding among the general public regarding the way “art” is still perceived in such a limited manner. Further, they are sometimes limited to only one specific artist or era. In the meantime, the way the museums, as governmental organizations, have the duty to serve the public and the majority of the population reflects the political structure of the country’s liberal democracy. As a result, recorded statistics regarding the number of viewers remain the key indicator of the museum’s performance estimation.

Conclusion

Following the establishment of nation states in the 19th century, various political and social institutions were formed. One of the early forms of nation-state outputs was the art museum, a place used to store art and cultural history for the citizens to learn about the roots of the nation, consolidate the history of various ethnic groups, and thread them together into a completely new story. The intentions of these art museums were to educate people about the history of the new nation and foster a shared ideal, political philosophy. Thereafter, the new nations attempted to gather every social element and citizen together as part of the state, hence, founding a political decentralization system.

The exhibitions of artworks from the pre-Modernism era such as Impressionism in contemporary or modern art museums in Japan create a sense of obscurity, while
modern and contemporary art collections from the western world. Building these unique art collections in each museum required a huge investment, while art pieces created by Japanese artists were largely ignored or disregarded by the museum. Moreover, Japanese art collectors did not pay much attention to modern and contemporary Japanese art. As a result, many of these works were purchased and possessed by foreign art collectors and museums. Once these Japanese artists became famous, their works’ value appreciated considerably in the global market.

But then in 1900s, Japan faced a tough financial crisis. After the bubble economy burst, the financial capabilities of many Japanese art museums diminished such that they could no longer afford to possess or acquire Japanese art pieces, whose prices were going beyond levels that the museum’s budgets allowed.

In addition, unlike their contemporaries in the western world, Japanese art museums do not have large funds that can support long-term activities. Moreover, the government does not give any special incentive to donors or art and cultural organizations – a scheme put in place in the US and the UK, where a donated amount is tax-deductible or entitles the donor to have the collection named after him or her. Western countries likewise hold various systematic fundraising programs and engage the private sector in the arts, to promote their organizations.

This comparison clearly shows that Japan has not established systematic funding support, even as capitalism and the art market are observed to have become inseparable in many parts of the world. It is evident, as well, that art galleries, artists, art collectors, and media in art museums have come to be regarded as benefits that the government must provide its citizens as these are all funded by tax. But, in Japan, the government has not established a system that can sustain the business of these art museums, an oversight that has consequently crippled other sectors in the Japanese contemporary art industry. It has been evident how some art museums have gone out of business because they did not have adequate funds to manage and maintain their sites.

Several Japanese art museums founded in the early 21st century have started to engage the general public, curators, architects, and specialists from different areas somehow involved in the process—from planning, designing and constructing the museums, to sourcing art collections which resulted in outstanding architectural design and remarkable exhibition programs, aside from reflecting transparency in the work process. This was in keeping with the liberal democracy nature of Japan. Still, the funding used to maintain the museums continues to be sourced from local government bodies. The negative affect of this arrangement will be palpable and inevitable once the economy falls.

Many private art museums in Japan have established a fund to help in the long-term sustainable management of the sites. But the limitations of this set-up remain evident. For example, the museums housing them are small scale and lack collection variety. To build a good collection takes time and consistency, along with the vision to see which collections will be of great historical value in the future. To achieve this status again requires time and effort on the part of curators, historians, and critics who design and plan collections that reveal powerful histories.

Art museums are often connected to politics in many ways – through policy, the economy, society, and culture. It is therefore important to maintain a good proportion of each element and fit them together with the budget.

Currently, Japanese art museums are facing difficulties from a tight budget, while experiencing the need to review their role in presenting contemporary art in a very competitive global arena, and to simultaneously provide more knowledge to society. These responsibilities add up to a huge burden in the face of limited manpower. We have yet to see how these art museums will adjust themselves and survive the tough current in the future.

NOTES

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