

Rethinking Resources for Japanese Studies: Using Realia in Research Papers  
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Today's presentation grows out of my experience working with a postdoc who was teaching Japanese Art History at Duke. It asks how students can do original research in Japanese studies even if their library resources and museum collections are not strong, and more germanely to Duke, they don't have fluency in Japanese. The paper is based on an assignment in a course whose goals were to introduce the students to the diverse artistic production of Japan over the past four centuries through painting, crafts, print media, and architecture, using items gifted to Duke at various times. By interrogating the relationship between art and its sociopolitical context, the course examined the critical questions of representation and power as well as art historical writing on Japan and the reception of Japanese art in the USA.

The students were asked to write a literary story of an object's life; they were referred to Edmund De Waal's, *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* as an inspiring example. Most of these objects -- a kimono, hina dolls, a sword, a tea house, pottery, photograph albums, woodblock prints which are known colloquially as realia -- are the sorts of things that visitors to Japan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries brought back with them or are family treasures that someone decided they (the family) no longer wanted and looked to find a home for. They are not high art; indeed, I would say that many libraries and museums no longer want to accept such items. The assignment taught the students the fundamentals of research -- the questions to ask -- that could be asked of almost any object.

Students were required to include:

- A visual description of the object and its material qualities
- Trace its provenance
- Provide a contextual analysis of its production in Japan
- Analyze its subsequent reception in the USA.

Students were encouraged to identify similar objects in other collections or groups of objects to which their particular object belongs. For example, the “Ishii Vases in the Lilly Library” could be examined within the context of Meiji era export crafts or photographs in conjunction with woodblock prints.

While I would like to think that similar projects can be done with images found online, both the physical description and tracing the provenance might prove challenging as only some websites detail the provenance or use iif so the viewer can zoom into the details. The exercise required the student to work closely with the librarian or archivist who managed access to the item.

The first step was for the students to examine their object and describe it. Their descriptions were meticulous; for instance, one student described in detail a sword she examined: “The Japanese Imperial Naval Officer sword has a 62 cm blade, which was typical of the length of a Japanese katana (samurai long sword), 60-65 cm.” She continues, that “Instead of covering the wooden handle of the sword with a criss-crossed cloth wrapping like traditional Japanese swords, the handle is wrapped with thin leather bands. The sword’s hilt is about 8 cm, longer than the traditional length of the Japanese sword’s 6 cm hilt. On the back of the hilt is the crest, two crossed feathers enclosed in a circle. The hilt distinguishes the Japanese Imperial

Naval Officer Sword from an army officer sword in that it does not feature any side pieces with various emblems on the backstrap. Along the hilt is a D-shaped ring connected to the backstrap with a red and gold oval tassel tied to it. The D-shaped ring as well as the top and bottom sections of the scabbard are some metal alloy. The top section of the scabbard has three rings meant for the sword to be able to be hung on the walls either in the officer's homes or their offices. The Japanese Imperial Naval sword's wide D-shaped ring along the hilt matches the sword mountings called the Russo-Japanese War style."<sup>1</sup>

Another student examined some Japanese hina dolls. She begins, "They are composed of the three primary elements: wood, silk textile, and *gofun*. Only the hands, feet, and heads have been carved from wood. Typically, within the hina tradition, the dolls heads are carved into oval shapes atop long tapering necks that are inserted into a stuffed body cavity. Due to the fragility of the two dolls, the heads were not removed to confirm, but other extant examples from this period adhere to this construction."<sup>2</sup> The rest of the dolls consist of silk textile, likely stuffed with silk wadding or straw-like wood shavings, lacquerware pieces, and silk fibers. These two dolls, though meant to represent imperial personages, wear clothing that is actually quite inaccurate to the clothing of noble / imperial personages at the time. The function of these dolls garments is likely more for sumptuary display than accuracy."<sup>3</sup> She continues with an extensive description of the dolls, focusing on their construction, their faces,

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<sup>1</sup> Shin, Christina, "The lives of a sword: From owner to owner, function to function." Unpublished paper written for Japanese Art 1600 to the present, November 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Pate, *Ningyo*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Reilly, "Bostock Library Hina-Matsuri Dolls: A Historical and Physical Analysis." Unpublished paper, December 2018.

the materials used to give luster to the faces or to die the hair, the fabric in the robes, how the brocades were designed to represent many layers of sleeves, and the purpose of the satin stitch embroidery used in the brocades. When she discusses the chirimen used in the Empress' hakama, she explains that it was most likely dyed with a chemical dye used in Meiji times or later, since it has not faded. Although Duke was told that they were Tokugawa era dolls, the student argues that they were produced in the Meiji period since such dyes are characteristic of Meiji and later. She continues her analysis all the way to the absence of feet, explaining that "female me-bina are always rendered without feet because it is considered immodest."

As these examples suggest, description of the object requires a keen eye and an interest in detail. The description of the two dolls, including photographs of separate parts, extends over 6 pages of text. The author documented what she observed and found support for her arguments both in print and online.

The next part of the assignment, a discussion of provenance, was often challenging. The information on the provenance of the Parrish papers is very slight; the catalog says that they were acquired through a combination of gifts and purchases, but the provenance file only lists gifts from Lenox D. Baker, and there is no indication of what his connection to the Parrish's was. I assume that their acquisition was most likely tied to the fact that Parrish attended Trinity College which became part of Duke University,<sup>4</sup> and/or Parrish's involvement in American Tobacco which merged with Duke Tobacco, which was involved in the founding of Duke.

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<sup>4</sup> Trinity College was founded in Randolph County and moved to Durham in 1892 and became Duke University in 1924. <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/uarchives/history/articles/narrative-history>

We have no records of how we received the wedding kimono, and the recollections of at least two people differ. The sword came as part of a collection, the papers of Robert L. Eichelberger who commanded all ground occupation troops during the Allied Occupation of Japan, and the student used the papers to research the provenance. The Eichelberger papers document that he received seven swords from General Doihara, Lieutenant General Honma, Lieutenant General Kuroda, Rear Admiral Yokoyama, Rear Admiral Miyoshi, Vice Admiral Ugaki and General Tojo, of which two were copies, but Duke got only five, and today has three. It seems most likely that the sword came from Miyoshi, who wrote Eichelberger on September 26, 1945 that he was handing over two swords: “a long one... appraised by a sword expert as Gi-Yoshimitsu’s make of the Ashikaga Period (about 5-600 yrs. ago)...[and] a short one...a later make generally known as the Kamakura sword.”<sup>5</sup> Miyoshi goes on to elaborate how the Gi-Yoshimitsu sword was a gift from his grandfather “to commemorate his entrance into the Naval Academy and bears [his] family crest as well the maker’s name, Yoshimitsu.”<sup>3</sup> The student then continues by discussing the fact the kamon on the sword matches that of the Asano family; rather than having a black square diamond with a smaller square diamond associated with the Miyoshi family, it has two crossed falcon feathers that was historically used by the Asano clan. The student speculates on the relationship of Miyoshi to the Asano clan but did not dig further.

The difficulties with identifying provenance that the students encountered highlighted for me how important it is for us to document it when we receive something. The kimono was gifted to Duke while I have been working there, and it did not cross my mind to ask the person

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<sup>5</sup> Shin, p. 3

at our institute for any documentation, and she did not submit any to gifts and records. We got the dolls more recently, and I have a series of emails asking us if we would take them -- the Duke gardens asked us to accept them so they could use them for girl's day, because they had no suitable place to store them -- but until the students did this exercise, I had made no effort to ensure that the correspondence would be available for future students to use. I can see that next spring before I retire, I will have to do some serious work going through my files, both print and electronic, deciding what to leave my successor and what to store in archives.

Students were also asked to do a contextual analysis of the object's production in Japan and discuss its subsequent reception in the United States. This was easier for some projects than others. The student who worked on the Parrish album had an abundance of material to work with as there have been other studies of nineteenth century photography and tourism in Japan<sup>6</sup> in addition to the family papers.

Edward Parrish was a tobacco auctioneer in North Carolina in the second half of the nineteenth century who fell into debt and took an offer from the American Tobacco Company to be a company representative in Japan in 1899. Parrish and his family lived in Yokohama for six years and brought home 9 souvenir photograph albums. The student examined one album, in box number 15, quite closely, analyzing the numbers and captions on the photographs. For instance, most of the photos have handwritten captions; some have numbers that are easily seen; this one of the Tokaidō road has 908 embedded in the photo and a handwritten caption,

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<sup>6</sup> Work, such as Eleanor Hight's, points out how photographs despite their illusion of objectivity, can be staged and manipulated to serve the desires of the buyer. *Capturing Japan in Nineteenth-Century New England Photography Collections*, Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2011.

while the one of the porcelain shop has a printed tag with the number 865. While it might be reasonable to suppose that the photo albums were purchased as is, the student carefully analyzes the photos to argue that Parrish, like many collectors, selected the photographs himself, and compiled the book after procuring a sufficient number of images.

That said, the coloring in the photographs is remarkably consistent. In order to argue that the photographs in the album could have been made by different photographers, the student investigated how the photographs were colored. She found a book on the internet archive which explained the colors used in turn of the century photographs; *The Peerless Japanese Transparent Water-Colors* handbook was published in 1902 by the Japanese Water Color Co,<sup>7</sup> and describes fifteen colors that were available to photographers to tint their photographs. For instance, “geranium pink” is described as “a very useful color for flower work and one of the most brilliant of all reds.... In its diluted gradations it is a beautiful pink, producing carnation pink, rose pink, apple blossom pink and rose madder for delicate flesh tints.” (p.36)

While the students varied in how they approached their objects – one student spent more time describing it, another the provenance, and a third analyzing the reception in the west – they all engaged in a close reading. At the same time, few students were successful in seeing the relationship to other items. Looking at the picture a girl in a rainstorm or Mt. Fuji from Kumagawa river, one can see the continuity with woodblock prints. Rather than being a

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholson, C. F. *Peerless Japanese Transparent Water Colors*. New York City, NY: Japanese Water Color, 1902. July 19, 2017. Accessed September 8, 2019. [https://archive-org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/details/gri\\_33125012878498/page/n1](https://archive-org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/details/gri_33125012878498/page/n1)

documentation of daily life, they are a careful construction of a pictorial motif rendered in a new medium. The girl is not in a rainstorm; rather she is posed in a shop, standing motionless so that the image does not become blurred. One can also find analogous photographs of young women, equally or even less convincingly staged, or woodblock prints of people in rainstorms. Fujisan, too, was routinely depicted in woodblock prints.

The final question the students had to address was the reception in America. The student who looked at Ogata Gekko's book was the most successful in doing this. The copy of it is part of the Parrish collection, and she examined it together with Rosa Parrish's diary and letters. She demonstrates how Ogata Gekko's prints in the US became detached from their Meiji context and "became merely an exotic object." To establish this, she read about women in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan, citing Rebecca Corbett's *Cultivating Femininity* as well as several Japanese women's magazines and other voices who did not support the subjugation of women to men, and argues that there were women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who endeavored to challenge traditional ideas." But she found in reading Rosa Parrish's diary, that the complicated social context seen in the prints became vague under her exoticizing gaze. She says, "To Americans, the women were cute and fragile "like quaint little dolls." She continues that even though Parrish was interested in women's rights in the US, she does not seem to consider the issue in Japan and concludes that "despite having lived in Japan, Rosa Parrish viewed Japanese women merely as exotic and small people just like her American contemporaries did, and did not recognize the changing social situation of women."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kwon, Ashley. "Meiji Era Japanese women through Ogata Gekko's "Manners and Customs of Women." Unpublished paper, December 2018. Japanese Art History: 1600-Present, p.11.

I found this project of reading these student papers interesting to pursue. In conclusion, I want to say that I discovered how much students were able to do with a single item, an item that we would not often consider “high art.” I was particularly impressed with their meticulous descriptions; they examined their objects closely and with great care. Then they related them to trends in Japanese art and culture. While Duke students have easy access to recent scholarship, nonetheless, I think these are projects that could be done by university students with fewer resources. The skills they learned – to carefully examine an object, to trace its provenance, and to relate it to broader trends in Japanese art history and to the reaction to Japanese art in the US (or anywhere outside of Japan) – are useful skills that they will take with them after they graduate.

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