

OBJECTS THAT MOVE: JAPANESE *NAMBAN* SCREENS IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES

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The public exhibition of local history in Nagasaki city, Japan, presents strategic and curatorial challenges of an unusual kind as all aspects of the city's past and present must contend with national and global responsibilities to relate the story of the tragedy of the atomic bombing in 1946. It is a gloomy image of the city for residents and many visitors alike and countered by ambitious and expensive city council sponsored projects such as the re-creation of the 17th century Dutch settlement at Dejima finished in 1998 and since 2005, by the 'Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture' (*Nagasaki Rekishi Bunka Hakubutsukan*). This museum focuses deliberately on the history prior to the modern period of militarism in the 1930's and 1940's and its cataclysmic ending. It starts by looking back to the original, 16th century foreign settlers of the city, the Portuguese missionaries and merchants referred to as 'Southern Barbarians' (*Nambanjin*). The encounters between these in-comers and Japanese residents are evidenced primarily by the imagery of the folding screens (*byōbu*) which depict their meeting as an exotically picturesque space of cultural exchange, mutual discovery and in some instances of comic mimicry (Toby 1998). (FIG. 1) Ships, goods, people and ideas move across what is typically a six paneled expanse of the screen, driven by elemental forces of wind and sea, but also by the passions for faith and profit. The museum encourages an appreciation of these movements as part of a journey of the imagination, into a romantic world now hardly visible in the urban architecture of the city outside but evoked within the museum by particular techniques for displaying the screens.¹ As a visitor enters the initial corridor of the exhibition, they encounter to-scale reproductions of the famous *Namban byōbu*, attributed to the painter Kanō Naizen² and are surrounded by the sounds of lapping water, wind and sea birds. The sounds index a pictorial reading of the screens, which show one of the great *Nao* sailing vessels departing, journeying, arriving and being disembarked at a location which is most likely

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² These screens are held by the Kobe city museum as part of the *Namban Komo* collection.



FIG. 1 - A pair of Namban *byōbu* attributed to Kanō Naizen and held in the *Namban Komo* collection of the Kobe city museum.

Nagasaki itself. The proximate nature of these sounds and indeed of the screens themselves, which are not behind glass, does not invite the kind of critical distance and attention paid to objects of artistic value in an art museum or gallery setting. They are not placed for scrutiny or for lingering in front of, due to the constant passing flow of visitors in this corridor. Instead the visitor is led onwards through a chronology of Nagasaki's history by an array of multi-media devices, which have the desired duration of an observer's attention built into their design. There are, after all, only so many times it is possible to listen comfortably to the same sound loop of waves and birds and 16th century court music, before moving to another exhibit. This restlessly mediated narrative history of Nagasaki ends with the entrance to a second section of the exhibition's display where the generosity of space within and between tall, wide, highly polished and temperature controlled glass cases reproduces the modernist design and purpose of the art museum familiar to the capital cities of Europe and North America. Here, the attention of the visitor who looks upon the arrangement of assorted, original *Namban byōbu* in these cases is engaged by the controlled absence of distractions, as the environment is regulated so as to still the senses and to concentrate vision. Sound is not built into the display mechanisms as elsewhere and in as much as it is a function of the presence of visitors it is muted by their self-conscious caution. For they are aware of the reverberant qualities of the gallery's constituent materials - wood, glass and steel - and are sensitive to their own voices in conversation and the potentially unwelcome publicity of being overheard. This kind of stillness is of course common to the



experience of looking at many other kinds of museum or gallery exhibited art-works in various locations, but it achieves a particular effect in regard to the academic appreciation of *Namban Byōbu* and takes on particular significances in this museum in Nagasaki (Cox 2008). These effects and significances are worth considering as they reveal the constraint of sensory modes of apperception besides and alongside vision. They also reveal the ways in which the screens are objects which were made to be mobile and performative (Lippit 2007) and which as confluences of constituent materials are also constantly in a process of movement and change. It shows how exhibition strategies are constructed around the desire or need to still and control these movements in order tell different stories across museum collections, stories of renewal, discovery and philanthropy.

In this case, the narrative of aesthetic appreciation built into the display environment confirms the authenticity of the objects and the veracity of the operation of sight in their observation. This kind of attentive vision embeds and solidifies the pictorial content of the screens within the history of the city and the history of art. It affirms the seriousness of the museum as a repository of aesthetic knowledge and works alongside the sensory design of the multi-mediated imaginarium in the first part of the exhibition, which evokes an exotic past.

Recent anthropological work on material culture has drawn attention to the way that museums construct sensory registers for the objects in their displays which may work with as well as against the ways in which they were made to be apprehended (Edwards et al. 2006). As such, the sensory realms of exhibition spaces may restrain

and direct the appreciation of material culture into knowledgeable forms that reproduce colonial, national, local and corporate regimes of power and authority. Vision remains the primary means and organizing principle for such discursive determinations, extending a linguistic paradigm whereby the value of objects may be read and tracked outwards from their visible appearance into networks of signification. Within these networks, objects are treated as static nodes, connecting points of production, dissemination and reception which in the 16th century would have included Kyoto, Nagasaki, Hirado, Macao, Goa, Lisbon and locations in Mexico. Today, it would include the various museums and private collections where *Namban Byōbu* are held but also the particular workshops and studios where they are repaired and conserved. This approach to material culture, which follows Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) by treating the agency of art as a distributed process (Knappet 2008, 139), is a means of mapping stylistic continuities and discontinuities between *Namban Byōbu* across space and as such confers a directionality and intent to the passage of time. The virtues of this theory are that they make apparent the semiotic connections between the pictorial elements of the screens and also, potentially, the material elements - the paper, wood, nails which must also hold together, if the screen is to be recognized as such. However, the subordination of materials to the pictorial elements of the screens as part of their en-visioning across different locations in time, manufactures lines of connecting relevance that are static and not dynamic. For it is the flow of materials, their movements within the composite elements of the screen through the action of time as an organic process and through the action of human agents as the screen is folded and unfolded, which are obscured by the attendant visualism of their exhibited environments. In this visual sense, where lines of connectedness are precipitates of movement and not flows of movement, material culture cannot be unequivocally conceived of as an index for the operation of strategic and economic networks and as a derivative of relationships formulated through stylistic continuities and discontinuities. It is by thinking in terms of the flow of materials and recognising in the activities of contemporary conservators, which are led not only by sight but also by the senses of touch and even hearing, that the means by which these movements create deposits and leave residues of their performative presence offer insights into the ways in which the screens were originally made to be used and made to be seen. Recognising how the extra-visual qualities of mobile objects like the *Namban Byōbu* may be stilled in the conditions of their museum display, which acts as a constraint upon the flow of the materials, can help us to understand how certain kinds of value are attached to them.

Studies of Japanese material culture have focused on identifying the value that is attached to objects in the process of their re-presentation as cultural heritage (Daniels 1999), in order to critique the invention of and nostalgia for tradition (Ashkenazi and Clammer 2000, Vlastos 1998). These essentially deconstructive approaches are motivated by a sense that the scopic regimes of modernity (Jay 1995) and the 'ethnoscapes' (Appadurai 1996) of globalisation define in visual terms and

spatial limits the historical meanings that are produced through the public and institutional uses of objects such as the *Namban byōbu*.

Such approaches are critical reactions to romantic, conservative interpretations of Japanese art as heritage that also use visual means to identify aesthetic genres and styles; such as the *Kanō* school from which the *Namban byōbyu* emerged to eventually become officially designated and protected national-cultural treasures. The historical and cultural integrity of these art works depends on the expert vision of art historical connoisseurship and is therefore undermined by the visual and extra-visual practices associated with the conservation as well as the reproduction and re-creation of these screens in local environs today. In this sense, this paper addresses the debate in visual and heritage studies (Lowenthal 1985, Elkins 2002) about the universalising claims made about art works by the discipline of art history, the heritage industry, and national and international institutions on the one hand and the concepts and practices related to the physical presence of artworks as objects that exist in diverse social contexts on the other.

Questions about the visual properties and materiality of art works as forms of heritage are particularly significant in Japan which was active in the creation (2001) of a universal evaluation of heritage for UNESCO as an 'intangible cultural property'. The convergence in the UNESCO proclamation of local practices with a generalising rhetoric about heritage has created a new regime for the valuation of art and culture, what Michael Herzfeld has called a 'Global Hierarchy of Value' (2005). I have argued elsewhere (Cox 2006, 2009) that this hierarchy can be approached through questions of visibility, asking what modes of seeing are active in the hierarchy and how people involved in presenting heritage en-vision its value. As such, and in relation to this case, I follow Ronald Toby's interpretation (1998) of *Namban* art as a subject rather than a style, for inscribing geographically distant foreigners within domestic cultural spaces so as to imagine and image a new anthropology of and for Japan.

The mode of assimilative, reflective vision which emerges from this interpretation of *Namban* art enables us to rethink and reformulate how the heritage value of *byōbu* is made through a constant process of combining and recombining its visual, material and performative elements in museum displays. This is ably demonstrated in the Portuguese context by Peixoto's analysis (2006) of different exhibition strategies for showing *Namban Byōbu* in locations within and around Lisbon. This deconstruction of the precedents and influences on the design of the exhibition of two famous screens, presently displayed in Lisbon's 'Museum of Ancient Art' (*Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga*), reveals the complex intersections of curatorial interventions, architectural propositions, spatial limitations and cultural deference to the screen's nominal 'Japanese' origins. The Museum of Ancient Art's exhibition of the screens exists in a space of the museum that is organized as a network of rooms and corridors full of objects distinguishable by the geography of their origins and their formally defined aesthetic or functional affinities. Both of these paradigms – geographic and aesthetic – work together in making visible a national narrative of Por-



tuguese discoveries and explorations, Catholic missionary work and settlements in Asia, as art and as power.

An interesting example of this kind of visually led narrative strategy can also be found in a museum on the other side of the world in the city of Portland Oregon. The pair of *Namban* screens on display in the Portland Art Museum is in a room which geographically distinguishes objects of 'Japan' from those in adjoining rooms belonging to Korea and China. However, like most of the 4000 or so items in the Asian collection, these screens were originally gifted by wealthy families and individuals whose entrepreneurship and philanthropy had helped to build the wealth of the city itself. Their names are listed on a plaque located prominently just to one side of the first entrance to the exhibition space of the Asian collection, a practice which is in keeping with the philosophy of making a public acknowledgement of the origins of gifts in US museums. The plaque divides into six categories the kinds of giving which have constituted the gallery space and its collection as it now appears to the visitor. In descending order, with type face that gets smaller with each listing, these are: 'benefactors', 'patrons', 'sponsors', 'donors', 'contributors' and 'supporters'. The relationships between these categories are complex, defined not simply by the monetary value of the gift, but also by the form of the gift and the type of organization making it. Therefore we have mixed together: individuals and families, Japanese banks, glass manufacturers and com-

FIG. 2 - The opening view from the entrance to the Asian collection at the Portland Museum of Art.

³ An extended version of this argument can be found in Cox 2006.

memorative associations. Top of the list in a category of its own making and displayed prominently on the wall above the cases housing the *Namban* screens is the name of the family who gave the screens to the museum and whose identity is now conferred on this first room of the Asian collection: 'Schnitzer Family Gallery'. (FIG. 2) These families and organisations constitute another, additional network of connections and significances to the *Namban* screens, wherein the precipitates of the movements of the objects are materialist as well as material and a narrative emerges of the prestige value of philanthropy. It is a narrative communicated through the textual visibility of names in the gallery, that speaks to the North American context of the display of the objects and more specifically, if somewhat cynically, to Oregon's state tax laws which allow its high level of income tax to be offset through donations to museum institutions.

To compare geographically distant, discursively distinct but in terms of exhibition design, visually similar examples such as these in Lisbon and Portland is to reveal the ways in which a particular art form from Japan may be used to tell different stories internationally, raising questions about how it is presented to communicate the value of local and national cultural heritage in Japan. My argument here is that our understanding of the national-cultural value held to reside in the aesthetic style and historical context of these screens in Japan, may be extended through a consideration of the paintings physical form, reproduced in the local public spaces of the sites where the encounters first took place³ and as they are conserved and repaired. The material presence of these screens is an active witness to the historical identity and cultural heritage of these sites through the kinds of vision they engender; for they are instrumental to the spectacle of annual historic parades (FIG. 3) and to the gaze of tourists looking for souvenirs of their visits. There is a link between the modes of seeing which are intrinsic to these paintings when approached as pictorial representations of a national history of cultural contact and the different forms of contemporary spectatorship which become evident when we consider their local utility in performances of historical identity. This shows that the heritage value of art in Japan resides not only in the identification of enduring aesthetic values but also in the material qualities and social trajectories of these objects as they are subjected to different sensorial practices: of commoditisation, reproduction, and re-creation in local performances and conservation in specialist workshops .

To acknowledge these practices as part of the evaluation of art-works is to recognize that as James Elkins has argued, there is no such thing as 'just looking' (1999) and that when we look at art, particularly in a museum context, there are many kinds of looking going on. We might, following the work in the anthropology of the senses, go further and recognise that other senses are engaged synesthetically alongside looking. This is the position taken by Janet Brodsky (2002) who proposes that a multi-sensory "whole body" experience is engaged in both the making and the viewing of artworks and that this is a perceptual relationship with a work of art not readily available to the observer because it has been ground out by the particular sensory environment of the museum and the ocular-centric epistemologies of art history.



FIG. 3 – The annual *Namban* festival (*matsuri*) parade on Tanegashima island off the coast of Kyushu.

My proposition in this paper has been that these institutional and professional modes of observation implicate the senses in distinct relationships to each other and may include a kind of acoustic visuality. This is a way of seeing that is circumscribed by the sounds of the institution and also by the 'aurality' of the artwork itself. I am referring to sound in two ways here: in relation to vision and in relation to the pictorial image. In the first sense I mean that the control of sound in an art museum setting may be understood as a necessary aspect of the viewing conditions of a work so that its mimetic value as a formal equivalence in composition and material structure to the object it represents can be appreciated.

In the second sense, I mean to recognize the subjectivity of the sensory observer who may experience the work not only in its museum location but perhaps in the very spaces that the work represents. Then visual likenesses between pictorial representation and original location may be perceived and made meaningful through a different array of sense and sound, as part of the presence of a lived environment. The recognition of the subjective observer may then help us to appreciate the sensory and in this case aural elements in a work that are not simply dependent on a mimetic understanding of its representational value. It is an approach that moves us beyond modes of interpreting art works exclusively as representations to be seen and read like linguistic signs and addresses the crucial question of depiction: that is do pictures cause us to see things they represent because they are likenesses of them or do we call them likenesses because they cause us to see them ?

I have argued elsewhere (Cox 2008) that the causality or agency of *Namban* screens that expresses the relationship between their formal content and the spaces they depict is played out in important ways visually, through the pictorialisation of sound. Here I want to propose that once we approach the screens as material objects they may also be considered as devices for listening with and for listening to. As items of furniture, the screens were used to divide up the living space of the homes of their usually wealthy merchant owners and to act as ornamental backdrops for the host on the occasion of meeting important guests. The grandeur and intimacy these screens lent to the ceremonious exchanges and conversations that ensued, means that we may regard them also as a kind of listening device changing the delivery and enhancing the importance of what was said. As many of their original owners were converters to Catholicism and its confessional practices, it may not be too much a leap of the imagination to suppose that the enclosed environment that the screens created had added significance as an auditory technology.

We can go a step further than this though in auditory terms and listen to the distinctive sounds of the physical substrate of the screens. The *Hyōsō-shi*, who are the craftsmen responsible for mounting the painted screens onto their frames and thereafter conserving their condition, speak in auditory terms of the differences in good and bad technique. Take the skill used to meld the layers of the screen together. A (*hinoki*) pine brush is used to strike down (*tadaku*) onto the screen's surface and it must be the edge of the curve of the brush that makes contact and with a heavy enough touch



FIG. 4 – The *Hyōsō-shi*, Mr Yamamoto demonstrating the correct brushing action needed to put moisture back into a screen.

so as not to bounce straight back up (*utsu*). It should therefore make the thicker ‘bam-bam-bam’, sound that denotes a good technique rather than the ‘pan-pan-pan’ cadence that is evidence of inexperience and ineptitude.

Perhaps the most distinctive sounds are those of the hammer fixing the pins to the frame of the screen and the brushing (*haku*) of its surface which should make a ‘fluffy’ (*kebatsu*) sound, as the loose back-and-forward wrist action with the brush puts moisture into the picture (FIG. 4). These last sounds were those noted by Mr Yamamoto, Yukio, a *Hyōsō-shi* that I interviewed in Kyoto and they are significant because he was asked to recreate them for a character who played a *Hyōsō-shi* in the film *Chikamatsu monogatari* (1954) (The Tale of the Crucified Lovers) by the director Kenji Mizoguchi.

The corporeal onomatopoeic language that is used by the *Hyōsō-shi* to describe these sounds isn’t bound by visual conventions and the bodily sensations this language evokes reach towards feeling and presence rather than semantic meaning. They propose that alongside the apprehension of what is made visible and therefore knowable about *Namban* screens through the sensory control of their museum display, we need to learn to engage with them through other sensory practices. This may include a certain kind of listening, to the touch of sound, through the techniques of craftsmen employed in the screen’s repair and conservation. It is through such interactions with these screens that we may come to understand their evaluation as cultural heritage not as a function of a static network or hierarchy but as emergent from the relationship between the movements of materials and the movements of the senses that they engender. •

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