

# **Towards a Better Understanding of Asian Cultures: Challenges Faced by the Tokyo National Museum's Asian Gallery**

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## **Introduction**

This paper provides a glimpse into the efforts made by the Tokyo National Museum's Asian Gallery (Fig. 1) to enhance its visitors' understanding of Asian cultures. I specialize in history of East-West cultural exchange, as well as Asian art history with a strong focus on Buddhist art history. At the Tokyo National Museum, I am a curator of Central Asian art and Indian miniature paintings. In the past, I also engaged in museum education activities for two and a half years, and was involved with planning events for the public, such as lectures and gallery talks. In summary, I have contributed to work associated with the Asian Gallery both as a curator and an educator.



**Fig.1** Asian Gallery of the Tokyo National Museum

In this paper, an event titled “Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum,” which is important not only for the Asian Gallery, but for the entire Museum, will be introduced in detail along with its significance.

### The Asian Gallery within the Tokyo National Museum

Within the premises of the Tokyo National Museum, there are six separate buildings (Fig. 2): the Japanese Gallery, the Asian Gallery, the Heiseikan and Hyokeikan galleries, The Gallery of Horyuji Treasures, and the Research and Information Center.

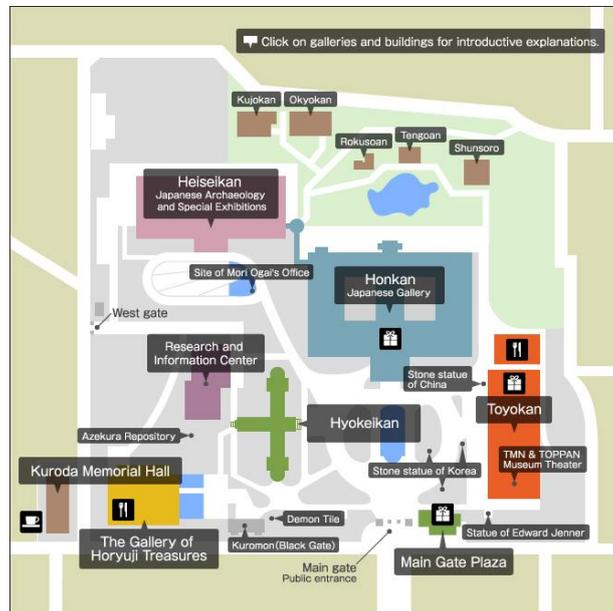
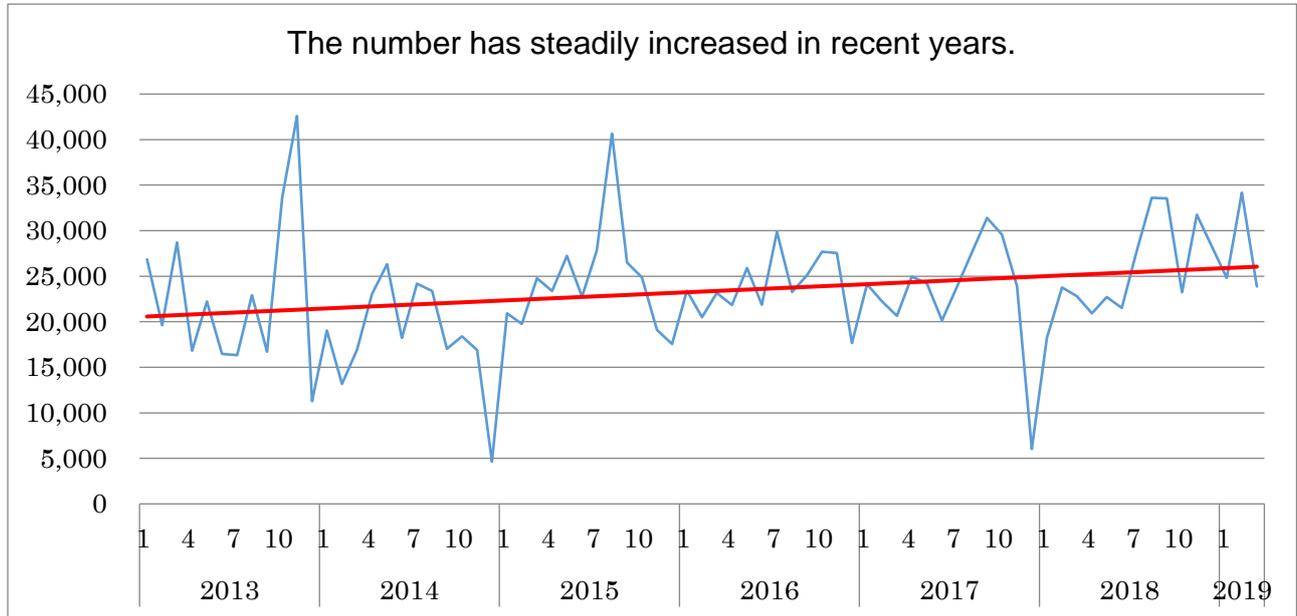


Fig. 2 Map of the Tokyo National Museum

The Asian Gallery exhibits and stores art and artifacts from countries and regions in Asia, excluding Japan. It may be unusual globally for a national museum to maintain a separate building exclusively for exhibiting Asian art. And for visitors, it might not be easy to visit every building in one day. The number of visitors to the Asian Gallery for the past several years has fluctuated as follows: 250,000 (2013), 240,000 (2014), 300,000 (2015), 290,000 (2016), 280,000 (2017), and 330,000 (2018). These figures demonstrate that, each year, around

300,000 visitors, or approximately 16 percent of the total number that the Tokyo National Museum receives annually, have entered the Asian Gallery in recent years (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3** Number of Visitors to the Tokyo National Museum's Asian Gallery

The Asian Gallery comprised of six floors, including a basement, and contains 13 galleries (Fig. 4):

First Floor

Gallery 1: Chinese Buddhist Sculpture



**Fig. 4** Gallery 1: Chinese Buddhist Sculpture

## Second Floor

Gallery 2: Giant Chinese Lacquerware; Education Space “Oasis: Journey Information”

Gallery 3: Art of India, Gandhara, Central Asia, Egypt, and West Asia

## Third Floor

Gallery 4: The Advent of Chinese Civilization

Gallery 5: Decorative Arts of Ancient China: Bronzes, Ceramics, Textiles, and Burials in China

Gallery 6: Education Space “Oasis: Fortune-telling in Asia”

## Fourth Floor

Gallery 7: Stone Relief Carvings of China

Gallery 8: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy

## Fifth Floor

Gallery 9: Chinese Lacquerware and Decorative Arts of the Qing Dynasty

Gallery 10: Korean Art: Ceramics, Polished Stone and Metal Tools, The Rises and Falls of  
Korean Kings, Buddhist Art, and Art of the Joseon Dynasty

## Basement (B1)

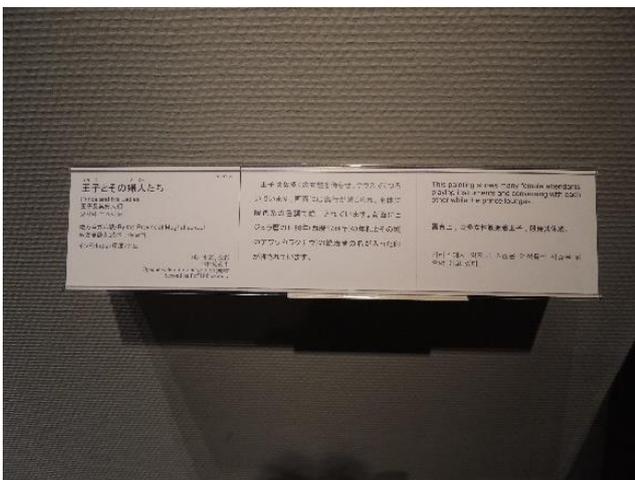
Gallery 11: Khmer Sculpture

Gallery 12: Southeast Asian Ceramics, Archaeology of India and Southeast Asia, Gilt-bronze  
Statues from Southeast Asia

Gallery 13: Ethnic Cultures of Asia, Asian Textiles, Indian Miniature Paintings

The building structure of the Asian Gallery is designed so that visitors go up or down the stairs in a spiral. Owing to this structure, visitors need to use the elevator or staircases when exiting the building half-way through the recommended viewing route, or when starting to view exhibits in a gallery from one of the middle floors. For this reason, in terms of its structure, the Asian Gallery might not be visitor-friendly, particularly to those who are visiting the Museum for the first time.

The Asian Gallery reopened with a broad theme of “Journey” in January of 2013, after extensive renovations, and its exhibition environment was greatly improved. For example, an elevator was newly installed in the center of the building, making it slightly easier for visitors to move between the floors of this uniquely designed building. To coincide with the re-opening, object labels (Fig. 5) and explanatory panels (Fig. 6) were shown in four languages: Japanese, English, Chinese, and Korean. This multilingual effort was quite progressive at the time.



**Fig. 5** Object Label Written in Several Languages



**Fig. 6** Explanatory Panel Written in Several Languages

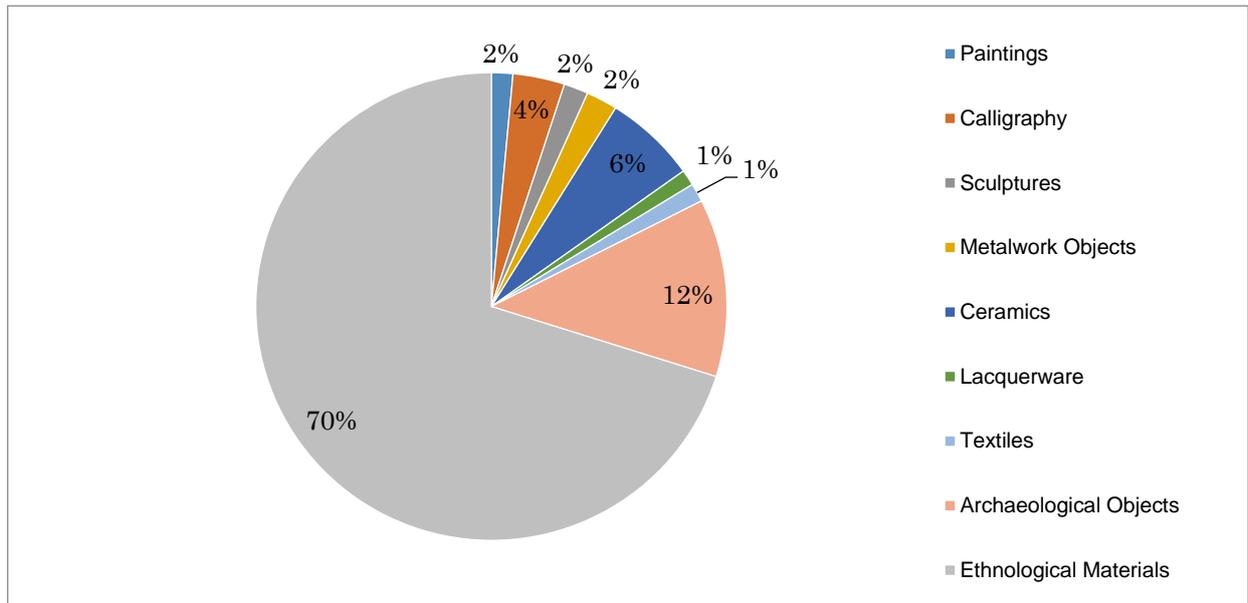
The Tokyo National Museum collection includes 48,387 artworks and archaeological objects from Asia, excluding Japan, and accounts for 20% of the Museum’s entire collection. Those 48,387 items of Asian origin consist of the following (Fig. 7):

- 709 paintings
- 1,720 works of calligraphy
- 811 sculptures
- 1,040 metalwork objects
- 3,057 ceramics
- 530 pieces of lacquerware

620 textiles

5,953 archaeological objects

33,947 ethnological materials

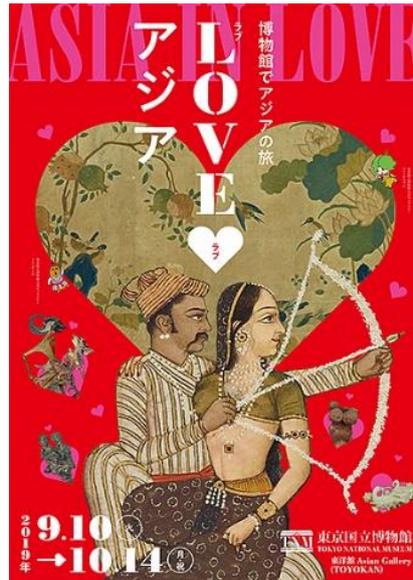


**Fig. 7** Breakdown of Artworks in the Asian Gallery Collection

Of these, items such as Asian paintings and calligraphy are made of especially fragile materials. For conservation reasons, with these delicate works, the exhibits are changed regularly: Indian miniature paintings every four weeks, and other Asian paintings and calligraphy every six weeks.

### **“Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum”: How It Started**

This multifaceted, annual event, named “Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum,” is held at the Asian Gallery every autumn. It encompasses exhibitions, gallery talks, lectures, music and theater performances, and related activities such as yoga, and is publicized using leaflets (Fig. 8), posters, and the museum website.



**Fig. 8** “Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum” Leaflet (2019)

It started in 2014 through a joint effort of curators and educators in an attempt to enhance visitors’ knowledge about Asian cultures. The yearly theme of this event is decided by all the curators involved, which is a crucial aspect. The theme can be a comprehensive one involving the entire Gallery, or one focusing on a specific region in Asia. Past themes are as follows:

- 2014 Asia Fest at the Tokyo National Museum
- 2015 Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum  
(Held with a broad theme of “cultural exchange”)
- 2016 Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum  
(Held in collaboration with Shanghai Museum)
- 2017 Mystical Asia at the Tokyo National Museum
- 2018 Crossing the Seas: Jalan Jalan
- 2019 Asia in Love

Back in 2014, when the series was launched, its catch phrase was “Asia Fest,” but this phrase was dropped from the second year. The inaugural year, the event included traditional performances from across Asia, such as Korean drum performances and traditional Chinese performances comprised of operas, acrobatic performances, and musical shows. The Museum’s Education Division took the initiative to organize additional activities including color-in and dress-up activities. For the dress-up activities, visitors tried on traditional costumes from China and Korea and had their photo taken.

In 2015, the theme was “cultural exchange.” Relevant works were categorized by the keywords “shape and pattern,” “technique,” “characters (letters),” and “people,” and were labeled with a unique mascot character created for that year’s event. The event in 2015 also included a range of traditional music and theater performances from Asia—specifically; China, Korea, and Kyrgyzstan.

In 2016, the event was planned to coincide with the *Joint Thematic Exhibition with the Shanghai Museum*. It incorporated live music performances of the sitar, guzheng, and morin khuur, as well as Chinese acrobatic performances.

In 2017, the event featured mysterious objects from across Asia that were attributed as having magical powers such as bringing good fortune and warding off evil spirits. Events included live music performances from China and Kyrgyzstan.

In 2018, the theme was “Crossing the Seas: Jalan Jalan,” with “Jalan Jalan” meaning “to walk” or “to take a stroll” in Indonesian. This theme was chosen to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the establishment of Japan-Indonesia diplomatic relations. The exhibits for that year were comprised of Indonesian objects, and related events included the traditional Indonesian puppet theater, Wayang Kulit (Fig. 9).



**Fig. 9** Wayang Kulit: Traditional Indonesian Puppet Theater

This year, “Asia in Love” was selected as the theme. A range of works were exhibited on the theme of various forms of love—romantic love, friendship, familial love, and philanthropy. During the event, the Indonesian shadow-puppet theater Wayang Kulit was performed again.

Yoga sessions and gallery talks are incorporated every year as part of the “Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum.” Yoga sessions are held in Gallery 1 on the first floor of the Asian Gallery. Participants can practice yoga surrounded by Chinese Buddhist sculptures (Fig. 10), which is quite an experience.



**Fig. 10** Practicing Yoga Surrounded by Buddhist Sculptures

In 2014, the sessions were held in the morning and at night, before and after the Museum's opening hours, while in 2015 and 2016 they were held only at nighttime. During these first three years, participants practiced yoga on their yoga mats placed on the floor. In 2017 and 2018, chair yoga sessions took place during the Museum's opening hours, while in 2019 both chair and floor yoga sessions were held in the Asian Gallery and another gallery, respectively. When I was in charge of these yoga sessions from 2016 to 2018 as an educator, I explained to the participants that yoga's "lotus pose" is same as the pose of the Buddha meditating, and talked to them about the Chinese Buddhist sculptures on display in the gallery, as well as other works featuring animals and imaginary creatures related to the names of yoga poses, such as monkeys, camels, and Garuda.

Another important aspect of the event for the curators involved is providing gallery talks called "special tours" (Fig. 11).



**Fig. 11** "Special Tour"

These special tours last for one hour, which is twice as long as our usual, 30-minute gallery talks, enabling their content to be more comprehensive and thorough. Moreover, the tours are designed to give the participants a "journey" experience as they explore the Asian Gallery

on foot. They are led by several curators, who serve as “tour conductors,” and take participants through the Asian Gallery while lecturing about relevant works. From 2016 onwards, “special passports” were created and issued to the participants. In addition, specially-designed stamps featuring relevant artworks were created to be used on these “passports.” Thanks to these attempts, these special tours have become increasingly popular. On the other hand, with so many visitors participating in these “tours,” we are faced with occasional complaints from participants who had difficulty hearing the curators through the microphone or viewing the exhibits. To tackle the issue of overcrowding at the Asian Gallery during the special tours, a few adjustments were made to how we run them from 2018: six curators now take charge of explaining artworks for the tours, which take place on two, separate days and stickers are used in place of stamps for the specially-made “passports.” Since the “Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum” became an annual event, awareness of the Asian Gallery has undoubtedly risen among visitors.

### **Significance of Holding the “Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum” at the Asian Gallery**

As mentioned earlier, since the reopening of the Asian Gallery, the gallery placed importance on providing translated explanations in three languages—English, Chinese, and Korean—in addition to Japanese. This multilingual effort extends even to object labels and is not limited to group explanations on wall panels that are placed throughout the building. This effort ultimately aims to enhance understanding of Asian cultures for both Japanese and international visitors.

Now I would like to discuss the significance of holding the event “Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum.” At the Museum, seasonal events are held every year. These include “New Year’s Celebration at the Tokyo National Museum” (winter), “Cherry Blossom

Viewing at the Tokyo National Museum” (spring), and “Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum” (autumn). Most of the events held at the Museum naturally concern the Japanese Gallery; in other words, Japanese art. The only event held at the Asian Gallery is the “Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum.”

Furthermore, many of the Museum’s events are led nearly exclusively by the Museum’s educators. Out of the aforementioned seasonal events, the ones held for the New Year and cherry-blossom seasons are simply an assemblage of themed exhibits and events.

On the other hand, the “Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum” is co-organized by curators and educators. Of particular importance is that yearly themes for this event are discussed and decided chiefly among curators. Moreover, during the event, objects relevant to the chosen theme are displayed and special events associated with those exhibits are proposed in an effort to better connect visitors with the exhibits. Initially, however, the event was not as comprehensive as it is today; its program and style gradually took shape over the years. Ultimately, this event, I believe, has the same objective as the Asian Gallery’s multilingual effort to provide object labels and explanatory panels in several languages: to enhance visitors’ understanding of Asian cultures.

## **Conclusion**

As a curator of Asian art who has worked in the Education Division of the Tokyo National Museum, I have considered the significance of holding events at the Museum’s Asian Gallery. It essentially concerns the meaning of having a separate building exclusively for exhibiting Asian art in Japan. The existence of such a gallery would suggest that a country’s national museum could not only exhibit art and archaeological artifacts originating in the country, but also provide its domestic visitors an opportunity to think about the connection between their country and others.

In addition, building up the Museum's collection is important from the view point of conservation and utilization of cultural properties. However, these art and archaeological artifacts enter a museum's collection removed from their original contexts, making it difficult for viewers to grasp their backgrounds. This is even more of a problem for objects from other countries as the viewer would have to first try to identify the era and region in an unfamiliar cultural background. In this sense, I believe the event "Journey through Asia at the Tokyo National Museum," during which exhibits and special events mutually supplement each other, is a useful undertaking for fostering understanding of cultures in their entirety and linkages between different cultures.

Owing to our continuous efforts, an increasing number of visitors to the Tokyo National Museum have become more aware of the Asian Gallery in recent years. However, this is not our ultimate goal. Our most important mission is to enhance our visitors' understanding of Asian cultures, and the Tokyo National Museum will continue striving to achieve this objective.