ON OCTOBER 25th, 2019, the Brooklyn Museum unveiled its new gallery for the Arts of Japan after an extended renovation and reinstallation project (1, 2). This represents the second step in a multi-year roll-out of the museum’s galleries for Arts of Asia and the Islamic World, which will eventually occupy most of the museum’s second floor. It opened together with the Arts of China gallery (discussed elsewhere in this issue), two years after the opening of the Arts of Korea gallery in 2017. Galleries for Arts of the Islamic World, Arts of South Asia and Arts of Buddhism, along with smaller spaces for Arts of Southeast Asia and Arts of the Himalayas, will complete the suite in the next few years.

The new Arts of Japan gallery was funded by the friends and family of Leslie L. Beller (1951–2017), a long-time Brooklyn Museum Board member. Beller was an avid fan of Japanese contemporary ceramics and, in fact, of all things Japanese, having lived in Japan for three years. Because of her love for the borough of Brooklyn and her support for the Brooklyn Museum in particular, it felt very fitting to dedicate the gallery to her memory.

Among the Brooklyn Museum’s Asian sub-collections, Japanese art is the largest, in part because of the extensive holdings of 1500 artefacts from the Ainu people of northern Japan, a distinctive feature discussed later in this article.¹ Other strengths of the Japan collection include colour woodblock prints, modern and contemporary ceramics, and folding screens, with one of the museum’s recently discovered treasures discussed by Professor Matthew McKelway elsewhere in this issue.
The new Arts of Japan gallery is actually smaller than its predecessor, but is designed to allow frequent rotations of light-sensitive objects while also maintaining the highest level of quality in the materials displayed. With the opening of the new gallery space, the museum is able to highlight several works from the collection that could not be shown previously due to their fragility and a lack of climate control in the old galleries.

The most important of the objects, making their first appearance in decades, is a pair of folding screens depicting fishnets hanging out to dry on forked poles, among seaside grasses and sandbars (3). The subject matter is not terribly common in Japanese painting, but its visual appeal is readily understood, with the draped nets forming a diaphanous mountain range, punctuated by the verticals of the posts.

Backed by a golden ground and sky, the subject of fishnets recalls a theme adopted from Chinese poetry and painting, *Sunset Glow over a Fishing Village*, from the *Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers*. For the erudite Japanese viewers of the early 17th century, the ghostly golden sails, just visible in the distance, would have recalled another Xiao and Xiang theme, *Sails off Distant Shores*. In addition to this poetic allusion, the screens represent the four seasons when read from right to left, with the short grasses of spring appearing at the far right, growing taller in the summer, brownish slightly and going to seed in autumn in the next screen, and then desiccating completely under a dusting of winter snow at the far left.

This handsome set is unsigned, but it can be attributed to the last years of the Momoyama period, to around 1600. It relates closely to two other pairs of fishnet screens, both depicting the subject in similar, but not identical, compositions and styles, and all unsigned. The most celebrated of the fishnet screens is in the Imperial Household Collection in Tokyo, and was originally part of the collection of the Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto. Because the builder of the villa, Prince Hachijō Toshihito (1579–1629), is known to have commissioned screens for the villa from the artist, Kaitō Yoshō (1533–1615), beginning around 1600, the imperial fishnet screens are usually attributed to that artist. Kaitō Yoshō is better known for ink paintings, many of which survive in the collection of the Zen Buddhist temple,
Kenninji, in Kyoto, but like other talented artists of his time, he was capable of working in many different modes, including the use of gold and colour, to suit the tastes of his varied patrons.

For years, the Brooklyn Museum screens were also attributed to Kaihō Yushō, but today it seems just as likely that they were painted by another artist, possibly for a patron who had admired the fishnets in the imperial villa.\(^4\) In any case, with their flattened forms, contrasted with passages of closely observed plant life, they represent a precursor to screens that Rimpa school artists would create later in the 17th century. The importance of the museum’s fishnet screens was acknowledged by the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (Tobunken) in 1996 when the screens were selected for full conservation treatment in Tokyo. Upon return to the Brooklyn Museum, they were placed in climate-controlled storage until the museum could provide an appropriate display area for them. That time has finally arrived and the screens will be on view in the new gallery until June 2020.

A very different painting, but with possible thematic connections to the fishnet screens, is also on view in the initial installation at the Brooklyn Museum. This is a hanging scroll by Soga Shōhaku (1730–1781), depicting a Chinese-style river landscape in ink on paper (4). Shōhaku is known as an eccentric artist, both for his own behaviour and for the style and subject matter of his paintings. He cited a Muromachi period monk, Soga Jasoku (died 1483), as his teacher and namesake, and he populated his paintings with a cast of glowing sages and grimacing animals, set amidst swirling clouds and oddly angled rock formations. After spending much of his career in the relatively remote area of Ise Province, Shōhaku settled in Kyoto in the early 1770s. While he did not completely reject his wilder subjects in the Kyoto years, he also began to produce a series of landscapes—including the Brooklyn Museum scroll—that contain only subtle hints of his celebrated eccentricity. With their quieter, more conventional themes, these landscapes invite the viewer to admire the artist’s virtuosic brushwork. Their restraint may be the product of a more mature artist, or they may have simply paid the bills, appealing to a less adventurous clientele without sacrificing the artist’s attention to craft.

The Brooklyn Museum landscape is clearly Chinese in inspiration, as filtered through 300 years of Japanese ink painting tradition, including the work of Shōhaku’s titular mentor. However, its dramatic contrasts of light and dark ink, abrupt juxtapositions of curvilinear and angular forms, and the smoky clouds of grey surrounding some passages of foliage, all defy tradition.

Shōhaku occasionally depicted specific Chinese subjects, including a pair of screens dedicated to the Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers, that is now in the Frerer Gallery of Art, and a hanging scroll of the Orchid Pavilion Gathering in the Cleveland Museum of Art. The Brooklyn Museum landscape bears no specific title in the artist’s brief inscription, but its riverine setting invites comparison to the Eight Views. While it omits reference to the more atmospheric themes involving weather, it does include such themes as fishing and distant sails (both seen in the fishnet screens), as well as a formation of birds descending, suggesting another of the Eight Views, Geese Alighting on a Sandy Shore.

Jumping ahead by only a decade or so, but coming from a very different milieu, is a print triptych by Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806), the celebrated Ukiyo-e artist. The triptych depicts courtiers and their entourages outside the Daikokuya teahouse. They are framed by flowering cherry trees that were temporarily planted each year along the main boulevard of the Yoshiwara, or licenced pleasure district, and they wear kimonos appropriate to the season (5). Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this triptych is its condition: the full range of colours remains unfaded, with salmon pink, powder blue, mauve and spring green allowing a glimpse of the brilliance that many late 18th century prints once shared.

The composition belongs to an early phase of Utamaro’s
career, before he began making the subtly emotive bust-length "portraits" of unnamed beauties for which he is best known. With its depiction of clusters of women in carefully rendered fashions, the composition recalls the work of Utamaro's contemporary, Torii Kiyonaga (1752–1815), and indeed at this point the two artists shared a publisher, Tsutaya Jūzaburō (1750–1797). Jūzaburō's first line of business was printing popular guidebooks to the Yoshiwara, which he sold from his shop at the district's entrance. These guidebooks mapped all of the brothels and teahouses, and listed their female employees. Each of the women and girls in the triptych is identified by name and brothel affiliation (a practice found in some of Kiyonaga's prints as well), so these illustrations can be understood as a luxurious addenda to the guidebooks. The triptych is more explicitly an advertisement for the Daikokuya teahouse, which displays its logo on a curtain in the left panel. The teahouse reopened in 1789 following its destruction by fire, so the print may have been designed to celebrate the new quarters of the business.

Naming courtesans in prints would become illegal with the passage of the Kansai reforms in 1790. The reforms targeted publications that dealt with current events (such as the latest brothel rosters) and excessive luxury (as seen in the sumptuous fabrics worn by the courtesans). Scholars associate the Kansai reforms with Utamaro's move toward creating new methods for portrayal of professional women: individuals became generic types and full-length portrayals of fashion finery gave way to close-ups of lovely faces.5

The naming of the women in this print makes it possible to identify its date of manufacture. Turning to Jūzaburō's Yoshiwara guidebooks, scholars have determined that only in 1789 did this group of women hold this variety of positions—high-ranking Oiran, Shinzo apprentices and Kamuro child attendants—at the Ogiya and Waka-matsuya houses.6 A poem written on a tanzaiku poetry strip, hanging from a tree branch in the right panel, is signed by the celebrated hyōka poet, Yadoya Meshimori (later known as Rokujūen, 1753–1830), who had collaborated with Utamaro and his publisher the previous year, contributing text to two of the artist's most celebrated illustrated books: the lovely Crawling Creatures and the erotic Poem of the Pillow. The poet's contribution also helps to date the print, as he was exiled from Edo in 1791 and was not able to return until 1805, just before Utamaro's untimely death.7

The print offers a wealth of information about the Yoshiwara of the late 1780s, and captures much of its touted beauty, refinement and abundance. Not only did the zone offer beautiful women and seasonal festivities, but the poem strip reminds the viewer of the vibrant poetry scene that grew within the teahouses there. All of these qualities would entice an avid clientele to visit the Yoshiwara rather than the city's less expensive, unlicenced pleasure zones.

Standing in sharp contrast to the sumptuous kimonos worn by Utamaro's courtesans—and dating to roughly 100 years later—is a robe made by the Ainu people of northern Japan (6). The Brooklyn Museum houses one of the world's

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5 The Brooklyn Museum screens are closer in style to the third set, which is now in the Sano Museum in Mishima, Japan. The pair is illustrated on the museum's website: http://www.sanobi.or.jp/eng/collection.html. It is tempting to see at least two of the three pairs as having been made as a larger suite, but only the Brooklyn Museum screens have all four seasons represented, suggesting that they were created as a stand-alone pair.


finest holdings of Ainu objects, ranging from carved wood implements, to necklaces of trade beads, to ritual and household objects made from animal skins and bones. The museum gives pride of place to this sub-collection with a large display in the new gallery, offering an important reminder that the art history of Japan is not homogenous, but rather consists of multiple strands, some of which intersected only rarely.

Unusual among Ainu garments, the robe is composed entirely of cotton patchwork, ornamented with silk embroidery. The Ainu people typically wore clothes of a golden-brown fabric, called *attush*, that they made themselves from fibres gathered from native plants. Both cotton and silk were imports, obtained from foreign traders, and were therefore luxury items. When cotton was incorporated on Ainu garments, it was usually used sparingly, to add the signature Ainu spiral motifs and thorny shapes to the cuffs, collars and hems of garments, where they may have served a protective purpose. While the use of cotton for the body of the robe marks it as a deluxe garment, the piecing together of small segments of cotton suggests that no cloth was wasted, and the maker may well have employed fabric from second-hand garments or home furnishings.

The robe illustrated was brittle and soiled, and had not been on view for several decades, until it received conservation treatment in 2015 as part of a textile assessment project funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The bulk of the Brooklyn Museum Ainu collection arrived in 1912, having been compiled by the Reverend John Batchelor (1855–1954), who lived among the Ainu for years; or by Frederick Starr (1858–1933), who organised an Ainu display for the St. Louis Exposition of 1904; or by the museum’s first Curator of Ethnography, Stewart Culin (1858–1929), who purchased the two collections for the museum, but also acquired select items directly from Ainu communities during his visit to Hokkaido in 1912. This robe does not have firm documentation to any of those three sources, but even if it did not come through the 1912 gifts there is a good chance that it entered the museum during Culin’s lengthy tenure.

Just as Brooklyn has long distinguished itself from other art museums with its collection of Ainu material, the museum was also groundbreaking in its collecting of ceramics by living Japanese artists. Now a vital and vibrant element of most Japanese collections in American art museums, contemporary Japanese ceramics were only just coming to the forefront in the 1970s, when curator Robert Moes began to acquire pieces by artists, such as Kawai Kanjiro (1890–1966) and Hamada Shōji (1894–1978). Moes was interested in the Japanese *Mingei* movement, in which Kawai and Hamada, along with Yanagi Soetsu (1889–1961), the movement’s founder, promoted appreciation for the simple beauty of certain everyday arts handmade by unnamed craftsmen. Moes acquired a strong collection of Japanese folk arts during his tenure, and curated an exhibition on the subject in 1985. In his pursuit of living potters (who were definitely not unnamed), he began with those inspired

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8 Robert Moes, *Mingei: Japanese Folk Art*, New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1985. The Mingei founders were particularly fond of Korean art, so it is perhaps not a surprise that the Brooklyn Museum acquired many important Korean pieces on Moes’ watch as well.
5 Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806), *Courtesans Strolling Beneath Cherry Trees Before the Daikokuya Teahouse*, Japan, Edo period, probably 1789, woodblock print triptych, colour on paper, each 39.1 x 26.4 cm. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Estate of Charles A. Brandon, by exchange; purchased with funds given by Mr and Mrs Richard M. Danziger, Joan Easton, Mrs Myron S. Falk, Jr., George S. Friedman, Mr and Mrs Mark Kingdon, Klaus F. Naumann, Robert Rosenkranz, and Mr and Mrs David Young and Asian Art Acquisition Fund, 1996.137a-c

6 Man’s robe, Northern Japan, Ainu culture, 19th century, cotton and silk, 140 x 131 cm. Brooklyn Museum, 12.751
by the Mingei movement and then moved on to collect other masters. Amy G. Poster, his successor, kept up the momentum, collecting major sculptural ceramic works in the 1990s and early 2000s. Today, the museum continues to acquire, with donations from several generous collectors as well as strategic purchases.

A major gift, donated to the museum by Joan B. Mirviss in memory of Leslie Beller, her close friend, is an oversized tsubo vessel by the Kyoto artist, Yanagihara Mutsuo, dating to 1998 or 1999 (7). While many ceramic objects shown in the Brooklyn Museum installation were made at traditional kiln sites or represent forms appropriate to the tea ceremony, this piece belongs to a group that is far more international in style. Many people associate Japanese aesthetics with restraint, but Yanagihara’s body of work flies in the face of those expectations. With its massive physical presence, curvaceous body perched on a tiny foot, bold surface patterns painted in metallics, and deeply dipping front lip, the vessel might even be said to take things too far, but that is precisely the artist's intent, challenging notions of seriousness in a body of work that is sometimes erotic, sometimes brashly pop, and always fiercely original.

Yanagihara is part of a generation of Japanese ceramicists—along with Morino Taimi (born 1934), Maeda Masahiro (born 1948), and others—who rediscovered and embraced surface decoration. The generation preceding them, many engaged with the Sodeisha movement of sculptural ceramics, had often eschewed surface embellishment as one of several tactics to distance their work from the domain of Decorative Arts. But once the groundwork had been laid by his predecessors, Yanagihara could produce works that would be recognised as sculptural while also drawing on a full repertoire of decorative techniques.

To round out the offering of landscape paintings on view while also giving space to more contemporary sensibilities, the museum is pleased to present a new acquisition, Falling Water, a 2012 painting by Senju Hiroshi (8). Born in Japan and trained in Nikko (traditional forms of Japanese painting), Senju now divides his time between Japan and New York and his work spans traditions as well. He paints landscapes of mountains and misty forests, but he is best known for his waterfalls. Senju has developed a distinctive technique for representing falling and splashing water: onto a single-colour ground of paper he pours and sprays a very diluted variant on the traditional Japanese white pigment known as gofun (crushed minerals and shell or coral, mixed with an animal-hide glue). The waterfall paintings recall photographs, with their apparent capture of a split second of vision, and historical ink paintings, with their masterful manipulation of a single colour to portray the beauty of a natural phenomenon. However, with their blank ground and brushless application of pigment, they also belong to the realm of Colour Field painting, especially recalling the work of Morris Lewis. Senju’s paintings manage to have both beautiful surfaces—powdery from the spray of gofun—and considerable depth from the illusion of overlapping rivulets and mist.10

One of the fresh features of the museum’s new Arts of Asia galleries, discussed at greater length in the articles in this issue by Dr Susan L. Beningson, is the presence of modern and contemporary art. As noted above, ceramics by living Japanese artists have long been a part of the gallery displays, but 20th and 21st century paintings and sculpture are a new addition. As an institution with a very active contemporary art programme and strong social justice mission, the Brooklyn Museum did not introduce modern and contemporary art into the Asian galleries without considerable deliberation about how that art would function.

Obviously the primary intent in showing 20th and 21st century art in the Asian galleries is to show that art making remains a vital part of the regions represented. One question is whether the objects shown should continue the narratives presented by the earlier objects on view. The majority of the objects chosen for the initial installation make reference to the materials, styles and subject matters of historical Asian arts, and therefore engage in a relatively easy dialogue with their neighbours in the gallery. In this, the display is decidedly not radical. However, moving forward, the museum hopes to show other contemporary works of art that will be more jarring when juxtaposed with older objects. To do so will highlight the radical break that took place worldwide in the 20th century, when artists looked to new forms and approaches that their forebears would not have recognised. Showing a broad swath of contemporary art will also avoid sending a message that some works of art are more “quintessentially Asian” than others. The curators are also very aware that some artists are not comfortable being shown as “Asian artists”, so it is a curatorial policy to check with artists prior to including their objects in galleries dedicated to Asian art.

It is an exciting time at the Brooklyn Museum as the
new galleries open with recent discoveries on view. This author looks forward to a time when she can write a similar article about the Arts of South Asia gallery. In the meantime, the paintings and other light-sensitive materials in the current galleries will be changed on a regular basis, so all are encouraged to visit soon, and frequently.
