

# Teaching American Art in East Asia

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Teaching American art in East Asia presents an array of challenges for a non-U.S. based art historian, including a daunting lack of resources and the need to invent new approaches that inspire the interests of students. I was trained for a dozen years in the United States as a historian of American art and have been teaching Korean, Chinese, and Japanese students in East Asia ever since. For more than nine years, I have been teaching American and modern art at Wonkwang University in South Korea, which has a total of 25,000 students (Figure 1). During the academic year of 2008–09, I had an opportunity to teach American art history as a visiting professor in the Graduate School of American Studies at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan. Before my teaching in Japan, I was also appointed as honorary visiting professor at Yanbian University in Yanji, China, in 2006 and 2007, where I gave lectures on American interactions with East Asian art and culture. My students in Korea are mostly Koreans, with some Chinese students and college professors enrolled in the master's and doctoral program. In China, students were almost evenly split between Chinese and Korean. In Japan, about two-thirds of the graduate students enrolled in my classes were Japanese with the rest being mostly Chinese, thus making me known as “the Korean professor teaching American art to Japanese and Chinese students in English.”

Globalization has made American popular culture widely available to many of my students, but has had little impact on their access to basic information about the history of American art. Challenges in teaching have included responding to their varying understandings or degrees of knowledge about American visual culture, meeting student interests that are mostly different from those of their American counterparts, exploring themes and



1. Professor Eunyoung Cho teaching an undergraduate class on American art in September 2009 at Wonkwang University, Iksan, South Korea.

critical issues that resonate with the students' goals, and developing alternative methodologies to meet their specific needs, as well as fitting this subject into the curriculum of each undergraduate and graduate school and dealing with the lack of interest on the part of other art historians.

The most immediate challenge concerns textbooks, or the lack of them. Several decades have passed since Western art history courses were first included in college curricula in Korea and Japan, and more recently in China. In most courses, "Western" means "European," and almost all of the Western art texts being used in classrooms represent European art, with American art usually appearing on the scene in the twentieth century, particularly post-World War II.

The majority of students do not feel comfortable reading English texts. While a good number of books on modern and contemporary American art now exist in translation, there are very few texts available covering American art of the pre-modern era in Korea and China, and only a few more in Japan. One survey book of American art translated in Korean, for instance, was first published in 1958 at the behest of the United States Information Service, an overseas branch of the United States Information Agency (USIA). James T. Flexner's *The Pocket History of American Painting* was published by the Korean Ministry of Education and distributed to many academic institutions. My search for library holdings shows that the Japanese and Chinese translations of Flexner's book were also published in Tokyo in 1955 and in

Taiwan in 1959.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. government launched a series of projects to promote the distribution of knowledge about American art and culture in East Asia. In Korea, between the Korean War and 1966, the U.S. Information Service commissioned the translation of 412 books on American politics, society, and culture, but American art was not its priority.<sup>2</sup> Since then, no Korean-language survey books of American art covering the pre-modern era have appeared, whereas a couple of Japanese editions have been published. In Japan, after Flexner's book, a translation of Abraham Davidson's *The Story of American Painting* (1974) became available in 1976 along with several books on American art and antiques written by Japanese authors.<sup>3</sup>

Even if they could be translated, the challenge concerning existing texts of American art is that they were written mainly from Western/American-centered perspectives, paying little attention to the readers in the "other" world who may have differing viewpoints and little knowledge of American history and culture. Thus, teaching American art to non-English-speaking Asian students using instructors' direct translations of American texts does not necessarily meet the interests of students. I prefer a combination of lecture notes, selected readings, and visual images over any particular American art textbook. This methodology has some merit; however, many students, both undergraduate and graduate, do express difficulty in approaching American art without texts and internet resources in their own languages. American art survey textbooks suitable for non-Western students with little or very basic knowledge of U.S. history and culture need to be developed.

In addition to the difficulties encountered in teaching American art without suitable textbooks, instructors confront the lack of visual and textual resources. Thanks to the digitization of archival materials and availability of online databases, the situation is improving. However, access to electronic journals and resources is limited at many academic institutions in East Asia, and their library holdings for American art are dismal in comparison with those in the United States. I personally purchase almost all of the books on American art necessary for my research and teaching and lend them to students who are willing to read English. I may be the only academic in Korea who subscribes to the journal *American Art*, and the only university to do likewise has a library supported by the U.S. Embassy in Korea. As for visual resources, the majority of students in Northeast Asia have not had an opportunity to "pay their respects" in person to an Eakins or a Copley, Bierstadt, Homer, or Ryder. Traveling exhibition programs supported by American museums, including the Smithsonian art museums, with their well-advertised policy—"if you do not visit us, we will visit you"—seem to be aimed mainly at the domestic audience.

We did have and still do have traveling shows of American art in East Asia. Just recently, in 2007, the exhibition *Art in America: 300 Years of Innovation*, launched by

the Guggenheim Museum and the Terra Foundation for American Art, introduced a large number of Chinese people to the history and themes of American art. Art exhibitions have proven to be excellent means not only for cross-cultural communications and mutual understanding among nations, but also for furthering political, diplomatic, and economic gains in an international society. In the past in East Asia, the USIA played a significant role in encouraging artistic and scholarly exchanges to bridge gaps between cultures as part of American foreign policy. During the post-war and Cold War years between 1952–65, the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, with collaboration from USIA, organized or supported more than 150 traveling exhibitions with venues covering five continents. More than half of these tours were organized for Europe as well as Central and South America, and 21 exhibitions were aimed at East Asia.<sup>4</sup> A good portion of them were sent to Japan, which was undergoing a rapid transformation from being America's enemy to an indispensable ally after the war.

One of the first exhibitions organized for an East Asian tour was *Eight American Artists* (1957), which included four of the so-called Northwest Coast artists, known for their keen interest in and appropriation of Asian art and ideas. About 30 works by Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan, and Guy Anderson were represented in this show, which toured first in South Korea and Japan and then in the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that the USIA did not select America's great landscapes or Westward Ho! expansion images illustrating manifest destiny, or the new "heroic and masculine" "American type" paintings of Abstract Expressionists, suitable for representing America's power in the new world order as well as endorsing the "exceptional" characteristics of American art. Instead, it chose these Pacific Coast/Seattle-area artists, who were, more or less, shunned by the mainstream New York art world owing to their multicultural tastes and "unmasculine," "mystical," "meditative," and Japanesque or Asianesque characteristics. Commenting on the purpose of this exhibition, *Time* magazine predicted that the artists would be welcomed in the "Far East" because of their Orientalism, mysticism, and calligraphic style—listing, ironically, the very elements for which they were undervalued in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

The United States was not the only country that employed art exhibitions to foster communications between cultures and support its foreign policy goals after World War II. Japan also attempted to replace its jingoistic image with an aesthetic one through its art exhibitions in the United States, often in tandem with American endeavors to create and circulate in various areas a new, agreeable image of Japan, which was becoming a valuable partner in the Cold War.<sup>7</sup> After the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, the Japanese government, in collaboration with the United

States, organized *The Exhibition of Japanese Paintings and Sculpture* in 1953, with venues in Washington, DC, New York, Seattle, Chicago, and Boston. In the following year, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, a traditional Japanese house and garden show entitled *House in the Garden*, as well as a Japanese calligraphy exhibition, were great successes, instrumental in the “Japan boom” in the United States that developed by the mid-1950s, remarkably soon after the war. In a similar context, after the Korean War, the Korean government, with U.S. support, sent the exhibition *Masterpieces of Korean Art* to eight American cities from New York to Honolulu in 1957–58 in an effort to convey the impression of a culture possessing strong artistic traditions stretching back thousands of years. Major Chinese exhibitions in the United States included a traditional Chinese painting show at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1954 and a series of exhibitions launched after President Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China and Deng Xiaoping’s 1979 trip to America.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, in contrast to the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean exhibitions, which stressed their long-standing tradition and history, U.S. art exhibitions in East Asia, with few exceptions, invariably dealt with post-1940 art demonstrating American freedom and diversity, thus unintentionally causing Asian students to conceptualize the art of the United States as having a shorter history than it actually has.

The intrinsic merit of American visual culture established on American soil is often questioned once it crosses native borders. Most students show great interest in American art beginning in the 1940s, but considerably less in art prior to early American modernism and even less in anything before the Hudson River School. Before my study in a master’s program in the United States in the late 1980s, I had received another master’s degree in the field of modern art in Seoul, where I studied under Korean professors who were Sorbonne graduates specializing in French art. Such painters as John Singleton Copley, Thomas Cole, or Winslow Homer were never mentioned in classes. Art history students had spent U.S. dollar bills with George Washington’s portrait but were unfamiliar with Gilbert Stuart. The situation has seen little change in Korea over the past 20 years. A couple of instructors might include Thomas Eakins and Mary Cassatt in their teaching of modern art, and a few more professors might discuss Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Edward Hopper. In my experience, having discussions on pre-1940 American art occurs more often while conversing with those in the field of American studies than in histories of Western art.

The Association of Historians of Western Art in Korea, of which I am a member, is composed of three divisions: art theory and criticism; art up to the eighteenth century; and modern and contemporary art (for which I have been serving as the chair from 2007 to 2011). We hold nationwide conferences and international

symposiums three times a year, but proposals for pre-1940 American art are rare. This situation is largely due to the fact that Korean scholars trained in France, Germany, and Italy constitute the majority in the field who are studying art history up to the 1930s, while those trained in the United States focus mainly on contemporary art. The lack of American art texts published in Korean, of course, is another contributing factor. But the door is open, and scholars and students have been encouraged to present and publish papers on American art in the context of art history, visual culture, and transcultural studies. Moving beyond academia, I try to accommodate invitations for public lectures on American art and to cover pre-World War II American art. For most of those in an audience, it is their first time ever hearing details about the subject.

As for the students, they tend to approach American art more as a means to understanding the United States and its people and culture than for its aesthetic aspects. They find subject matter raising issues of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, cultural encounters, and identity to be most appealing. During my school years in South Korea in the 1980s, seminar discussions about American art concentrated on several selected issues and began with Ben Shahn and Social Realism, in which we found parallels to Korea's political turmoil and social predicaments at that time. Such an approach and correspondences still hold appeal. Asian students' responses to American art may differ to a varying degree depending on their own interests and goals as well as mirror their respective countries' shifting relations with the United States. The needs of students of each Asian country determine how U.S. art is perceived and defined. I have been tailoring my teaching to the specific demands of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese students by skimming through art of the antebellum period to elaborate on late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century art and by engaging them with artists, themes, and issues reflecting the multiracial and multicultural facets of America.

For my undergraduate courses at Wonkwang University, I incorporate American art history from the colonial period to the present into the six-semester histories of Western art courses. I also teach completely different classes for the M.A. program, the Ph.D. program, and the teachers college graduate program. I have been offering courses to discuss subject matter and issues that resonate with their interests. In Japan, at Doshisha University, I adopted a similar, yet broader approach and methodology as the graduate student body was a mix of students of differing nationalities who were majoring in American studies (Figure 2).<sup>9</sup> Few had ever taken an art history course, but these students had a solid background in American and cultural studies consisting of classes, international conferences, and lecture programs.

In order to elaborate on the kind of themes generally covered in art history



2. American art class at Doshisha University during a field trip in May 2008 to Ho-o-do Temple in Uji, near Kyoto, on which the Japanese building, Ho-o-den, at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago was modeled.

classes, I will outline here the contents of two of my syllabi for Doshisha University. Written in English, these syllabi were developed in 2007 for the 2008 academic year because the university printed them in advance for students. As the students had practically no background in American art, I offered several kinds of courses.

The first was a twentieth-century American art course. I divided it into one part covering the 1880s to 1930s, and another from the 1940s to the present. This class was essentially an introduction to the history of American modern art with references to its European counterparts. I took a general chronological and thematic approach, focusing on historical, social, and cultural developments in a global context through a discussion of key artists, major movements, and critical issues such as the making of a national identity and style; the construction of “American type” paintings and canon; the tensions of class, gender, and race in American art scenes; and the issues of globalization, localization, and glocalization.

The two other courses I offered in Japan received a more enthusiastic response from the student body. “American Interactions with Japanese Art and Culture,” a version of which I still offer in Korea, covers American interchanges with East Asian art and ideas in a broader context. This class deals with American interest in Asian art as well as America’s conflicting attitudes toward Asia as manifested in U.S. popular culture and various fields of the arts between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Developed from the topics of my papers published in Korean over the last



10 years, the course traces the various aspects of the reception and appropriation of Asian art and culture in American production, including American Japonisme, early American modernism, the Pacific Coast artists, Abstract Expressionism, and Fluxus. It discusses these subjects in the light of race and gender issues, cultural politics, critical perception, and reception of Japanese/Chinese art as well as Japan's nationalistic philosophical and religious ideas, anti-Asian sentiments, and American nationalist tendencies during and after the war. The tentative schedule printed in the 2007 syllabi booklet of Doshisha University shows:<sup>10</sup>

*Week 1. Introduction*

*Week 2. The American Encounter with Japan*

*Week 3. Japanese Participation in Creating Japonisme*

*Week 4. Imaging Cultural and Racial Others: American Perceptions of Japan and East Asia*

*Week 5. Myth-makers*

*Week 6. American Japonisme in Visual Arts and Popular Culture*

*Week 7. Images of Japanese Women in High Art and Low Art*

*Week 8. Japanizing the American Feminine Ideal*

*Week 9. Interpreting the Use of Japanese Fashion by American Women as Portrayed in American Paintings*

*Week 10. Early American Modernist Perceptions and Use of Japanese Art and Ideas*

*Week 11. Institutional Zen Buddhism in American Art and Culture*

*Week 12. Marginalizing Mark Tobey and the so-called "Northwest School"*

*Week 13. Anti-Japanese/Asian Sentiments in American Modernism*

*Week 14. After the 1950s*

The other course I offered in Japan is "Asian American Art," an introduction to the diverse themes, aspects, and issues of Asian American visual art, artists, and artistic production, in particular, of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Americans. Various forms of visual arts made by and about Asian Americans are discussed within the context of transnational Asian American histories, cultures, and identities. Some of the topics include: Orientalist prejudices and stereotypes of Asians in Hollywood and the mass media; the re/creation of history and memory; the politics of Asian American production and reception; the impact of Asian American art on the canon of American modernism; and the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality.<sup>11</sup> The tentative schedule of lectures for this course, as printed in the 2007 Doshisha University pamphlet, follows:

- Week 1. Introduction*
- Week 2. Picturing Chinatown*
- Week 3. Picturing Asian Women: Geishas and Dragon Ladies*
- Week 4. Madame Butterfly versus M. Butterfly*
- Week 5. Asians at the World's Fairs of the Turn of the 20th Century*
- Week 6. Representing the "Yellow Peril"*
- Week 7. Stereotypes of Asian American Men: American Media Images*
- Week 8. Performing the Asian Stereotypes in American Popular Culture*
- Week 9. Documenting Japanese American Internment Camps*
- Week 10. Visual Art: Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Isamu Noguchi*
- Week 11. Visual Art: Minorities in American Mainstream Art Scenes*
- Week 12. Issues of Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity: Yoko Ono and Hung Liu*
- Week 13. Issues of Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity II: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Yong Soon Min, Tomie Arai, Hanh Thi Pham*
- Week 14. Contemporary Asian American Artists*

In my experience, teaching American art on the other side of the globe requires reframing American art in order to underline its universality and its applicability to all cultures. At the same time, we must also balance that with its Americanness and try to avoid either an American or Asian-centered point of view.

This effort to maintain equilibrium between universality and Americanness, however, is at times questioned: as we locate American art in a global context, should we also reexamine it in the context of "glocalization"? By glocalization, I mean a co-presence of "globalization" and "localization," a historical process whereby each locality or indigenous culture bridges the global and local, and thus develops a cultural relationship to the global system against the global onslaught of global capitalism, ideology, media, and network identities. For a Korean professor teaching American art histories to Korean, Japanese, and Chinese students in East Asia in either the mother tongue or English, is it effective to adopt wholesale the methodologies and curricula of an Americanist in the United States? Should an Asian historian of American art teaching in Asia "Asianize" American art or, more specifically, "Koreanize," "Japanize," or "Chinize" the subject, tailoring it to the sensibilities of the students located in their respective cultures and societies? For instance, discussions on Asian-American art within the context of transnational Asian-American histories, cultures, and identities, as done in universities in the United States, may not work in individual Asian countries that do not support a pan-Asian concept. For many Asian students, Asian Americans do not exist; instead, there are only Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, and so forth.

Teaching American art in East Asia invites some significant revisions in the canon of American art history and reallocations of “major” and “minor” artists currently engraved in and out of the mainstream. Most Asian students show little interest in the American construction of the histories of American art, but demonstrate much more interest in a reinterpretation of American art that caters to modern Asian experiences and issues. These questions have caused me to reflect on and understand the reasons why American organizations, including Christian missions, have changed their strategies over the recent years concerning Asia and have been increasing their efforts to cultivate native emissaries in tandem with sending American counterparts trained in each society’s language and culture. Is it not due time for us to develop alternative methodologies for approaching American art in this era of globalization and glocalization?

## Notes

1. Flexner’s text was published by Pocket Books, New York, in English in 1950 and printed simultaneously by Houghton Mifflin Company under the title *A Short History of American Painting*. A book covering modern American art, John I. H. Baur’s *Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1951) was translated and published in Japan in 1954 and in Korea in 1958 at the commission of the U.S. Information Service.
2. See Young-Na Kim, *Korean Art of the Twentieth Century* (in Korean) (Seoul: Yekyong, 2001), 217–19.
3. Flexner’s *A Short History of American Painting* was translated by Kiyomi Morimoto and printed by Arechi Syuppansha in Tokyo in 1955 (175 pages). Davidson’s book was co-translated by Sumio Kuwabara and Michiyo Kuwabara and published by PARCO Syuppanyoku in 1976 (166 pages). Japanese university library holdings show four American art survey books written by Japanese authors: Ryohei Nakamura, *Amerika no Bijyutsu* [American Art] (Tokyo: Toa Syuppansha, 1947), 206 pages with 12 illustrations; Koji Ichida, *Amerika no Bijyutsu, Kotto* [American Art and Antiques] (Tokyo: Yuhosha, 1975), 243 pages with 17 illustrations; and *Amerika Bijyutsu Hatten shi* [The History of Development of American Art] (Tokyo: Ichimai no e, 1982), 253 pages with 19 illustrations. Sumio Kuwabara, one year after his translation of Davidson’s book, published his own book, *Amerika Kaiga no Keifu* [Genealogy of American Paintings] (Tokyo: Bijyutsu Syuppansha, 1977), 176 pages with 24 illustrations.
4. The Museum of Modern Art, *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: At Home and Abroad* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 143. Seven of the 21 shows were organized during the period between 1952 and 1960, and the other 14 shows between 1961 and 1965.
5. Ten sculptures by Rhys Caparn, David Hare, Seymour Lipton, and Ezio Martinelli were also included.
6. “Contemporaries Abroad,” *Time* 70 (22 July 1957): 56.
7. See Naoko Shibusawa, *American’s Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
8. Chinese shows in the United States included, for instance, the touring exhibition of Taiwan’s National Museum collection in 1962; *Beyond the Great Wall of China* (1973); *New Visions of Classical China* (1974); and an exhibition of Chin dynasty art and artifacts (1979).
9. The students were all master’s students. There is no general coursework requirement for doctoral students at Doshisha University as it has adopted a European system.
10. I later revised some of the content for the actual classes I taught at Doshiha, but followed the main frame of the syllabi I had prepared. *Graduate School of American Studies 2008 Bulletin*, Doshisha University, 32–33.
11. *Ibid.*, 36–37.