CHAPTER ELEVEN

TREASURES OF THE NATION: JAPANESE PAINTINGS IN THE FINE ARTS PALACE

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INTRODUCTION

The official report of the Japan-British Exhibition, published in 1911 several months after the close of the Exhibition, singled out the display of Japanese arts in the Fine Art Palace in order to acknowledge the popularity of this section:

One of the greatest attractions of the Exhibition proved to be the Japanese Fine Arts section. Never before, not even in Japan, and of course not in any foreign country, has there been brought together for public exhibition so comprehensive and magnificent a collection of the masterpieces of Japanese art as was arranged by the imperial Japanese Commission at the Japan-British Exhibition.¹

The passage succinctly reflected the enthusiastic reviews published in newspapers and journals as soon as the Exhibition opened in May 1910. Amongst the diverse array of Japan-related attractions in the White City complex, including the Japanese gardens, Ainu village, sumo wrestlers, and the display of historical scenes with realistic human figures, what aroused the most favourable intellectual curiosity from the art historians and the British public was the display of Japanese ‘Retrospective’ Art in the Fine Arts Palace. The grandiose white marble building with a domed roof was a purpose-built exhibition hall constructed two years earlier for the Franco-British Exhibition in 1908 (Figure 15). In 1910, half of the building was used for the display of British art while the other half was allocated to the Japanese art specially brought over from Japan for the occasion. Carefully selected works of art were displayed in separate rooms divided into six categories drawn from the ‘ancient’ (kodai) art of painting, sculpture, architectural models, metal works, lacquer, and the

contemporary painting which was subdivided into Nihonga (Japanese style painting) and Yōga (Western style painting) (Figure 16). It is evident from the large number of reviews published that what impressed the British audience most was the fine antique paintings, depicting serene Buddhist deities and exuberant genre scenes which were little known in the West previously. This essay aims to analyse the contents of the painting section in order to clarify the intention of the Japanese selection committee, and considers the impact of the Exhibition on the perception of Japanese art, and in extension the image of Japan, in Britain.

**Japan in Britain: Pre-1910 Perception of Japanese Art**

The British knowledge about Japanese art was mostly confined to the decorative export porcelain and lacquer objects that adorned palaces and country houses until the early nineteenth century, but by the time the Japan-British Exhibition was held in London in 1910, the awareness about Japan and some aspects of Japanese art had already proliferated to the general public through the series of international expositions held in quick succession in the second half of the nineteenth century both in Europe and the United States. A small number of Japanese artefacts had already been displayed in the Great Exhibition of 1851, and a substantially