CHAPTER TWELVE

JAPANESE FINE ART IN THE 1910 JAPAN-BRITISH EXHIBITION

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Among the programmes sold to NHK was, of course, Sir Kenneth Clark's famous 'Civilization' series. The very fine conversion of this series into Japanese and local presentation was of particular importance to me. I had met Sir Kenneth in Japan some time previously and, for a week, filmed him in the temples, museums and gardens of Kyoto for a programme he would be doing for British viewers. He had been invited over by the Japanese government. Wherever we went to film he was a VIP and treated with great respect for his deep knowledge about the art treasures brought out for him to see – although it was his first visit to Japan, I came to admire him greatly and we got along well. Over lunch one day I put to him the question of when, where and how his interest germinated to turn him into such a great scholar on Japanese art. His answer astounded me: 'Whenever I'm asked that, my answer is "At the British-Japanese Exhibition of 1910 at White City."' Father had done it.1

As Yōnosuke Ian Mutsu (1907–2002) recollected, some art historians and artists visited the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition in London and were impressed with its exhibits and pavilions. First, impressions raised their consciousness, and these later bloomed in their aesthetics. Sir Kenneth Clark (1903–1983) was only seven years old at the time, but his childhood memories were evidently intense and lasting. Yōnosuke Ian Mutsu, the son of Count Mutsu Hirokichi (1869–1942), visited the Exhibition at the age of three. Hirokichi was charge d'affaires at the Japanese Embassy, London, when the idea of the Japan-British Exhibition was first proposed.

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and later he was released from Embassy duties to become the Japanese Commissioner General in charge of the whole Exhibition.

This essay, which initially began as an investigation into the fine art exhibits of the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition, developed into a discussion of Japan’s art administration in the late Meiji era. The incentive to reinvestigate the Japan-British Exhibition as crucial in the history of International Exhibitions came through analysis of the importance of the formation of national identity and the formation of Japanese art history.

There are three critical characteristics of the art section of the Japan-British Exhibition that need to be analysed. These are:

1) The abundance of Japanese old fine arts, thirty-three national treasures, was the largest number exhibited at any international exhibition to that date in which Japan participated. In addition, all of the works were transported from Japan, rather than being borrowed from European collectors, which had hitherto been the norm.

2) This was the first international exhibition held after the foundation of the Bunten (Ministry of Education Fine Arts Exhibition) in 1907. The Bunten functioned as a preliminary to, or audition for, the Japan-British Exhibition.

3) The painter’s participation in spectacle as a scenery designer was an example of the mixture between high and low art in the Meiji era.

1. Old Fine Arts and National Treasures from Japan

The 1910 Japan-British Exhibition was the largest exposition of Japanese art at any international exhibition up to that time. Its Japanese Fine Art Section included 1,138 old fine art works – 33 of them national treasures – and 263 modern and contemporary works of art. Importantly, whereas other international exhibitions borrowed art works from international collectors, all the 1910 exhibits were loaned from Japan. As Lawrence Binyon described it, this was a presentation of ‘treasures quite beyond price’.²

As Dr Ono Ayako pointed out in her book Bi-no Kōryū: Igirisu no Japonisumu (Exchange of Beauty: Japonisme in Britain),³ Japonisme in Britain was matured by exhibitions, against the background of the emergence of the ‘aestheticism movement’ to a middle class audience.

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² ‘Fine Arts at the Japan-British Exhibition’, The Times, 2 November 1909.
³ Ono, Ayako, Bi-no Kōryū: Igirisu no Japonisumu (Exchange of Beauty: Japonisme in Britain), Gihō-do Shuppan, 2008.