NATIONALLY NAKED? THE FEMALE NUDE IN JAPANESE OIL PAINTING AND POSTERS (1890s-1920s)

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Introduction

Nude painting was appropriated by Japanese elites in the late nineteenth century as part of the canon of modern Western knowledge they were eager to master. The academic genre of the nude appeared significant to them precisely as it was beginning to lose its significance for European art; incidentally, this lag put Japanese male artists on a par with European women artists. What the latter had been denied by academism, the former were about to discover at a time when the independence of their country was in danger. Accordingly, the Japanese study of European art was closely tied to issues of nationality. Until the early twentieth century, Japanese painters as well as their fellow countrymen positioned oil painting nationally as non-Japanese (in the sense of “non-native” or “non-traditional”) and, paradoxically, at the same time utilized it in the process of creating a modern national culture. The genre of nude painting attracted attention mainly in two respects: on the one hand, regarding the capability of the medium of oil painting to realistically render corporeality and, by means of that, suggest the actual reality of the new nation; on the other hand, regarding the power of fine art to transform the image of a naked body, that is, nature, into the carrier of profound meanings, in other words, culture. The depiction of naked female bodies within the framework of fine art allowed, among other things, for a visibilization of national accomplishments, especially with respect to modernization. Assigning such value to the nude, however, did not necessarily result in a visually discernible nationality.

As I am well aware of the amount of convincing analyses published by art historians about the correlation between academic nude painting and gender, I will focus less on representations of female bodies rather than on how female bodies mediated representations of nationality. Concentrating on Japanese oil paintings and posters
I will pursue under what circumstances pictorial presentations of Japanese bodies looked Japanese, and what invited viewers to “read” them as particularly Japanese (and not more generally as Asian, for example). This investigation is underpinned by a cultural as well aesthetic interest. Without leaning heavily upon the exceptional traditions of European art, the academic nude cannot be appropriated, a fact which is conversely illuminated by the tendency of all anti-European cultural claims to refuse the nude. Yet, as the case of modern Japan reveals, nationality is not always visible: early nudes appear in European disguise. Theoretically, this relates to aesthetics as a practice of mediation, first and foremost, between historic discourses and individual experiences. While such a perspective allows for a consideration of visualities—in relation to tactility on the one hand and symbolization on the other—it also draws attention to ambiguities, or the co-existence of different positions. Consequently, the various impacts of nude painting are to be considered as much in regard to intercultural as intracultural power relations. Representing the nation abroad by means of this genre differed fundamentally from similar endeavors at home in Japan where (male) elites appreciated nude paintings in “secret” rooms, while the more ordinary person (male and female alike) enjoyed posters in quotidian interiors. This essay concentrates on what happened within Japan and, therefore, refrains from highlighting, for example, the so-called “Yokohama photographs” which were mainly produced for pleasure-seeking foreigners.

In tune with this anthology’s focus on the late-19th to early-20th century, the two cornerstones of my discussion are a western-style nude painted in 1893 and two years later the subject of a famous scandal, as well as a no less famous photographic poster featuring a semi-nude: Kuroda Seiki’s (1866-1924) Chōshō (Morning Toilet, Figure 10.1) and the Akadama Port Wine Poster by what was then Kotobukiya, today the Suntory company (1922; fig. 10.12). Representing a case of implicit “Japaneseness,” the first serves as the main example in Section 1, where I foreground how the universalizing which is characteristic of the academic nude correlated with local conditions in Japan. Remaining in the realm of painting, Section 2 explores the shift which occurred from the 1910s onwards: from utilizing the female nude in order to achieve a modern male agency and, as part of that, equality with European men, to deploying the genre for the