

Review Article:

Should Museums Welcome Parody?

Lords of the Samurai: The Legacy of a Daimyo Family. San Francisco Museum of Asian Art, 2009

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The twenty-fifth object in the catalog *Lords of the Samurai: The Legacy of a Daimyo Family* is a black and dark blue suit of armor from Japan. Worn by Hosokawa Morihisa (1839-1893) during the tumultuous period of Japan's modern revolution, the piece serves as a powerful symbol of the changing fortunes of the samurai leaders known as *daimyō* (variously translated as warlord, feudal lord, or domain lord) in Japanese history. Morihisa was born into the Hosokawa house that ruled a large domain on the southern island of Kyushu. In the old sociopolitical order of the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), Morihisa would have become the feudal lord of this realm on the death or retirement of his father; instead, with the Meiji Restoration of 1868, he became a member of the modern aristocracy, eventually serving as governor of Kumamoto Prefecture and receiving the title of Marquis. In his lifetime, therefore, this imposing suit covered in wrinkled leather and with silver-coated tassets was transformed from a tool of military leadership to a historical relic, not unlike the samurai themselves.

Encountering the social biographies of art and historical objects is of course one of the great joys of perusing an exhibition catalog such as *Lords of the Samurai*, which is richly illustrated and well organized. Painted historical portraits going as far back as the sixteenth century put faces to otherwise obscure historical names. Samurai clothing, swords, matchlocks, and battle regalia remind us of the physicality and materiality of war in Japanese history. Paintings and calligraphy informed by Chinese literature, centuries of Japanese poetry, and religious movements such as Zen Buddhism help illustrate samurai interest in diverse visual and literary products. And the opulent selection of ceramics, lacquerware, textiles, and other objects associated with still influential practices such as tea (*chanoyu*) and the Noh theater demonstrate the key role that warrior leaders played as patrons and practitioners of culture.

The catalog includes a number of essays as well.

First is a short but compelling set of musings by the Japanese art historian Takeuchi Jun'ichi that helps to contextualize elite warrior appreciation for literature and poetry. Next is an extremely "by the books" overview of the samurai in Japanese history by Yoko Woodson, the main organizer of the exhibition and the head curator of Japanese art at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. The third and by far the longest piece in the book is Thomas Cleary's essay on *bushidō* or "the way of the warrior," which draws exclusively on his own translations of certain Japanese texts to elucidate the role of religion in samurai conduct and ethics; though Cleary is a respected translator of religious texts from a variety of traditions, his work is not scholarly and seems out of place here. This is also true, if to a lesser extent, of Deborah Clearwaters's "Introduction to the Catalogue," which leans toward the kind of crowd-friendly generalizations that would be more appropriate in an education pamphlet aimed at students than an exhibition catalog. ("The samurai of medieval Japan felt vulnerable to being characterized as class upstarts" is one example.) The catalog entries are generally informative and clear, though as is typical of this genre of writing, they assume a lot about their readers.

The book is a satisfying read, but it becomes even more edifying when read against information that is either entirely absent or visible only in the visual and discursive interstices of orthodox catalog structure. The prefacing comments, for example, which many readers would skip entirely, reveal the vital institutional relationship and funding source that helps to frame all that follows. Hosokawa Morihiro, Chairman of the Eisei-Bunko Museum, writes the following:

This is [the] first time that the Hosokawa family's heirloom arms and armor, paintings, and decorative and applied art objects have been shown in a comprehensive way in the United States. I am very grateful to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and all the others who have collaborated in this project for providing us with this valuable opportunity. (P. viii)

He then goes on to present a highly edited version of his family history, a kind of marketing document for feudal lords in general and the Hosokawa in par-

ticular, noting at one point that "Japanese generals have always had a high regard for the arts" (p. viii). What is going on here?

It is not uncommon for American and European museums to collaborate with arts institutions in Japan, particularly when an exhibition requires borrowing objects that are regulated by Japanese laws about cultural heritage, a process that is sometimes facilitated by the Agency of Cultural Affairs (the Bunkachō). Or, as in this case, museums sometimes collaborate directly with a single institution in Japan. What is entirely effaced is the role of the Japanese institution in editing the selection of objects, making content and design decisions, and influencing the overall narrative of the exhibition and the catalog. (I was impressed to see an entry titled "Packing Samurai" on the blog of the museum about the process of preparing objects for shipping to the U.S. at the Eisei-Bunko Museum, which included pictures and a fairly detailed discussion of the role of staff from both museums.¹)

Also hidden is the connection between this hefty, well-illustrated book and the actual physical exhibition that occupied the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco from June 12 to September 20, 2009. A single paragraph of text can be found in the front matter above the logo of the Society for Asian Art, noting that the book was published "on the occasion of" the exhibition. It is perhaps unfair to single out *Lords of the Samurai* for failing to adequately recognize and make sense of the powerful experience of walking through galleries that display the very same art that is collected in the catalog in a series of relatively flat and formal photographs. It is, after all, the convention of the museum world to view exhibitions and catalogs as mostly concurrent but ultimately separate forms of cultural production. These beautiful books do not include details on the layout of the exhibition, the design of the displays, summaries of accompanying educational talks and symposia, or particulars of the now abundant marketing materials that often reach a much wider audience than the exhibition itself.

In the case of this particular exhibition, the disconnect between the catalog and the exhibition itself

¹ Christina Lichauco, "Packing Samurai," weblog entry, *Asian Art Museum Blog* (retrieved May 26, 2010, from: <http://www.asianart.org/blog/index.php/2009/05/14/packing-samurai/>).

is particularly unfortunate, because the exhibition opening inspired a series of interventions by artist-activists who objected to the premise, marketing, and educational programs of *Lords of the Samurai*. This group, led by an artist with the nom-de-plume Majime Sugiru (which means "Too Serious" in Japanese), created pamphlets and a website that adopted the images and designs of the exhibition's own marketing campaign and playfully used them to deconstruct *Lords of the Samurai* as a problematic product of Orientalism:

Enter the world of the samurai, where more than seven centuries of martial rule are reduced to a single Disney-like trope of gentleman-warrior myth. Military prowess meets cultural connoisseurship in an ideal of masculine perfection--selling militarism as beauty in a time of war.

Neither harmless nor innocent, it masks a real history of violence and domination that extends well into the 20th century.

Below are a just few examples of the context hidden behind the gentility of fine weaponry, paintings and ceramics.²

The deconstruction goes on to highlight aspects of Japanese history that the exhibition—and, it must be acknowledged, most samurai exhibitions inside and outside of Japan—fail to include: samurai violence and mutilation of prisoners as a counterpart to the aestheticization of swords and armor; human trafficking in Korean artisans perpetrated by samurai during the destructive Imjin War (1592-1598) as the dark side of the depoliticized display of Korean ceramics used by Japanese tea practitioners; samurai appreciation for male-male sexual relationships, usually between older men and young men or even boys; and the modern appropriation of the samurai image and rhetoric during Japan's imperialist expansion and brutal war in the Pacific.

In fact the black and dark blue suit of armor described in the first paragraph of this review makes an appearance in both the museum's marketing ma-

² Asians Art Museum, "Lord It's the Samurai," intervention webpage (retrieved May 28, 2010, from <http://www.asiansart.org/amurai1.html>)

terials and in the activists' critical response. On the front page of the museum's main exhibition website (Figure 1), as well as on posters and in advertisements that appeared in the summer of 2009, the suit appears like an ominous specter against a glowing red background, reminding many viewers of the black helmet and robe of Darth Vader from the Star Wars movie series. Below the title, "Lords of the Samurai," is a subheading that reads "Brilliant Warriors. Artistic Masters."³

In the work of the artist-activists (Figure 2), the same suit appears against a red background, but with a number of modifications. The suit has a pair of Mickey Mouse ears as well as a flesh-colored nose and a pair of glowing eyes. The red background is now filled with the rising mushroom cloud of the Hiroshima atomic blast. The title reads "Lord It's the Samurai" and the subheading reads "Myth + Militarism + Man-Boy Love." In the shadow of the helmet, written in a mixture of Japanese characters, Roman letters, and emoticons, is the phrase "I heart shudō," which roughly translates to "I love the way of male-male love."⁴



Figure 1. Screenshot of the San Francisco Asian Art Museum's exhibition website

³Asian Art Museum, "Lords of the Samurai," exhibition webpage, *Asian Art Museum Website* (retrieved May 26, 2010, from <http://www.asianart.org/Samurai.htm>).

⁴Asians Art Museum, "Lord It's the Samurai," intervention webpage (retrieved May 28, 2010, from <http://www.asiansart.org/samurai1.html>).



Figure 2. Screenshot of the parody website produced by Majime Sugiru

The artist-activists distributed a high quality pamphlet version of these materials at some museum events, engaging in a kind of guerrilla counter-marketing campaign.

The activists' "Lord It's the Samurai" website itself also became the focus of considerable online attention, receiving reviews and comments from dozens of bloggers, journalists, and academics. The response to the intervention of course varied, with many anonymous commentators expressing confusion about what it was the intervention was meant to accomplish. But on the whole, the deconstruction united a diverse group of observers who felt the exhibition materials, and by extension many museum displays of Asian history and culture, were problematic. Asian American activists in the Bay Area and online cheered Majime Sugiru for challenging representations of Asian culture and history that lean toward "exotic Asiaphilic fantasies."⁵ Some scholars of Japanese art history responded positively as well, raising concerns about Orientalism in museum displays and the Asian Art Museum

⁵ Valerie Soe, "That's Not My Name: Lord, It's the Samurai! intervention," weblog entry, *beyondasiaphilia* (retrieved May 26, 2010, from <http://beyondasiaphilia.wordpress.com/2009/08/26/hats-not-my-name-lord-its-the-samurai-intervention/>).

of San Francisco in particular. One commented on a post that I wrote on a group blog devoted to East Asian history: "Given that the museum has been challenged on three prior occasions— the 'Geisha' and 'Tibet' exhibition and the installation of a Japanese painting that provoked protest from the Korean-American community— I do wonder what the 'learning curve' has been within the museum exhibition planning process."⁶ One major curator of Japanese art even responded to the exhibition, the intervention, and the ensuing discussion. She noted that museums are more concerned than ever with numbers of visitors and revenue generated from exhibitions (increasing "the gate" of a show), and that this impacts the work of curators in complicated ways:

As public museums, we have a dual duty to encourage our public, woefully underinformed in their education about Asia, to look at unfamiliar works of art from foreign cultures, and simultaneously to advance the field of art history. As you can imagine, these priorities sometimes clash. The Asian Art Museum's marketing department apparently got the reins on promoting the gate, calling the exhibition, "Lords of the Samurai" (too close to "Lords of the Dance"), and putting a Darth Vader-like image on the poster. The promotional video was cute and silly, and fairly insulting to the whole idea of the samurai.⁷

Many others have weighed in as well, particularly in the less formal contexts of blogs and discussion lists.

This leads me to my final point: many of the issues raised by the *Lords of the Samurai* catalog, exhibit, intervention, and subsequent dialogue are born of the in-betweenness of museum exhibitions and catalogs, which are neither mainstream scholar-

ship nor public performance. In an age of shrinking budgets, increased competition from other cultural institutions (not to mention online sources of information about art), and a more businesslike attitude toward museum administration, it must be difficult to strike the right balance between adopting a critical approach to race, gender, and other forms of identity, and mounting a simplistic blockbuster that sells well in a soundbite. Some museums have produced increasingly scholarly catalogs, with proper citation of sources, bibliographies, and attention paid to contextualization of art and culture as well as the biographies of objects in the exhibition, while others, as the *Lords of the Samurai* exhibit and catalog show, have not. This is not a new problem, to be sure, as controversies over the 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," made clear a quarter of a century ago. The possibility, however, that individuals in the community who take exception to museum practices will make sure that their complaints are heard—particularly through new media technologies—is very new indeed, and demands, I think, that we all collectively take notice of the power and responsibility of museums. Scholars of early modern Japan whose books might sell a few thousand copies if they are lucky should remember that exhibitions of Japanese art at major museums routinely attract tens of thousands of visitors, while blockbuster shows bring in hundreds of thousands of viewers.

As long as museum exhibitions and catalogs are not subject to the same processes of peer review and academic criticism as other forms of scholarship, they should be open to—and indeed welcome—informal and if needed anonymous critiques of the sort orchestrated by Majime Sugiru and his band of merry artist-activists. Because in the end, the complicated and at times heated conversation about history, identity, and representation that can be traced through the websites, interventions, blogs, and even radio shows related to the *Lords of the Samurai* exhibition adds up to one of the more significant and compelling English-language critiques—albeit in the form of online hypertext—of the politics of museum displays of Japanese culture.

⁶ Greg Levine, 8/30/2009 comment on the weblog post "Samurai Exhibit Pwned," *Frog in a Well Japan* (retrieved May 26, 2010 from <http://www.froginawell.net/japan/2009/08/samurai-exhibit-pwned/comment-page-1/#comment-203883>).

⁷Hollis Goodall, "A museum curator's response," weblog entry, *asians art museum's samurai blog* (retrieved May 26, 2010, from <http://asiansart.wordpress.com/2009/09/03/a-museum-curators-response/>).