

The Life of Animals in Japanese Art.  
Exhibition. National Gallery of Art, Washington  
D.C. June 2, 2019-August 18, 2019. / Robert T.  
Singer and Kawai Masatomo, eds., with essays by  
Barbara R. Ambros, Tom Hare, and Federico  
Marcon. The Life of Animals in Japanese Art.  
Exhibition catalogue. Washington, D.C.:  
National Gallery of Art, 2019.

MILLER, J. ALISON

Sewanee, The University of the South : Assistant Professor of Art and Art History

<https://doi.org/10.5109/2794927>

---

出版情報 : Journal of Asian Humanities at Kyushu University. 5, pp.97-102, 2020-03. Kyushu  
University, School of Letters, Graduate School of Humanities, Faculty of Humanities

バージョン :

権利関係 :



***The Life of Animals in Japanese Art. Exhibition.***  
**National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. June 2,**  
**2019–August 18, 2019.**

**Robert T. Singer and Kawai Masatomo, eds.,**  
**with essays by Barbara R. Ambros, Tom Hare,**  
**and Federico Marcon. *The Life of Animals***  
***in Japanese Art. Exhibition catalogue.***  
**Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2019.**

EXHIBITION/BOOK REVIEW BY ALISON J. MILLER

**I**N the midst of the Anthropocene, when news on climate change informs us daily of the precipitous drop in animal populations around the world, it is easy to forget that humans once lived in closer contact with the natural world, and ascribed powers and significance to the creatures that lived within. Visitors to *The Life of Animals in Japanese Art*, were, by contrast, immersed in the marvelous world of flora and fauna that once enveloped humanity, and which inspired Japanese artistic production for millennia. Held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., from 2 June to 18 August 2019, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from 22 September to 8 December 2019 (under the alternate title *Every Living Thing: Animals in Japanese Art*), the exhibition and accompanying catalogue present a plethora of representations of animals, real and imagined, and trace the theme in Japanese visual culture from the sixth century to the present day. The exhibition and catalogue were primarily successful in their aims, but the large scale of the show at the National Gallery of Art, which this review addresses, meant some missed opportunities for further connections between objects. Additionally, the catalogue and exhibition could have done more to engage in meaningful dialogue on relevant contemporary issues, for example, addressing our

current environmental crisis and its impacts on the animal world. Furthermore, a catalogue essay by an art historian was notably missing.

Starting with the juxtaposition of a sixth-century *haniwa* 埴輪, hollow earthenware ritual figures including, in this instance, dogs and a horse, standing opposite to Kusama Yayoi's 草間彌生 (1929–) green and pink spotted plastic canine sculpture *Sho-chan* (2013), the exhibition engaged visitors with whimsical objects in thoughtfully exhibited combinations (figure 1). As one progressed through the various rooms, large installations, such as a monumental wooden *Bishamonten* 毘沙門天 (1124), provided intriguing visual markers to entice people from one gallery to the next (figure 2), while exquisite smaller objects, such as Nagae Shizan's 長江司山 (1867–?) Satsuma ware, *Tea Bowl with Butterflies and Net* (late nineteenth–early twentieth century), gave one the opportunity for an intimate viewing experience. The close placement of the fourteenth-century *Deer Bearing Symbols of the Kasuga Deities* (figure 3) with Nawa Kōhei's 名和晃平 (1975–) *Pixcell-Bambi #14* (2015, figure 4) certainly created a striking opportunity to contrast the representation of four-legged creatures in differing contexts. However, this could have benefited from a deeper analysis of the reasons for the divin-



**Figure 1.** Installation shot, National Gallery of Art. Kusama Yayoi. Heisei Period, Megu-chan, 2014. H 31 ½ x W 18 ⅞ x D 39 ¾ in., Sho-chan, 2013. 26 ¾ x 11 x 34 ⅝ in., private collection, Cori and Tony Bates; and Toko-chan, 2013, 31 ½ x 18 ⅞ x 39 ¾ in., private collection, all fiberglass-reinforced plastic, paint. Haniwa Horse, Kofun period, 6th c., earthenware. 47 ¾ x 45 ¾ x 16 ¼ in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of the David Bohnett Foundation, Lynda and Stewart Resnick, Camilla Chandler Frost, Victoria Jackson and William Guthy, and Laurie and Bill Benenson. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.



**Figure 2.** Installation shot, National Gallery of Art. At left, Bishamonten. 1124, Heian period. Wood. H 102 x W 44 ½ x D 39 in. Private collection. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.



**Figure 3.** Deer Bearing Symbols of the Kasuga Deities. 14th c., Nanbokuchō era. Bronze, wood with pigments. H 42 ½. Hosomi Museum, Kyoto, Important Cultural Property. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.

ity of these animals in Shinto or the artistic choice to use taxidermized creatures.

The concept of the exhibition, a survey of Japanese art history through the theme of animals, was engaging. Oftentimes, exhibitions covering a broad topic are derided as trivial or academically uninformed in concept, yet seeing such a wide-ranging span of media, with objects created for diverse reasons and spanning fifteen centuries of artistic production, provided the opportunity for comparisons and connections for both the expert and lay viewer. Sponsored by the Japan Foundation with contributions from a team of international curators and special consideration from the Tokyo National Museum, the exhibition included many works that are not often seen outside of Japan and notably included a significant number of works by previously overlooked women artists. Viewing these works together was quite enjoyable, and with the diverse objects included in the eight thematic sections, ranging from zodiac animals to the world of the samurai, religion to the world of leisure, there was something for everyone.



**Figure 4.** Nawa Kōhei, Pixcell-Bambi #14. 2015, Heisei period. Mixed media. H 24 ¼ x W 23 ¾ x D 23 ¾ in. Collection of Ms. Stefany Wang. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.

Although the exhibition provided an overview of animals in Japanese art, it did not attempt to provide a reason for the significant place of animals in the visual culture of Japan. The catalogue editors link animals to their roles in Shinto and Buddhism, and posit that Japanese artistic production through time has conceived of nature in relation to humanity, placing the animal and plant worlds within nature, and in a “mutually beneficial symbiosis” (p. xvii) to humans. The editors further state that understanding this visual relationship between humans, flora, and fauna is the key to understanding Japanese art and is a feature that distinguishes the Japanese artistic worldview from that of China and Europe. These theoretical concepts could have been developed more. In their abbreviated form, these theories hint at essentialism, yet the editors are undoubtedly correct that animals, both real and fantastic, have a central place in Japanese visual culture. Further theoretical elaboration in the preface essays would have benefitted both the framework of the catalogue and the larger discipline of Japanese art history.

Within this framework, the exhibition included many exquisite objects that may otherwise not have fit into an exhibition with broad popularity. Works that are lesser known in the United States, such as Oka-



**Figure 5.** Utagawa Yoshitsuya, *Earth Spider*. Edo period, c. 1847–1852, triptych. Woodblock print. Left H 14  $\frac{3}{4}$  x W 10  $\frac{1}{8}$  in., center H 15 x W 10 in., right H 14  $\frac{7}{8}$  x W 10  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, museum purchase. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.

moto Tarō's 岡本太郎 (1911–1996) *Dawn* (1948) were a thoughtful inclusion, although in the National Gallery layout this painting was placed behind a wall, and therefore missed by many visitors. Also, the incorporation of mythical animals through time was clever and appreciated, and made for an adroit transition from early religious imagery, replete with fabled beasts, to modern and contemporary works, such as Okamoto's, that celebrate legendary creatures and their role in Japanese folklore and culture.

The samurai armors selected for display were magnificent objects that supported the exhibition's aim of illustrating the pervasive nature of both real and imagined animals in Japanese visual culture. The Momoyama/Edo-period *Armored Horse and Rider*, complete with a fierce dragon mask for the horse, shows both the skills and creativity of its maker, and when exhibited with *Helmet Shaped like Rabbit Ears* and *Helmet Shaped like a Conch Shell*, show the multiplicity of armor designs. While objects of this kind are widely exhibited in the U.S., these examples were particularly outstanding in their detail and quality of craftsmanship, as well as the diversity of animal designs, the symbolic meaning of which are concisely described and historically situated in the exhibition catalogue.

The prints that were integrated throughout the varied themed sections were a welcome addition of pop-

ular media, and works like Utagawa Yoshitsuya's 歌川芳艶 (1822–1866) *Earth Spider* (1847–1852, figure 5), Utagawa Yoshifuji's 歌川芳藤 (1828–1887) *The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō: The Bewitched Cat of Okabe* (1847–1848), or Utagawa Hiroshige's 歌川広重 (1797–1858) *New Year's Eve Foxfires at the Changing Tree, Ōji*, from the series "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo" (1857), provided a fantastical view of animals in Japanese culture, and vis-à-vis their common medium, gave continuity to the disparate topics of the exhibition.

Some of the contemporary works fit seamlessly into the exhibition, such as Tabaimo's 束芋 (1975–) *Chirping* (2016), a two-channel video installation projected on two hanging scrolls (figure 6). *Chirping* takes its inspiration from an 1843 painting of butterflies and dragonflies, with the text removed and the animals animated. This fanciful work allowed for a comparison of bird and flower imagery through time, including Mochizuki Gyokkei's 望月玉溪 (1874–1939) painting *One Hundred Insects and One Hundred Flowers* (1930), the many cloisonné pieces, or Shibata Zeshin's 柴田是眞 (1807–1891) *Carp Ascending Waterfall* (nineteenth century).

Other contemporary works, such as Murakami Takashi's 村上隆 (1962–) *In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow* (2014), which takes inspiration from an Itō Jakuchū 伊藤若冲 (1716–1800) image, felt less integrated into the whole. The display



**Figure 6.** Tabaimo, Chirping. Heisei period, 2016. Two-channel video installation on handmade Japanese scrolls, edition 5 + 1AP, running time 7 min. 36 sec. Scroll, each H 74 x W 18 in., image, each H 38 ¼ x W 13 in. Courtesy of the artist James Cohan, New York. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.

of the Murakami image in the final gallery of the exhibition, together with Issey Miyake's (1938–) garments based on animals (for example, *Monkey Pleats*, 1990, or *Cicada Pleats*, 1988), lessened the opportunity to compare or connect the Murakami piece to Edo-painting precedents, or the Miyake designs to the samurai animal garments viewed earlier in the show. In this way, while the exhibition worked well within each thematic section, for an exhibition attendee with little knowledge of Japanese art, there were many messages that were too subtle to appreciate. This sparse contextualization was also apparent in the teamLab チームラボ (f. 2001) video installation *United, Fragmented, Repeated and Impermanent World* (2013), an interactive digital work based on Itō Jakuchū's eighteenth-century painting, *Birds, Animals, and Flowering Plants in Imaginary Scene*. Jakuchū's painting is comprised of 43,000 small squares that utilize the optics of color mixing to create an image of what to the modern eye appear like pixels. TeamLab updated the painting into a digital format that reflected the movement of people standing before the eight-channel display. Although this work appeared to be very popular with visitors, the only contextualiza-

tion was provided on a small panel placed away from the primary traffic pattern and unread by most viewers.

The catalogue for the exhibition is extensive and replete with beautiful photography. The essays are written by scholars of literature, religious studies, and history, and many prominent art historians were involved with writing the texts for the individual objects and thematic sections. However, a longer, overarching essay by an art historian is a remarkable absence.

Texts in the catalogue include Tom Hare's "A Place for Animals in Japanese Letters: Beasts and Beasties—Pests, Partners, and Pets," which chronicles the role of animals in Japanese poetry and prose through time, and the roles of animals in literary allusions to love, romance, sexuality, food culture, religious training, the theater, and pornography. Barbara R. Ambros's "Cultivating Compassion and Accruing Merit: Animal Release Rites During the Edo Period," details the ritual practice of Buddhist animal release from its origins in fifth-century China to its development in Edo Japan. Finally, Federico Marcon's "All Creatures Great and Small: Tokugawa Japan and its Animals," provides a detailed history of the exotic animals that arrived in Edo

Japan as part of international trade, and examines the visual representation of animals in *honzōgaku* 本草学, natural-history encyclopedias of plant and animal life, linking these records to their impact in accurate visual representations of flora and fauna and documenting the ties between academic, artistic, and entertainment functions in accurate animal imagery. The individual catalogue entries are brief, but informative. In the catalogue, the object entries are interspersed with slightly longer explanatory texts that mirror the organization of the exhibition.

By juxtaposing premodern objects with works by contemporary artists, the curators of *The Life of Animals in Japanese Art* participated in the trend of de-historicizing objects in an attempt to make premodern objects relevant to contemporary audiences. This approach was generally successful; in some ways, the flattening of history in the exhibition allowed viewers to consider thematic threads in Japanese art history, but in others it may have given a space for stereotyping Japanese culture as “close to nature” or “timeless.” Furthermore, the opportunity to discuss the impacts of the Anthropocene and climate change on animal populations or our current view of animals was missed. Just as with the abbreviated theoretical framework in the preface essays, further contextualization or elaboration would have strengthened the object comparisons and given space for conversations on contemporary issues.

As an exhibition, *The Life of Animals in Japanese Art* was a great pleasure to view, and the accessible theme seemingly proved popular with museum visitors. While scholars likely found satisfaction in seeing so many important works in one place, the exhibition was rather sprawling in scope and could have benefitted from a more focused theme or a more concise vision. The catalogue, while beautifully designed, could have benefitted from additional scholarly essays, and from an editing of the object list. In both forms—as catalogue and exhibition—*The Life of Animals in Japanese Art* will surely have an impact on the broader understanding of Japanese art in the U.S., providing the lay viewer with a vision of Japanese flora and fauna that range beyond the cute or uncanny in visual culture, and giving scholars inspiration for a means of interpreting the scope of Japanese art from a specific thematic lens.