

## Landscapes of Identity: Nature, Art, and Modern Nations in Three Recent Exhibitions

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# Landscapes of Identity: Nature, Art, and Modern Nations in Three Recent Exhibitions

EXHIBITION REVIEW BY LORENZO AMATO

**I**N 2022, three exhibitions held in Tokyo displayed works that, despite their different backgrounds, shared important common elements. Their themes were nature painting in Europe, landscape painting in Japan, and the collection of Western and Scottish paintings of the National Gallery of Scotland. This review will address the importance and strengths of these exhibitions and will reveal a common flaw in how the crucial connection between landscape painting and Romantic nationalism seems to have almost completely vanished from panels and catalogues. Representations of nature and landscapes have always been polysemic expressions of an artist's culture, society, and belief system, and are often associated with wider ideological-political movements and systems of power.<sup>1</sup> In the catalogue titled *A Mirror of Nature: Nordic Landscape Painting 1840–1910* (published for a joint exhibition held 2006–2008), Torsten Gunnarsson wrote that a painting mirrors the actual natural landscape much less than the world of ideas of the painter who is representing the landscape.<sup>2</sup> This statement implicitly referred to the myth of Narcissus, described by Leon Battista Alberti in his *De pictura* (book II, par. 26) as the origin of

painting,<sup>3</sup> and the caveat that paintings of nature have to be read through the eyes and culture of the painter.<sup>4</sup>

The first Tokyo exhibition, titled *Shizen to hito no daiarōgu: Furīdorihi, Mone, Gohho kara Rihitā made* 自然と人のダイアローグ: フリードリヒ、モネ、ゴッホからリヒターまで (*In Dialogue with Nature: From Friedrich, Monet and Van Gogh to Richter*), was held at the National Museum of Western Art (NMWA) from 4 June to 11 September 2022. It showcased 102 paintings, etchings, lithographs, and photos of nature and landscapes and offered the possibility to admire a number of masterpieces rarely visible outside of the Museum Folkwang of Essen (Germany), vis-à-vis a complementary selection from the collection of the NMWA. This second joint effort between NMWA and Museum Folkwang (the first was in 2002) also celebrated the reopening of the NMWA, and was visited by 223,250 persons, making it the fourth most visited art event in Japan in 2022.<sup>5</sup>

The paintings selected for the exhibition ranged from the Romantic era of the early nineteenth century (e.g., *Woman in Front of Setting Sun*, by Caspar David

1 Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*.

2 Gunnarsson, "A Mirror of Nature," p. 11.

3 Alberti, *De pictura*, pp. 46–47.

4 Filippi, "Narciso nel Quattrocento," pp. 96–99.

5 See the art magazine *Bijutsu no mado* 美術の窓 171 (December 2022), p. 94.

Friedrich, cat. no. 28, dated 1818, and *Landscape near Pichelswerder*, cat. no. 29, painted by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in 1814) to the postmodern, anti-capitalist approach to landscape painting expressed by Gerhard Richter in 1970 in his *Clouds* (1970, cat. no. 25), as elaborated by Shinfuji Atsushi.<sup>6</sup>

The exhibition was divided into four sections, corresponding to different approaches, observations, and personal relationships with nature. The first section, “Skies Across Time” (cat. nos. 1–27), focused on the representation of clouds, water surfaces, and other atmospheric conditions among French Romantics and Impressionists, with a section on photographs by photographer Heinrich Kühn of the Viennese Photo-Secessionism. The second section, “Journey to the Other” (cat. nos. 28–58), focused on the Romantic idea of nature, which, according to the section introduction, “came to be seen as a place for psychological sanctuary and healing, a place that encouraged aesthetic experiences.”<sup>7</sup> In the nineteenth century, nature became an expression of interiority, acquiring a mystical sensibility that derived from the fusion of the viewing subject with a nature that is often represented as a forest of arcane symbols. The third section, “The Architecture of Light” (cat. nos. 59–76), focused on the definition of a pictorial space that could equal nature’s power, which manifests as intense physical sensations that the painter tries to recreate on canvas (e.g., Paul Cézanne in *The Bridge and Dam at Pontoise* and *House and Dovecote at Bellevue*, cat. nos. 59–60) or as a mystical and even sacred source of life and myth (e.g., Ferdinand Hodler’s *Weisshorn Seen from Montana*, and Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s *Lake Keitele*, cat. nos. 61–62). The fourth section, “Cycles of Time Between Heaven and Earth” (cat. nos. 77–102), focuses on the cycle of the four seasons in the Western tradition, often mirroring the cycle of life and death in the human condition. Paintings representing pastoral activities and other human labor (e.g., Giovanni Segantini’s *The Sheepshearing*, Camille Pissarro’s *The Harvest*, and Van Gogh’s *The Wheatfield behind Saint Paul’s Hospital with a Reaper*, cat. nos. 82–84 respectively) were chosen to represent this sensitivity towards life and death that also involves the creation and representation of flowers and gardens as contemplative moments (e.g.,

Monet’s *Yellow Irises*, cat. no. 97, and in his unfinished and monumental *Water Lilies, Reflections of Weeping Willows*, cat. no. 98, recently acquired by the NMWA).

The second exhibition, *Nihon no fūkei o egaku: Utagawa Hiroshige kara Tabuchi Toshio made* 日本の風景を描く: 歌川広重から田淵俊夫まで (*Depicting Japanese Landscapes: From Utagawa Hiroshige to Tabuchi Toshio*), was held at the Yamatane Museum of Art, Tokyo, from 10 December 2022 to 26 February 2023.

The compact venue of the museum showcased a total of sixty-two artworks, including paintings, sketches, and *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, in both thematic and chronological order. It included two sections: the first section was dedicated to Edo (1600–1868) paintings and prints from various schools and genres, and had three sub-themes: (1) topical Japanese landscapes inherited from Heian 平安 (794–1185) literature and art, represented as famous places, *meisho* 名所, with representative well-known characteristics (e.g., the Rinpa painting *Mt. Utsu: Scene from the Tales of Ise*, cat. no. 1, by Sakai Hōitsu 酒井抱一 [1761–1829]); (2) several artworks by literati painters, who inherited the tradition of depicting Chinese landscapes, *sansui-ga* 山水画, originating in the Muromachi 室町 period (1336–1573). These works featured idealized Chinese mountains (*Landscape*, cat. no. 2, by Ike no Taiga 池大雅 [1723–1776]), utopian villages (*Shangri-La*, cat. no. 3, by Yamamoto Baiitsu 山本梅逸 [1783–1856]), and occasional experiments of real Japanese landscapes (*A View of Higashiyama* by Ike no Taiga, cat. no. 6); and (3) the new visual genre that emerged during the Edo period: depictions of real Japanese places, especially along the newly constructed main transportation roads of the country. For example, four of Utagawa Hiroshige’s 歌川広重 (1797–1858) *53 Stations of the Tokaido* accompany this section, rotating with another four during the two periods of the exhibition (cat. nos. 7–14).

The second and larger section began with the encounter in the Meiji 明治 period (1868–1912) with the Western landscape tradition, and the birth of *yōga* 洋画 (Western-style painting) based on materials, techniques, and themes derived from European painting, and the *nihonga* 日本画 (Japanese-style painting) created from the fusion of the older *yamato-e* 大和絵 (Japanese paintings) traditions.<sup>8</sup> As a result, with the

6 Shinfuji, *Beyond the Capitalocene Landscape*, pp. 45–55 (Jp.), pp. 231–40 (Eng.).

7 Jingaoka and Shinfuji, *In Dialogue with Nature*, p. 93.

8 For context, see Foxwell, *Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting*, pp. 1–12.

application of Western painting techniques, subsequent redefinitions of Japanese landscape paintings occurred, such as perspective and shadows, to the depiction of Japanese landscapes. Great stress is placed on how the painters take advantage of features of different schools in the same painting, defining a new Japanese aesthetic that would become dominant in the landscape painting of the next century. The exhibition also underlines the importance of the 1894 treatise *Nihon fūkeiron* 日本風景論 (On Japanese Landscapes) by Shiga Shigetaka 志賀重昂 (1863–1927) that popularized the notion of a national identity towards distinctive Japanese landscapes. It also helped initiate the fashion for travel and mountain hiking throughout Japan and created the representation of new Japanese landmarks in painting and photography.

After the early Shōwa 昭和 period (1926–1989), the exhibition leaped forward to postwar works, with the majestic and dreamy *Oirase in the Four Seasons* (cat. nos. 39–42), completed in 1985 by Ishida Takeshi 石田武 (1922–2010) and here exhibited for the first time in thirty-seven years, dominating an entire room. Next to it was a column devoted to the reinterpretation of the classic painting theme: the *Eight Views of Xiao and Xiang Rivers* in China. It displayed Hiroshige's two woodblock prints of the *Eight Views of Ōmi* (also changing during the two periods of the exhibition, cat. nos. 26–29), which were a Japanese reinvention of the famous Chinese theme. Yokoyama Misao 横山操 (1920–1973), who had previously followed the model of Yokoyama Taikan 横山大観 (1868–1958) and depicted the Xiao and Xiang rivers in China, created in 1968 a series of *Ten Views of Koshiji*. In the two large paintings exhibited, *Wild Geese over Kanbara* and *Echizen after the Rain* (cat. nos. 37–38), Yokoyama, once a prisoner in Siberia, represents powerful and visionary images of winter desolation in ink. The repetition of tree barks and the dark, gloomy skies, recall not a beautiful, idealist landscape that could be considered a symbol of a cultural tradition, but more of the struggle with death and desperation when he was detained in Siberia. The second section ends with paintings born as projections of personal feelings (*shinshō fūkei* 心象風景), such as *White Wall* (cat. no. 55) by Higashiyama Kaii 東山魁夷 (1908–1999), and abstract reveries over landscapes unseen, like the bird-like view *Frozen Fields* (cat. no. 58) by Kakurai Kazuo 加倉井和夫 (1919–1995).

The third exhibition, titled *Sukottorando Kokuritsu Bijutsukan: Bi no kyoshō-tachi* スコットランド 国立美術館: 美の巨匠たち (*The Greats: Masterpieces*

*from the National Galleries of Scotland*) was successively held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum (22 April–3 July 2022), Kobe City Museum (16 July–25 September 2022), and Kitakyushu Municipal Museum of Art (4 October–20 November 2022). A group of ninety-three paintings and other visual arts arrived from Scotland, and they were displayed in four chronological sections: (1) “Renaissance” (cat. nos. 5–16); (2) “Baroque” (cat. nos. 17–32); (3) “The Age of the Grand Tour” (cat. nos. 33–55); and (4) “Nineteenth-Century Innovators” (cat. nos. 56–92), with a “Prologue” (cat. nos. 1–4) and an “Epilogue” (cat. no. 93). Each section had text panels, referred to as columns (some of which alas were missing in the catalogue) explaining both the periods and some of the most important artistic movements. The highlights of the exhibitions were *The Virgin Adoring the Christ Child* or *Ruskin Madonna* (cat. no. 5), attributed to Verrocchio (Andrea di Cione, 1435–1488), the *Study for “The Madonna of the Fish”* (cat. no. 6) by Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio, 1483–1520), the *Christ Blessing* (cat. no. 16) by El Greco (Domenikos Theotokópoulos, 1541–1614), *An Old Woman Cooking Eggs* (cat. no. 19) by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *A Woman in Bed* (cat. no. 26) by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), *The Ladies Waldegrave* (cat. no. 45) by Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), and an impressive selection of Impressionist paintings, including *A Woman Nursing a Child* (cat. no. 84) by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), *Poplars on the Epte* (cat. no. 81) by Claude Monet (1840–1926), *Three Tahitians* (cat. no. 86) by Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), and other great masters. All in all, for the neophyte the exhibition could be an excellent introduction to different ages of Western art, and for an expert a way to admire works usually exhibited only in Edinburgh.

Another important aspect of the exhibition was the celebration of the 150th year of the foundation of the gallery (1859), and more in general of the Scottish artistic tradition. As it transpires from the articles in the catalogue (though never openly stated), the National Gallery of Scotland had great importance in defining the cultural independence of Scotland's capital Edinburgh from London. In the introduction to the catalogue Christopher Baker states that the foundation stone of the Neo-Classical building that would host the museum, designed by William Henry Playfair (1790–1857), was posed in 1850 by Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria.<sup>9</sup> After its opening the gallery displayed

<sup>9</sup> Baker, “Introduction: The Greats.”

a relatively small collection, which then expanded over the years, becoming one of the most important museums in the world. Baker highlights that such a collection was created from scratch democratically and did not derive from a royal collection. In a subsequent essay Patricia Allerston, after mapping the changing disposition of the paintings within the museum over the decades, states that a future restructuring will give even more space to Scottish artists and will establish the National Gallery of Scotland as the most important center for Scottish culture in the world.<sup>10</sup>

The three exhibitions focus on different themes and geographical areas and are organized according to different priorities. However, they show recurrent motives and common threads. One of the most interesting themes is the way these exhibitions decided to tackle, or avoid, the discussion of the relationship between national identities, especially after the Romantic era, and the representation of nature and local landscapes.

The entire exhibition at the Yamatane Museum was openly centered around the “dialogue” between Japanese people and the scenery of the Japanese archipelago. The appreciation of landscapes and natural phenomena such as the changing seasons is essential to Japanese identity, but the exhibition, along with other similar exhibitions of the past, seemed to imply that this sensitivity is somehow innate to the Japanese people. Instead, this supposed harmonious relationship with nature is a notion created by the revival of a literary and visual tradition that flourished during the Edo period.<sup>11</sup> During the Meiji Reformation, when the superior military power and technology of the West shook all forms of political and sociocultural order in Japan, national identity needed to be reassessed. It was the cultural construct of the unicity of the Japanese landscape, and a special relationship with nature, which helped strengthen the identity of this “new” Japan: a modern country with ancient roots.<sup>12</sup>

Very similar constructs and the notion of “national landscapes” linked to the definition of national identities can be found in several Western traditions. But despite their importance, especially in painting, they were not mentioned extensively in the panels nor in the catalogues of the Western-centric exhibitions held at

the NMWA (*In Dialogue with Nature*) and at the Metropolitan Museum of Tokyo (*The Greats*).

In the NMWA exhibition the column *Nature and National Identities in the Nordic Countries*, written by the Associate Curator Kubota Azu, introduced “National Romanticism” as a crucial cultural movement for defining Finland and Norway’s national identities.<sup>13</sup> For brevity’s sake, Kubota focuses on three painters only: the Norwegians Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857, known as “the father of Norwegian Landscape painting”), Edvard Munch (1863–1944), and the Finn Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931). But the importance of nature in Nordic countries is deeper. The national anthems of Sweden (*Du gamla du fria* [“You Ancient, You Free”] by Rickard Dybeck), Norway (*Ja, vi elsker dette landet* [“Yes, We Love This Country”] by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson), Denmark (*Der er et yndigt land* [“There is a Lovely Country”] by Adam Oehlenschläger), and Finland (*Vårt land* [“Our Land”] by Johan Ludvig Runeberg), all elaborate on the moral resonance of the landscape in nurturing the inhabitants of these respective nations. The painting *Lake Keitele* by Gallen-Kallela, exhibited at the NMWA (cat. no. 62), is an example of the Finnish lakes being envisioned as symbols of Finnish identity. Gallen-Kallela’s most famous painting, the tryptic *Aino* of the Ateneum of Helsinki, represents the death of the maiden from the *Kalevala* in front of another “typical” Finnish lake. And the most famous Finnish tone poem, Ian Sibelius’s *The Swan of Tuonela* (*Tuonelan Joutsen*, 1895), centers around the mystical lake Tuonela, gateway to the land of death, as narrated in the *Kalevala*. In Finnish Symbolist culture the lakes harbor the ancient *legendarium* connected to the national poem, first published by Elias Lönnrot in 1835 and 1849. In these works, nature does not stand as a mirror of the authors, but of their “nation,” in the Romantic sense of the term.

Local landscapes represented in connection with the idea of nation and nation-building can be seen in the artistic traditions of other Western countries. The exhibition *The Greats*, a celebration of the titular National Gallery of Scotland, showcased landscape paintings that were meant as an integral part of nineteenth-century British discourse on the identity (and independence) of Scotland. The importance of Scotland, as a territory and as a cultural entity, was in fact the focus of the “Prologue” section, with paintings by Joseph Far-

10 Allerston, “A Work of Art Itself.”

11 Machotka, *Visual Genesis of Japanese National Identity*, pp. 187–208.

12 See Foxwell, *Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting*, p. 9.

13 Kubota, “Nature and National Identities in the Nordic Countries.”



ington (1747–1821), Francis Towne (1739–1816), Arthur Elwell Moffat (1861–1944), and James Burrell Smith (1822–1897). Of particular note was also the selection of Scottish and English painters who represented landscapes of Scotland, such as David Roberts (1796–1864), William Dyce (1806–1864), Sir George Harvey (1806–1876), Sir Edwin Landseer (1802–1873), and Edward Arthur Walton (1860–1922). Apparently unrelated was the painting *Niagara Falls, from American Side* (1867), by the U.S. painter Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) that was donated to the National Gallery of Scotland by the “Scot” John S. Kennedy (1830–1909).<sup>14</sup>

It is from a “Scottish” point of view that we should look at William Dyce’s religious meditations on canvas. While the contemporary tradition prescribed Oriental deserts as ideal settings for religious stories, Dyce represented David (in *David in the Wilderness*, cat. no. 67) and Christ (in *Man of Sorrow*, cat. no. 68) immersed in the windy and barren atmosphere of the highlands, with its shiny white light that chisels the rocks and fixes the crystal-like human figures in a contemplative stasis. This choice—connected to the Anglican theologian John Keble, who “aimed to revive ... liturgical practices usually associated with Roman Catholicism”<sup>15</sup>—was so innovative that the works were harshly criticized.<sup>16</sup> The paintings date to around 1860, the year after the opening of the National Gallery of Scotland, and it would be hard to dismiss a cultural relationship between the sacralization of the “typical” Scottish landscape and the establishment of an institution that was meant to represent Scottish national identity to the world.

Other “national identities” were founded on the grounds of the majesty of their nature. Christopher Baker interprets the grandiose *Niagara Falls, from American Side* by Church (cat. no. 93) as anticipating mass tourism, given the small human figures staring at the falls. Not much is said, on the other hand, about Church’s national painting culture and the Hudson River School, of which Church is probably the most famous representative. A late blossoming of the Romantic taste for the sublime, painters of the Hudson River School represented the New World of the young American nation as an immense, strong, pure, holy land.<sup>17</sup> Overall, despite the fact that the curators of *The Greats*

frequently imply that the National Gallery of Scotland was itself a work of art and the cornerstone of Scottish cultural resurgence, the theme of national identity is not really explored in the catalogue.

The NMWA exhibition was even more radical in canceling references to the inter-connected themes of nation, nation-building, identity-building, and nationalism. With the exception of Kubota’s column on Norway and Finland, the only mention of this theme was in Shinfuji’s column *The Reunion of Art and Life: The Worpsswede Artists’ Colony*: “The ruralism of these artists, based on a conviction that bucolic Lower Saxony possessed unique and idyllic qualities, echoed the ascendant ethno-nationalist ideology of the time: a German revivalism that located the wellspring of Aryan identity within this region. Leaving that consideration aside, however...”<sup>18</sup> This last word, “however,” could be used as a summary of all the writings in the catalogue that touch upon the use of landscape paintings in the Romantic, Symbolist, and post-Impressionist eras. Not one single occurrence of the words “nation” or “nationalism” can be found in the four main articles of the catalogue, written by Jingaoka Megumi, Raffaele Milani, Nadine Engel, and Shinfuji Atsushi, not even in connection with the meanings of the paintings by Friedrich and Schinkel (cat. nos. 28–29). The focus of the curators is, instead, on the investigation of nature and the appreciation of nature painting as a moment of self-reflection and self-transformation.<sup>19</sup> But the agency and culture of the artist need to be fully acknowledged. The act of considering the painters as single, isolated representatives of humankind as a whole, without any relationship to their contemporary people and cultures, reduces the titular “dialogue with nature” to an interior and probably empty monologue.

In fact, the Folkwang collection that contributes half of the works displayed at the NMWA exhibition is itself proof of the importance of rooting any understanding of paintings and art collections in the culture that generated them. Born as the Germanization of the Norse *Fólkvangr*, the name of the Museum Folkwang derives from the *Poetic Edda*, a medieval nordic collection of poems. *Fólkvangr* indicates the otherworldly field ruled over by the goddess Freyja, a field where some of those

14 Baker, “Epilogue.”

15 See Tsumura, *The Greats*, p. 247, nos. 67–68.

16 Pointon, “William Dyce as a Painter of Biblical Subjects.”

17 See for example Ferber, *The Hudson River School*, pp. 82–131.

18 Shinfuji, “The Reunion of Art and Life: The Worpsswede Artists’ Colony,” p. 246.

19 See for example Jingaoka, “In Dialogue with Nature: The ‘Inward Eye.’”

who fell in battle go after they die. The sources of the Norse myths were the Icelandic manuscripts such as the famous *Codex Regius* (thirteenth century), avidly used by the composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883) in recreating the pan-Germanic mythology which lies at the core of his tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (a pillar of our contemporary *imaginarium*). Excluding any notion of “nation” from the discussion of the collections of the Museum Folkwang implies being reticent also about the cultural intentions of the philanthropist Karl Ernst Osthaus (1874–1921), founder of the Museum Folkwang.<sup>20</sup>

But Romantic and post-Romantic national identities, and the myths on which they were built, do not imply a connection with twentieth-century militarism or modern identitarianism. Osthaus demonstrated in collecting French and international painters, including Asian art, and promoting so-called Primitivism, that it was possible to combine national identity and appreciation for other nations and traditions. This is visible also in the history of the National Gallery of Scotland, which could expand its collections and grow as a cultural landmark even if the relations between Scotland and England were not (and are not) completely settled. Cultural dialogue promoted through a better knowledge of different traditions should be considered alternative to militarism, and not a preparation for it.

The association of militarism and nature painting brings me back to the Yamatane exhibition, *Depicting Japanese Landscapes*. The explanatory panels (to which I have to limit my analysis, as, alas, no catalogue was released) openly associated Japanese nature with national identity, and mentioned Shiga's *Nihon fūkeiron*, a book that was later crucial in creating the symbols of nationalistic pride during the militaristic era.<sup>21</sup> However, the exhibition omits many wartime artworks, which depicted natural landscapes such as Mount Fuji or cherry blossoms as spiritual symbols of Japan's imperial expansion in East Asia. The painting *Young Ladies Planting Rice* (cat. no. 45) by *nihonga* painter Kawai Gyokudō 川合玉堂 (1873–1957), depicts a group of women happily working in a rice field under the sun. The caption label introduced the painting as having been made in 1945, the final year of World War II, when Gyokudō evacuated to Mitake. For this reason, according to the caption, this image represents a “refreshing” image of

nature, a rare moment of serendipity in difficult circumstances. Nowhere is it mentioned that depicting field work as a happy and idyllic activity was actually a mandate of militaristic propaganda: soldiers had the duty to fight on the battlefield, and farmers and traders had the duty to “fight” at home, providing resources for the empire.<sup>22</sup>

The general impression is that the Yamatane exhibitors did their best to avoid mentioning the connection between the “harmonious dialogue” that Japanese people have with nature and war propaganda. This also explains why one or two decades of landscape paintings were missing from the selected exhibits. Such reticence could also be perceived in previous exhibitions, such as the special exhibition held for the 110th anniversary of the Nitten 日展 art organization, *Okuda Gensō and the Nitten Masters: From Fukuda Heihachirō to Higashiyama Kaii* (23 April–3 July 2022, Yamatane Museum of Art). Nitten had a pivotal role in establishing the trends of Japanese painting (both *yōga* and *nihonga*), and was also strictly controlled during the militaristic era; not surprisingly, the exhibition never mentioned this period.

Jingaoka, one of the organizers of the NMWA exhibition *In Dialogue with Nature*, voices in her essay her concerns about the dark side of culture, including the arts: “Modern ‘culture’ has continued to cultivate nature and enrich human beings. At the same time, however, this culture also resulted in two World Wars during the 20th century... both Japan and Germany heedlessly dashed into two world wars, carving deep scars in both the history of mankind and in the earth.”<sup>23</sup> This is probably the reason why Jingaoka tries to limit her analysis of landscape paintings to a meditation on the mysteries of the nature represented. By quoting Alberti's myth of Narcissus, Jingaoka seems to think that the purpose of appreciating art derives from a process of self-transformation on an individual basis:

Alberti ... called Narcissus looking at the reflection in the water the genesis of painting, not because he tried to scoop out the image of the mirror, much less because he despaired and was ruined by the fact that the person he fell in love with was his own image, but rather because he transformed into a

20 Gorschlüter, “On the History of Museum Folkwang.”

21 Toyosawa, “An Imperial Vision.”

22 See for example Ikeda, “Twentieth Century Japanese Art.”

23 Jingaoka, “In Dialogue with Nature,” p. 211.

“flower” thanks to his love for painting as an image of illusion.<sup>24</sup>

This idea of meditation, self-improvement, and self-transformation in front of nature and, by proxy, in front of nature paintings, seems to be offered as an alternative to the knowledge of more problematic aspects of the “culture” connected to the artwork. And this seems, indeed, the approach that many exhibitions have in Japan, especially when confronted with similar exhibitions held in the West.

But even the darker sides of history connected to art need to be known, as they are also an integral part of our history and identity. In the case of the Japanese militaristic regime, a proper explanation of the historical context of nationalism and imperial expansion could have helped understand, at least as historical documents, the paintings that were created in those difficult circumstances.

I will conclude by saying that all three exhibitions reviewed offered stunning masterpieces to admire, created by men and women who lived in different countries and historical periods. Getting to know their ambitions and fears is part of what makes their art beautiful, even if they involve complex themes such as nationalism. But if we superimpose our current ideologies, with their reticence and political mandates, to the culture of the artists, then we stop seeing nature, or paintings of nature, or even our own image reflected into nature. This way we limit our vision to the mere physical surface of the painting, and we end up seeing nothing at all.

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