

Ado(a)pt – Relate – Transmit: Asia/America, Mother/Daughter¹⁾

by *Toshi Ishihara*

My original intention to present a talk under this title was to show ways of adoption, adaptation, and transmission of culture from generation to generation, through works by Asian American women writers, such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. Their works represent conflicts of values between generations of mother and daughter.

But gradually I started to think that I wanted my talk to have flesh and blood, and to be delivered in my own words, in my own voice. I thought it should be based on my own experience. Then I happened to have a chance to visit the U.S. with Mother for a month in summer 1993.

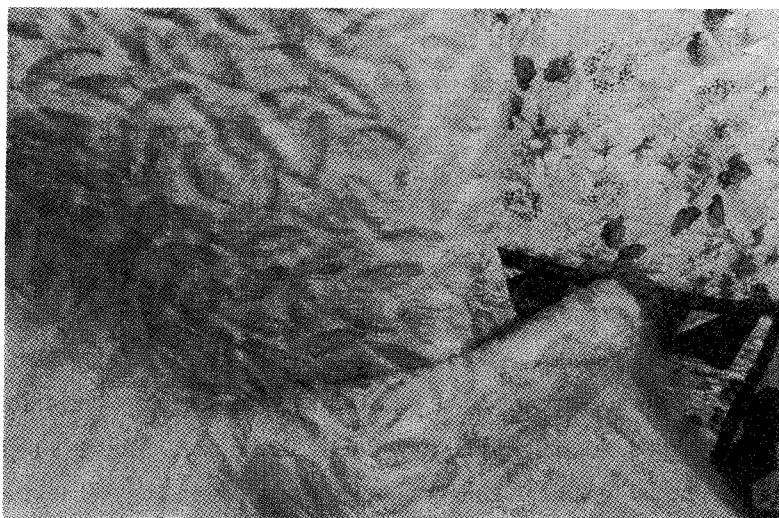
We stayed at the house of our English speaking friends and when we were with them, there was no room for me, as a translator, to intervene into the circuit of their communication and insert my opinions. Yet when Mother and I were left together, with just the two of us, our natural reactions came out. Our individual perceptions did not always differ from each other's, but quite often they did. In those cases, Mother's point of view was helpful as a contrast to mine, highlighting my own understanding. What interested me most was the difference in our perceptions, especially in the experience of visiting museums. That is what I am going to talk about.

I will start with my experience of visiting the Asian collection section in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Mother had gone to the section of European paintings, saying that she has many chances in Japan to see Japanese things, and that the Boston Museum cannot beat any museums in Japan in the number of possessions. But I wanted to see things from Asia in different light, away from their countries.

I enjoyed seeing things collected from China and Korea. There were beautiful artifacts, plates with marble designs, glass bottles for sniffing tobacco — bottles with hind

glass painting. But when I encountered the things from Japan, I felt a strong disgust.

Initially I assumed that I was disappointed at the small size of their collection. Maybe Mother was right? But gradually I came to realize that the disgust was due to the fact that those art works are displaced. They are out of context. First of all, scrolls, paintings, suits of armor are removed from where they belonged and served their original purposes. (Of course that can be said about anything housed in any museum.) Secondly, they are taken out of Japan, removed from their cultural background, or cultural context. Thirdly, they are placed in a surrounding where a lot of effort is made to create a feeling of “Japanese” by building a fake Japanese room in the style of Japonisme, which does not convey any authenticity. Doesn’t it show the arrogance of the Museum to think that it is able to create cultural background with its art and power? The harder it tries to make up a cultural context, the more it amounts to a show of authority.



Thinking about the power of museum, I would like to mention next the Peabody Museum in Boston.

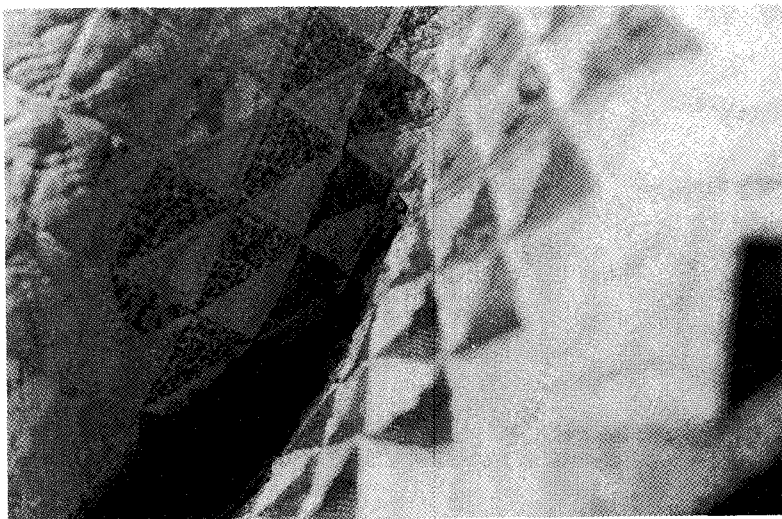
On its third floor, the display starts with two dark rooms dedicated to Maya culture, displaying textiles, stones with letters curved, paintings that depict the daily life of the Maya people, and so on. (Mother was busy taking pictures of textiles. She told me she would photograph for me the letters curved on stones.) The darkness continues to a next room for Eskimo culture. Then there follows a section, still dark, that holds bits and pieces from the Orient and the islands in the Pacific Ocean. After those rooms, a corridor takes us around the corner (where Mother was taking rest on a bench) into the brightness of

electric lights where minerals from all over the world — agate, amethyst, turquoise, etc. — are displayed in brightly-lit glass cases. Then in the last room, glass flowers, and artificial plants made of glass fiber are on display, well protected by air-conditioning.

Many of us would wonder why what human beings made and what nature made are exhibited side by side.²⁾ We gradually come to realize that they are both treated as specimens, samplings, rare and curious objects to be observed and studied. The people conjured up through those things are exposed to the viewer's gaze, as in a kind of show that attracts people for entertainment.

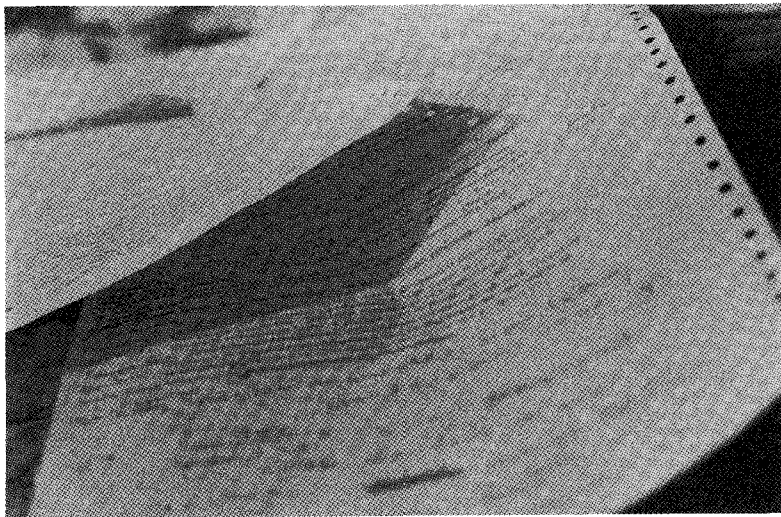
As the viewer physically advances through the rooms displaying the things of the people of foreign cultures, to that of natural resources, then to that of power and art of the Museum, he/she may be prepared to realize that the Museum enjoys the most advanced state. We should recognize how effectively the lighting is manipulated. Darkness of the rooms for the cultures foreign to the American people is easily associated with ignorance, or backwardness. On the other hand, brightness in which natural objects are kept may imply enlightenment and place them as superior to what the people of other cultures have made.³⁾ The darkness may be partly due to a protection of things on display. But the Museum cannot be free from being seen as operating with cultural chauvinism.

The Peabody Museum is expected to be a decent museum, serious about its subjects, archeology and ethnology. But under its surface, it embodies a sense of superiority over other cultures. Anger towards cultural imperialism drives me to think more seriously about what is behind the mask of museums.



It is easily proven that museums are an institution where cultural chauvinism may sneak in when we recall how modern museums started to develop. The main purpose of building museums in the nineteenth century was to promote industry. Many were established in conjunction with the World's Fair where new knowledge and technology were introduced and their development was encouraged.⁴⁾ The World's Fair also provided a place for rare and interesting things from all over the world. Sometimes not only things but people from colonies of European countries were brought and displayed for show.⁵⁾

However, the etymology of “museum” — “the shrine of Muse” — shows that at the beginning museums were meant neither for cultural imperialism nor for entertainment.⁶⁾ Their function was religious. Gifts were brought for gods and goddesses. Sculptures that represented gods and ancestors, paintings that depicted the life of gods and historical events, and stones that represented the power and beauty of nature were often offered to the divine and the dead, and kept on display in order to heighten among the people a sense of communion with those in heaven. But with time, the kinds of offerings changed. In the fourteenth century, antiquities were brought as gifts, and in the fifteenth century, people's interest in traveling drew things from abroad. It is important to know that at the end of the fourteenth century, museums replaced churches as a place where people gathered to promote the sense of community. Obviously museums no longer function as a means to consolidate the bonds among people of a community. They no longer hold meaning for the local people as they used to.



Many people consider that museums are where human knowledge is stored. Many people go there, eager to learn, and absorb whatever knowledge things on display may embody. But there is a danger in an uncritical reception of the (re)presentation.

One Saturday, I came across a clothesline show being held on the grounds of the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, New York. Hundreds of people were selling their handicrafts, pottery, glasswork, stonework, sculptures, etc. Going back and forth between the art gallery and the Clothesline Show, (looking for Mother), I started to wonder what differentiates the things in the gallery from those outside. Once a gallery or museum decides to take somebody's crafts, now sold outside, the meaning of his/her works changes dramatically. But obviously the quality of the work does not change at all. Value depends heavily on the museum's decision if one thing is housed and another is not. Thus museums have power to give a meaning and to determine what is considered as culture.

We should keep in mind that museums operate on the basis of curators' and scholars' interpretations. Takeo Umesao, President of the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan, states that display requires editing.⁷⁾ When Krzysztof Pomian points out that museums were originally a place where many different things were collected, and that later on miscellaneous things came to be given a certain sense of unity,⁸⁾ he also implies a necessity of editing.

It is inevitable that editing is personal. Thus, as Umesao points out at various places,⁹⁾ museums should be careful not to force interpretation on the viewer and to give room to the viewer to have her own interpretation and appreciation. Each viewer has to reconsider how to relate oneself to museums and understand the necessity of involvement/participation in museum experience. From now on I am going to see things in museums with my own eyes, to have my own interpretation, which allows me to see more than I would have noticed otherwise.¹⁰⁾

In museums we encounter a great number of things. Out of profuse things on display the viewer is allowed to choose what to see. Abundance also teaches the viewer to acknowledge a variety of lives, things, and cultures, and promotes in him/her tolerance of difference.¹¹⁾

Let me tell you how I reacted to abundance at the Strong Museum in Rochester, New York.

It houses the collection of one Mrs. Strong, a local resident, of dolls, doll houses, plates, silverware, spoons, furniture, pots, pans, kitchen gadgets, things from the Orient,

netsuke, ironing machines, carpentry tools, and so on. Her collection is well-known especially for the dolls and doll houses.

At the Museum, Mother was absorbed in the display and spent much time on each showcase. I was not only overwhelmed by the number of things, but found the exhibition cadaverous. Why do they look so lacking in life?

Strong might have started collecting dolls and doll-houses because she liked them. But gradually the collection got out of hand. A doll house is an epitome of a house of normal size and enables one a miniature experience. One function of a doll house is to teach children social rules.¹²⁾ But when the act of collecting becomes an end in itself, the social function of doll houses is lost. In the process of her collection, Strong's desire to control miniature houses gradually gave way to the desire to control large houses. A small universe mirrored a large universe, images multiplied through mirroring, and finally the collection came to a point where she could no longer stop it. She was tempted to collect anything she got hold of. It is said that near the end of her life, she purchased whole houses with furniture, tools, everything inside. However, it is obvious that a collector cannot establish a link with things acquired in such an easy way. It is only when one relates him/herself to a particular thing amidst a variety of things, that it assumes a significance for him/her.¹³⁾ Lack of such a serious relationship must be the reason Strong's collection looks lacking in life, and disturbs the viewer.

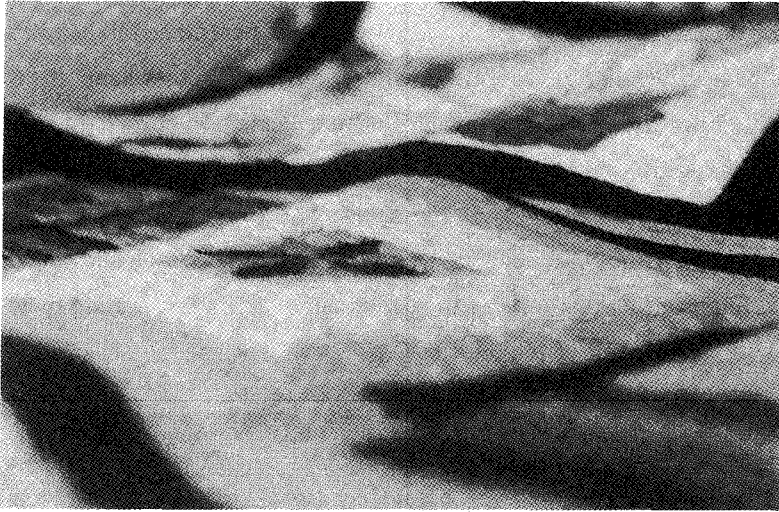
Another reason for the lifelessness of the display is that there are rows after rows of showcases in which things are neatly ordered, numbered, and displayed to perfection. It heightens a sense that the curator controlled too much, which deprived things of whatever life they had. He/she did what the collector could not. The contrast of the curator's power with the powerlessness of the collector makes the display cacophonous.

However, the exhibition is saved from being an occasion of showing off of the rational mind in that the showcases are not arranged in order. There is no smooth transition from a showcase of one category to that of another. It may disturb the viewer initially, but as one sees more, the viewer is left as disoriented as the collector herself. It is only then the viewer starts feeling freedom.

If Mother enjoyed the display, it is because she lets herself to be drawn by her interest, and chooses what to see. She is interested in things in themselves — not like me, who try to see more than things can tell. I learnt from her way of appreciation to see things individually. I came to realize Strong's individual collections, such as of dolls, dolls houses, plates, etc., are useful for the study of the particular genres. They should give important

information to those interested. Things of different categories should be appreciated separately. The collection should not be observed as of one piece. Otherwise it would only reveal the insanity of the collector in her desire for possessions.

In retrospect, my museum experiences so far were unnatural in that I tried too hard to write a story of each exhibition complete and as a whole. Maybe it is better to compose a mosaic out of the pieces I am attracted to in an exhibition. I should not worry about the whole.



Like the Strong Museum, the Gardner Museum in Boston overwhelms the viewer by its abundant possessions.

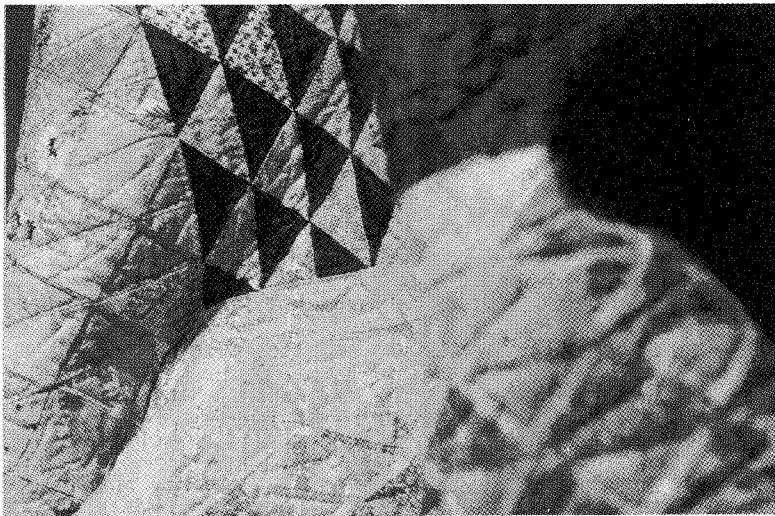
The mansion of Isabella Gardner has become a public museum, and all the paintings, sculptures, and arts and crafts on display are her collection. As ordered in her will, all her collections have been kept as they were and where they were.

Some may take the way Gardner covered the wall with her collection as the case of *horror vacui*.¹⁴⁾ But now I recall paintings that depicted the inside of the Louvre in its early history. They show how paintings were displayed then, covering almost all of the wall. Thus, covering the wall might have been, at the Gardner as well as at the Louvre, for a practical reason: there was not enough room. Unlike Strong, Isabella Gardner does not seem to have been a clinical case.

Mother complained of the darkness in the mansion. I tried to convince her that the poor lighting system at the beginning of the century may have been kept in order to evoke the feeling of the time the mansion was built.

We have considered above in the case of the Peabody Museum that darkness is possibly associated with backwardness. In the Gardner Museum, however, the dimness of the light curves the weirdness which the abundance might cause. In order to interpret the darkness accurately, I would like to refer to Francine Prose's observation of the Gardner mansion as an "icon" of Boston. She points out that what makes Boston interesting is the "tension between Puritan abstemiousness and acquisitive passion for *things*, between Yankee self-denial and southern European sensuality."¹⁵⁾ Such a tension, to follow Prose's argument, may have been embodied in Gardner herself, as in her Puritan conscience, and in her eccentric character (for instance, she would walk her leashed lion in Boston).¹⁶⁾ The latter must have driven her to show off her collection. On the other hand, the former must have prevented her from revealing the expensive collection in clear light. She wanted to show but at the same time did not like to show. And this ambivalence of showing and hiding functions in a favorable way to the mansion as an art gallery.

What emerges from Gardner's collection is an aesthetics of showing and hiding. Darkness is important in that it hides the demarcation around a painting to let its subject stand out with its aura out of the dark background.



Showing and hiding leads me to a speculation on the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. I am interested in photography. And I had heard that the Eastman House Museum is a "must" for those interested in the art of photography. So I went there with an expectation of learning about the development of the camera and photography as an art.

The George Eastman House Museum consists of two sections: one is the house of Kodak's founder, and the other is a section where they show cameras and photos to trace the history of photography and cameras. Eastman, born in 1854, lived in the house from 1905 to 1932. At his death, the house was donated to the University of Rochester, and later was changed into a photographic museum by the State of New York. In 1989, an annex was built to display and house the Museum's collection of photography, photographic equipment, and documents.

We first took a guided tour so that we could have a rough idea how the museum is laid out and we could go back later to the section we found interesting. But the tour turned out to cover only the Eastman mansion. Another tour was to cover the garden. We decided not to take it and went to the second section, the photography exhibit, by ourselves.

How did Mother feel about the Museum? The tour was conducted in English, so she was completely left out of what was going on. Later on she told me that she did enjoy the second section without any interruption by a guide trying to explain what the display means, which sounded merely a noise to her. Her experience may imply that though information (showing) may be useful, we could enjoy a display better without noises (hiding), or without interpretations being forced on us.¹⁷⁾

I also had a negative reaction to the Museum. I was upset with the assumption of the curator that the visitors to the Museum are interested only in the mansion. When I want to know about camera and photography (hiding), do I have to be shown the family life of the man (showing)? My intellectual curiosity was subjugated by the force of the curator into sharing a vulgar desire to look into the private life of the man. We do not enjoy a forced subject. To force a subject is violence both to the subject and the viewer. But even though we might be curious about the life of the man, when so much of his daily life is exposed (showing), what else do we expect to know? Our curiosity is aroused only when there are things kept from our view (hiding).



We could rephrase the issue of showing/hiding into that of being visible/invisible. In visiting the Museum, we are aware that Eastman is dead. The Museum is trying to construct, through showing concrete objects, an image of a person who is no longer there. To represent an image of what is invisible to us, or to invite the viewer to imagine a world that is not easily accessible to us, as Pomian points out,¹⁸⁾ is one of the functions of museums. If the first section concentrates on conjuring up an image of Eastman, the subject, by showing his life in the house, his detailed background, what does the second section try to present an image of? What is expected to become visible through the display in the second section?

It is said that the Museum has much information on photography in the archive. It extends downstairs as large as a football field and one can have an access to it by appointment, but it is usually hidden from the visitors. Therefore, the task of the second section is to give the viewer a sense of the collection of the Museum. Things should be displayed in such a way as to make us feel their background. The second section should stand as a metonymy of the whole and give a sense of the space behind each thing shown.¹⁹⁾

The last point I want to touch on in the context of visibility/invisibility is the vulgar desire, mentioned above, to peek in, to invade somebody's privacy — voyeurism. I want to emphasize that voyeurism is not healthy. A great danger is involved in voyeurism. As Susan Sontag points out in terms of taking pictures, in her *On Photography*, when one

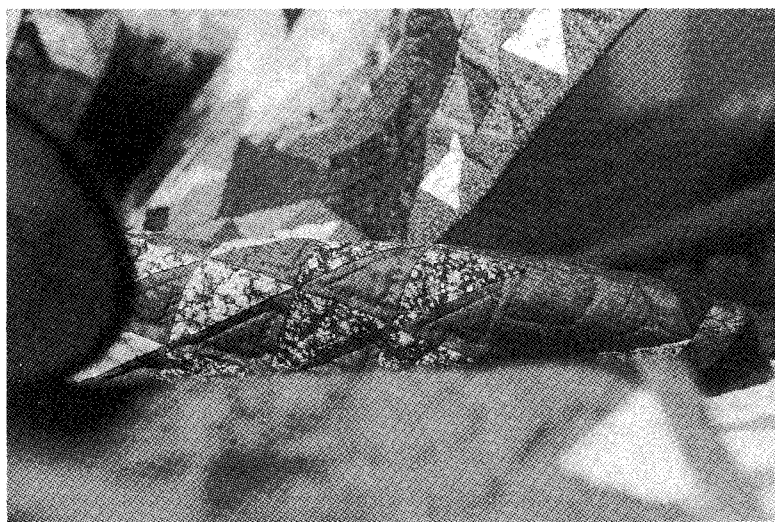
(behind camera) satisfies a desire to have a knowledge of another person (the object) that he/she him/herself does not have, it means that the one stands at a vantagepoint, or has power over the other.²⁰⁾ It is a form of subjugation. Let us recall the Peabody Museum. When a collector assumes that his/her own culture is superior to those she/he is collecting things of, a voyeuristic pleasure accompanies his/her research. It is not only the collector who is to blame for the mean pleasure: the viewer could be complicit. Or there are cases where the viewer enjoys the sense of superiority when the collector has no such intention.

What matters is the viewer's attitude. We go to museums to learn different cultures and reflect on our own culture. We would like to compare them and have a better understanding of our own and its relative position. A danger resides in that in comparison, many people, though unconsciously, tend to stand favorably on the side of their own culture. We easily forget the etymological meaning of the word, "to compare": *com*, "together," *par*, "equal." As is clear in its etymology, when we compare two things, it is required that the two stand on equal terms. There should be a dialogue between the two, not only the gaze from one to the other. In order to make an exchange possible, the one who compares is required to see both terms without prejudice. It is necessary for him/her to deframe (or get rid of) the framework or value system he/she has been forced to and/or attached to. It is only when he/she is freed from the assumption that one's culture is superior to the other's that he/she is ready for a dialogue between the two. Both terms become speaking subjects.

The idea of "deframing" and "dialogue" is suggested to me by the Photography Exhibition at the Anderson Gallery at Buffalo, New York, "Portraits in Steel." It is an exhibition of portraits of the people who used to work in steel plants in Buffalo. Pictures taken in 70's and 80's of the same people are displayed side by side. Beside them are presented the texts which are interviews, comments by the people looking back on the image of themselves taken in the 70's. Some talk about the family members in old pictures, or some talk about what happened to their plants or work.

Usually in the act of taking pictures, power, as we have observed in the voyeuristic gaze, is with the person behind the camera. No power is given to the one who is seen. I am fully aware that for some kind of photos, there should be a communication between the object and the cameraperson. But once captured in an image, the object remains as he/she/it was, and has no control over his/her/its own image. However, in the case of the Photography Exhibition at Buffalo, those people, objects, are given a chance to become

subjects and comment on their images. They can let the image speak. Thus there is a sense of dialogue between the one who sees the photo and the one seen in the photo. They deframe (or remove the frame of) the images so that what has been kept within the frame can emerge and start talking. To deframe means to release an object from a fixed image to allow it to become a speaking subject.



We have been considering dangers implicit in the system of museums or art galleries: cultural imperialism, reductionism, categorization, forcing a sense of order, replacing the intellectual curiosity by voyeuristic pleasure. And I have been suggesting ways to arm ourselves against them: to try one's own interpretation, to see things individually, not to look for totalistic order, and most important of all, to deframe oneself from the value system which one has been attached to.

Our speculation on museums finally comes down to the recognition of their basic function: to teach the viewer about different cultures. Museums do that in two ways. One is through actually showing things. The other way, I would suggest, is through letting the viewer to experience different modes of appreciation.

Museums used to be proud of themselves as a system of making meanings. They did not care about reception by the viewer of their collections. But recently they seem to have changed. They have been trying to enrich experience by accomodating different ways to let the viewer approach their collections. For example, in the Museum in Yokohama, children are invited to draw paintings while viewing works by artists.²¹⁾ They could enjoy the action of painting, which would enrich their way of appreciating others' paintings.

Another example is not a museum but a temple, but I would like to cite it for its implication. In a temple in Kyoto, a replica of a statue was made so that blind people can touch it and feel how it is.²²⁾ Thus, participation, not considered important by museums in the past, is now highly recommended.

Different modes of appreciation have been gradually acknowledged. Now in museums we could try several ways to appreciate things from different perspectives. It is obvious that there is not only one way to experience things. It varies from one person to another according to his/her mode of life. One may like to depend on touching or listening instead of seeing, or combine those modes. One should be allowed to choose things and the mode of appreciating them that is suitable for each of us.

When we say “cultures,” many people may tend to think of cultures of large geographical areas — Asia, America, Africa — , or cultures of countries, or regions. But we should bear in mind that each mode of life constitutes a culture, and that different modes of perception are cultures. Thus museums could help us understand different cultures by providing us with various modes of appreciation. They will also make us aware of the necessity of regarding different cultures on equal terms.

Museums fulfil their task as a place to save us from a provincialism that heavily depends on one specific culture, and to consolidate bonds among human beings. They can take us beyond differences. It is the assignment of museums at present and in the future to restore their original function as a place where a sense of community is cultivated.

Back to the title — though my paper did not touch on literary works by Asian American writers, my concern remains basically the same. It is to understand the process of adoption, relation, and transmission of cultures. And it is to encourage myself and others to get seriously involved in the attempt to establish a plain ground among differences.

Notes

- 1) This paper was delivered at the Open Seminar sponsored by Soai University and Osaka City, held at Soai University on November 13, 1993. For this published version, I rephrased certain portions. I am grateful to my friend who took pictures of Mother's quilting.
- 2) In the talk with Takashi Tachibana, Takeo Umesao points out that natural history museums in the U.S. often include human beings as their subject of display, along with plants and animals. In *Umesao Tadao Taidanshu: Hakubutsukan no Shiso* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1989), 48.
- 3) Implication of light is suggested by Shunya Yoshimi, *Hakurankai no Seijigaku* (Tokyo: Chuokoronsha, 1992), 195–197. He points out the manipulation of color in Buffalo Expo in 1901.
- 4) We could cite the Tokyo National Museum as an instance. It started in the fifth year of Meiji Era. In the following year when the Museum decided to take part in the World's Fair held in Austria, it asked interested communities in Japan to submit their local specialties and rare products in pairs, one for the Fair and one for the Museum. *Geijutsu Shincho*, June 1989 (Tokyo: Shinchosha), 44.
- 5) Yoshimi, 184–187, 192–194, 197–201.
- 6) As for the history of museums, I referred to Krzysztof Pomian's *Collection*, translated by Jo Yoshida and Noriko Yoshida (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1992), 27–72. I also referred to Noritaka Shiina, *Meiji Hakubutsukan Kotohajime* (Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 1989), 9–11.
- 7) Umesao, *Hakubutsukan no Shiso*, 218. Takeo Umesao, *Media toshiten no Hakubutsukan* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1987), 98.
- 8) Pomian, 370.
- 9) Umesao, *Hakubutsukan to Joho* (Tokyo: Chuokoronsha, 1983), 21.
- 10) As an example of a display which allows the viewer to establish one's way of seeing instead of being forced, I would refer to Hyokeikan at the Tokyo National Museum. Here earthen ware and haniwas are displayed in chronological order without any effort on the side of the Museum to edit their display. The Museum thinks that when different interpretations are possible among scholars, it should not advocate one particular interpretation. Rather it lets the viewer interpret by him/herself. *Geijutsu Shincho*, June 1989, 23.
- 11) Umesao, *Hakubutsukan no Shiso*, 216, and *Hakubutsukan to Joho*, 12–13.
- 12) For a discussion of doll houses, see Koji Taki, *Me no In'yu: Shisen no Genshogaku* (Tokyo: Aotsuchisha, 1992), 44–67. Also Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narrative of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, originally published by Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 61–65.
- 13) Also pointed out by Umesao in *Hakubutsukan no Shiso*, 149–151.
- 14) Suggested by Francine Prose in her article, "Boston, Where Puritan Meets Sybarite." In *The Sophisticated Traveler, The New York Time* (Sunday Edition), September 12, 1993, 23.
- 15) Prose, 23, 47. Emphasis in the original.
- 16) Prose, 23.
- 17) Pointed out by Umesao in *Hakubutsukan to Joho*, 12–13, and other places.
- 18) Pomian, 40–45.

- 19) A modest display is considered as characteristic of the Japanese collection by Yuichiro Nakamura and Koji Taki. They point out that Japanese collectors do not reveal everything they have, but that they suggest their collection by showing only one or a few. *Shumatsu no Yokan: Yokubo, Kigo, Rekishi* (Tokyo: Heibonsh, 1988), 56–62.
- 20) Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 14–15.
- 21) *Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 29, 1993.
- 22) *Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 28, 1993.

Bibliography

- Geijutsu Shincho*. June 1989. Tokyo: Shinchosha.
- Nakamura, Yuichiro and Taki, Koji. *Shumatsu no Yokan: Yokubo, Kigo, Rekishi*. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1988.
- Pomian, Krzysztof. *Collection*. trans. Jo Yoshida and Noriko Yoshida. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1992.
- Prose, Francine. "Boston, Where Puritan Meets Sybarite." In *The Sophisticated Traveler. The New York Time* (Sunday Edition), September 12, 1993.
- Shiina, Noritaka. *Meiji Hakubutsukan Kotohajime*. Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 1989.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. London: Penguin Books, 1979.
- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narrative of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. Originally published by Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.
- Taki, Koji. *Me no In'yu: Shisen no Genshogaku*. Tokyo: Aotsuchisha, 1992.
- Umesao, Takeo. *Hakubutsukan no Shiso*. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1989.
- _____. *Hakubutsukan to Joho*. Tokyo: Chuokoronsha, 1983.
- _____. *Media toshiteno Hakubutsukan*. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1987.
- Yomiuri Shimbun*. September 28, 29, 1993.
- Yoshimi, Shunya. *Hakurankai no Seijigaku*. Tokyo: Chuokoronsha, 1992.