

The *Kobu Bijutsu Gakko* and the Beginning of Design Education in Modern Japan

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Introduction

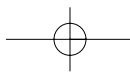
In November 1876, the Kobu Bijutsu Gakko (the Art School of the Ministry of Public Works) was established by the Japanese government and immediately after its opening several Italian artists began teaching elementary theory and practice in painting and sculpture to young Japanese students. Most studies of this school indicate that it was the first government school for orthodox, Western-style fine art in Japan. Today, generally speaking, by 'Bijutsu' we mean "fine art" or "visual art," namely painting and sculpture. However, the question of what Bijutsu meant in the 1870s still is open. And it has a close relation to the beginning of design education in modern Japan.

During the 1870s, after the Meiji Ishin (Meiji Restoration), the Japanese government made efforts to develop communications and industry, as well as military power. Telegraph lines, a postal service, railways, a banking system and national currency, gun foundries, shipyards, mining, model factories for silk reeling and spinning, the production of cement, glass, and brick; the foundations of these were laid and expanded through the introduction of Western technology, institutions, and ideas. To succeed in these ambitious programs of modernization, the government hired a large number of foreign experts and advisers, known as O-Yatoi to serve in Japan. A mission consisting of fifty high-ranking officials was sent to the United States and Europe. It was headed by Iwakura Tomomi, who

Figure 1

The Iwakura Mission. Left to right: Kido Takayoshi, Yamaguchi Naoyoshi, Iwakura Tomomi, Ito Hirobumi, and Okubo Toshimichi.





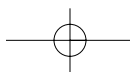
took Okubo Toshimichi and Ito Hirobumi as deputies accompanied by fifty-nine students, five of whom were women. Although the mission was not successful in its primary aim of revising the unequal treaties, the Meiji leaders themselves inspected the governmental organization, industrial development, trade, and education in the Western world.¹ If the mission was one important project for the study of the West, the participation of Japan in international exhibitions was another. The committee that was sent to the Vienna Exhibition in 1873 consisted of over seventy officials, and some of the most able among them were dispatched to different European countries to study the various scientific subjects bearing on industry.

The 1870s were a time of learning about the West and adopting ideas and customs of Western civilization. It was against this backdrop, expressed in the slogans, *Fukoku Kyohei* (rich country, strong army), *Shokusan Kogyo* (increase production, promote industry), and *Bunmei Kaika* (civilization and enlightenment), that the new Japanese word *Bijutsu* appeared in 1872. The government institutions adopted the word shortly after. The *Kobu Bijutsu Gakko* was opened by the Ministry of Public Works under Ito in 1876, and the *Bijutsu Kan* (Fine Art Gallery) was founded by the Home Ministry under Okubo in 1877.

The Program of Vienna Exhibition 1873 and the Word Bijutsu
The word *Bijutsu* first appeared in the Japanese program of the Vienna Universal Exhibition of 1873, *Weltausstellung Wien 1873*, published by the Exhibition Committee in February 1872. It was a translation from the original German program of the exhibition, which H. Calice, an Austro-Hungarian diplomat, had handed over to the committee three weeks before. In early spring of 1871, he asked Japan to participate in the Vienna exhibition. In a letter dated 10 May 1871, Calice requested the Japanese government's assistance, so that the great variety of interesting and valuable products of Japanese art, industry, and agriculture could be represented in its entirety at the exhibition.² At first, the Meiji government showed little enthusiasm for the international exhibition, after being saddled with debts incurred by the former government, the Tokugawa Bakufu, at the Paris exhibition in 1867. But as soon as Calice had an audience with Emperor Mutsuhito in January 1872, the Exhibition Committee, headed by Okuma Shigenobu, one of the Meiji leaders, was organized.

One of the committee's functions was to translate the German program into Japanese. According to the classifications of the program, exhibits were divided into twenty-six groups. Using the word *Bijutsu*, the committee translated the titles of Group 22, Group 24, and Group 25. The original German titles are as follows:

- 1 Kume Kunitake, the mission scribe, recorded the details of their visit in *Bei-O Kairan Jikki*.
- 2 The diplomatic documents on the Vienna Exhibition including Calice's letters, and the English, German, and French programs of the Vienna Exhibition are kept in the Diplomatic Record Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



22 Gruppe: Darstellung der Wirksamkeit der Kunstgewerbe-Museen.

24 Gruppe: Objekte der Kunst und Kunstgewerbe früherer Zeiten

25 Gruppe: Die bildende Kunst der Gegenwart.

By "Bijutsu," the committee meant "Kunst" and "Kunstgewerbe," as well as "bildende Kunst"; therefore, the difference between applied art and fine art was unclear in the Japanese program. Based on the classifications, a great number of exhibits sent to Vienna were collected from all over the country, but there was nothing for Group 22. At the time, Japan had no such institution as the museum, and knew nothing whatever of fine art applied to industry in the Western sense. It was to be learned during the Vienna exhibition.

Sano Tsunetami, vice president of the committee, planned to dispatch some young officials to factories and schools in European countries to obtain the latest knowledge in all fields, and to import new tools and machines. With the help of Gottfried Wagener, a German adviser to the committee, they studied the various fields bearing on industry. Sano and Wagener had a great interest in applied art, rather than in fine art. And so Hirayama Eizo, a young official interpreter of the committee, entered the School of Applied Arts (Kunstgewerbeschule) in Vienna, instead of the Academy of Fine Arts (Akademie der bildenden Künste). The school, founded in 1867, was attached to the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry (das k.k. österreichische Museum für Kunst und Industrie) in Vienna, and there he studied applied art under Josef von Storck from 1874 to 1877. In Hirayama's school days, Austrian industrial art was influenced by historicism represented by Storck and Rudolf von Eitelberger.

Storck studied ornament and flower painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna under the architects Eduard van der Nüll and August Siccard von Siccardsburg. In 1866, he took the post of ornament and drawing teacher at the Vienna Polytechnic Institute. In 1868, he moved to the newly established School of Applied Arts where he taught architecture. He was director of the school several times until 1899.

The aim of the School of Applied Arts, was to educate workers to be able to meet the demands of the art industry.³ Designers and draftsmen for factories, handicraftsmen, and teachers in technical and vocational school were to be trained there. Its basic instruction was in architecture, painting, and sculpture, industrial art being based upon nothing less than the application of these arts to the needs of daily life. This was a belief of Rudolf von Eitelberger, the first director of the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry, for whom fine art and industrial art were inseparably connected.⁴

Eitelberger, a friend of van der Nüll since the 1840s, became an extraordinary professor of the theory and history of fine art at Vienna University in 1852, and in the following years he was a member of numerous commissions including the Austrian Commis-

3 *Das Kaiserlich-Königliche Österreichische Museum und Die Kunstgewerbeschule, Festschrift bei Gelegenheit der Weltausstellung in Wien.* (Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1873).

4 Ulrike Scholda, "Die Ausführende Hand der Theoretiker," in Peter Nover, ed., *Kunst und Industrie, Die Anfänge des Museums für Angewandte Kunst in Wien*, (Wien: MAK-Museum für Angewandte Kunst, 2000), 219.

sion for Fine Art. Through his service as observer and judge at the international exhibitions held in Paris in 1855 and London in 1862, he gathered information on the condition of industrial art, and strove to establish the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry. Since the London Great Exhibition held in 1851, Austria had been on the losing side with respect to the design of objects for daily use, and Eitelberger saw a remedy through the activities of the South Kensington Museum. The Austrian Museum for Art and Industry was founded in May 1864, and was the first museum of this kind on the Continent. Eitelberger was director of the museum until 1885.

After returning to Japan, Hirayama promoted and encouraged Japanese industrial art, not as a professional designer, but as a bureaucrat and teacher.

The Vienna exhibition was a classroom and its program a textbook for members of the committee. The fruits of their studies were published after the closing of the exhibition. In their reports, we can find important definitions of and proposals for applied art. In the first official record on the exhibition, *Okoku Hakurankai Hikki*,⁵ published in December 1873, applied art was defined as painting and sculpture applied to industrial products for daily use, and fine art mainly as painting and sculpture displaying skill in technique.

In other reports⁶ published in 1875, Sano and Wagener recommended that museums be established in major towns of Japan, and art schools be attached to these museums to encourage industrial art, namely pottery, porcelain, metal work, lacquer, and weaving. Sano and Wagener stressed that painting and sculpture be chiefly taught in art schools, and that periodic exhibitions be held at the museums. Models for these concepts were the South Kensington Museum with the School of Design in London, and the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry with the School of Applied Arts in Vienna. Sano clearly wrote that the organization of the South Kensington Museum undoubtedly was suitable for the needs of Japan.⁷

But Sano and Wagener's ideas were not realized entirely. There was another plan, approved by the government in 1875.

The Koku Bijutsu Gakko and the Koku Daigakko

After conversations between Ito Hirobumi and the Italian diplomat Alessandro Fe about the situation of art in Japan, Ito accepted Fe's proposal for Italian leadership in art education in Japan. His plan was to found an art school in Tokyo and employ three Italian artists as instructors in painting, sculpture, and architectural decoration. In November 1876, the Koku Bijutsu Gakko was opened as a department of the Koku Daigakko (Imperial College of Engineering). In the same year, the Italian government officially sent three artists: Antonio Fontanesi, Vincenzo Lagusa, and Giovanni Vincenzo Caperreti, along with many teaching materials including oil paintings and plaster figures. The school taught three consecutive courses. The Preparatory Course was for beginners during the first three years. The

5 *Okoku Hakurankai Hikki* is kept in the National Diet Library.

6 Hakurankai Jimukyoku *Okoku Hakurankai Hokokusho, Hakubutsu Kan No Bu*. (Tokyo: Hakurankai Jimukyoku, 1875). A complete set of *Okoku Hakurankai Hokokusho* is kept in the National Archives of Japan.

7 Ibid.



Figure 2
The main building of the Koku Daigakko.

Figure 3
 Drawing Class of the Art School.
 (Drawing by Matsuoka Hisashi, 1877).

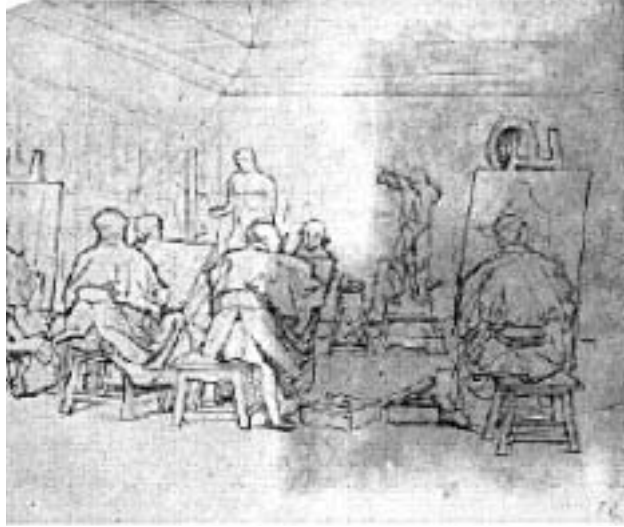


Figure 4
 Fontanesi (third from the left in the front row)
 and his students, 1878.



Painting Course and Sculpture Course were for students demonstrating a certain degree of competence for the last three years. Fontanesi chiefly instructed in painting, Lagusa in sculpture, and Caperreti in drawing.

In his book, Henry Dyer, then principal of the Imperial College of Engineering, wrote:

All the more important foreign Powers were anxious to have a hand in what they were pleased to call the "civilising" of Japan. The Americans were influential in general education, the British in the navy and public works, the French in the military service, and the Germans in medicine. The Engineering College represented the United Kingdom, as we had on our staff graduates of English, Scottish, and Irish universities. The Italians thought that their special sphere was that of art, and they were anxious that there should be a School of Art in which they could

impart the methods and ideals of European art. To please them the Government established such a school, which was, for convenience, connected with the Engineering College.⁸

The Imperial College of Engineering, originally known as the Kogakko (Technical School), founded in 1871, was established in connection with the Bureau of Engineering in the Ministry of Public Works. In 1877, the college was officially named the Koku Daigakko. It was not until 1873, when Dyer was employed by the Japanese government, that a solid syllabus for the college was set. When the Iwakura mission went to England at the end of 1872, Dyer was offered the position of principal of the Engineering College. It was Ito Hirobumi's plan that a college be established to train young Japanese men to continue the industrial process by Western methods.

In April 1873, Dyer, accompanied by eight British professors, sailed to Japan with a new idea in engineering education. The training courses, arranged by Dyer, were to meet the needs of Japan. They extended over six years, with the first two years devoted to general training in engineering. The technical courses, taught during the third and fourth years, comprised six branches: civil engineering, mechanical engineering, telegraphy, architecture, chemistry and metallurgy, and mining. The last two years were spent entirely in practical work. Later, the method of combining theory and practice in the training of engineers which Dyer introduced into Japan was named the "sandwich" system of apprenticeship.

The Imperial College of Engineering and its graduates played an important role in the program launched by the Ministry of Public Works, headed by Ito, for the development of railways, machine factories, mining, telegraph lines, lighthouses, and Western architecture. The government organizers of the college were preoccupied with practicality, and this was reflected in the two fundamental purposes of the Art School. First, the Art School should encourage industry by implanting modern Western techniques into old Japanese manufacturing systems. Second, to catch up with the European school of art, and to master the profound principles of art and make up for artistic defects by teaching art starting from elementary theory and practice.

According to its aims, the Art School should instruct in the application of art to industry. In other words, it should be a school of design, because Japan required design education.

In the same year that the art school was established, Japan participated in the international exhibition held in Philadelphia. The preparations were actively entered into at the end of 1874. The exhibition committee was organized in January 1875 as a department of the Home Ministry, which was charged with the promotion of

⁸ Henry Dyer, *Dai Nippon The Britain of The East* (London: Blackie & Son, 1904), 207.

industry, commerce, and agriculture. Okubo Toshimichi, the Home Minister, was appointed president of the committee. And it was entrusted to these people who, as members of the committee of 1873, had experience with exhibitions in Vienna. They now were able to assist manufacturers, both in the preparation of the necessary designs and in the selection of the goods. Several of the most remarkable pieces of porcelain, bronze casting, and woodcarving had first been designed by artists, and then the drawings were sent to manufacturers to be executed.⁹

Since the Vienna exhibition, the government had directed its attention to the design of Japanese manufactured products and had started organizing the drawing schools. In the Japanese Official Catalogue¹⁰ of the Philadelphia exhibition, published in 1876, we can clearly see the government's intention to organize a school of design as a means to encourage the progress of industry and manufacturing. It was realized as the Koku Bijutsu Gakko. Its establishment was the beginning of design education in modern Japan. The results of the Art School were put on view for the general public at the National Exhibition in Tokyo in 1877.

The National Exhibition in 1877 and After

In July 1876, the government announced that the National Exhibition would be opened at Ueno Park in Tokyo. The Exhibition Bureau soon was organized as a division of the Home Ministry, and was presided over by Okubo Toshimichi. The government had participated in the Vienna and Philadelphia international exhibitions, and several periodical exhibitions had taken place in Japan, but no attempt had been made to bring together the products of the whole country. It was Okubo's wish that a national exhibition be held to encourage the manufacturing industries.¹¹ Based on the experience gained with Iwakura mission in America and Europe, especially in Britain, Okubo strongly believed that Japan needed productive power through manufacturing, and Japanese manufacturing required the patronage and encouragement of the government and its officials. To provide this support was an important task of the Home Ministry.

The aim of the National Exhibition was to bring together in one place all of the various products of Japanese agriculture and industry for comparison and examination. In order for Japan to make further advances, the merits and defects in manufacture, agriculture, art, and science would be brought to light. For this reason, no exhibits of foreign manufacture were admitted except those found useful for comparison with home-manufactured items.

The preparation followed the example of the Philadelphia exhibition. Central government officials in charge of measures for the promotion of agriculture and industry were sent to each local government. The local authorities were instructed to encourage the people to send as many objects as possible, to assist them in coming

Figure 5
Outside view of the *Bijutsu Kan* at the
National Exhibition, 1877.



Figure 6
Inside view of the *Bijutsu Kan*.



Figure 7
Machinery Department at The National
Exhibition, 1877.



to Tokyo, and finally, to give all possible financial assistance as well as advice. The Bureau assisted the exhibitors, as the Philadelphia Committee had done, both in the preparation of necessary designs and in the selection of exhibits.

The exhibition was a national project. Although a large rebellion had taken place under the leadership of Saigo Takamori, Okubo's best friend and the most adored Meiji leader, the exhibition was opened in the summer of 1877 under Okubo's strong leadership.

The various products were divided into six main categories: mining and metallurgy, manufactures, art, machinery, agriculture, horticulture, and were arranged in seven buildings. The machinery exhibits, arranged by Dyer, showed machines and appliances made

at the government factory connected with Dyer's college. The main building was built of brick, and designed to be permanent in the Western style, while the other six were temporary buildings of wood in the Japanese style. It was named the Bijutsu Kan (Fine Art Gallery), where works of art were arranged. The art exhibits consisted of five categories: sculpture, painting, engraving and lithography, photography, and industrial and architectural design. In the official English Catalogue¹² of the exhibition, we can find numerous entries of paintings, sculpture, drawings, and industrial and architectural designs from the Art School (Kobu Bijutsu Gakko). In the official Japanese catalogue,¹³ by Bijutsu, the Bureau meant five categories of the art exhibits, and consequently the word Bijutsu incorporated various branches of art and design.

The Art School had really started, and more than fifty students, including six women, studied there. But, toward the end of the 1870s, in spite of its fundamental purpose to encourage industry, the Art School moved away from design education and toward education in the fine arts. Teachers and students had their own artistic interests. Fontanesi was a landscape painter, and his students followed his lead. Wagener wrote in his report¹⁴ on the National Exhibition that he had never seen industrial design at the Exhibition, and that Japanese artists had a dislike for it and would not master it.

In September 1878, Fontanesi was compelled to return to Italy on account of his health. Two months later, more than ten students including Asai Chu, Koyama Shotaro, and Matsuoka Hisasi dropped out of the Art School because of their strong dislike for Fontanesi's successor. They established their own private school of painting. In the same year, Ernest Fenollosa, a Harvard graduate, came to Japan to teach philosophy. He soon became a representative enthusiast of native Japanese art, and deplored what he considered the excesses of Westernization. He thought it wrong to teach Western-style art instead of Japanese-style art in the government school,

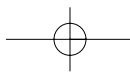
9 After the Exhibition, the drawings were compiled as *Onchizuroku*. A complete set and *Onchizuroku Genko* currently are in the Tokyo National Museum.

10 The Japanese Commission: International Exhibition, 1876. Official Catalogue of the Japanese Section, and Descriptive Notes on the Industry and Agriculture of Japan, (Philadelphia: W.P. Kildare, 1876), 51, 93. The diplomatic documents of the Philadelphia Exhibition are kept in the Diplomatic Record Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

11 Kunaicho, *Meiji Tenno Ki, Dai 3* (Tokyo: Yoshikawakobunkan, 1969), 697.

Figure 8
The Rokumei Kan.





and encouraged Japanese artists who were painting in the traditional style. Fenollosa's activities were welcomed by Japanese conservatives.

On the attempts to introduce Western art into Japan, Okakura Kakuzo (Tenshin), Fenollosa's student and colleague, wrote:

That eagerness and profound admiration for Western knowledge which confounded beauty with science, and culture with industry, did not hesitate to welcome the meanest chromos as specimens of great art ideals. The art which reached us was European at its lowest ebb—before the Fin-de-siecle aestheticism had redeemed its atrocities, before Delacroix had uplifted the veil of hardened academic chiaro-oscuro, before Millet and the Barbizons brought their message of light and colour, before Ruskin had interpreted the purity of pre-Raphaelite nobleness. Thus the Japanese attempt at Western imitation which was inaugurated in the Government School of Art, where Italian teachers were appointed to teach, grovelled in darkness from its infancy, and yet succeeded, even at its inception, imposing that hard crust of mannerism which impedes its progress to the present day.¹⁵

In 1883, the Rokumei Kan social center, designed by Josiah Conder, the English architect and a professor at Dyer's college, was established as a site for Western-style social events attended by prominent Japanese and foreigners. It disgusted not only the Japanese but also Westerners. By the 1880s, the excesses of Westernization under the leadership of Ito had begun to arouse a nationalistic reaction.¹⁶ Consequently, the government decided to close the Art School. And so Western-style art and design education disappeared from Japan. It was not until 1890s that the government started Western-style art and design education again.¹⁷

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- 12 The Exhibition Bureau, *Official Catalogue of the national Exhibition of Japan*, (Tokyo: Kobun Kan 1877).
The official documents on the *Naikoku Kangyo Hakurankai* (National Exhibition) are kept in the National Archives of Japan.
- 13 Hakurankai Jimukyoku, *Meiji Junen Naikoku Kangyo Hakurankai Shuppin Mokuroku*, (Tokyo: Hakurankai Jimukyoku, 1877).
- 14 Gottfried Wagener *Meiji Junen Naikoku Kangyo Hakurankai Hokokusho* (Tokyo: Hakurankai Jimukyoku 1877).
- 15 Kakasu Okakura, *The Ideals of the East with Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (London: John Murray, 1903), 226.
- 16 Kunaicho *Meiji Tenno Ki, Dai 6*, (Tokyo: Yoshikawakobunkan, 1971), 432–3.
- 17 For more on this chapter on Japanese design education see: Haruhiko Fujita, "Notomi Kaijiro: An Industrial Art Pioneer and the First Design Educator of Modern Japan" *Design Issues* 17:2 (Spring 2001):17–31.

