

Review of Bachelor Thesis

Title: Assimilation and Transformation: Meiji Japan's Encounter with Western Art

Author: Sarah Adachi

Introduction & Structure

The thesis offers a well-structured and precise exploration of the impact of Western art on Meiji-era Japan. The abstract briefly summarizes the research, and the table of contents and overall structure reflect a logical progression through various schools of art and their historical contexts. However, the focus on certain popular art schools seems disproportionate, especially when some are not further elaborated on in later sections.

Clarity of Argument

One of the thesis' challenges is the lack of a clear, overarching argument. While the topic itself is compelling—exploring how Japanese artists assimilated Western techniques—the actual thesis aim only becomes explicit on page 11. There is a tendency towards a more descriptive approach, with less emphasis on original analysis or argumentation. As such, while the work is rich in historical detail, it does not sufficiently establish the unique contribution of this research beyond synthesizing existing scholarship. For instance, the conclusion of the schools section lacks clarity on why these schools were mentioned.

Use of Sources & Methodology

Adachi's use of both English and Japanese secondary sources is commendable, as is her inclusion of Czech scholarship, particularly the work of Adéla Tumová. However, the reliance on secondary sources rather than original or primary research limits the thesis' depth. Including more primary sources, such as museum records or city council documents, could have enhanced the originality of the research and allowed for deeper analysis.

Additionally, the distinction drawn between English and Japanese sources creates an unnecessary hierarchy, as highlighted on page 15. This differentiation detracts from the thesis' otherwise inclusive and comparative approach and could have been avoided by equal treatment of both.

Depth of Analysis

The thesis does a thorough job of explaining various Japanese schools of art, but the connection between these schools and Western influences is not always clear. For example, the *Rinpa* and *Kanō* schools (*Yamato-e*) are discussed at length, and the *Tosa* school as well, yet it remains unclear why particularly the *Tosa* school was included if no significant Western influence was present. It is left up to the reader to decide on the significance of these schools and connect them to what is presented later in the thesis. The conclusion only hints at Rinpa school allowing for more individual expression, but it is unclear whether this allowed artists to integrate other styles.

One of the main suggestions for improvement is that the author could have benefitted from focusing more on one or two specific case studies rather than adopting such a broad, descriptive approach. By narrowing the scope, the author could have provided a deeper, more thorough analysis of how specific Western techniques and movements influenced Japanese artists and their artworks. This approach would allow for a more detailed exploration of the processes of assimilation and transformation, making it easier for the reader to grasp the nuances of cultural exchange during the Meiji period. Concentrating on fewer examples could also provide the space for more original thought and analysis, rather than relying heavily on summarizing existing scholarship. This would strengthen the thesis by

offering more concrete insights and allowing the author's own voice and argumentation to shine through more clearly.

The analysis improves significantly in later sections, where specific Western techniques—such as *chiaroscuro* and linear perspective—are discussed in relation to Japanese works. Adachi's explanation of these artistic transformations, particularly in *kōsen-ga* is well executed. One of the thesis' strongest points is the emphasis on how Western techniques, like the use of light and shadow, transformed traditional Japanese aesthetics. Another very strong facet is Adachi's explanation of how broader societal dynamics shaped the integration of Western styles and techniques into Japanese art, including anti-Buddhist sentiments (outlining its impact on traditional sculpturing), or how several art schools were ideologically and politically guided by certain ideas around opening up or preserving traditional Japanese art.

Specificity & Visuals

One major limitation of the thesis is the lack of visual references. For a topic so deeply rooted in the visual arts, the absence of images makes it difficult for the reader to grasp the nuances of the described artworks fully. Links to online repositories or including copyright-cleared images would have greatly improved the reader's engagement with the material.

Moreover, there are moments when greater specificity would have strengthened the analysis. For instance, while the discussion of *Shunga* (erotic woodblock prints) is interesting, its relevance to the overall thesis remains unclear. The connection between *Shunga* and Western art is not sufficiently explained, aside from some Western interest in this art, leaving the reader wondering why this genre received so much attention without a clear linkage to the core thesis.

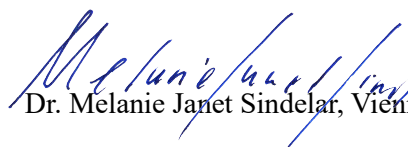
Conclusion

The conclusion clarifies the thesis's structure and intent, providing reasoning for the chosen chapters and the inclusion of specific schools. However, much of this justification should have been present in the introduction. A more focused argument, established early on, would have strengthened the overall coherence of the thesis.

In summary, this thesis demonstrates an impressive depth of research and knowledge, particularly regarding the integration of Western techniques in *kōsen-ga* and related art forms. The inclusion of examples, such as *Kuroda Seiki's* integration of *en plein air* painting, highlights Adachi's ability to link historical context with artistic practice. Nonetheless, the thesis would benefit from a stronger argument, a more analytical approach, and the inclusion of visual material. These revisions would elevate the work beyond its current nature.

Recommendation

Overall, the thesis is well-researched and demonstrates a solid understanding of the subject matter. While the analysis could be more focused and the connection between certain sections clearer, the thesis presents a valuable exploration of how Western art influenced Japanese artists during the Meiji Restoration. With more emphasis on case studies and a reduction in descriptive content, this thesis could evolve into a good publication focusing in-depth on two to three case studies. Despite these suggestions for improvement, the author's in-depth research and balanced presentation of Western and Japanese sources make this a strong piece of work. I recommend this thesis for defense and consider it as very good.


Dr. Melanie Janet Sindelar, Vienna, on the 18th of September 2024