

An Interview with Ms. Anna Jackson

—Keeper, Asia Department, Victoria and Albert Museum

Posted on March 19, 2025

Curating Japan at the V&A: Display, Research, and Conservation of a Renowned Collection

With 2.8 million objects held in collections that span 5,000 years of human creativity, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London draws on a wealth of resources to promote enjoyment of the designed world. Indeed, this has been the institution's mission since its founding in 1852. Ahead of the fortieth anniversary of the museum's Toshiba Gallery of Japanese Art in 2026, Japan-Insights sat down with Anna Jackson, Keeper of the Asia Department at V&A, to talk about the museum's renowned holdings of Asian art and design, and some of the innovative projects through which curators and conservators have presented Japan's cultural creativity in decidedly fresh and relevant ways.

Interview by Susan Rogers Chikuba*



Ms. Anna Jackson
Keeper, Asia Department Victoria
and Albert Museum

Every gallery in the V&A is designed to be different. We take people on a journey during which they are conscious that they're moving from space to space, from culture to culture. The Toshiba Gallery is not an enormous space, but it is a dynamic one, and visitors really enjoy the diversity of media and the mixture of historic and contemporary objects and the many connections that can be made between them.

From its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, the Victoria and Albert Museum played an instrumental role in putting Japanese art and craftsmanship on display and, more importantly, in interpreting Japan at a time when objects from the country had only just begun to arrive on Western shores. One of the V&A's earliest Japanese acquisitions, comprising lacquerware, ceramics, textiles, and arms and armor, was part of a diplomatic gift presented to Queen Victoria in 1860 by Shogun Tokugawa Iemochi shortly after Japan's reopening to the West. Today, with nearly 50,000 works dating from the sixth century to the present in its Japanese collection, the V&A remains committed to bringing the arts of Japan to the widest possible audience in exciting and engaging ways.

We are lucky at the V&A to have amazing archives as well as the objects. In these, you can read the conversations among past curators about what should be acquired and why, and this makes it possible to build a clearer picture of changing tastes and opinions about Japanese art over time.

Anna Jackson, Keeper of the Asia Department at V&A, joined the institution in 1988 as a junior curator with a specialist background in nineteenth-century British and European painting, but was soon enthralled by the diversity of media she encountered in the East Asia collection. “The rest of the museum is divided by media—paintings in one department, textiles in another, ceramics in another,” she explains, “but I really enjoyed the fact that here, in the East Asia section, it was mixed.” Uniting her knowledge of nineteenth-century Western art history with a new focus on the acquisition, reception, and influence of Japanese art in Europe during the Meiji period (1868–1912), she became deeply engaged in the ways that art is transmitted and transformed across cultural borders, a passion she still pursues today.



Exhibition entrances to Encounters: The meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800 (2004) and Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk (2020)
©Victoria and Albert Museum, London

A commitment to collecting art and design from around the world, and to educating about the practice of design, has been a hallmark of the V&A since its founding. The first cultural institution to emerge from London’s Great Exhibition of 1851, it was known as the Museum of Manufactures when it opened its doors the following year. As history would have it, Japan, meanwhile, saw the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853 and the subsequent reopening of its ports to trade with Western powers after more than two centuries. “There was enormous interest in this hitherto mysterious country,” Jackson says, citing numerous ways Japan figured early-on in the V&A’s acquisition strategy and curatorial work.

The Paris Exposition of 1867 was the first time Japan represented itself in an international exhibition; then, with the fall of the shogunate soon after, objects from the estates of daimyo and their retainers inundated the European art market. Travel to and from Japan for scholarly pursuits as well as trade and diplomacy surged as the 1869 opening of the Suez Canal shortened the maritime distance between Europe and the West Pacific. It was the beginning of the age of Japonisme and an intense curiosity about all things Japanese. “The V&A played an important early role in presenting and interpreting Japan for the public then. And that is still what we do now,” Jackson offers.

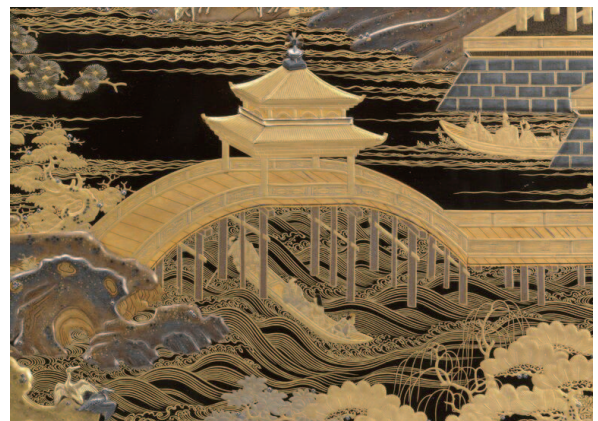


At any given time, several hundred exemplary pieces from the V&A’s Japan collection can be seen on display in the Toshiba Gallery.
©Victoria and Albert Museum, London

People like the fact that within this one space they can see everything from a samurai suit of armor to a Hello Kitty rice cooker. We have the world’s first mass-market laptop—a Toshiba—and at the same time we display inro and netsuke.... We try to show in the gallery that there is continuity across time in Japanese creativity and craftsmanship—that historic techniques have evolved and are still part of contemporary practice.

Launched with the sponsorship of Toshiba Corporation in 1986 and refurbished in 2015, the Toshiba Gallery on the ground floor of the V&A was the first permanent, large-scale gallery for Japanese art in the UK. Its ability to showcase Japan’s finest arts and crafts is supported by the museum’s commitment to honing in-house skills and techniques that are integral to preserving the collection to the highest standard. This stance, in turn, has made the V&A eligible over the years for grant support from the Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO). One notable example is the ambitious undertaking that restored the Mazarin Chest, a strikingly ornate piece of lacquerware that counts among the top-ten “must-sees” across all galleries that the V&A recommends to visitors.

“We received four years of funding from 2004 that enabled us to conserve the Mazarin Chest, one of the most important objects in our collection,” Jackson explains. Made in Kyoto around 1640 for export to Europe, the chest’s black-lacquered surface is ornamented with gold and silver lacquer and inlaid with gold, silver, and mother-of-pearl. Its front and sides are painstakingly decorated with scenes from *The Tale of Genji* and, on the right side, *The Tale of the Soga Brothers*; its lid and interior are embellished with imagery of palatial architecture and scenic landscapes alluding to classical Chinese poetry. Dragons, phoenixes, and a tiger also feature in its elaborate designs.



The Mazarin Chest (detail on right), ca. 1640, Japan
©Victoria and Albert Museum, London

A lacquer conservator travelled from Japan to London on several occasions to work with V&A colleagues on the complex challenges of conserving a seventeenth-century piece using a combination of modern and traditional materials. Through this project, co-funded by TIFO and the Getty Foundation, the V&A pioneered a preservation model that reconciles Western and Japanese principles surrounding reversibility, re-treatment, and authenticity of decoration—pivotal research that has enhanced conservation and mentoring practices at other heritage organizations in the UK and abroad. A film and touchscreen display in the Toshiba Gallery recount discoveries made in the course of the chest’s conservation.

More recently, TIFO grant support has enabled a senior V&A furniture conservator to undergo practical urushi lacquer training at the Mejiro Institute of Urushi Research and Restoration in Tokyo, thus ensuring the future care and protection of other such objects in the V&A collection. When the highly anticipated V&A East Storehouse opens in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in May 2025, it will house a humidity chamber—Europe’s first—for the proper

treatment of traditional and modern Japanese lacquerware. Moreover, research now underway by V&A curator Masami Yamada into the work of Japan's contemporary lacquer artisans will be showcased on the occasion of the gallery's fortieth anniversary in 2026.

The V&A was founded on the notion that it was going to inspire people. It is important to encourage creativity and ingenuity. Hopefully those who come to see the Japanese collection will be literally inspired, if they are makers or designers, but we hope everyone can feel this creativity. You might see a new way of dressing or styling yourself, for example, or simply enjoy the objects that give you a buzz, an energy.



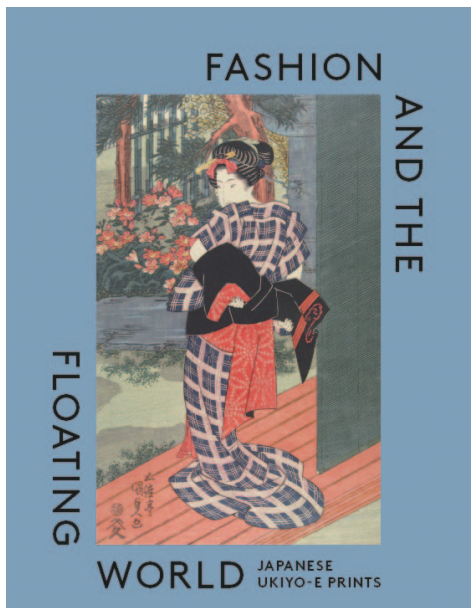
“Kimono Transformed” section,
Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk exhibition (2020)
©Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Jackson avers that the deepest study emerges through direct engagement with the objects themselves. She channeled her specialist passion for Japanese textiles, her decades spent poring over the museum's extensive collection, and a personal interest in cross-cultural fashion into the groundbreaking Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk exhibition of 2020. Displaying rare kimono dating as far back as the seventeenth century along with modern-day interpretations of the garment, it celebrated the kimono as a constantly evolving icon of world fashion.

Although the show's immensely popular London launch in February 2020 was soon beset by the trials of the coronavirus, it regrouped online with curator tours by Jackson; a one-day online symposium in which academics, curators, and textile makers across the world addressed the kimono's radical impact on global fashion; and a film showcasing the work and philosophy of tenth-generation obi purveyor Yamaguchi Genbei of Kyoto. A second film offering rare access to the studios of Yamaguchi's collaborating weavers was made as well.

The physical exhibition eventually went on to enjoy critically acclaimed runs in Gothenburg, Paris, Zürich, and Dundee, closing in January 2025. “In it we included quite a lot of Japanese prints, essentially to show our audiences the original contexts in which the kimono were created and worn and what they actually looked like on the body,” Jackson explains, “but doing so revealed to us the symbiotic relationship between the print and fashion industries.” Realizing this was a topic worthy of closer study, she and Masami Yamada published their curatorial research as *Fashion and the Floating World*, a lavish compendium that brings alive the culture of entertainment, style, and glamour of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan.

Woodblock prints were ephemeral, inexpensive images that allowed information about the latest styles to circulate; they provided fashion inspiration; and of course they acted as amazing advertisements for textile manufacturers, kimono merchants, makeup suppliers, and owners of theaters, brothels, and restaurants.



Fashion and the Floating World, published in 2024;
Women Outside Saruya by Utagawa Kunisada, 1847-52
©Victoria and Albert Museum, London

“Although ukiyo-e are arguably the most popular form of Japanese art in the West,” Yamada offers, “surprisingly nobody has written extensively about the fashion culture seen in them. Even in Japan there are not a lot of books on the subject.” A grant from TIFO supported the publication, which includes many prints never before published and is all the more delightful for its generous explications of what is happening in every colorful scene—from the many visual puns to the figures’ makeup and tattoos and even the weave structures of the kimono they wear.

“What attracts me, and I think others as well, to Japan is the craftsmanship that is apparent even in the tiniest detail,” reflects Jackson. “We see this equally in large objects like the Mazarin Chest and in much smaller pieces, such as inro. And then there is the interest in surfaces—whether it is the kind of sumptuous surfaces we associate with lacquer or silk, or the pleasures of irregularity, imperfection and unexpectedness. Also, the idea of appreciating change that happens over time, like the variations in patina or, with cotton textiles for example, that they fade and get mended and patched. And in terms of design, the attraction lies in the use of asymmetry and negative space. Plus the many layers of meaning, the references to poetry or literature or other kinds of allusion that you find—there’s a kind of wit and playfulness, quite often, in Japanese objects. I think all of this is really appealing.”



V&A Japan curator and Fashion and the Floating World co-author Masami Yamada

TIFO have always showed great interest in everything we’re doing about Japan—they really engage with and encourage these projects, they ask questions. So it’s been a great and enjoyable relationship. Essentially, TIFO and the V&A have the same aim: to foster the appreciation of Japanese art and culture.

* Writer's Profile: Susan Rogers Chikuba

Susan has been following popular culture, architecture and design in Japan for three decades. As a Tokyo-based writer, translator and editor she covers the country's art, design, literary and culinary scenes for domestic and international publications. She is a graduate of Cornell University.

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