THE EDINBURGH COMpanion to T. S. ELIOT AND THE ARTS

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Waste Land “is a literary collage of urban, desert, and ocean scenes which seem to be disconnected and without order or meaning” (137). See Chapter 4 of Hargrove, Parisian Year. More recently, Young Suck Rhee has continued to explore this fertile terrain in “A Reading of T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land from the Perspective of Cubist Painting,” Foreign Literature Studies 37 (2015): 51–59.

23. For the Palais du Trocadéro and the Luxembourg, see LI, 19–20. In a letter of July 25, 1914, Eliot told Conrad Aiken that he had seen Mantegna’s Saint Sebastian, the 1480s version of which was on display in the Louvre during his stay in France; see LI, 48–49. For Bernheim’s gallery, see LI, 35. Hargrove discusses works of art available to Eliot in the museums of Paris and London in Chapter 4 of Parisian Year.
24. LI, 18. Eliot indicates that he “made notes!!” in the Wallace Collection, though these appear not to have survived.
25. Ibid., 46.
29. LI, 20.
30. Ibid., 18.
31. Ibid.

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Eliot in the Asian Wing

“Mandarins” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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In recent studies of the influence of China and Japan on modernist literature, T. S. Eliot has played a conspicuously minor role.1 Far from being indifferent to Asia, of course, Eliot openly avowed his fascination with Indic thought, an interest that has received its critical due over the years. His graduate study of Sanskrit, Hindu philosophy, and Buddhism enlarged his thinking, enriched his imagination, and shaped some of his greatest poems. Even before his philosophical turn, however, Eliot encountered Chinese and Japanese art in the museums of Boston, London, and Paris, an aesthetic and intellectual experience documented and explored in the first two chapters of this cluster. The clearest evidence of his encounter with Asian art is the four-poem sequence “Mandarins” that he inscribed in his notebook in August 1910, after he graduated from college and before his year abroad in Paris.2 This sequence seems to register scenes in a museum gallery, most likely the newly opened Fenway building of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The museological context of “Mandarins” and how the poem comments on the display of Asian art are the subject of the present chapter. Following chapters by Nancy D. Hargrove and Michael Coyle concern Eliot’s further museum explorations in Paris and London from 1910 to 1914. While Eliot’s relation to Asia has primarily been understood through his reading and academic study, these three chapters focus on his visual encounters with art in museum contexts. Here we attempt to recover his experiences in the Asian galleries of Boston, Paris, and London and understand how his poetry reflects the aesthetic and social dimensions of these momentous visits.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Living in the United States at the turn of the last century, Eliot could hardly have avoided exposure to East Asian, and specifically Japanese, art. Since the 1850s (when Commodore Perry forcibly established diplomatic and trade relations with Japan), a “Japan craze” had gripped the United States, especially in Boston and nearby Salem. Vast collections of ceramics, bronze, jade, and artworks were amassed by those with access to Japanese imports, including Edward S. Morse, William Sturgis Bigelow, and Ernest F. Fenollosa, “the apostles of Japanese culture in Boston.”3 The artifacts they bequeathed to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Peabody Museum of Salem established collections that remain the most extensive in the world outside of Japan.
Japanese art commanded higher prices at the turn of the century than at any time before or since. Curiosity about and admiration for Japanese art resulted in hundreds of books and articles on the Far East; "so many," writes one historian, "that few with any interest in culture could have remained totally oblivious to the seduction of Japanese civilization."  

Japonisme was not limited to collectors and the cultural elite. Americans hungrily consumed domestically produced Japanese-style ceramics, textiles, lacquer-ware, wall hangings, screens, wood- and metal-work, paper lanterns, paper umbrellas, and other decorations. Easy to make and transport, Japanese-style fans could be found in nearly every American home in the 1880s and 1890s. Japanese-inspired fabrics were made into curtains, upholstery, table covers, piano scarves, kimonos, and smoking jackets. American design incorporated Japanese decorative motifs such as cranes and storks, flowering fruit trees, leaping carp, and insects. Of particular interest for readers of Eliot's "Mandarins," which refers to "screens" several times, the Japanese-style decorated screen, described by Edward Morse as "beyond all question, the richest object of household use... ever devised," became a most coveted item for middle-class American homes. While the appeal of the rare and exotic might have originally fueled the Japan craze, it took on a life of its own as an interior decorating fad, becoming a virtually ubiquitous feature of middle-class visual culture, especially in New England, by the time it peaked around 1890. How Japanese-style decorations were used to effect is shown in many scenes by Boston society painter Edmund Tarbell, such as the screen in The Breakfast Room (1903) or the kimono in Girl Mending (1910). A bronze Japanese vase even appears in photographs of the Eliot family at home in St. Louis.

This historical background clarifies two important features of Eliot's undergraduate context: first, that Japanese-style decorations had acquired a familiarity approaching cliché by the first decade of the twentieth century; and second, that Victorian-American Japonisme primarily consisted of a vogue for "industrial arts" rather than paintings and prints. The colored print, or ukiyo-e, which played such a major role in James McNeill Whistler's development and in French Impressionism, did not become available in the United States until the 1890s. Consequently, figurative representation, "far more prominent in ukiyo-e prints than in the crafts," played little role in the nineteenth-century Japan craze; rather, "Japonaisque qualities of posture, facial expression, and dress" became influential only at the turn of the century, when print-collecting came into vogue. In Eliot's college years, ukiyo-e prints still had cultural cachet; he much later wrote that his undergraduate discoveries included "Manet and Monet, Japanese prints, the plays of Maeterlinck, the music of Debussy and above all the combination of Maeterlinck and Debussy in Pelléas et Mélisande." In this nostalgic recollection, Japanese prints belong to that fin-de-siècle world of French Symbolism that so charmed Eliot and indelibly marked his aesthetic sensibility. By contrast, the bric-a-brac of American Japonisme would have been an all-too-familiar piece of the genteel New England culture to which his family belonged.

The distinction between prints and crafts, or between the fine and industrial arts, with their different cultural resonances and social functions, is important to the history of the Museum of Fine Arts, which opened the doors of its new building in November 1909. Founded in 1876, the MFA originally occupied a neo-Gothic palace in Copley Place modeled on the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert) in London. Extensive glass cases of artifacts organized by craft or material (metal, ceramics, wood) were designed to educate the public on the development of the industrial arts. As with the South Kensington, its ultimate purpose was to enhance domestic production of such arts—and the Japan craze provides a perfect example of how museums successfully carried out their mission by enlarging (and whetting) Americans' taste. Nevertheless, by the turn of the century a conception of the fine arts rather than the industrial arts as the proper object of aesthetic contemplation caused museum trustees to rethink the organization of their displays. The acquisition of the Morse, Bigelow, and Fenollosa-Weld collections, consisting of more than five thousand ceramics, fifteen thousand works of art, and some forty thousand prints, had strained storage and exhibition space at Copley Square, which was also vulnerable to fire. Such a wealth of artifacts also raised questions about how and why they should be displayed.

"THE PUBLIC DOES NOT LOOK AT GREEK VASES. THE PUBLIC DOES NOT LOOK AT JAPANESE POTTERY. THE PUBLIC DOES NOT LOOK AT ANY LONG SERIES OF SMALL OBJECTS, save in the most perfunctory manner at all," fulminated Matthew Prichard. (The charismatic Prichard, Assistant to the Director of the MFA and friend of Isabella Stewart Gardner, was acquainted by 1911 with the young Eliot, who later described his influence as "hypnotic" and his sensibility to art "greater than that of anyone I have ever met."). Instead, Prichard argued, the central galleries should feature well-spaced "masterpieces" in sympathetic surroundings, flanked by rotating displays of secondary works in the smaller galleries. Okakura Kakuzō, Curator of the Department of Chinese and Japanese Art (also acquainted with Eliot) had written in his popular Book of Tea (1906), "We classify too much and enjoy too little. The sacrifice of the aesthetic to the so-called scientific method of exhibition has been the bane of many museums."

With progressive ambitions for their new museum, MFA directors rejected the South Kensington model for one that emphasized the fine in "fine arts"; in a 1907 analysis of the plans for the new building, Frederick Coburn wrote in the art journal International Studio that "persons desirous of the inspiration that comes from seeing noble works of art so displayed as to show their quality" had "received first consideration" in the new museum's design. Rather than promoting industrial arts, the new museum sought to encourage the spiritual and cultural elevation that art could provide, starting with the invitation to worship extended by its neoclassical temple-like façade. No longer organized by craft type, exhibits were ordered by region or culture, and within those categories, by chronology. As Coburn explained, this principle of exhibition came from German museums, where "the attempt has been made to develop backgrounds harmonious with the period of specific collections displayed." Rather than confronting visitors with rows of glass cases of materially similar but culturally and temporally unrelated objects, the museum would arrange artifacts so that they provided coherent historical context for each other. Nowhere in the museum was this principle more faithfully carried out than in the Japanese galleries. As the museum Bulletin stated, in these galleries "simple forms of woodwork are introduced in order to secure an appropriate and natural setting" for the collection that, more than any other, constituted the raison d'être of the museum. Distinguished Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram, who was also a scholar of Japanese art and architecture, probably collaborated on the design of
In his unpublished writings, he advocated treating all artifacts as, in essence, fine arts:

The word ‘Art’ does not mean alone the major arts of painting, sculpture, architecture and music, but equally all the more popular and universal expressions of man’s quest for ideals and love of beauty... wood carving, pottery, stained glass, tapestries, embroidery, illumination, all are fine arts... Every work of art, from a Greek earthenware cup to a Venetian altar-piece, is an evidence of its creator’s joy in life and work.22

Just as the new MFA aimed to provide “the inspiration that comes from seeing noble works of art,” Cram envisioned galleries where visitors could experience the artists’ own feeling of inspiration through their works. The galleries were to be, in other words, more human-centered. The aim of the museum was “To bring all the arts together, in human scale and after the fashion for which they were intended,” whether in rooms evocative of domestic settings, or in the case of religious art, in “a room or rooms in chapel-form.”23

One of the architectural highlights of the new museum was, in fact, a temple-like interior constructed out of wood and plaster with low lighting, designed to house several of the MFA’s most famous Buddhas in a “setting suggestive of the early temple architecture of Japan” (Figure 1.1).24 On the floor below was a “temple forecourt, with neatly raked sand, carefully chosen rocks, stone lanterns and fu-dogs that guarded the approach to a recess where gilded Buddhas sat” (Figure 1.2).25 This design promoted an aesthetic principle as well as a social agenda of bringing two cultures closer to each other. “The Japanese and the American, thinking in terms of Nippon and of the United States, stare, uncomprehending and mutually repellant [sic], but when either is able to cast aside the convention race has wrought, understanding is possible, or if not understanding then at least implicit acceptance,” Cram wrote.26 By showing something of the “foundations of Japanese character” in the national “[r]evenerance for ancestors, worship of all the dead, [and] recognition of the perfect unimportance of the individual and of the supreme moment of the family, the commune, and the State,” Cram hoped both to enhance museumgoers’ appreciation for the works of art on display, and to encourage a more sympathetic understanding of the Japanese people.27 All of these museological innovations emphasized the presence and sensibility of the human being: the creator of artifacts, whose beliefs, practices, and personal inspiration the exhibit aimed to make visible, and the viewer, whom the museum sought to inspire, enlighten, and lead to greater cultural understanding.
In his 1909 essay for the Harvard Advocate, “Gentlemen and Seamen,” Eliot refers to the board of “shaws, the ginger-jars, the carved ivory which the captains brought back from the Orient, the gifts which their descendants are proud to display.” The display of oriental treasures in New England homes was a sight to which Eliot was accustomed, while the new MFA proposed a more historical and culture-centered way of seeing the same objects. Whether by direct experience or through the poet’s remarkable ability to absorb the zeitgeist, “Mandarins” investigates how context gives meaning to artifacts, particularly those he might have seen in the Chinese and Japanese galleries of the MFA. The sequence places well-known kinds of Asian artifacts (fans, swords, teacups) into settings where humans use them, either as museum pieces or as domestic accessories—and sometimes as both. These human dramas do more than respond to a “prompt” provided by the museum; however, the museum ultimately comes to seem like a bare accommodation in contrast to the world in which the poet imagines its treasures.

Little is known for certain about Eliot’s doings in college, as no correspondence survives from this time, and so any biographical connections with “Mandarins” must be speculative. However, a number of facts support the likelihood that Eliot did visit the new building at some point between November 1909, when it opened, and June 1910, when he completed his Master’s of Arts. In spring 1910, Eliot took Edward Waldo Forbes’s “Fine Arts 20B” course on Florentine painting. The final exam for this 1910 course, serendipitously saved in Harvard’s archives, refers to “the four galleries the class has examined.” Given the small size of the Fogg collection at the time (which Forbes, as its recently appointed director, would soon vastly enlarge), Forbes’s position as a member of the board of trustees of the MFA, and the excitement that surrounded the reopening of the Boston museum, the MFA presumably numbered among these four galleries visited by Eliot’s class. While the European rooms would have been the focus of any class trip, Forbes also had a strong interest in Asian art, and may have conveyed this to his students.

Even apart from this specific connection to the MFA, there were many avenues that could have led Eliot to see it for himself. His membership in Harvard’s Signet and Stylus societies, as well as his own roots in the Boston aristocracy, put him on a social footing with the literati and art connoisseurs of Boston, such as Isabella Gardner, who supported and guided the creation of the new museum. The press greeted its opening with enthusiastic fanfare: “Boston’s New Museum a Temple of Fine Arts. Priceless Collections Are Magnificently Housed. Many New Treasures Now to Be Given a Proper Setting. Problems of Effective Display Solved by Patient Study by Experts,” read the Boston Globe headline of November 9, 1909, the day before an inaugural reception at the museum welcomed five thousand “prominent Bostonians and New Englanders.” Finally, the Peabody Museum in Salem rivaled the MFA for the splendor of its collection, and it is possible that Eliot also went there in the summer of 1910 while staying with his family in Gloucester, perhaps during one of his sailing trips with Harvard friend Harold Peters. The fact that Ricks has dated the poem to August 1910 may mean that the setting of the poem combines features of both museums. The particular scenes and arrangements of artifacts described in the sequence suggest MFA displays in the new museum building; more generally, the sequence registers the complex social and aesthetic questions of museum design and function that were being actively debated at the time.

“Mandarins” comprises four lyrics thematically linked by references to recognizably “oriental” artifacts such as a “sword and fan,” “thin translucent porcelain,” “screen and cranes,” and gowns decorated with “goldwire dragons.” (In what follows, I use the term “oriental” to indicate a set of ideas and clichés associated with the Far East in the minds of Eliot’s contemporaries.) The sections also share a preoccupation with sight: the poet/speaker observes men and women who are also engaged in looking. Indeed, the predominant features of the sequence are people looking at things, and people looking like things. While these situations could happen anywhere, they are especially pertinent to museums, where the question “what am I looking at?” often arises. One might see a given artifact as the embodiment of a person (the artist, or an individual portrayed) and yet also as a thing (made from a certain material at a certain date). In an encounter with a cultural Other, when the represented figure seems human yet substantially unlike the viewer, such questions are especially relevant. The two themes are thus closely interrelated, with the poet investigating how context shapes our perceptions of such artifacts—a dynamic that is at the heart of museum studies.

The first section of “Mandarins” describes the public viewing of a male figure who “Stands there, complete,/Stiffly dressed with sword and fan...” Indifferent to all these baits/Of popular benignity/He merely stands and waits/Upon his own intrepid dignity.” With “fixed regardless eyes—/Looking neither out nor in,” the figure could as well be an artifact (set on a “stand”) as a person. The figure’s solidarity and immobility contrast with the movement of “crowds that ran/Pushed, stared, and huddled at his feet,/Keen to appropriate the man”; their homage makes him the “hero” of the moment. The poet, rather than rushing in himself, watches the crowd’s interaction with the male figure. If they have come to the museum to see the foreign-looking “mandarin” with his “sword and fan,” he has come to view their “formalities.”

The likelihood that this poem describes a scene of museumgoing is supported by Eliot’s previous experimentation with ekphrasis in “On a Portrait.” Printed in the Harvard Advocate the year before, this picture sonnet describes Édouard Manet’s Jeune Dame en 1866 in terms not unlike those he uses for the Mandarin. “On a Portrait” begins, “Among a crowd of tenuous dreams, unknown/To us of restless brain and weary feet... She stands at evening in the room alone.” “Mandarins” employs the same language of a singular figure who “stands” before a “crowd,” which is exactly the relation that an artwork has to its spectators. Again like “On a Portrait,” the status of the central figure is ambiguous: at first we assume that he (or she) is a living person, but gradually it dawns that we are looking at an inanimate artwork. A further similarity with the earlier ekphrastic sonnet is the way Eliot pairs the figure with accessories: a parrot on a stand in the sonnet, and the sword and fan in “Mandarins.” Similar to the iconography of a visual portrait, these accessories convey important information about the person represented (in this case, the sword and fan are talismans of the Orient). At the same time, they raise the disturbing question of whether the person represented is fundamentally different from the objects that signify his character.

Eliot’s “Mandarin” with “sword and fan” could well refer to a particular artwork, although the generic quality of the description makes it difficult to ascertain which. Nevertheless, some notable artifacts held at the MFA in 1910 suggest themselves as
sources, such as Bishamonten, Guardian of the North, with His Retinue, an impressive painting on silk over wood panel from the late twelfth century, depicting a sword-wielding deity who stares unnervingly at the viewer and is supported by "goddesses and demons of his magic power" clustering around his feet (Plate 1). This large panel was acquired by Okakura in 1905 and may well have been one of the "early Buddhist paintings" on display in the "tokonomia" (above) when the museum opened. In her exhaustive 1910 description of the MFA collections, Julia de Wolfe Addison judged this work "the finest representation of Bishamonten existing." The arrangement of the composition is not unlike the situation described in the first section of "Mandarins," featuring a central figure surrounded by a crowd. The warlike Bishamonten lacks a fan, however, and might be too energetic to be seen merely to stand and wait. Another candidate for the mandarin is one of the MFA's suits of Japanese armor, which would certainly have stood "stiffly addressed," most likely with a sword and possibly with a fan (which was also carried in battle for signaling purposes) (Plate 2). In human form with a terrifying mask, but lacking humanity, the "complete" suit of armor definitely looks neither out nor in. The December 1909 Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin reports that the room next to the Buddhist Temple displayed lacquers from the Bigelow and Weld Collections, especially "suits of armor and three swords of special excellence."48 If indeed the "hero" described in "Mandarins I" refers to a suit of Japanese medieval armor, this figure takes his place alongside the marionettes and "stuffed men" in Eliot's gallery of automatons.

Ultimately, Eliot is vague about whether the speaker sees a human being or an artwork, and this is an important compositional choice. Like the poet, we do not know precisely how to understand this central figure, accompanied on the one hand by a sword and fan, and on the other by gawking spectators. The MFA's new method of display encouraged viewers to think of culturally related artifacts together, as interrelated aspects of life in a particular time and place. The sword and fan in Eliot's poem become an occasion for thinking about how accessories confer identity. (In her discussion of the MFA's sword collection, Addison explains the relationship of these two objects: "When a Japanese child is presented at the temple he receives two little fans. These are symbolic of the swords which he will one day wear.") Does the possession of the sword and fan (the one warlike, the other feminine, both embodying Western stereotypes of the Oriental man) make the figure inscrutable, by virtue of making viewers see him as Oriental? Especially the fan, that most ubiquitous of the Japan-craze knockoffs, seems to confer both orientality and thinness on the male figure. In addition, quite aside from the cultural prejudice that (as Cram wrote) makes the "Japanese and the American... stare, uncomprehending and mutually repellant" at one another, simply juxtaposing fine and industrial artifacts might have the effect of likening a stylized human figure to a patterned decoration. To an audience accustomed to viewing artifacts as examples of industrial arts (alongside other bronzes, porcelain, textiles, etc.), the addition of the sword and fan emphasizes the figure's own materiality and mere woodiness.

Or, perhaps, does encircling him with admirers make him seem more human? The mandarin is, after all, described in terms more appropriate to a person than a thing: he "waits," he has "dignity," he is a "hero." Moreover, the poet introduces a note of cultural relativism by placing the mandarin at the "center of formalities." Just as the many decorated sword guards (separated from their original blades) on display at the MFA remind viewers of the sword's ceremonial significance, the poet also observes a Bostonian ritual of rushing to see rare artifacts housed in the new museum. While the sword and fan place the male figure as part of a display of curiosities, the crowds remind us of the equally curious behavior of our fellow humans. These observations are consistent with Eliot's interest in human interaction as performance, a theme that permeates the March Hare notebook, from "Convictions (Curtain Raised)" to "Portrait of a Lady," which begins, "You have the scene arrange itself—as it will seem to do." The sword and fan pull the mandarin one way in the poet's perception; the crowds another.

In taking the museum context as his subject, rather than focusing more narrowly on an artwork, Eliot expands the scope of ekphrasis from art objects to the human comedy of their display. Perhaps for this reason, the first section ends with the line, "The rest is merely shifting scenes." "Scene" may refer to a visual composition or to the unit of a stage production. The "scene" of the mandarin hovers between the artwork that the museumgoers have come to see, and the "shifting scenes" of human drama as subsequent crowds push in toward it. Indeed, Eliot raises a question that postmodern artists have exhaustively (some might say repetitively) explored: how much does context define the meaning of an artifact? Specifically, does looking at something in an aesthetic way make it an artwork? This question underlies the ambiguity of the scenes in "Mandarins," which might represent artworks, or else live vignettes of art appreciation and consumption.

The second section of "Mandarins" moves from the museum gallery to a domestic setting where "two ladies of uncertain age" sit by a window drinking tea and "Regard/A distant prospect of the sea." The ladies are observers, cultivated connoisseurs of beauty. At the end of the poem, "one lifts her hand to pour" while the other "raise[s]/A thin translucent porcelain" and "Murmurs a word of praise." This is a scene of art appreciation and consumption, two acts deftly assimilated in the raising of the cup at once to take tea and to receive the light from the window so as better to admire its fine porcelain. Eliot's poem takes the porcelain out of the display case, so to speak, and places it in a domestic context where we can see it being used. The ladies might easily be Boston Brahmins of the sort so often exposed to Eliot's wit. Yet the context could also be Japanese, as depicted in a ukiyo-e print; we are not exactly in the scene so much as viewing it from afar: "By attitude/It would seem that they approve/ The abstract sunset (rich, not crude)." We are not privy to their thoughts, or even their speech (just the sound of "murmuring"). Their own appearance, in fact, pushes the ladies in the direction of being aesthetic objects themselves: "The outlines delicate and hard/Of gowns that fall from neck and knee/Grey and yellow patterns move/From the shoulder to the floor." Their profiles, "delicate and hard," resemble the china cups from which they drink tea. This equivalence between the ladies and their teacups might comment on the decorative function of women, but it also renders the entire scene less "live" and more still, closer to the condition of visual art.

Similar scenes can be found in Japanese prints and the Western paintings they inspired. Whistler's Variations in Flesh Color and Green: The Balcony (1864–79), influenced in part by the art of Katsushika Hokusai, combines Japonistic composition and accessories (azaleas, kimonos, sake cups, a long-necked banjo or shamisen) with a London background (Plate 3). It is tempting and indeed plausible to read the last line of "Mandarins"—"And so I say/How life goes well in pink and green"—as a
reference to this painting. Closer to the MFA context that “Mandarins” evokes, however, the scene might also describe an ukiyo-e print representing courtesans drinking tea or sake; gowns that fall from the neck suggest the loser-flowing kimono rather than a tightly-laced Edwardian dress. Their “tranquility” may be less a state of mind than a cultural stereotype or, perhaps, simply a description of art’s stillness. This episode of “Mandarins” places a display-worthy artifact, a porcelain cup, in a human “scene” of its use and appreciation, just as the museum designers intended. In that sense, it perfectly enacts their intentions; yet we are not sure whether the scene is in Tokyo or Boston. In addition, the poet could be watching real ladies appreciate a porcelain cup, or he could be gazing at a Japanese print. Something about the poem resists our desire to place its action precisely in a time and geographic location. Like the first part of “Mandarins,” this second part is rooted in the observation of an object (whether cup or print), but in departing from the museum setting, Eliot takes the idea of “context” to a different level. In the domestic scene he evokes, appreciation and use are united in one gesture, a gesture that moreover is imagined to be universal. The flight of Eliot’s imagination from museum to life is both in keeping with the spirit of the new MFA and also, paradoxically, in sympathy with the MFA’s most ardent critic, Matthew Prichard, who had left his post in 1907 as his frustration mounted. Prichard later wrote (in an unpublished manuscript), “The same spirit puts objects into museums and men into prisons... the ancient object of art... derives its being and value from those who pay attention to it. Apart from them it would sink at once to the level of the rubbish of the ages from which the self-conscious efforts of its admirers have rescued it... A museum is like the smell of cooking when you are not hungry.” (In contrast, the scene of tea-drinking in this section of “Mandarins” exemplifies the integration of appetite and aesthetic appreciation.) It is possible to see how the new Japanese galleries at the MFA evolved out of Prichard’s criticism, yet were still open to it, insofar as no museum can literally reproduce the living context of its artifacts, only point to their original setting in a way that stimulates the public’s imagination. The imagination, in other words, will always outstrip the museum immediately, if the museum is properly constituted to enable flights of fancy.

From a porcelain cup in section two, we move back to the figure of another mandarin, this time seated, in section three. At the new MFA, the “Porcelain Corridor” on the main floor led directly to one of the museum’s prize possessions, “a large Japanese carved wooden figure of Amida Dai Butsu” (Plate 4).44 This statue, described by Addison as “full of majesty and dignity” with “true religious repose,” resembles “The eldest of the mandarins/A stoic in obese repose,” who, “With intellectual double chins, Regards the corner of his nose” (“Mandarins” 3). Other possible models for the eldest mandarin are the wooden Buddhas “enshrined in dignity” in the Buddhist Temple Room (Figure 1.1), or those below on the ground floor looking out into the court.45 Like the first mandarin, this figure seems almost too inert to be alive, yet possesses human characteristics: though motionless, he seems thoughtful. Evoking the language of European philosophy to call him a “stoic” and an “indifferent idealist,” the poet places him indeterminately between East and West, with a cultural relativism similar to that employed in the first two sections. While the mandarin regards his nose, “cranes that fly across a screen/Pert, alert, Observe him with a frivolous mien—” The screen Eliot refers to here is presumably the decorated kind that Morse praised as “the richest object of household use... ever devised.” Photos of the original Japanese court show screens lining the sides of the garden, with three wooden Buddhas seated at the end of the court (Figure 1.2). This arrangement demonstrates how birds on a screen could be imagined to be flying toward or looking at a seated figure in their vicinity. This act of gazing is different from those of the first two sections, where people look at artifacts; here, one artifact looks at another. If the first section of “Mandarins” zooms out to observe the museum context of display, this section zooms in on a self-contained world of art. The screen is the mandarin’s context, and vice versa; this situation literalizes the conditions of the new MFA, where the arrangement of artifacts was supposed to generate a sense of the culture and period to which these works belonged. The statue and screen may belong together culturally, but there is something absurd about the scene as Eliot describes it: the displayed artifacts still lack a context of living humans to make use of these objects in the ways for which they were intended. Instead, the alert cranes look forever at the stoical mandarin. They are “trifling” because removed from a setting where they can serve the function for which they were designed.

Nonetheless, this self-contained world of art offers aesthetic ideas that are of value to the poet. Japanese screens played an important role in the development of Impressionist and modern painting, particularly for Whistler, who placed a decorated screen in counterpoint with painting itself in works such as The Golden Screen and La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine (both 1864). In these works, a Japanese-style screen behind the figure effectively cuts off the background and pushes into the foreground, flattening the picture plane and emphasizing the continuity of painting and screen. The scattering of ukiyo-e prints in The Golden Screen further insists on the essential flatness of the four media present: painted screen, textiles, prints, and the painted canvas itself. This compositional device led Whistler to the more thoroughgoing flatness of Variations in Flesh Color and Green: The Balcony, begun in the same year, where not only the costumes of the women but also the design of the whole composition and the lack of shadow show the influence of Japanese prints (Plate 3).46 Edouard Manet’s portrait of Émile Zola of 1868, showing the author flanked by a Japanese screen and an ukiyo-e print (alongside a reproduction of Manet’s own controversial Olympia), similarly gerutres to the influence of Japanese art on the painter’s development. The combination of Olympia’s impassivity and the pasty, depthless look of her skin upon white sheets had made Manet notorious a few years before. Eliot’s “On a Portrait” registers Manet’s aesthetic flattening in Jeune Dame en 1866, whom the poet finds inscrutable and stony.47 “Mandarins” continues this train of thought by linking the aesthetic flatness of a decorated screen with an impression of indifference and stoicism in the central figure.

Apart from the psychological ramifications of flatness, the idea of a screen contributes to or at least harmonizes with a purely formal aspect of “Mandarins.” This sequence, like others in Eliot’s notebook, experiments with a non-narrative structure of composition, juxtaposing four related scenes without linking them by plot or character development. The multi-paned screen is not the only model for such organization; “Preludes” and “Caprices,” for example, evoke musical sequences as their inspiration. However, “Mandarins” gives many cues of its specific compositional model by end-of-line references to “scenes,” “planes,” and (twice) “a screen.” As mentioned above, the decorated screen was a prized possession in many turn-of-the-century American homes, and the MFA’s Fenollosa-Weld collection boasted many fine examples—in particular
the wave-screen of Korin, which Addison called “its most precious possession” and which is still today frequently featured on the museum's website and its products. In a letter to Scofield Thayer of 1916, Eliot refers to “a screen by Korin” as an appropriate furnishing for the interior where he hopes Thayer will “enshrine” his new wife.31 Numerous screens from the Fenollosa-Weld collection represent birds, including Birds in Trees and Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons.32

Such a screen not only stands behind the “screen and cranes” in section three, but also informs the multiplicity of views throughout the composition, and in particular the principle of “scenes” hailed in the last line of the first section (“the rest is merely shifting scenes”) and “planes” in the last line of section three (“how life goes on different planes”). In a folding screen, the arrangement of the panels is not limited to temporal or narrative sequence, and indeed, right-to-left reading is not conventional in Japanese and Chinese. Instead the screen encourages a “shifting” mode of looking—moving back and forth among panels. Elements in each panel lead the eye to other panels, yet each can also be studied individually. Similarly, each part of “Mandarins” issues from the first Mandarin, the “centre of formalities,” and is thematically but not narratively linked to the others. Throughout his career, Eliot experimented with non-narrative structures, and his longer poems all work on the basic principle of numbered sections that do not necessarily proceed chronologically, as in “Mandarins.” This early sequence, like his “Preludes,” “Caprices,” and “Suite Clownsque,” is important as a testing-ground for his lifelong compositional technique.

A sense of lightness and movement is also important to “Mandarins” in a way that suggests the aesthetic of the decorated screen. An important compositional device of Japanese art is the juxtaposition of an object at rest (tree, rock, shore) with one in movement (bird, wave, butterfly, fish).33 Each section offers this contrast: between the standing mandarin and the crowds that rush to see him; the seated lady and the cup she raises; the seated mandarin and flying cranes. Movement is especially significant in section four, where “demoiselles and gentlemen/Walk out beneath the cherry trees,/the goldwire dragons on their gowns/Expanded by the breeze.” The movement of “walking out” is picked up by the textiles, which in a brilliant stroke are transported by a breeze from the display case to a natural setting. The idea of a breeze that “expands” or contracts the poem unexpectedly also applies at the level of form, where Eliot’s lineation and the length of each section gently disrupt our expectations, conveying movement without disjuncture. His lines vary between trimeter and tetrameter, with a few two-syllable lines thrown in at unpredictable intervals (“How much,” “Regard”); rhyme comes and goes; and section lengths vary from twelve to seventeen lines. Without meter lines, three of the four sections are fourteen lines long, but Eliot’s refusal to make the poems into sonnets seems conscious, since ultimately each falls short of or overshoots that magical number. Eliot’s formal choices, or rather his informalities, avoid any sense of fixed regularity and generate a sense of movement.

It is appropriate that the sequence should end with a scene of walking, for this gesture underlies the whole composition: with the poet, we stroll through connected rooms of the museum, observing the art and those who have come to see it; allowing artworks to inspire imaginative reveries of their use in other times and places; and absorbing the aesthetic principles represented in these galleries. Formally, we move from one scene to another; visually we shift between artworks and their museum context, seeing first the mandarin, then the crowds who press about him. Where is the ritual: in his sword and fan, or in their gawking? Then, seeing a porcelain cup, our imagination evokes ladies (decorated not unlike the cup itself) drinking from it, perhaps in Boston, perhaps in Tokyo. A richly threaded textile evokes a vision of couples walking decorously through a cherry orchard. The mind shifts between the world represented by artworks (paintings, religious statues, ceremonial swords, ceramics, textiles, prints) and the spectacle of our appreciation and consumption of these works.

It seems likely that the Asian galleries of the MFA provided the catalyst for “Mandarins”; even if this connection cannot be demonstrated with certainty, the sequence clearly considers the kind of questions raised by museumgoing. Each section revolves around one or two artifacts that the poet places in a social setting, extracting the object from the stand or case where it might have appeared and bringing it to life in a human drama. The idea of context extends farther than the MFA directors might have envisioned, for at least in the first two sections, the artifact becomes the subject of Bostonian rituals of appreciation, even as these blend with a vague suggestion of Oriental ceremonies. In the third section, Eliot exposes the poverty of the bare museum context, in contrast to the domestic surroundings that one might imagine for these artifacts. Finally he turns to “one more thought for pen and ink”—reminding us, in fact, that at least two of the poems represent imaginative acts rather than actual experiences—in a scene of couples in “conversation dignified/Nor intellectual nor mean,/And graceful, not too gay.” This ending “expands” beyond the artifact (whether a garment or ukiyo-e print), drifting into a pleasing, if idealized, realm of courtly socializing remote from the gallery setting of the first mandarin. Whereas people take on the qualities of objects in the opening sections, here the gowns with goldwire dragons become merely a detail in a pastoral scene of leisurely conversation beneath the trees. “Pen and ink” carry the day here, in the sense that we leave the museum context of crowded galleries and Boston connoisseurs for a truly “natural” setting (as the MFA Bulletin called its Japanese galleries). Eliot becomes, perhaps despite himself, the visitor envisioned by the museum’s designers, a person “desirous of the inspiration that comes from seeing noble works of art.”

Notes


2. As dated by Ricks in the “Chronology of T. S. Eliot’s Poems” in IMH, xxxix.

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4. Ibid., 43.
5. Ibid., 17.
7. Ibid., 75.
8. Ibid., 50–51.
9. Ibid., 76.
13. Morse sold his collection to the MFA and held the title of “Keeper of Japanese Pottery” there from 1892 to his death; see Meech and Weisberg, Japonisme Comes to America, 45. Bigelow deposited his collection in 1889, making the donation official in 1911 (thus many items bear the year 1911 as part of their acquisition number, although they would have been on display for many years before that); see Meech and Weisberg, 52.
15. L2, 132. See Morgenstern in Chapter 2, this volume, for further discussion of Eliot and Pritchard.
16. At what point they became known to each other is uncertain. Okakura, like Pritchard, was friends with Isabella Stewart Gardner, whose house Eliot might have visited as early as 1909, when he became a member of Harvard’s Signet Society, to which she had social ties. See Crawford, Young Eliot, 114. In a 1915 letter to Mrs. Gardner, Eliot refers to Okakura, and a note (probably contributed by Valerie Eliot) states that “in 1910, [Okakura Kakuzô] had taken TSE to meet Matisse” (L1, 101). Okakura was traveling in Asia during much of Eliot’s undergraduate period at Harvard, including 1909–10. He did lecture at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, but it is not known whether Eliot, who attended the fair, was aware of him at this time. In her 1910 book on the MFA, Julia de Wolfe Addison writes, “The name of Okakura Kakuzô is well known both in literature and art to anyone who has ever felt the least intelligent interest in the subject” (Julia de Wolfe Addison, The Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Boston: L. C. Page & Co., 1910), 323).
19. Ibid., iviii.
21. In “First Impressions of the Rediscovery of Two New England Galleries by Ralph Adams Cram,” Douglass Shand-Tucci finds compelling evidence of Cram’s role in the design of the galleries (in the form of architectural plans from 1909 bearing his handwriting and initials) (The Carrier Gallery of Art Bulletin (fall 1979): 2–16). Anne Nishimura Morse, curator of Japanese Art at the MFA, however, cautions that no record of his participation has been found at the museum archives. Most likely Cram worked with Assistant Curator Francis Gardner Curtis and Okakura Kakuzô, who would have required the services of a trained architect.
23. Ibid 12.
29. Edward Forbes, Fine arts 20 b Final exam (1910), Harvard University Archives, HUG FP 139.62 box 1.
30. For example, a piece of 1911 correspondence from P. K. Hisada, a Boston dealer of Japanese and Chinese art objects, reminds Forbes to pick up a pair of decorated doors that were being held for him and offers “a few other things, recently imported, which we presume might interest you” (Harvard University Archives, HUG FP 139.62 box 1). And, as Nancy D. Hargrove also points out (see Hargrove in Chapter 1, this volume), Forbes later asked Eliot to send him a copy of the catalogue of the Trocadero museum in Paris, home of the Musée d’Ethnographie and the Musée cambodgien (see Eliot’s letter to Edward Forbes, May 22, 1911, L1, 19).
34. Crawford, Young Eliot, 141.
35. IMH, 19. All subsequent references to this poem taken from IMH, 19–22.
36. For a discussion of “On a Portrait” and “Circe’s Palace”—as ekphrases, see Frances Dickey, The Modern Portrait Poem from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ezra Pound (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 77–92. I also discuss “Mandarins” there, with a different focus (93–96).
38. MFA accession number 05.202; description from Addison, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 342. Her book provides an important resource for knowing what might have been displayed in 1910, although unfortunately her discussion of Asian art is organized by medium rather than by room of the museum.
40. Addison added, “It is essentially Japanese in character, although a casual observer may think that it savours of the art of China and India,” and this ambiguity could explain why Eliot calls his figure a “mandarin” when most of the artworks on display at the MFA were Japanese. It is unlikely that as a college junior he would have been alert to the cultural distinctions between Japan and China and that he connoisseurs of his day recognized. (See Addison, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 342).
41. Suggestion from Anne Nishimura Morse, MFA. An example from the collection would be the suit of armor in the Weld Bequest, 11.12347.
42. MFA Bulletin 7, 58. Addison describes the sword collection and dwells on Samurai customs in Chapter XIII of Boston Museum of Fine Arts, though she doesn’t mention any armor.
Eliot’s Tour of Asian and African Art in the Museums of Paris and London, 1910–11

Nancy D. Hargrove

When Eliot traveled to Paris in October 1910, he had already developed an appreciation of Asian art that is less well known than his subsequent interest in Indic language and philosophy.¹ The museums of Paris and London fed his interests in the arts of Asia as well as exposing him to those of Africa, laying the groundwork for his immersion in anthropology and Indic studies upon his return to Harvard in the fall of 1911.² Eliot’s religious and philosophical views and ultimately his creative work reflected this many-sided education in non-Western culture.

During the academic year 1910–11, Eliot visited many museums, both in Paris and during the Easter holidays, in London. Japanese and Chinese art were wildly popular in both capitals at the time, while Europeans were beginning to appreciate African artifacts as art, rather than only seeing them as ethnographic curiosities. This chapter gathers for the first time information about the Asian and African art on display in London and Paris at the time of Eliot’s sojourn. Owing to the limited number of documents from this time of his life, for the most part we cannot know with certainty what he saw in Paris. However, from his Baedeker guidebook to London (held in King’s College library, Cambridge), and from a letter to his cousin Eleanor Hinkley about his London trip, we do know which London museums he visited and what he saw or wanted to see, thus confirming some of his artistic inclinations.³

Eliot’s interest in Asia began in childhood when he read Sir Edwin Arnold’s “The Light of Asia,” a poem about Buddha for which he retained great affection for the rest of his life.⁴ Furthermore, Anita Patterson has shown that as a youngster he was aware of the Orient by way of his own family. She notes that his great-grandfather was a New Bedford shipowner and that his uncle supervised a Unitarian mission in Japan in 1903.⁵ Building on the work of Tatsuki Narita, who discovered Eliot’s admission ticket to the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis and contextualized his short story “The Man Who Was King” (1903) in light of the Philippines exhibition, Roderick Overaa has established a compelling case that Eliot also attended exhibitions from Japan, China, British India, Ceylon, and Siam. The enormous Japanese exhibition, for example, showcased its art and seems to have contributed to the craze for Japonisme in the United States and Europe in the early twentieth century. Overaa argues that Eliot’s interest in Eastern art and culture as well as his concern with primitive civilizations was doubtless stirred by what he saw there.⁶

Eliot’s essay “Gentlemen and Seamen,” published in the Harvard Advocate in May 1909, indicates his knowledge of the commercial aspects of Asia for American merchants and also the Asian art and cultural objects that trade introduced to the West.⁷ He wrote about the men of the Merchant Marine “who carried American commerce to the Levant, to India, to China” and described “the shawls, the ginger-jars, the carved ivory which the captains brought back from the Orient, the gifts