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Beauty in the Age of Empire: Japan, Egypt and the Global History of Aesthetic Education. By RAJA ADAL. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. xvii, 268 pp. ISBN: 9780231191166

On their own, the introduction into children's art education of the brush in Japan and Arab designs in Egypt exemplify 'an aesthetic discourse of indigeneity', writes Raja Adal; in a global comparative context, however, they 'point to more than the rise of national forms of aesthetic expression' (pp. 140–141). From a global perspective, the particular, articulated in aesthetic terms and cast as uniquely Japanese or distinctly Egyptian, emerges as decidedly mimetic.

These transnational and global dynamics animate Adal's impressively researched, lucidly argued and elegantly written study of the histories of aesthetic education in Japan and Egypt from the 1870s to the end of World War II. The rise of border-crossing forms of knowledge is the most significant development in Japan studies in recent years, part of a powerful paradigm shift against the geopolitically-driven approaches of 'area studies', for which the nation-state was the sole validating category and the teleologies of modernisation theory the only framework. Current work in history, literature and visual studies often places Japan within an East Asian context. Adal's work exceeds this East Asian frame with its focus on aesthetic education in Japan and Egypt, two very different societies at the receiving end of Western expansion. The co-eval transformations described in the book are traced back not to direct contacts between Japan and Egypt, but to the flow of texts, objects and practices from the metropoles (Britain, France and the United States). Common conditions also gave rise to common ideological reflexes, made attractive through aesthetic education. Beauty was outside the largely social-Darwinist world order of

imperialism; as Adal puts it, 'If Western techniques were powerful, the indigenous self was beautiful' (p. 4).

Adal's investigation is also a response to Dipesh Chakrabarty's call for 'histories of the embodied practices of subjectivity'.[1] Aesthetics is returned back to its original Greek meaning of the sensory experience of perception, as elaborated by Kant's predecessor Baumgarten. Adal's history of aesthetic education is the history of music, writing and art as curricular subjects that provided a cultural training of the senses and made enchanting a large spectrum of ideologies. His archive includes curricula, teaching materials and the discourses of various actors (educators, bureaucrats, artists), with sources in Japanese, Arabic, English and French. The two parts of the study are each framed by fascinating interludes: the first on the piano (an imperial and modern instrument *par excellence*, perfected by mechanical manufacturing), the second on national anthems (signatures of national uniqueness that are actually deeply mimetic).

Part one deals with music and writing. Educators in both Japan and Egypt were aware of the corporeal effects of music and its powers of enchantment: they were in constant battle with the foreign, commercial and vulgar melodies in the children's soundscape. Writing, on the other hand, was instrumentalised along adopted Western principles of efficiency. Despite the weight of tradition, calligraphy did not have much of a role in modern Japanese and Egyptian schools, wartime Japan the only exception.

[1] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Afterword: Revisiting the Tradition/Modernity Binary." In *Mirror of Modernity*: *Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, edited by Stephen Vlastos (Berkeley: University of California Press), 295.

Part II traces the global rise of drawing education and the shifts in its content and ideals – from technical skill to an embodiment of cultural difference and ultimately to an expression of creativity and individuality. In both Japan and Egypt, the turn to indigenous visual forms and techniques again served to make the nation charismatic. During the interwar years, nativist discourses in Japan called for a return to a pure self, untainted by Chinese and Western rationality; in Egypt, cultural nationalism also emphasised pharaonic antiquity , establishing a mystical bond with a distant past (p. 175). The leading figures of the freehand drawing education movement in Japan and Egypt, Yamamoto Kanae and Habīb Jurjī, have been studied within their national histories of education; Adal's global perspective situates them into the context of anti-industrial and anti-positivist currents of thought in the West.

Freehand drawing education became the dominant method in Japan in 1918 and a few decades later in Egypt. Adal stresses that because the child's individual creativity always happened within a social world, drawing could 'shape attractions and desires' and associate the school – one of Althusser's original ideological apparatuses – with pleasure (p. 166). The prominence of art in the curriculum of wartime Japan reveals a 'concern with aestheticizing the content of school education' (p.9); children's drawings could beautify war and sacrifice.

It felt strange to find terms like 'the inner life', 'the inner self' used as if they are self-evident, in a study committed to rigorous historicization. Conceptions of the modern self and interiority have been interrogated within Japanese literary studies for several decades now and revealed to be historical and discursively constructed. The critic and philosopher Karatani Kōjin provocatively stated as early as 1980 that 'the self and interiority … did not exist a priori, but were constituted through the mediation of material form, through the

establishment of *genbun itchi* [vernacular language]'.[2] It was also slightly odd not to come across any mention of psychoanalysis in a book about desire. How exactly did the micropolitics of attraction and enchantment operate? Were educators' strategies always successful, or could ideological messages be deflected, imperfectly constituted, passively or actively resisted?... One direction in which Adal's lines of inquiry can be developed further is the exploration of the lived experience of the children themselves – and here psychoanalytical approaches can help.

These minor criticisms, however, should not distract from the fact that this is a hugely important book. Its ground-breaking methodologies – the global optics, the comparative frameworks based not on regionality, but on shared conditions and synchronicities, the focus on embodied histories – have the potential to transform the field.

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[2] Karatani Kōjin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 77.