

## Art Review

### Asian Aesthetic Influences on American Artists: Guggenheim Museum Exhibition

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During the spring of 2009, the New York City Guggenheim Museum sponsored a three-month group exhibition entitled “The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989.” Alexandra Munroe, Senior Curator of Asian Art and a leading scholar who had spent three years in Japan, organized this ambitious project to display 250 works of art by 110 major American artists who had been influenced by Asian aesthetics. She selected the works because each one reflected Asian philosophy and cultural motifs and integrated intercultural experiences. This exhibition was an opportunity to validate the curator’s perspective about how Asian cultures, beliefs, and philosophies touched many American artists’ creative process of art-making over a 130-year period (Monroe, 2009). Thousands of visitors saw the exhibition, which included artworks by major American artists such as James McNeil Whistler, Mary Cassatt, Arthur Wesley Dow, Georgia O’Keefe, Alfred Stieglitz, Isamu Noguchi, Mark Tobey, David Smith, Brice Marden, John Cage, Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg, Tehching Hsieh, Ann Hamilton, James Lee Byars, Nam June Paik, Adrian Piper, Bill Viola, and 92 others. These artists were influenced by Asian aesthetics. They used various mediums in different conceptual and stylistic approaches, which included traditional painting, drawing, printmaking, performance, video art, installation, sculpture, and photography. Each of the artists shares a common thread of being influenced by Asian culture, beliefs, intercultural experiences, or by practicing Buddhism, reflected in their art making.

This large exhibition presents a fresh approach to appreciating and understanding American art. The Guggenheim Museum should be commended for presenting a big picture that helps clarify the influences of Asian aesthetics on American art and art practice and promote intercultural understanding and acceptance.

**Exhibition Highlights:**  
**Selected Artists and Works of Art from the Exhibition**

This exhibition was organized chronologically and thematically from 1860 to 1989, and divided into seven thematic categories (see also the video of the exhibition, *The Third Mind*, 2009):

1. Aestheticism and Japan: The Cult of the Orient
2. Landscapes of the Mind: New Conceptions of Nature
3. Ezra Pound, Modern Poetry, and Dance Theater
4. Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde
5. Art of Perceptual Experience: Pure Abstraction and Ecstatic Minimalism
6. Abstract Art, Calligraphy, and Metaphysics
7. Experimental Performance Art: The Aesthetics of Time

***Aestheticism and Japan: The Cult of the Orient***



James McNeil Whistler "Nocturne: Blue and Gold-Old Battersea Bridge" (ca. 1872-75)

Commodore Matthew Perry's opening of Japan in 1853-1854 led American artists to become exposed to and fascinated by East Asia. The affected artists began to explore the Asian aesthetic in their artistic creation. The first section of the exhibition included James McNeil Whistler, a turn-of-the-century American artist who lived in London and became deeply interested in collecting Japanese and Chinese art. He never visited Asia but integrated Asian themes and motifs in his artistic expression. He adopted sophisticated Japanese composition and simplified forms. His thinly painted paintings show evidence of Asian influences. Whistler's painting entitled "Nocturne: Blue and Gold-Old Battersea Bridge" (ca. 1872-75, Tate, London) is a good example of his adaptation of Japanese ukiyo-e printmaking techniques. Whistler used shallow space, subtle tone ranges, and muted light and mist. Another well known abstract oil painting, entitled "Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket" (1874) which created a controversy at that time, represents Whistler's advocacy of art for art's sake in the aesthetic movement.



Mary Cassatt, "Mother's Kiss" (1890-91)

color drypoint etchings and themes drawn from Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock printmaking.

Another artist of this time period was Mary Cassatt, who was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she received academic training in art. In 1866 Cassatt and her mother went to Paris. Cassatt joined the Impressionists in 1877. She never married or had children, yet maternity and motherhood provided the thematic and formal focus for most of her work. Her painting "The Bath" (1891-92) deals with the tender, loving relationship between a mother and her child. She adopted Japanese motifs, using off-centered composition and emphasized patterns. In "Mother's Kiss" (1890-91) and "Maternal Caress" (1890-91), we see the beautiful and tender moments of a mother with her child captured in an experimental dry-point etching. There was strong evidence of inspiration by Japanese printmaking, especially Kitagawa Utamaro's "Midnight: Mother and Sleepy Child" (1790), a woodblock print Cassatt owned. In Cassatt's "The Lamp" (1890-91), she emulated the Japanese printmaking technique by using a set of 10-

### ***Landscapes of the Mind: New Conceptions of Nature***

The second section of the exhibition focused on early twentieth century American modern and abstract art. During this period many artists were inspired by Asian aesthetics and philosophies, which perceived nature as a unity of matter and spirit. Arthur Wesley Dow disseminated his universal principle of art through his book entitled *Composition: A Series of Exercises Selected from a New System of Art Education* (1899). This book contained research about Japanese prints that he conducted while working in Boston Museum of Fine Arts. His expertise with East Asian aesthetics led him to develop a theory that line, color, and light and dark are three principal compositional elements in visual art. Dow was an influential teacher and Japanese-art specialist who taught at Teachers College, Columbia University, and explored the use of Japanese composition. Dow influenced Georgia O'Keeffe, who studied with him from 1914-15. O'Keeffe's innovative abstract charcoal drawings from that time show clear evidence that she adopted compositional devices from Japanese art. O'Keeffe married the photographer Alfred Stieglitz in 1924. He was a major figure in the American Modernist movement in the



Arthur Wesley Dow, "Rain in May" (1907)



Georgia O'Keeffe "Banana Flower"  
(1934)

early twentieth century. Stieglitz and Edward Steichen founded the Photo-Secession group and published the magazine *Camera Work* from 1903-1917. In Stieglitz's photographs, the use of natural elements, softened and unified images, and his asymmetrical compositions reveal the influences of Asian aesthetics.

In the 1930s, increased Asian immigration to America inspired many artists to study Buddhism and East Asian calligraphy. Kinesthetic expression was a major aesthetic value in East Asian calligraphy, which influenced Mark Tobey's works. Tobey, a pioneering figure in the application of East Asian calligraphy in painting, was inspired by his interest and intercultural experiences after studying Chinese calligraphy in Shanghai and living in Kyoto, Japan, for one month. His white writing on dark background has a composition freed from form and concerned with lines, similar to Asian calligraphic handwriting as seen in his painting "Crystallizations" (1944). Tobey applied spontaneous lines and markings similar to handwriting on canvas.

### ***Ezra Pound, Modern Poetry, and Dance Theater***

The third section of the exhibition focused on artists and dance theater collaborative works. Ezra Pound, the American expatriate poet and critic, promoted Imagism, a poetry movement that used classical Chinese and Japanese poetry techniques.



Isamu Noguchi, "The Cry"  
(1959)

Pound introduced classical Japanese Noh Dance-theater to American modernists such as Martha Graham. She was influenced by Asian dance-theater aesthetics through Isamu Noguchi, who worked with Graham's theater from 1935 to 1966. He collaborated with Graham on set design. Noguchi was born in America to a Japanese father and an American mother. He was raised in Japan from 1907 to 1918 by his mother. He visited Beijing, China, where he studied Chinese ink painting and later moved to Japan and studied Japanese garden design and ceramics. In 1952 he set up his house and studio in Japan, where he produced abstract sculptures. In his work "The Cry" (1959), he mounted a balsa wood sculpture on a steel base. Noguchi applied a great range of Asian motifs, ideas, and techniques in his sculptures and designs. His intercultural experiences had a significant impact on his artistic creations.

### *Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde*

John Cage's works on paper were mainly abstract pencil-line drawings which dominated the fourth section. This avant-garde musical composer and artist had a great influence on American postwar avant-garde artists including Nam Jun Paik. Cage's deep connections to Zen and other forms of Buddhism emerged as critical methodological and philosophical influences in the American postwar neo-avant-garde. Many artistic creations and activities of Dada, Fluxus, and Happenings followed the mediation of Cage's approach. During the 1950s and 1960s in postwar America, Cage's writings, musical compositions, and collaborative works with visual artists influenced many.



Nam June Paik, "TV-Buddha" (1974)

Paik, the first internationally acclaimed video artist, was born in South Korea. In 1950 due to the Korean War his family fled to Hong Kong and then to Japan, where he studied music at the University of Tokyo. Paik continued studying music in Germany, where he met Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, and the conceptual artists Joseph Beuys and Wolf Vostell who inspired his work in electronic art. The projection of Paik's "Zen for Head" (1962), "Zen for Film" (1964), and "TV-Buddha" (1974) are good examples of Asian aesthetic influences on Cage's approach.

Robert Rauschenberg made "Automobile Tire Print" (1953) with Cage by collaborating in the artistic creative process. Cage drove his Model A Ford with black paint applied to a back tire, over a long strip of paper that Rauschenberg placed on the street outside of his studio in New York. While Rauschenberg was working with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as the art director and Cage as the musical advisor, they traveled to Japan. Rauschenberg made his process-based collage and assemblage works by incorporating common materials in a random fashion. His mixed media assemblage entitled "Gold Standard" (1964), which incorporated a Japanese folding-screen and objects found from streets in Tokyo, is an example of West embracing the East.

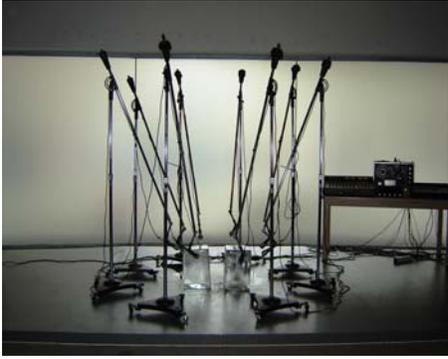


Robert Rauschenberg, "Gold Standard" (1964)

Paul Kos' influence of Zen art and thought is reflected in his "Sound of Ice Melting" (1970), which demands the audience's curiosity and attention. Kos presented



John Cage "New River Watercolor Series I, # 5" (1988)



a contradiction by mixing imaginary voices symbolized by microphones recording the subtle sounds of melting ice. His installation combines the nothingness of melting ice, silence, time, and process, which are elements of Zen Buddhism.

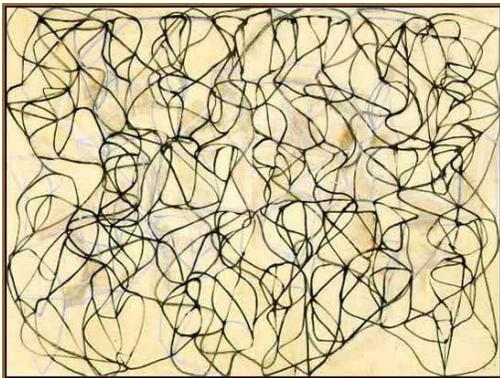
Paul Kos, "Sound of Ice Melting" (1970)

### ***Art of Perceptual Experience: Pure Abstraction and Ecstatic Minimalism***

In the fifth section of the exhibition, Ad Reinhardt, who studied Asian Art, taught Asian Art History and traveled to Japan and India in 1958, personifies the meaning of pure abstraction and art of perceptual experiences. His paintings entitled "Abstract Painting, Blue" (1952) and "Abstract Painting" (1960-66) require viewers to contemplate his visual challenges, which are visible and invisible. His artistic statements appear and disappear, causing viewers to concentrate and then lose their focus. Reinhardt's works require a deep meditative state of mind to fully appreciate his religious thoughts and expression. His paintings are objects of contemplation and meditation, influenced by Asian philosophy and concepts.

### ***Abstract Art, Calligraphy, and Metaphysics***

The sixth section explored the calligraphic brushstroke, which is an approach to abstract painting that focuses on the spontaneous gesture of the artist's hand. The artworks were informed by East Asian calligraphy and popular Zen writings with its ethics of direct action. Paintings, ink paintings, and sculptures by such towering artists as Franz Kline, Sam Francis, Philip Guston, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, David Smith and Mark Tobey reveal how this cross-cultural discourse inspired the creative culture of postwar America. The traditions of metaphysical speculation in Hinduism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism provided artists with a conceptual basis for the understanding and representation of the visionary, spiritual, and universal potential of abstract art.



Brice Marden, "Cold Mountain Painting" (1989-91)

In 1983 Brice Marden traveled to India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In 1984, Marden visited the Japan House's Gallery exhibition entitled "The Masters of Japanese Calligraphy." This exhibition inspired him to study Chinese

calligraphy which he adopted in his artistic practice and painting process. His personal interest and intercultural experiences played a significant role in opening new doors to his art practice. He displayed greater freedom in his abstract painting compared to his earlier dry minimalistic approach. Marden's breakthrough series of calligraphic ink-on-paper works from 1987-90 included "Cold Mountain Studies 1-35" and "Brice Marden's 4 (Bone)" which show clear evidence of the inspiration he received from East Asian calligraphy.

### ***Experimental Performance Art: The Aesthetics of Time***

The top floor of the Guggenheim Museum was filled with the last section of *The Third Mind*, including the site-specific installations by Ann Hamilton entitled "Human Carriage" (2009), Bill Viola's installation, Tehching Hsieh's performance installation "Punching the Time Clock on the Hour, One Year Performance, 11 April 1980-11 April 1981" video works by South Korean artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Kim Jones' mixed media sculptural works, and live performance art of the 1970s through 1989 by other artists. This section reflects the postmodern period of the globalism era. Some artists were born in Asia and immigrated to America, while others lived in Asia or served in the Vietnam War. As part of their artistic practice, these artists made connections between art and daily life, or they explored endurance through a long and arduous art-making process to achieve self-understanding.



Tehching Hsieh, "Punching the Time Clock on the Hour, One Year Performance, 11 April 1980-11 April 1981"(1981)

Taiwan-born artist Tehching Hsieh came to America in 1974 as an illegal immigrant. He later received amnesty and experimented with his performance art entitled "Punching the Time Clock on the Hour, One Year Performance, 11 April 1980-11 April 1981," which dealt with art and everyday life. His daily life became his art making process. He woke up every hour and punched a time clock, wearing a uniform, and followed the same routine for an entire year, missing only a few hours. His daily art-making process and everyday life was recorded by a time clock. The punched records and photo documents were displayed on four walls with the witness's signatures, letters, his performance clothing (uniform), and his shoes in a glass case. Through these documents, viewers are invited back to the 1980's. This fascinating performance is evidence of a year's marathon art making. It shows Hsieh's endurance and resistance, taking on the extreme conditions of physical hardship and isolation. The written attestations of his performance maintain the integrity of his diligence to make art. Such performances require a high level of self-discipline and mental endurance, which is the daily life of a Buddhist monk.

Kim Jones served as a United States Marine in the Vietnam War during 1967-68. His experiences in Southeast Asia, especially in an unconventional war, had a great impact on his artistic expression. After returning from Vietnam, he recorded his wartime experiences in a drawing entitled "Blue Shirt with Horns" (1983-2005). This drawing is a diagram and a map of troop movements with locations of armored tanks' fortified positions and targets on clothing. Jones' work reveals his status as a veteran traumatized by an Asian war.



Tehching Hsieh, "Punching the Time Clock on the Hour, One Year Performance, 11 April 1980-11 April 1981" (1981)

Two site-specific installations by Ann Hamilton and James Lee Byars attracted many viewers because of their attention to meditative energy. Hamilton, who studied textile and sculpture, incorporated different materials in her installation. As a child she was introduced to Japanese textiles by her grandmother who had traveled to Japan, and later she studied Japanese textile weaving techniques. Hamilton's site-specific installation entitled "Human Carriage" (2009) is a metaphor for the processes of transmission and transformation through reading books. The Human Carriage was a white silk carriage composed of weights made from cut-up books and carried by a



Ann Hamilton, "Human Carriage" (2009)

tracked installation that goes from the top floor to the bottom of the Guggenheim's rotunda entrance, snaking along Frank Lloyd Wright's spiraling balustrade. The installation welcomes visitors, raises their curiosity, and awakens them, using the chime of Tibetan bells to encourage visitors to investigate the exhibition. The Human Carriage mechanism was installed on the top floor, where an attendant exchanged the cut-up book weights. On its descent to the rotunda's ground floor, the carriage carrying book parts makes unexpected and periodic "ching" bell sounds which gently alerts the viewers to its presence. According to Hamilton, the elements of the Human Carriage compose a visual metaphor for the processes of reading, which leave no material trace but may forever change you.



James Lee Byars, "The Death of James Lee Byars" (1982/94)

James Lee Byars, who studied art and philosophy, lived in Kyoto, Japan, between 1958 and 1968, and his experiences were reflected in his site-specific installation "The Death of James Lee Byars" (1982/94). While living in Japan, he studied Zen and the music tradition of Noh Theater, practiced Shinto rituals, and taught English to Buddhist monks. His engagement with the Asian Japanese aesthetic was evidenced in his experimental performance-based artworks. "The Death of James Lee Byars" (1982/94), a site-specific installation composed of a large shimmering gold-leafed space with a sarcophagus in the middle, invites viewers to contemplate and

listen to the sound of silence seasoned with whispers of air passing over the delicate and super-thin gold leaf foil. The tomb room is 20 feet high and contains a death bed in the middle. The entire space is covered in gold leaf, which shows the contradiction between the Buddhist practice of nothingness and modesty and an expansive materialistic world. This space filled with shimmering gold leaf honors the nobility of life at its end and gives respect to death rather than to the fear of the unknown.

## Conclusion

The exhibition *The Third Mind* connects major American artists by the common themes of Asian aesthetics, motifs, and intercultural experiences and gives visitors a wonderful opportunity to view, appreciate, and understand the influence of Asian aesthetics on towering American artists in the history of modern and contemporary art. This carefully organized exhibition by the Guggenheim's Senior Curator of Asian Art Alexandra Munroe is a tribute to her fresh perspective about how Asian cultures, beliefs, and philosophies touched many American artists' creative process of art-making during a 130-year period. The remarkable contribution of the exhibition rests on the vision of the Museum and Munroe's ability to combine in one thematic exhibition over 250 major works of art in various mediums, such as painting, drawing, printmaking, performance,

video art, installation, sculpture and photography, as well as in different conceptual and stylistic approaches from the impressionist, modernist, and postmodernist periods.

It is a well organized and conceptualized exhibition and provides an opportunity to shed light on hidden facts or perhaps neglected truths and correct the record in the history of modern and contemporary art in America. The exhibition reexamines the history of American art, which usually emphasizes European influences, with the fresh perspective of Asian East aesthetics and cross-cultural impact on American art. The curator provides convincing evidence and photos in a 439-page catalogue published by Guggenheim Museum. The catalogue is very helpful for understanding the influences and impact of Asian aesthetics on artistic practice and supports the curator's argument. The catalogue provides supporting documents, photos and short biographical sketches to help understand the impact of cultural experiences on art works. These works were produced as a result of the cross-cultural experiences such as a short trip to Asia or an extended residency, religious training, or studying in Asia. This exhibition based on in-depth research promotes a deeper appreciation of Asian aesthetics and its role in the development of Western art in America and the history of art. As we are living in a globalized society and embracing cultural diversity, this exhibition is timely and highly valuable.

### References

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- The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*. [Video of the exhibition]. Retrieved May 15, 2009, from <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/2716>