The Asahi Shimbun Displays

現代日本の女性作家、
6つのストーリー

Contemporary women artists of Japan
six stories
This exhibition showcases works created from the 1960s to the 2010s by six internationally acclaimed Japanese women artists.

Although each artist’s story is unique, and their work reflects their own vision, they all share a quiet sense of self-possession. Each of them has established their own path.

Significant social, legal and political changes since the 1960s have positively impacted on the position of women in Japanese society. However, as with many other nations, gender equality is still a work in progress.
In early 2021, a senior male politician in Japan praised the women on his team because they knew not to talk for too long. He used the Japanese verb ‘wakimaeru’.

A basic definition of ‘wakimaeru’ is ‘to be able to tell the difference’. However, it can also mean ‘to understand the correct order and customs, and to act accordingly’. The word is applicable to anyone, regardless of gender or social status.

Although an established concept in Japan, this incident immediately unleashed a domestic and international backlash. In Japanese social media, ‘wakimae-nai onna’ (‘women who refuse to be shackled by social position’) became a top trending hashtag.
Leaf Boat, 2019
By Yamamoto Akane (born 1977)

Beautiful in its simplicity, delicate patterns of cut gold and platinum leaf (kirikane), laid by hand, are sandwiched between two pieces of cast glass. This complex method is Yamamoto’s own invention drawing on centuries-old traditions from both East and West. The title, Leaf Boat, refers to her childhood memory of playing with a leaf by placing it on the water of a canal and letting it be carried away by the current, while she ran along until it vanished from sight.

Coloured glass, gold and platinum leaf
2019,3027.1
Purchase made possible by the JTI Japanese Acquisition Fund
Yamamoto Akane (born 1977)

Born in Kanazawa, Yamamoto lives and works in an isolated location in Kyoto. In a solitary environment, surrounded by nature, she focuses on capturing the beauty of precision in what she calls ‘kirikane glass’. Kirikane, traditionally, was used to decorate Buddhist images in Japan. Yamamoto, however, has transformed it into an independent art. Her life’s work is to express the sensibilities of all the female protagonists in the epic court love story The Tale of Genji (about AD 1000). Yamamoto rereads the text, written by Lady Murasaki, almost every day.

Photo courtesy of the artist
「Well」 篠田桃紅

**Well, about 1970**  
By Shinoda Tōkō (1913–2021)

This painting’s moist grey brush marks, resolutely placed and layered, leave a deep impression. The overlay of long, thin and extremely agile strands in a different tone became Shinoda’s hallmark. For her, the unbrushed area is not a blank background, rather it symbolises the universe to which the artwork belongs. The inked area indicates the existence of the vast universe and helps us conceptualise it.

Ink on paper  
2005,0502,0.1  
Gift of Philomena Guillebaud
Shinoda Tōkō (1913–2021)

Shinoda Tōkō was born in Dalian, northeast China. From a young age, she was taught calligraphy by her father. Having never formally studied under a master calligrapher, she pursued her own style, and her artistic exploration led her to develop abstract forms. Her work was acclaimed internationally from the 1960s onwards for its combination of modernism and tradition.

Shinoda remained single all her life. She described herself as a failed daughter, disobedient to her father’s wish for her to marry, but she knew that her mother had quietly supported her way of life.

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Photo Courtesy of the Gifu Collection of Modern Arts
「白い層 A」 吉田千鶴子

White Layer A, 1966
By Yoshida Chizuko (1924–2017)

In the late 1960s, Yoshida created a series of prints featuring bold designs and limited use of colours, each of which has different embossed patterns, composition and multi-coloured shapes. In this print, we can see Yoshida’s playfulness. Two distinct areas of embossing, as if metamorphosing, push against each other. The intervention of saturated colours from the side creates a dynamic and the situation dramatically changes.

Colour woodblock print
1986,0321,0.859
Yoshida Chizuko (1924–2017)

Born in Yokohama, Yoshida Chizuko was an avant-garde painter before she married fellow artist Yoshida Hodaka, son of the renowned painter and print artist Yoshida Hiroshi, in 1953. Married into a family of artists, she became increasingly active and experimental, forming the Women’s Print Association (Joryū Hanga Kyōkai) and travelling around the world with her family for inspiration. Her daughter Ayomi (born 1958) is also a print artist, and her work is currently on display in the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries (Room 94).

Left: Yoshida Chizuko in her studio, 1956. Right: Yoshida Chizuko, about 1956-60. Photo courtesy of Yoshida Ayomi
『花子』 川内倫子

Hanako, 2001
By Kawauchi Rinko (born 1972)

The subject of this photobook, Imamura Hanako, is a 22-year-old woman with autism, who lives with her parents and sister in Kyoto. Kawauchi visited their home and followed Hanako and her family’s daily life. Her family shrugs off the attention smiling politely, saying that they are nothing special, just an ordinary family of four.

Kawauchi’s approach is insightful but never intrusive. Kawauchi and Hanako formed a subtle friendship. Light and air fill her photography creating an uplifting atmosphere.

Photobook
2007,3007.87
Kawauchi Rinko (born 1972)

Kawauchi Rinko was born in Shiga prefecture. Since winning the prestigious Kimura Ihei Photography Award in 2002 as an up-and-coming photographer, she has been internationally recognised and become one of the most celebrated Japanese photographers today.

Photo courtesy of the artist

Kawauchi remembers her time with Hanako in the following extract from the photobook:

Hana-chan (Hanako) is a fast walker
While I stop to admire dandelions
Hana-chan keeps on walking, walking
While she walks, she snatches up grass on the roadside, then chucks it away
She picks up a branch from someone’s garden tree,
and again, tosses it away
Her mother walks with her
Even if cautioned by her mother, she never gives in
Then, as I am a slow walker
Hana-chan sometimes turns her head and checks on me
When our eyes meet, she resumes her walk
Her face never changes expression
From home to the station
Only a 20-minute walk
Everything is condensed in that space, it feels
But that was all there was

Kawauchi Rinko
Translated by Yano Akiko
「赤坂見附」 小林清子

Akasaka-mitsuke Junction, 1990
By Kobayashi Kiyoko (born 1947)

In this print Kobayashi deals with a specific site in central Tokyo, which makes it distinctive among her mainly abstract works. She feels that with this location she can capture the beauty of the city, which she imagines as a living and growing creature, with its own speed and tension. This work combines conceptual and lyrical elements, creating an arresting vision, composed of four mirror images along the vertical and horizontal axes.

Lithograph
2006,0220,0.19
Gift of the artist
Kobayashi Kiyoko (born 1947)

Kobayashi was born in Niigata prefecture. She initially studied oil painting at university, before moving to print art, graduating with an MA from Tokyo University of the Arts. Her main interest is representing the urban environment. Kobayashi had earlier employed the female body as a symbolic motif in her works. She later shifted her focus to the rough texture of concrete, geometrical design, movement, time and speed. She said, ‘I felt I needed to see the human condition beyond the male and female binary’.

Photo courtesy of the artist
Furuta Miyuki was 11 when her mother collapsed from a brain haemorrhage, dying eight days later. Miyuki started writing poems to come to terms with what had happened. Miyuki, her father and elder brother had to adapt to their loss. She took over the domestic chores.

Her poem, ‘Mum, you’re so stupid’, was published in the Asahi Shimbun newspaper in 1964, capturing readers’ hearts. This led to the publication of her poetry anthology accompanied by photographs.

Photobook
2007,3007.66
Furuta Miyuki (born about 1952)

Furuta Miyuki wrote a poem almost every day, like a diary. She rarely reveals her emotions in the photographs. However in her poems, her true feelings come through strongly as she tries to understand how her life has changed.

In the photobook’s preface, her father quotes Miyuki’s words: ‘Father, you and brother are depending on me, aren't you? I'm in the sixth grade now, so I’d like to brighten up the atmosphere at home, like when mother was living. Your face seems to suddenly light up when you read my poems. (...) They make me feel better, and I think they’ll help boost the morale of the family, too.’

Photo by Eikoh Hosoe, 1965
おかあさんのばか

おかあさん
のう出血で死んじゃってばか
おにいさんは スキーに
おとうさんは 学校に
いっちゃった
みゆきはひとりぼっち
おかあさんのすきな
おもちがとどいたのよ
おかあさんは
おもちをきるのが
とってもじょうずだった
おかあさんのばか
Hey, Mum,

dying of a brain haemorrhage

was so stupid.

Big brother’s gone out,
Dad’s gone out,
to ski, to school.

Miyuki is all alone.

You know, Mum, they delivered
those New Year’s rice cakes you liked.

Mum,

you were really great
at slicing New Year’s rice cakes.

Mum, you’re so stupid!

Translated by Alfred Haft
The Global Gender Gap

The Global Gender Gap index, published by the World Economic Forum, benchmarks over 150 countries. The rankings are based on an assessment of four key areas:

1 Economic participation and opportunity
2 Educational attainment
3 Health and survival
4 Political empowerment

Out of the 156 countries covered in the 2021 report:

Iceland is ranked 1st
UK is ranked 23rd
Japan is ranked 120th

For all the countries listed in the index, closing the gender gap is still a work in progress, and true gender equality a goal to strive for.
Women’s involvement in the arts has a long history in Japan. Female poets are recorded as early as the AD 700s. *The Tale of Genji*, written by Lady Murasaki (active about AD 1000), is considered a classic. More named women artists are known from the Edo period (1615–1868), many of whom were born into artistic families, or who chose to pursue an artistic career.

In the Museum’s Japanese collection, there are works made by about 4,500 men, but only 140 women. The Museum is seeking to address this imbalance by actively collecting modern and contemporary works created by Japanese women artists. A selection of women artists’ works is always on display in the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries (Rooms 92–94).
Related galleries

To see more work by Japanese artists, visit The Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries (Rooms 92–94) on Level 5.

Events

Details of all events are to be found at britishmuseum.org and recordings are on www.youtube.com/britishmuseumevents

Join in online
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