

The Asahi Shimbun Displays

Contemporary women artists of Japan: six stories

2 December 2021 – 13 February 2022
Room 3, Free

Images: <https://bit.ly/3rGDhvE>

Supported by The Asahi Shimbun

The latest Asahi Shimbun Display explores the experiences and expressive visions of six internationally acclaimed Japanese women artists from the 1960s to the 2010s.

The free display in Room 3, next to the main entrance hall of the British Museum, spotlights six striking artworks in a range of mediums from the Japanese collection, exploring each artist's unique vision and their shared quiet sense of self-possession. The display also examines the implicit codes of conduct for women in Japanese society, for example, the use of the term 'wakimaeru', which means 'to be able to tell the difference', and by extension 'to understand the correct order and customs, and to act accordingly'.

One of the artworks is 'Leaf Boat' (2019), a coloured glass sculpture by Yamamoto Akane (b.1977). It references her childhood memory of playing with a leaf by placing it on a canal and letting it be carried away by the current, while she ran along until it vanished from sight. Yamamoto focuses on capturing the beauty of precision in what she calls 'kirikane glass', combining glass and *kirikane*, which is cut gold leaf traditionally used to decorate Buddhist images in Japan. 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.

'Why, Mother, Why?' (1965) is a deeply personal photobook with poems by Furuta Miyuki (b. about 1952). She 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. As her family adapted to their loss, Miyuki 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 by Hosoe Eikoh (b. 1933), featured in the display.

As well as highlighting the artists' individual stories, the display invites visitors to reflect on wider issues surrounding gender inequality worldwide today. During the last 50 years, while Japan saw social, legal and political changes, such as the enforcement of the equal employment law, and the influence of feminist campaigns in the west, the publication of the Global Gender Gap index by the World Economic Forum in 2021 indicates Japan's gender gap along with many other nations. This show offers an intimate glimpse into the lives of women navigating contemporary Japanese society, amplifying the six artists' stories, and celebrating the universal resonance of their work.

The other works include the ink painting 'Well' (about 1970) by Shinoda Tōkō (1913 – 2021); the colour woodblock print, 'White Layer A' (1966) by Yoshida Chizuko (1924–2017); the lithograph 'Akasaka-mitsuke Junction' (1990) by Kobayashi Kiyoko (b. 1947); and the photobook 'Hanako' (2001) by Kawauchi Rinko (b. 1972), who photographed the everyday life of Imamura Hanako, a 22-year-old woman with autism, who lives with her parents in Kyoto.

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 on permanent display in the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries (Rooms 92–94).

The Asahi Shimbun Displays are a series of regularly changing displays which look at objects in new or different ways. Sometimes the display highlights a well-known item, sometimes it surprises the audience with extraordinary items from times and cultures that may not be very familiar. This is also an opportunity for the Museum to learn how it can improve its larger exhibitions and permanent gallery displays. These displays have been made possible by the generous sponsorship of The Asahi Shimbun Company, who are long-standing supporters of the British Museum. With a circulation of about 6 million for the morning edition alone, *The Asahi Shimbun* is the most prestigious newspaper in Japan. The company also publishes magazines and books and provides a substantial information service on the Internet. The Asahi Shimbun Company has a century long tradition of staging exhibitions in Japan of art, culture and history from around the world.



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