Elegant, avant-garde, cool: The idea of “Japanese Art”

This presentation discusses how the boundaries of art, of “high” and “low,” “tradition” and “modernity,” have been negotiated in discourses about Japanese art since the 19th century. Around the fin-de-siècle, a network of art dealers, writers, politicians, artists and collectors – both from Japan and the West – participated in defining “Japanese art”. This was often done by highlighting differences, a virtual “separation of East and West”, but in some cases also by processes of creative adaptation and transformation, which eventually contributed to the development of the Western avant-garde.

Since the 1990s, a shift of attention from “traditional” Japanese arts to popular culture is visible in the West, with young people reading Manga, listening to J-Pop and wearing Japanese street fashion. This enthusiasm is shared by the world of “high art”. One central figure is Murakami Takashi, whose strategy it was to establish himself in the Western art world by creating an art form that had a global appeal and was “uniquely Japanese” at the same time. Visual elements as well as marketing mechanisms of Japanese pop culture form the foundation on which his enormous success is built. In his works he deliberately blurs the line between traditional binaries, like high art vs. popular culture or works of art vs. commercial products. The craze for this Japanese “Neo Pop,” however, has not been crafted by some individual, but is part of a complex process of interactions between numerous actors.

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