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Cosmic Characters: Wood Puppets Of Asia by Annie Reynolds
and Michael Schuster (review)

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Exhibition Review

COSMIC CHARACTERS: WOOD PUPPETS OF ASIA. By Annie Reynolds and Michael Schuster. East-West Center, University of Hawai'i, 20 January–5 May 2019.

As you enter the gallery of the East-West Center during the *Cosmic Characters: Wood Puppets of Asia* exhibit, your attention is immediately split: on your left a nearly life-sized Japanese *bunraku*-style puppet is caught mid-dance. Her refined features betray no emotion and the spotlights reveal delicate gold stitches in her red kimono. The glass case that protects her from inquisitive fingers adds to the rarefied air that surrounds her (Fig. 1). To your right, a small “theatre” is created with draped fabric. The fabric is decorated with colorful figures and patterns, but the effect draws your eye downwards to the even more colorful Indian *kathputli* marionettes captured as if mid-performance. No glass surrounds them, and the puppets in their fabric home are barely a foot off the ground. This contrast in presentation suggests the range of puppetry in Asia, they are sacred and profane, high-culture and low, performed at the highest courts and by the most humble street performers.

Tucked away on the wall besides the entrance, a few museum labels help orient the visitor. The first gives an overview of the exhibit's content and the goals of Guest Curator Annie Reynolds and Gallery Curator Michael Schuster. The scope is impressive: the exhibit includes examples from more than ten distinct traditions from Sri Lanka,



FIGURE 1. Female character, *bunraku* style, Japan; painted wood, cloth, human hair. Loaned by Northwest Puppet Center The Cook/Marks Collection. (Photo by the author)

Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. Hawai‘i is also represented in an example from the recently reborn *hula ki‘i* tradition. To illustrate the breadth and situate the forms geographically, a large map is hung by the entrance—something I often returned to in order to see whether geographically-close forms shared aesthetic features.

Returning to the *kathputli* display, I notice that the frame of the fabric theatre is made of white PVC water pipe. According to the accompanying label, these simple string puppets from Northern India are the “oldest and simplest form of marionettes represented in this exhibition.” Schuster explained the reason for the PVC pipe construction during a guided walkthrough he co-hosted with Reynolds at the exhibit’s opening reception: *Kathputli* is traditionally performed in Rajasthan state by itinerant street performers. Built from PVC and fabric, their small puppet stages can be quickly set up and taken apart yet remain light enough to be carried on the backs of the performers. This attention to presenting the puppets in a mid-performance context is present throughout the exhibit. Peer behind the backdrop of the

kathputli stage and you will find several more marionettes waiting in the wings. These puppets are every bit as lovely as those given the spotlight, but by presenting the stage as if caught mid-performance—with some puppets on stage and others off—the exhibition emphasizes that these are not merely lovely objects of cultural art, but examples of a living performance tradition.

Just past the *kathputli* display lies another strong example of the curators' presenting the puppets in a performance context. The *gombeyatta* string and rod puppets from Karnataka, India are among the exhibit's largest. The puppets' method of control is unique: the puppeteer wears a ring on his head which connects to the puppet's head with two rods. Strings then control the puppet's hands, and the puppeteers stand behind a chest-high backdrop to mask the bulk of their bodies. To illustrate how this would look in performance, four *gombeyatta* puppets are on display, each "controlled" by a puppeteer silhouette cut from black foam core. A nice additional touch is each "puppeteer" has a splash of color where colored fabric is wrapped around the puppeteer's head to protect them from the control ring (Fig. 2).

Throughout the exhibit, larger section labels give an overview of the general geographical area (the "South Asia" one, e.g., covers



FIGURE 2. From left to right: *gombeyatta* string and rod puppets from Karnataka, South India; *rukada* string puppets from Sri Lanka; *pavakathakali* glove puppets from Kerala, South India. (Photo by the author)

kathputli and *gombeyatta* as well as Indian *pavakathakali* glove puppets and Sri Lankan *rukada* marionettes), while smaller object labels besides each individual display repeat some information but also give specifics of construction material and the collection they are borrowed from. Other two-dimensional material is limited to a few large photographic prints to illustrate some context that the limitations of a gallery makes impossible to convey any other way. This was especially helpful for the large display of *mua roi nuoc* rod puppets from Vietnam. *Mua roi nuoc* is performed on water. In the gallery walk-through, Reynolds explained that they brainstormed various ways to bring a small pond or pool into the gallery, but in the end all proved untenable and a table draped with blue fabric had to suffice (Fig. 3). It sets off the puppets well but is inevitably a bit abstract. A photograph on the wall beside the display of several floating dancer puppets fills in the missing context.

Also aiding with context, on one wall hangs a flat-screen television showing examples of the forms on display in performance. When I returned one afternoon for a more detailed examination of the displays and to take photos, a young woman sat enraptured in front of it for the entire hour of my visit, absorbed in the comic scenes performed by Taiwanese *budaixi* glove puppets. While I rarely take the time to sit and watch videos in such situations, the soundtrack spread through the



FIGURE 3. *Mua roi nuoc* rod puppets from Vietnam; wood, metal, recycled rubber tires, bamboo, plastic. Loaned by Kathy Foley, Michael Schuster, and Gayle Goodman, East-West Center permanent Collection. (Photo by the author)

gallery space providing yet another reminder that these are puppets meant for *performance*.

One of the most visually arresting displays is that of the *yokthe pwe* string puppets from Myanmar. With at least a dozen individual puppets on display, no attempt at representing puppeteers or scenery was possible. Instead, the marionettes are displayed with their controllers hung from invisible thread and in poses that represent the dynamic dances and acrobatics that the form is renowned for (Fig. 4). The puppets are also clustered in groupings that suggest tableaux from well-known traditional scenes.

In conjunction with this exhibit, the gallery also hosted a series of performances, lectures, and workshops. These included the Opening Gala, which, in addition to the aforementioned walk-through, also included a performance by Kathy Foley and musicians Made Widana and Oriana Filiaci; a talk by Schuster on his “45 Years as a Puppeteer”; lectures on Hawaiian puppetry, puppetry in Iran, Chinese glove puppet theatre in Indonesia, Balinese shadow puppetry; and a Japanese toy puppet making workshop led by Dmitri Carter, director of the Northwest Puppet Center.



FIGURE 4. Horse, *yokthe pwe*, Myanmar; wood, cloth, string, metal sequins. Loaned by Michael Schuster and Gayle Goodman. (Photo by the author)



FIGURE 5. King Rama, *hun krabok*, Thailand; wood, cloth, sequins, beads, jewels glass, papier-mâché paste. Loaned by Kathy Foley. (Photo by the author)

The exhibit also featured glove puppets from diverse cultural backgrounds, although their displays were usually of the less dynamic pedestal-and-glass-cube variety. These included *pavakathakali* from India, *budaixi* from Taiwan, *hun krabok* from Thailand (Fig. 5), and, perhaps the most pleasant discovery of the exhibit for me, the simple but lovely *in hyong guk* from Korea. The *wayang golek* rod puppets from Indonesia are displayed simply standing on a table in opposing armies based on whether they show refined or coarse characteristics. The variety is impressive, but the arrangement shows little indication of how dynamically the simple puppets fight and dance in performance. Aesthetically closely tied to glove puppets but in operation more akin to *wayang golek* rod puppets were the *tiezhi kuilei* of southern China, apparently a slightly controversial inclusion when this exhibit of wood puppets was in the planning stages as their wooden parts are minimal: their control rods are iron and heads ceramic, while hands, feet, and bodies are made of wood.

While breadth is not always the enemy of depth, it must be said that the gallery at the East-West Center is not a large space and the number of forms represented means many were represented by a few token examples. As the curators' goal was to demonstrate the variety of

forms that wooden puppets have developed across Asia, I will happily accept the inclusion of a form like *in hyong guk*, which was previously unknown to me, with just two small examples as they have enabled me to search out further information. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that Reynolds and Schuster have fit a staggering number of puppets into their small space. While one might always wish for more samples, I wonder where they might have put them as in several instances the puppets were quite literally hanging from the ceiling. As the introduction label begins, "Puppet theatre presents the entire cosmos." *Cosmic Characters: Wood Puppets of Asia* attempts to present a representative sample.

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