Japan’s Book Donation to the University of Louvain

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Japan’s Book Donation to the University of Louvain: Japanese Cultural Identity and Modernity in the 1920s.


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This publication is a companion to the Special Exhibition “Japan’s Book Donation to the University of Louvain. Japanese Cultural Identity and Modernity in the 1920s” (October 2022-January 2023), held at the University Library of the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in close collaboration with l’Université catholique UCLouvain to commemorate the centennial of the book donation made by Japan to the University of Louvain in the 1920s. The publication serves a double purpose: it is a catalogue for the exhibition, which besides a selection of the donated books also includes items from 1920s Japan that represent the contemporary culture, society, and politics of Japan, while at the same time adding further background information and context through five essays. The focus of this publication is to introduce a carefully selected number of the more than 3,000 book titles consisting of almost 14,000 volumes donated by Japan to the University of Louvain – the ancestor of KU Leuven and UCLouvain – in the 1920s, and to explain the history of the donation as part of the international effort to rebuild the university library, which had been destroyed soon after the outbreak of the First World War.

All too often Japanese historical books and artworks are exhibited without contextualizing them or explaining the very modern background of their arrival in Europe. One only needs to think of the iconic *ukiyo-e* print of the famous wave by Hokusai or colorful prints of actors and courtesans in exhibitions throughout Europe, where until recently not much attention was being paid to the context of the time these books or prints arrived in Europe nor to the contemporary circumstances in Japan. In the case of the Japanese donation to the University of Louvain this is even more problematic since the books donated were carefully selected by a Japanese National Committee comprising prominent Japanese academics and businessmen, which had entrusted the task to Wada Mankichi, the renowned Head of the Imperial Libraries Association and Director of the Library of Tokyo Imperial University. The donated books have therefore to be seen also in the political, socio-economic, and cultural context of their own time – the years from the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, when Japan committed to participate in restoring the library of the University of Louvain, to 1928, when the new library was inaugurated. They were an expression of how “Japanese culture” was conceived by the donors in the 1920s, and thus of their – quite elitist – vision of Japanese cultural identity and how it should be displayed to a Western audience.

The core of this publication, conceptualized and written by Willy Vande Walle, engages with the historical background of the donation and offers a careful description of a selection of 65 books and works of art that are representative of the enormous breadth of the donation, ranging from history, religion, art, and literature to what today would be the natural sciences. His essay is so far the most exhaustive account of the history of the donation, including many hitherto unknown facts, for instance about the background of the selection of books by Wada and others, as well as about the miraculous way the book donation survived the second fire that ravaged the university library again in 1940 after the outbreak of the Second World War, a fact the details of which were long shrouded in mystery.

In addition, a different part of the exhibition and, hence of this book, is the section curated by Jan Schmidt, which presents objects related to aspects of the larger context of 1920s Japanese
politics, society, and culture, designed to offer a glimpse into the complexity of Japanese cultural identity and modernity during the years when the donation arrived in Leuven. This will also provide hints why the donation was subsequently almost forgotten even in Japan. An obvious reason for that long neglect was that after the fire of 1940 and the devastations of the Second World War in general in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific region that ended with Japan’s formal capitulation on September 2, 1945, around the globe more urgent matters were pressing. Thus, the 1920s donation was neither on the priority list in Belgium nor in Japan for decades to come. But as the explanations about 1920s culture and modernity in Japan in this publication will show, the donation, which was essentially a project of the political, economic, and academic elites of late 1910s and early 1920s Japan, was in a way already an event on the margins of the immense cultural and socioeconomic dynamics that swept through Japan and everywhere else at the time when the last books arrived in Leuven in 1926. The political currents of the time, too, which can be associated with mounting socioeconomic inequality, the rise of leftwing radicalism as well as of a growing tendency on the political right towards “ultra-nationalism”, but also with the countervailing tendencies of democratization and cosmopolitanism of the 1920s, affected the – never homogeneous nor holistic – attempts to define a “Japanese cultural identity” in such a way that there was for decades no follow-up on the donation. The books remained – well preserved and in pristine condition – largely unused and unnoticed. There were notable, but again elite, exceptions, such as the donation of an academic chair to the University of Louvain in 1927 by Satsuma Jirōhachi, the wealthy son of a textile dynasty residing in Paris and engaging in philanthropy. This “Satsuma Chair,” designed to fill the Japanese book donation with life by way of lectures on Japanese culture, religion and history, is still extant. It is hosted by the two sister universities KU Leuven and UCLouvain, regularly inviting guest speakers and guest lecturers. It is an occasion of great joy that now, celebrating the centennial of the 1920s Japanese book donation against all challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the special exhibition and this publication could be realized.

Aside from the core part carefully laying out the history of the donation in a long essay and introducing a comprehensive range of representative examples of the books and artworks donated in the 1920s in careful descriptions provided by Willy Vande Walle, and the descriptions of objects on the culture, society, and politics of 1920s Japan, four more essays invite the readers to deepen their understanding of the background to the Japanese donation:

The first essay by Jan Schmidt on “The First World War as the Precondition to the Japanese Donation to the University of Louvain” argues that the First World War (1914-1918) not only simply caused the destruction of the library and elicited in its wake the international contributions to build a new library in which Japan participated, but had other distinctive effects in Japan that are important for understanding the book donation. Firstly, the war catalyzed a shift in the perception of the world among the wider Japanese public towards a more self-confident stance vis-à-vis the European countries including Belgium, which had been an ally of Japan and won widespread solidarity for its fate during the war. This formed an important background for a wave of philanthropic efforts by the Japanese state and private actors in the wake of the war. This shift was also fueled by the fact that the war for Japan had not brought widespread destruction, in contrast to so many regions of Europe and some of the European colonies, especially in Africa. It had instead ushered in a period of unprecedented economic boom, which helped to fund such philanthropic efforts and unprecedented projects of cultural diplomacy. The war was also highly mediatized in Japan, similarly to the rest of the world. This sparked an upsurge of sympathy and moral support for Belgium, which had been hit hard by the devastations of military actions and by the harsh German occupation. This mediatized attention further facilitated mutual relief efforts and symbolic acts that started during the war, for instance when a precious Japanese sword was presented to the Belgian King Albert I in 1915 by a Japanese newspaper, while in 1921 the then-Japanese crown prince and later emperor Hirohito visited many sites associated with the war, among them also the ruins of the old library in Leuven that had been set ablaze by German troops in August 1914. In return, the Japanese support during the First World War and its aftermath, triggered enormous solidarity throughout Belgium when one of the most devastating earthquakes in modern history, the Great Kantō Earthquake, destroyed large parts of Tokyo and
Yokohama on 1 September 1923 and claimed around 100,000 lives. This support from Belgium, including books sent from the University of Louvain, which was still recovering from the destruction of 1914, fueled the decision in Japan not to discontinue the book donation in the face of the enormous loss of books there in fires caused by the earthquake.

In his essay “An Empire of the Mid-Tier: The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the New Mass Public-Focused Diplomacy of the Early Twentieth Century” Lieven Sommen argues that the 1920s Japanese book donation must be seen in the perspective of the diplomatic efforts of the Japanese Empire trying to redefine its position among the other existing empires and the so-called Great Powers. Since the 1890s, Japan had put itself on the map as a fledgling empire. This development coincided with the advent of mass media, which in turn caused diplomacy to change, as it was now required to not only appease the officials of the other nations but also the ‘international public opinion’. This chapter explores how from the early 1900s on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to adapt to the need to promote Japan abroad via mass media. The essay explains how propaganda press offices established during the First World War made the promotion of the empire through public diplomacy a mainstay of international politics, and how from the early 1900s on the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs realized that its methods for shaping this public diplomacy effectively proved deficient at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. It further argues that in the 1920s Japan actively played its role in the new internationalism as a permanent member of the League of Nations (the predecessor of today’s United Nations), and that the young Crown Prince Hirohito, the later Shōwa Emperor, could function in this form of diplomacy as the new and international face of Japan when he made a trip to Europe in 1921.

In her essay on “Japanese Art in Belgium in the 1920s: Hidden Treasures and Public Celebrations,” Freya Terryn argues that the book donation can be seen in the context of the 1920s being an important decade for the celebration and appreciation of Japanese culture and its arts in Belgium. This study explores the fascination with Japanese art in the interwar period in Europe, by focusing on two main examples: the first is a print series by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi preserved in the Royal Museums of Art and History (recently renamed: Art & History Museum), and the second are paintings by Fujita Tsuguharu, known as Léonard Foujita in Europe, today in the collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. The study sets out to examine the acquisition of Tsukioka’s woodcuts in the larger context of the longstanding appreciation for Japanese prints in Europe since the 1860s. Even in the 1920s, Belgian museums continued to acquire prints, prompting the Japanese donators to include woodblock-printed illustrated books of the Edo period in the collection donated to the University of Louvain. The essay further discusses how during the 1920s there was significant interest in art painted by Japanese artists in Europe, and how this led to several exhibitions of Japanese artists, primarily based out of Paris. Especially the works of Fujita Tsuguharu were received positively by the European audience. He combined Western-style oil painting and sumi-e techniques to create cross-cultural art and managed to garner much praise for this synthesis. Fujita was the president of the (short-lived, since it came into existence and folded again within 1929) French Japanese Artists Association, which was in large part funded by Satsuma Jirōhachi. In this way, Fujita’s work is indirectly connected to the 1920s book donation because aside from both having Satsuma involved in them, they also show how there was a continuing interest in Japanese culture within Belgium throughout the 1920s.

In his essay “Japan’s Sonic Modernity: Popular Music and Culture in the 1920s” Aurel Baele adds important contextualization to the selection of 1920s objects and their significance for understanding the culture, society, and politics of 1920s Japan. He argues that in the 1920s Japan went through a transformation into a society of mass culture and mass consumption. Jazz and other popular tunes that reverberated through Japan’s society marked the tempo and energy by which this change was taking place. The essay briefly discusses the places where popular music was consumed, and the role and influence of the culture industry, to illustrate the pervasiveness of this sonic modernity in Japan. It is this vibrant modernity that is often forgotten when Japanese prints, books or artworks are displayed. They were produced in previous centuries but, as in the case of the Japanese book donation to the University of Louvain, found their way to Europe in times of changing and multidimensional cultural identity and modernity.
1. View of the present East-Asian Library in the KU Leuven University Library, with part of the original stacks for the donation still in use. Photograph KU Leuven Digitisation and Document Delivery.

2. Section of the original stacks made to shelve the Japanese book donation, as re-used when the Chinese-Japanese library of KU Leuven was moved into the KU Leuven University Library in 1981. Photograph KU Leuven Digitisation and Document Delivery.

3. View of the present East-Asian Library in the KU Leuven University Library, with part of the original stacks for the donation still in use. Photograph KU Leuven Digitisation and Document Delivery.
The exhibition and this publication would not have been possible without the support of numerous institutions and individuals. Above all, we thank the rectors of KU Leuven and UCLouvain, Luc Sels and Vincent Blondel, for their continuous support to the exhibition, to this publication, as well as to the Japan fundraising campaign, which was initiated concurrently, with the ultimate goal of facilitating the full digitization of the precious 1920s Japanese book donation and establishing a position for a researcher specializing in the Edo period (1600-1868), in which the majority of the books was originally printed. In addition, the immense support of Emilie Vilcot of the UCLouvain Libraries Central Service, and of Charles-Henri Nyns, UCLouvain Chief Librarian, was crucial. On the KU Leuven side, we are particularly indebted to Hilde Van Kiel, Director of the KU Leuven Libraries, and her team, as well as to Demmy Verbeke, Head of KU Leuven Libraries Artes. An extensive list of the many institutions and persons who supported the exhibition and this publication can be found in the acknowledgements. In case anybody involved has accidentally been omitted, our utmost gratitude will still be with them.

If this publication with its five essays and the two sections containing descriptions of the objects displayed during the exhibition manages not only to catch the interest of its readers but also to serve as a basis for further research into the fascinating history of the donation and of the books and artworks donated, we as editors would see our mission more than fulfilled. Now, at the time of the centenary of the 1920s book donation, we all realize that once again major challenges for humankind lie ahead of us, including the threat of climate change, pollution and extinction, rising social inequality, the chances offered and dangers posed by artificial intelligence, and geopolitical tensions. But the history of the 1920s Japanese Book Donation, realized after the First World War and in the midst of another devastating pandemic, the so-called “Spanish flu”, which claimed several times more lives than the war before it, provides also an example of mutual aid across continents in times of global reconstruction. It may be hoped that in the coming years such mutual assistance will be able to play a role in preventing another devastating failure like the one that occurred at the end of the Interwar period.