

Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues

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—Measuring the distance to Western modernism

Though a bit long, I would like to cite a passage from the “Foreword” of the exhibition catalogue of the Tokyo exhibition.

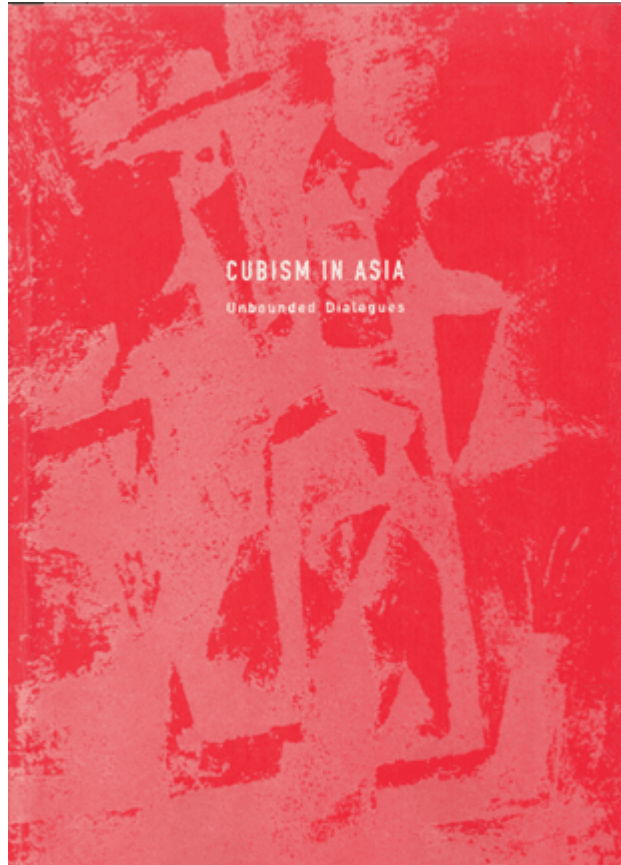
As an influential force in Western modernism, Cubism [which was founded by Picasso and Braque, among others, at the beginning of the 20th century] spread instantaneously (...) As an analytical aesthetic model, rather than merely a new painterly expression, it spread rapidly all over the world providing a modern view and approach to things. That is not to say that Cubism was simply received passively all over the world. As a form that circulates and transmits notions of “modern art” conceived in the West, it also provides an opportunity for us to refocus our sights on the various cultural factors that may operate out of the Western framework of “modernity.” In Asian countries too, through repeated collision and fusion with the diverse range of pre-existing artistic styles, traditions, and customs, Cubism provided a stimulus and portent driving force for “modern art” to evolve specific to differing cultural settings.

(Cubism in Asia—Unbounded Dialogues, exhibition catalogue, 2005, p.005)

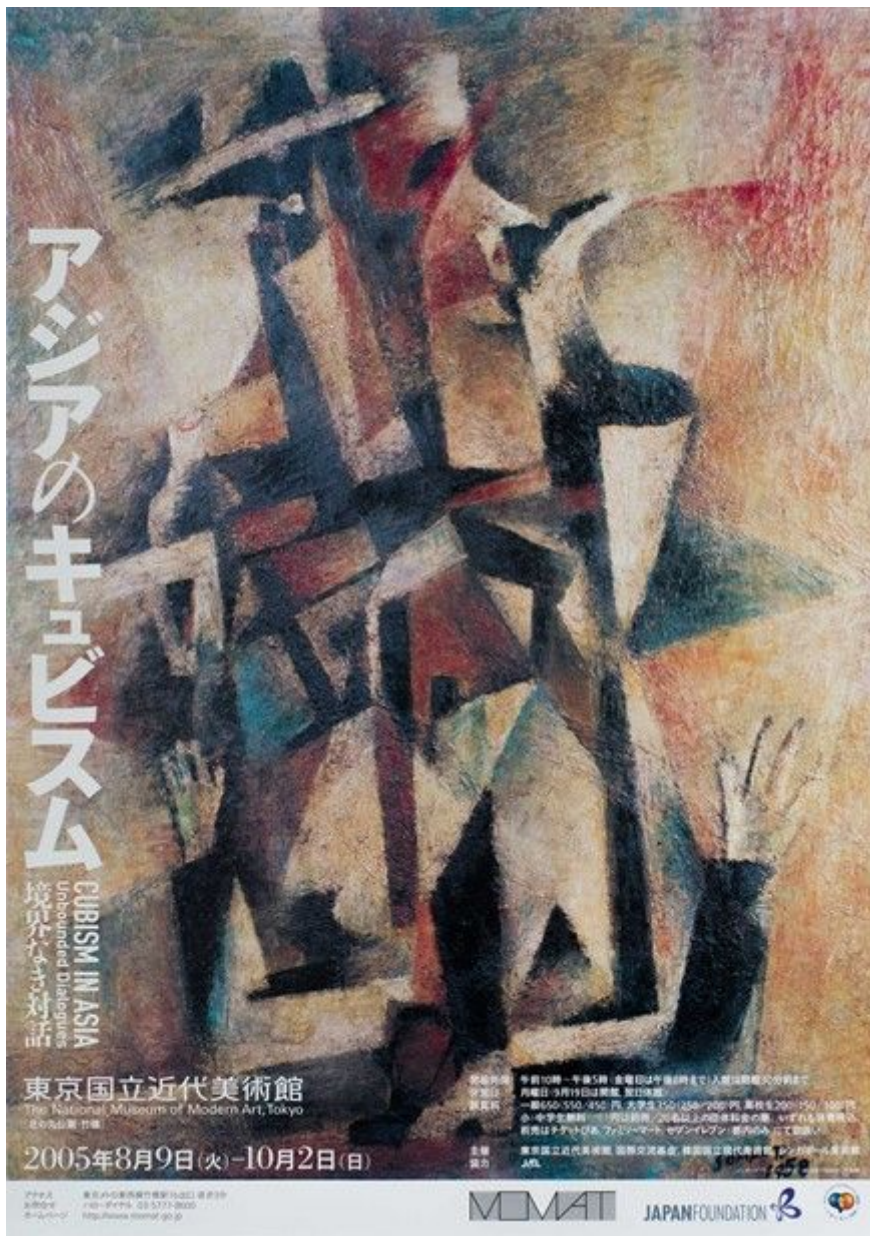
Reading this passage in 2020 enables us to surmise the place where curators stood back in 2005. In other words, the curators, no matter how impartially they approached the artworks in question, were only able to perceive modernism in Asia by way of understanding from a distance its commonalities and differences

with the Western concept of Cubism. This post-colonial situation, where Asia is always discussed alongside the West, was also prevalent in the international symposiums held across Asia during the first half of the 2000s. To word it differently, we can say that the exhibition came into being because of this sort of historical background.

“Cubism in Asia” started as a theme-based exhibition in Tokyo, which then traveled to Korea and Singapore. Later in 2007, the exhibition was reorganized according to regions/countries and was shown at the Maison de la culture du Japon à Paris as a sort of homecoming for Cubism. The exhibition was highly recognized as a project organized collaboratively by national museums across Asia for the first time, from the research stages to the exhibition presentation, while overcoming many difficulties along the way. Later, the national museums of Korea and Singapore followed suit and co-organized the exhibition “Realism in Asian Art,” but no Japanese museum took part in it. One reason for this, perhaps, is the difference in degree of sensitivity to the post-colonial situation revolving Asia. In that sense, we are never entirely free from our historical and cultural backgrounds.



Cover of *Cubism in Asia—Unbounded Dialogues*, exhibition catalogue (Tokyo: National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and The Japan Foundation, 2005)



Poster of "Cubism in Asia—Unbounded Dialogues," (Tokyo exhibition), 2005
 Design: Hattori Kazunari

Related Links

- The Japan Foundation Asian Art Archive "Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues"
https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/publish/asia_exhibition_history/35_05_cubism.html
- International Symposium 2002 "Asia in Transition: Representation and Identity"
https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/publish/asia_exhibition_history/29_02_transition.html