

What Mori Art Museum can teach China about showing contemporary art

Yoshiko Mori talks about how she and her late husband began collecting new artists' works to open Japan's eyes to contemporary art, and explains novel ways museum in Tokyo's Roppongi Hills draws audiences

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80 SHARES



An Asian collector makes an astronomical bid for an important modern Western painting auctioned by Christie's, securing a work that had never been in Asian hands. It is also the most money paid for the artist's work.

No, this wasn't last November when Chinese billionaire Liu Yiqian paid US\$170.4 million for Amedeo Modigliani's *Nu Couché*. It was May 1990, when a Japanese businessman called Ryohei Saito paid US\$82.5 million for Vincent van Gogh's *Portrait of Dr Gachet*. The next evening, he paid US\$78.1 million for Renoir's *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* at a Sotheby's sale.

Japanese collectors disrupted Western dominance of the modern and contemporary art market when they burst onto the scene in the 1980s, at the height of what was, in hindsight, an unsustainable bubble economy.



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The strength of the yen, the easy availability of credit and soaring asset prices at home allowed many people like Saito, honorary chairman of Daishowa Paper Manufacturing, to acquire trophies such as artworks, golf courses and famous buildings such as New York's Rockefeller Centre.

The bubble burst and Japan has yet to emerge from the "lost decades" of slow economic growth. In 1995, Mitsubishi Estate walked away from its stake in the Rockefeller Centre with losses. That same year, Saito was convicted of bribery and his company sank under a mountain of debt.

Japan's economic woes and the rise of China have turned the spotlight away from collectors in Tokyo to those in Shanghai and Beijing. But a recent exhibition and symposium at the Hong Kong Arts Centre highlighted the dynamism of seven major Japanese collections and the zeal with which their owners promote their passion for new art through private museums.

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Of all the names in Japan associated with contemporary art, Mori is probably the best known internationally. The eponymous museum in Tokyo has been a fixture for visitors since it opened 13 years ago.



Yoshiko Mori, chairwoman of the Mori Art Museum, brought over a number of personal favourites from her own collection to add to a Hong Kong Arts Centre exhibition of photography, sculptures, paintings, installation and videos on loan from Keita Arisawa, Daisuke Miyatsu, Takeo Obayashi, Atom Suematsu, Ryutaro Takahashi and Seichi Yoshin.



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YOSHIKO MORI

anything she owns at the museum.

Most collectors open a private museum to show off what they have amassed, but Mori only started collecting when she opened the museum – a move which she frankly admitted was very much part of the calculation of how Mori Building, her husband's property company, could develop the upmarket business and residential area that came to be called Roppongi Hills.

"Of course, I had always been interested in art but I didn't have a serious collection. Since the museum idea came up nearly 17 years ago, my husband and I started seriously studying overseas museums and I was inspired by what I saw to start buying contemporary art for my own home," Mori says.

The relationship between the museum and her collection remains unusual. When buying artworks, Mori takes her cue from the museum's curators and she has never shown



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"I pick up art or new artists after seeing our exhibitions. I have lent pieces to other museums but not to Mori. That's because once they've had a solo exhibition of an artist, an exhibition that alerted me to the artist, they are not likely to feature the same person for a long time," she says.



For Hong Kong, she picked a recent acquisition called *Flower Painting* by the young Japanese artist Toru Kuwakubo. It is an impressionistic, dreamlike landscape dotted with flowers that are borrowed from famous paintings, and Mori points out Van Gogh's sunflowers and Monet's water lilies with glee.



Another work on show is Motohiko Odani's creepy *Malformed Noh Mask Series: San Yūjo*, three Noh theatre masks with anatomical details of facial muscles exposed.



She has also chosen Mariko Mori's *Butterfly*, a small-scale replica of a futuristic Möbius strip that the artist made for the set of the 2013 Teatro La Fenice production of *Madame Butterfly*.



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All three works are a mix of the new and the old, much like the programming of the Mori Art Museum. The two-storey space at the top of the Mori Tower, a modern skyscraper at the heart of the Roppongi Hills area, is split into a museum and a gallery. The museum on the 53th floor is headed by Fumio Nanjo, the museum director, who also curated the Hong Kong exhibition.

It recently wrapped up the highly acclaimed show "Takashi Murakami: The 500 Arhats", a detailed examination of the ideas and studio set-up of the Japanese contemporary artist. Running concurrently on the 52th floor was an exhibition of 17th century Dutch paintings, including a couple by Vermeer and Rembrandt that drew vast crowds. Next on the agenda is an exhibition of ancient Roman murals from Pompeii, centuries apart from the survey of contemporary Japanese art showing upstairs in this year's "Roppongi Crossing" exhibition.

Contemporary art was not a big draw in Tokyo when Yuriko and Minoru Mori opened their museum in 2003.

"We wanted to make the Roppongi development project a culture centre, with a museum being the main symbol. My husband and I wanted a contemporary art museum because contemporary art was not so familiar to the Japanese people but very important in the era in which we live now. Art should be about moving forward, the cutting edge," she says.

So why is she showing Vermeer and Rembrandt?



This is part of the museum's long-term tactic to attract more visitors, Nanjo says. "A small contemporary art centre would have a narrow audience. We have our own message to send out through our programming, of course, but we don't want to do just that. By working with other stakeholders, we can broaden the programme and attract different types of audience to our shows," he says.

The 53rd floor contemporary art museum shows in-house programmes curated by Nanjo and his team. The 52th floor space, called the Mori Art Centre Gallery, often features more classical and popular exhibitions organised by outsiders. People who came for the Vermeer and Rembrandt might never have made the trip to see a show about Murakami. Since they were in the same building, however, most wanted to take a look anyway, Nanjo says.



People who only buy tickets for the observation deck can usually just walk into the museum when they come out, and around 70 per cent of them do

YOSHIKO MORI

Even tourists going up to the observation deck are potential converts to contemporary art by the museum's reckoning. "We have a unique ticketing system to drive traffic. People who only buy tickets for the observation deck can usually just walk into the museum when they come out, and around 70 per cent of them do," says Mori.

The strategy has worked. For its 10th anniversary year in 2013, a record two million visitors came to the two exhibition spaces, compared with just over 400,000 visitors to the Hong Kong Museum of Art in the 2014-15 financial year.

Even with healthy traffic, the museum still relies heavily on subsidies from Mori Building. Tickets for exhibitions cost about 1,800 yen (HK\$130) and sales cover around 40 per cent of the museum's expenses. Ten per cent comes from sponsorships, which amounts to about US\$1 million a year. That leaves the property company paying for half of the

expenses.

It's a heavy commitment and Nanjo says people new to it, such as Chinese property developers opening private museums across mainland China, will need to focus on not just the art but also the science of running a museum.

"My only tip is that they should study. They should study art and also the secrets of how to deliver a good experience to museum visitors," he says.