

REVIEW

Beauty in the Age of Empire: Japan, Egypt, and the Global History of Aesthetic Education. By Raja Adal. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

Raja Adal's *Beauty in the Age of Empire – Japan, Egypt and the Global History of Aesthetic Education* is a historically-grounded critique of aesthetic education provided in Japanese and Egyptian primary schools from the early 1870s to the early 1940s. It is drawn from what the author terms the 'global archive' of curricula, textbooks, and educational manuals. Using these resources, Adal has endeavoured to 'put a global group of educators in dialogue with one another' to examine the similarities in the priorities of educators worldwide at the end of the nineteenth century and then, subsequently to consider the independent responses to art education by the societies on the receiving end of Western expansion. This book presents an important transnational approach and highlights indirect connections that can be identified between Japan and Egypt during the period of modernization. Adal's approach is refreshing because it avoids the usual trope of an uncritical West-to-East transfer of knowledge, where, in reality, it has always been more complicated than that. Comparing Egypt and Japan gives insights into this complexity.

The importance of this book lies in Adal's commitment to write a global history that extends not from the West out towards its colonies but rather, from the perspective of those nations seeking to define themselves in opposition to the West. To do this he turns to aesthetic education, an often-neglected aspect of nation-building. "What happens", he asks, "if for a moment we allow wealth and military power to recede to a backdrop and bring aesthetics to fore? In so doing, not only are we adopting a different perspective, but we are giving voice to a different set of historical actors (p.15)." This is the crux of Adal's study. By examining ways in which Japanese and Egyptian educational policy makers enlisted music, writing and drawing as tools for cultivating the sensibilities of the young and shaping

their ideas of nationhood, he shows how countries threatened by the imperialist West turned to aesthetics as a form of resistance.

The first half of the book examines the educational trajectories of the subjects of art education in question. After an introduction to the importation of primary curricula from Western nations at the turn of the twentieth century, Chapter 2 focusses on music education. By the end of the nineteenth century, educators in both Japan and Egypt had largely abandoned indigenous musical traditions in favor of Western music. In terms of curriculum, Japan incorporated music education from 1886, whilst Egyptian schools would lag behind by more than four decades, possibly a consequence of the less pervasive state control of education. By the late 1920s to 1930s, however, the situation was being re-evaluated and both countries began to turn to their indigenous traditions. Adal nonetheless highlights differences between their respective conceptions of traditional music: Japan celebrated local musical forms such as the courtly *gagaku*, its continued existence distinguishing it from other East Asian nations that witnessed the erasure of their ancient indigenous music whereas — Egyptian educators embraced a wider Arabic canon of ‘Eastern beauty’. Yet the embrace of nativist traditions was highly significant in both countries. Late nineteenth-century philosophies of music posited musical sensibility as the most primal sensory experience of the individual. If music had such privileged access to hearts and minds, it followed that traditional forms of music had the power to cultivate not just humanist sensibilities, but nationalist ones. The intervention of music in the aesthetic economy surrounding children was thus a crucial tool of nation-building. As Adal explains in a later chapter (the second Interlude), this, in turn, encouraged the adoption of national anthems. While anthems were colonial imports, they used patriotic lyrics to appropriate the emotional impact of rousing melodies for a national cause.

Chapter 3 explores the evolution of writing pedagogies and the early emergence in both Japan and Egypt of a conflict between the calligraphic and the purely pragmatic aspects of writing. Whilst premodern attitudes to writing skills in Japan at least had emphasized the aesthetic qualities of a

calligraphic hand, rapid industrialization in the modern era led to the worldwide drive for new efficiencies of speed over form (dismissed memorably by a nineteenth-century Koyama Shōtarō who stated that calligraphic art as a ‘silent, dark alley, away from the lights of civilization and enlightenment’). American educational manuals such as Charles Northend’s *The Teachers’ Assistant or Hints and Methods in School Discipline and Instruction; Being a Series of Familiar Letters to one Entering Upon the Teachers’ Work* (1859), for example, would discuss ‘penmanship’ in terms of legibility, rapidity and beauty — whereby beauty was considered in terms of aesthetic value but only as long as it was as the reproduction of a model script

Nonetheless aesthetics and its pragmatic aspects continued to co-exist, albeit in different sections of the curriculum. The situation is well demonstrated in the case of Japan where students studied the aesthetics of calligraphic brush-work as part of a new art curriculum whereas ‘writing’ with a pencil was adopted in the “national language” section of the curriculum.

The gradual journey away from aestheticized scripts was briefly interrupted in Japan during the war years, when educators identified novel parallels between writing and the way of the brush with the martial arts or the way of the warrior, transforming the act of writing into an act of patriotism. Nonetheless, for the larger part of the first half of the twentieth century the rationalization of scripts was a priority for both Egyptian and Japanese educationalists. Its dynamics, however, were markedly different: whilst Japan’s concern was to develop a script that supported the bureaucracies of domestic industrialization, Egypt was under different pressures from the 1940s onwards to make its script accessible to foreigners through the introduction of capital letters and Latin punctuation marks. The latter is a legacy visible to the current day.

In the second half of the book, Adal goes on to describe the commonality of many nations’ educational systems during the late-19th century, a phenomenon he describes as a moment of “global mimesis”. Attitudes to drawing were a case in point. At the turn of the century, educators both in the East and the West approached drawing as a means of describing the physical world, with an emphasis on

geometric drawing derived from the South Kensington School: the interpretation of the world through a system of geometric lines which provided the foundations to industrial and technical drawing. By the early twentieth century, geometric drawing in Japan, Egypt and the West, had given way to new efforts to draw from nature. Within 30 years, however, Japanese educators were arguing for a new approach to drawing as a means of developing a child's aesthetic response to the world. This is what Adal terms the aesthetics of "self-expression". Not surprisingly, much like the cultivation of the calligraphic hand, 'free drawing' was appropriated during the war period as a means of personal cultivation as the nurturing of a sense of the subjective self that would form the basis of the patriotic individual. Aesthetic education, that is, became 'a means of inscribing morality into children's bodies and in their sense' (p.168) and it would subsequently be exported throughout Japan's colonies of Okinawa, Taiwan, and Korea as a tool for the cultivation of Japanese subjects.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, art education in Japan and Egypt would become central not just to the construction of national identity, but to what Adal terms an 'aesthetic national subject' (p.5). Confronted with the homogenizing forces of modernity — music, writing (calligraphy) and drawing — would be tasked with creating culturally distinctive communities; and it was the power of these accomplishments to 'enchant' the soul of the young student that made them such crucial tools for educators across the globe, who sought to instil moral and cultural values in the young. As a paradigm for the power of art to enchant — and thereby influence — the young, Adal invokes the tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, whose melodies so fatally seduced the children of that town: It is this instinctive response that persuaded early twentieth century policy makers to emphasise cultural pursuits as an educational tool. A problematic term central to Adal's thesis, is "aesthetic." For Adal, aesthetic education comprises music, writing and drawing, and his account of the roles of these subjects in Japanese and Egyptian primary school curricula — and their comparison with Western curricula — is wholly persuasive. Yet important English language studies, such as *Modern Japanese Aesthetics* by Michele Marra — have also demonstrated the intense preoccupation of Japanese thinkers from the early Meiji period onwards — figures such as Nishi Amane, Okakura Kakuzō and

Takayama Chogyū– with Western concepts of beauty and the aesthetic philosophies of Kant, Hegel and others.¹ To what extent did these philosophies, which also exerted a profound influence on the imagining of Japanese identity – filter down and influence early twentieth century educational policy? What was the context within which the artistic education of the young came to be perceived as a core element of Japanese curricula? Moreover to what extent did traditional aesthetic terminologies – in the case of Japan, for example, concepts related to emotive categories such as “*aware*,” “*wabi sabi*,” or “*yūgen*” – participate in curricula designed to cultivate children’s sensibilities? These are important questions that remain largely unanswered in this study. In addition, it should be noted that Japanese aesthetics, such as “*nōtan*”, were highly influential in early twentieth century USA, Poland, and elsewhere.² This demonstrates the flow of ideas from “peripheral” countries to the West.

Through a close examination of contemporary educational materials, however, the book does compellingly chart the irony by which, through the gradual appropriation of Western aesthetic philosophies, Japanese and Egyptian educators identified cultural pursuits as one of the realms of human activity that offered “the best chance of escaping from the hierarchy imposed by Western technological superiority (p.141).” By inculcating school children with increasingly local aesthetic sensibilities, the book elucidates how Egypt and Japan escaped the simple imitation of Western culture and technology while achieving their own indigenous goals of modernization and nationalism.

Beauty in the Age of Empire – Japan, Egypt and the Global History of Aesthetic Education offers important insights into the use of aesthetics not just as an educational tool but as a powerful, and significantly non-linguistic instrument of political influence. By demonstrating important parallels between educational policies in Japan and Egypt, it also offers new points of contact and comparison

¹ Michele Marra, *Modern Japanese Aesthetics A Reader* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999).
Michele Marra, *Essays on Japan: between aesthetics and literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

² Dow, Arthur Wesley, *Composition. A Series of Exercises Selected from a New System of Art Education* (Boston: Joseph Moore Bowles, 1899).

The above is usually given as the first major publication by him, but later books with the title of ‘Composition’ with a slightly different subtitle, became ubiquitous and are available even now. I owe this information to Japanese art historian, Toshio Watanabe.

between the Sinosphere and the Arab world in the critical years of the early twentieth century. The book will be of relevance to students of modern history and for general courses on imperialism, art history, philosophy, and aesthetic studies, and should also inspire scholars and students in art education, interdisciplinary, and transnational studies. This book would work well in graduate courses that deal with such topics as aesthetic educations during the era of Empires, in both Japan and in Egypt.

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