

Letters and Essays from Sydney 2.0 – Volume 8

~ Japanese volunteers' guided tour of the Art Gallery of NSW ~

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Last weekend, I visited the Art Gallery of NSW following an invitation from Japanese volunteer guides.

For some time now at the Art Gallery, volunteer guides have been giving guided tours in Japanese. Currently there are nine volunteers and tours are conducted every Friday and Sunday. All are qualified guides who have passed examinations and undergone training. During COVID restrictions, tours were suspended, but with the opening of the new building in December last year, they have resumed, and Japanese language tours are being actively promoted. Taking part in the guided tour myself, I can say that it was a unique opportunity to go around the gallery in the presence of a guide – it gave me a deeper understanding of what I was seeing and I gained many insights.

While outlining the content of the tour, I would like to introduce the activities and contribution of the volunteers. Furthermore, I hope that many people will take the opportunity to go on a Japanese guided tour.

On the day, I was fortunate enough to have several guides. Together with Ms Midori Furze, who put the word out, Ms Kazuko Chalker, Ms Mikiko Hanasaki and Ms Chie Hamada kindly showed me around both the new building and the old building. Later, we were joined by three other volunteer guides – Ms Nobuko Matsuda, Ms Hiromi Kamokasu and Ms Kaoru Morioka – and I had the opportunity for a group discussion with seven volunteer guides. One of the volunteers has been working as a guide since 2003.



Arriving at the welcome plaza outside the entrance of the new building, you first see the large bronze sculptures of human figures by New Zealand artist, Ms Francis Upritchard. These two long-limbed figures represent human interaction and the artist was influenced by Kyōsai (Kawanabe Kyōsai [1831-1889]), an ukiyoe artist who was active from the end of the Edo Period through to the Meiji Period.

Also near the entrance is a living artwork (garden) by Indigenous artist, Mr Jonathan Jones, which is currently being constructed. It should be completed this year and I am looking forward to seeing it.



Entering the new building, we first entered the Yiribana Gallery which displays artworks by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists.



The piece in the photo above right is called “Waterbrain”. It depicts a person’s life and the path of humankind. The large grey circular shape almost in the middle of the painting is said to depict the brain.



Depicted from top to bottom in the image above are a crown, a crest and a flag.



Also visible from outside the gallery is the work “Many bags” which hangs in a 20 metre hall.



Individual glass yams, an important food for Indigenous people, create a cloud-like shape. This artwork has a political message; black yams mixed through the cloud represent the pollution that was caused by nuclear tests.

In the next hall is the exhibition “Making Worlds” which includes the “participatory artwork” below. The photo shows visitors rolling spheres of clay which will become part of the artwork.



An upside-down map of the world. The threads show the movement and migration of people, and the threads themselves are made of barbed wire representing the limits and disruption of these movements.



On the way to the next hall, I was struck by the giant mural by Mr Takashi Murakami. Its subject is samurai and ghosts (*yōkai*).



The theme of the next hall is family and home. Particularly avant-garde and innovative is the work comprising various types of household items surrounded by mirrors in all directions.



The new building was constructed as the “Sydney Modern Project” to commemorate the 150th anniversary since the Art Gallery opened in 1871. Due to COVID, the opening was postponed for one year. Since opening in December last year, the new building has proved very popular and is becoming a new Sydney landmark. The design was the result of a competition which unanimously chose Japanese architects SANAA, represented by Ms Kazuyo Sejima and Mr Ryue Nishizawa. When I met with them at the end of last year, they explained to me that they paid careful attention to utilise the existing landscape without damaging it. The new building, which maintains trees and plants, was the first public art gallery to receive 6 stars, the highest number possible under the Australian “Green Star Design” rating for environmentally sustainable buildings.



I don't have a photo of it, but I also visited the gallery located in the remains of the oil tank. Built in 1942 during the war, it had the capacity to hold between 6 million and a maximum 10 million litres of oil. The smell of oil still lingers. You walk slowly through the darkened gallery space to be sure not to bump into the exhibits.

Next, we moved on to the main building.

Modern paintings make up most of the exhibits here, and there is also an excellent display of Asian art.

I was delighted to see a number of works with connections to Japan.



These ceramics were part of the Government of Japan's exhibition at the Sydney International Exhibition in 1879. The designs showing the fruits of the sea are beautiful.



Among the items on display are a painting by an Englishman depicting Japan as well as Japanese ukiyo-e works.

This is only the simplest of overviews. My guides explained so many works to me that I cannot introduce them all. I would like to express once again my respect for the work and contribution of the volunteer guides. I would like to thank them for the many “insights” and “discoveries”.

I hope that more and more people will go to visit the Art Gallery of NSW and that many of them will take part in a Japanese guided tour.

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