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## BOOK REVIEW

### *Designing Modern Japan*

By Sarah Teasley

Reaktion Books, 2022  
424 pages.



Reviewed by Ruselle MEADE\*

*Designing Modern Japan* is an ambitious work that aims at no less than telling “the history of the design industries, profession and practice in Japan from the mid-nineteenth to late twentieth century” (p. 12). A topic as expansive as this needs a steady guide, and one feels in safe hands with Sarah Teasley. She opens the volume by describing the encounter that prompted her fascination with Japanese design. In an Osaka bookshop in 1991 Teasley found herself “transfixed” by rows of “achingly beautiful” design magazines, an experience many others will no doubt recognize. The fascination endured, such that Teasley has since lectured and published extensively on Japanese design. This feels like a culmination of expertise honed over several decades.

Teasley adopts a chronological approach, charting the major transitions in Japanese design over a century and a half. These include, as one might expect, changes in the professional identity of designers and the materials with which they worked. However, despite considerable changes, some enduring threads run through the history of Japanese design. Teasley demonstrates that what is considered “Japanese” design has consistently been the product of global flows of ideas and people. This of course predates the mid-nineteenth century. Japan’s inclusion in an Asian “network of knowledge” enlivened its early modern craft scene.<sup>1</sup> By “global,” though, Teasley is referring primarily to North America and Western Europe.

While modern Japan’s designs were occasionally the result of serendipitous inspiration, more often than not they were the outcome of deliberate strategizing. Teasley points out, for example, how the national expositions of the early Meiji period held in Ueno Park in Tokyo functioned as “preparatory events” for international expositions, particularly those in Paris (1878, 1889) and Chicago (1893). The role of Japanese design in exports meant that civil servants continued to research international design trends throughout the twentieth century, often commissioning reports with recommendations about what trends to pursue. Top-down interventions were a factor in the popularity of Art Nouveau aesthetics at the turn of

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<sup>1</sup> Guth 2021.

the twentieth century, as well as in the influence of pared-back Nordic design in the 1960s. By keeping an eye on international trends, leaders were able to promote designs that were distinct—meaning legibly “Japanese”—but not alienating.

By using design as a lens through which to view modern Japanese history, Teasley also shows how design, as a concept, and designers, as actors, advanced the colonial project. She argues that design professionals were complicit, through their collection, classification, and curating practices, in reinforcing ideas about hierarchies of civilizational levels, which coded colonized regions such as Korea, Taiwan, Okinawa, and Hokkaido as backward. She also points to the use by Japanese colonial authorities of modernist aesthetics in infrastructure design as a means of presenting Japan as a “world power and modern nation” (p. 151) and “visibly asserting Japanese authority over colonized lands and people” (p. 143). Though compelling, the discussion of the role of design in the imperial project reveals some of the pitfalls of Teasley’s capacious approach to design. Here, the design areas touched upon encompass household craft, architecture, graphic design, and much more. A similarly disparate cast of actors are discussed. Teasley explains her broad-ranging approach by noting that design meant “different things to different people at different times and in different places.” Thus, she explains, the work is driven by “definitions of design that shaped its practice in the period explored” (p. 12). Dealing with a broad array of design enables the author to demonstrate how coloniality was enmeshed in the fabric of everyday life of colonial subjects, but it comes at the expense of the effectiveness of “design” as an analytical category. It can be difficult at times to gain a sense of which forms of design were most effective and why. Ultimately, the discussion does little to disturb the narrative of the colonial period to which we are accustomed, despite the claim that “historical narratives and conditions can be understood afresh if viewed from the perspective of design” (p. 17).

The volume is at its best when discussing industrial design in the postwar period, where we see a clearer and more circumscribed profile of the designer. Design played an important role in Japan’s economic recovery, wherein consumption was increasingly prioritized. However, in an era of high growth, designers started to reflect on their values. Many pushed back against a sense that design was simply about generating profit. Concerns about improving product efficiency and enhancing user experience took on greater importance. However, some designers went further, questioning the wider social ramifications of their practice. Prompted by civil unrest in the 1960s, some left-leaning designers resisted the image of design as a mere cog in the national development machine, publishing manifestos that called for designers to engage more with the pressing geopolitical and ecological crises of the time.

Teasley acknowledges that because much of women’s design work “occurred outside of the waged economy” (p. 340), her focus on professional design and designers means that, inevitably, it is male practice that is spotlighted. Women appear in this work primarily as consumers, albeit powerful ones. Women were of course major drivers of design trends in the prewar period, particularly in home furnishings, but increasing numbers of young unmarried women in the workforce from the 1960s onward made them an even more powerful demographic in the eyes of designers.<sup>2</sup> Dubbed “single nobility” because of their purchasing

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2 On the prewar influence of women on design, see Sand 2005.

power, young women exercised outsized power in shaping design, particularly in the areas of fashion and cosmetics, from the 1980s onward.

Overall, this is a highly valuable contribution to our understanding of modern Japan, a work of encyclopedic heft, yet engagingly written. Teasley marshals a wide range of archival sources into a flowing narrative that brims with fascinating insight. The illustrations, too, are a delight, and provide a snapshot of the “achingly beautiful” designs that captivated the author, and which are likely to do the same to her readers.

## REFERENCES

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