

My Japan Journey - Episode 3
Gennifer Weisenfeld: A Life in Art in the US and Japan

[Music]

Gennifer Weisenfeld 0:05

For a country, again, that's so small, to have gifted so much amazing stuff to the world. That's what drew me, I think, to a lifetime of dedication to Japan. That this was a place that was so deep and so rich that I would never run out of things to be curious about. And I never have, twenty-some-odd years later. I've never run out of curiosity for all of the wonderful things produced in Japan.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 0:18

A single moment of curiosity can lead to unexpected opportunities. Some, ending in a lifelong involvement with Japan. Our conversation partners all have a unique Japan journey to tell. One that's steeped in connections that have enriched their lives and altered them in deep, meaningful ways. Join us in their Japan journey, and be inspired to embrace what's unfamiliar. Your next single moment of curiosity could lead you to possibilities you've never dreamed of.

[Music]

This is My Japan Journey. I'm Yuko Handa from the Japan Society of Boston.

[Music]

So welcome, Gennifer Weisenfeld, to our podcast series. It is a great pleasure to have you here today.

Gennifer Weisenfeld 1:33

It's a pleasure to be here.

Yuko Handa 1:34

Gennifer Weisenfeld is a professor in the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University. Gennifer, this is a question that I always start with: "Where did your Japan journey start?"

Gennifer Weisenfeld 1:49

My Japan journey started many different times, but I would say that it was born in college, where I went to Wesleyan University in Connecticut. And as a freshman, I was looking to study a new foreign language. I had studied French for many years in high school and went to a language open house. And that's where I met Professor Yoshiko Samuels, who was the Japanese teacher at Wesleyan. And she was just... She knocked my socks off. She was an amazing ball of energy, and I thought, "This could be really interesting!" Japan seemed like a really interesting place. I didn't know much about it. And Wesleyan had a fabulous year-long study abroad program called The Associated Kyoto Program that was done with ten

other universities. And it meant that I could spend a year at Doshisha University and also live with a homestay family during my junior year, which I ended up doing.

So I think that's kind of where the journey started. It started just with, "let's study a new language." And it was such an immersive language. It was so different from anything I had ever done before. And I thought, "This is something that's that's going to take me somewhere interesting." And then, after spending a year in Japan, in Kyoto, I was just smitten for life.

Yuko Handa 3:07

Take us to that moment, that first moment that you land at Narita Airport. I'm going to assume this was your first time in Japan?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 3:15

It was. And, I think the impressions were so physical, they were sensory. The smell of Japan, the look of Japan, the bodily feel of it, everything. And then, of course, adjusting to living with a homestay family. That was such a unique, interesting experience. And I think the best way to learn any language, but certainly, Japanese, because Japanese is so contextual, is to be in an everyday situation with regular people and to see the way they respond to things. And you learn that. You learn the whole bodily comportment, how people apologize for things or the way they live their lives. And the language is a living language for you. And I learned that with my family. It was just, such a great tool to open this world of daily life. And daily life is so different in Japan. It was so different at least from the daily life that I had come from. And to me, that's what was so interesting.

And then, of course, we took so many trips and, and I saw just so many exquisite places. And that's what really drew me in was this -- the sensibility of Japan. The aesthetics, the food -- I'm a food person -- and that everything seemed to be highly aestheticized. The food was beautiful and tasty. The art was beautiful and immersive. The architecture and the cities -- everything was just really -- almost just overwhelmed your senses. And I really felt like I just got -- just kind of took it all in, and I'm not sure I even processed at all that first year.

Yuko Handa 5:03

Now, Gennifer, you are an art historian. Were you an art historian before you were somebody who's interested in Japan? Or is that something that grew together? Or is that something that came afterwards? How does Japan play in your art history journey?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 5:22

That's a great question. And you would think that it was Japanese art history that drew me there. But actually, those two interests were entirely separate. I didn't study Japanese art history at all in college. And I really didn't do much art history study in Japan, except for architecture and visiting temples and things. And I think part of it was because I was really interested in the modern period. I was interested in the contemporary experience of Japan. And at that time, art history wasn't dealing with that. That really wasn't the topic that art historians were addressing.

But it was later -- and we'll jump forward a little bit in terms of that question of "When did this become a career?" I think it was when I realized that art history and my interest in modern Japan could come

together that -- which was after I graduated and went back to study at the Stanford Center, the Interuniversity Center for Japanese Language Study in Yokohama. That was really when I brought those two interests together. And it happened in a gallery in Tokyo. It happened when I was visiting -- I would often go to galleries and just see the contemporary art that was on view. And there was a lot of interesting art being shown. And I met a woman in a gallery who was writing a review of one of the shows for an English language newspaper. Her name is Janet Koplos. And ultimately -- she actually became a senior editor at Art in America -- very, very, prominent woman who had been writing for years. And I walked up to her and I said, "I was an art historian in college, I speak Japanese, I'm really interested in knowing how I can be -- how I can write contemporary criticism." She said, "Write something for me. Write something, and I'll see if I can get you published." And she liked what I wrote. And that became a freelance gig for that entire -- about a year and a half, I wrote for the Japan Times, for the Mainichi Daily News, just going to galleries, talking to artists. And that was really the moment that those two interests came together and it seemed like a possibility.

Yuko Handa 7:28

So to some extent, it is a serendipitous connection.

Gennifer Weisenfeld 7:33

Completely serendipitous. Completely serendipitous. And, actually, it shows, in many ways, how people are your greatest asset. And the greatest network that you can have is just asking that question, "I'm interested in what you do, how can I do what you do?" And the person who's very generous -- and she turned out to be a tremendous mentor to me -- and as so many people have in the Japan field -- and both in North America but also in Japan itself.

Yuko Handa 8:04

I do want to go back to what you just said earlier about your experience in Narita, or the first time in Japan. You mentioned smell. I'm curious, what is a Japan smell?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 8:16

Well, of course, this is very personal. And I'm sure everybody has different aromas that draw them in. But I feel it every time I go back to Japan. It's a combination of like, a burnt soy sauce smell. It's cooking, but it's woody and a little bit aromatic. And it's just... It's delicious. It has this deliciousness about it, but it's very earthy. And I feel like you kind of get waves of it as you pass places. But it is very distinctive. It just has that -- It's very intoxicating, to me, anyway.

Yuko Handa 8:53

So, Gennifer, I know you've traveled back and forth between Japan and the US for years. This smell hasn't changed every single time you go? It hasn't changed over time?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 9:03

It probably has. But, I still find it quite distinctive, and I still really look forward to it. It makes me know that I'm there. It feels -- it makes me feel very grounded there. And of course, the visual -- the visual part of it as well. Just looking at different cities. And each city is so different too. Kyoto is much more human scale. It is human scale. And I feel very lucky that my first year being in Japan was in a city that was very

much scaled to my experience. I had a bicycle. I rode my bicycle everywhere. And that idea of just walking the city, bicycling the city -- it felt very manageable. And that was a really great entree into Japan, just so it wasn't overwhelming. Because, I think, in Tokyo, a lot of people have their neighborhoods, they have their places that they go, but it's hard to encompass the entirety of the city in one experience. And so you kind of go away with just a partial experience. But Kyoto felt like it was a city that I could inhabit for the year.

And then I traveled a lot during that year as well. I went all over Kyushu. And, the thing that really amazed me, even during that year when I didn't know that much, was the diversity and variety of places and landscapes, languages -- Kyushu -- trying to master Hakata-ben,¹ and I was there for New Year's. Or I worked in Osaka for the summer after I finished my year at the Stanford Center and I was out in Osaka for a while, and it's just -- the language is very different from place to place. I think the difference is that in the US, we have accents, and in Japan, there are actual dialects where the words are different.

And so I spent my first year in the Kansai area² and the dialect is entirely different. And also, the intonation is different. I spent my year after I was back correcting my Kansai-ben³ intonation, which was the opposite of Hyoujungo,⁴ so it's -- of standard Japanese. So I think it's a combination. It's a combination of accent. And of course, Kansai speech is more lyrical, it's more rhythmic, it has this kind of -- more sing-songy quality to it than Kanto accents. But the -- just that kind of -- going to Osaka where people greet you and they say "mokarimakka?" You know, "Are you making money?" That's not something that people say to you in Tokyo. It's just a really different kind of, of dialect.

Yuko Handa 11:51
Very true.

Gennifer Weisenfeld 11:52

I know. I remember going up to Tohoku, and Tsugaru-ben⁵ is a whole other dialect. And that's -- I never ever really mastered any of that. But I really appreciate that linguistic diversity in -- as you said, in such a small country. To have that much variety. And you see that in the culture in general. So much variety.

Yuko Handa 12:13

So, Gennifer, I'm a little bit stuck right now, in what you said about aesthetics. I just -- I'm curious. I'm curious to see what you're seeing in Japan.

Gennifer Weisenfeld 12:23

I think, for me, the aesthetics are revealed in the craftsmanship. In the attention to detail. It's a very artisanal culture where people study to be something. When I did my Ph.D. work, I lived down the block from the Tsukiji fish market in Kachidoki, which is a great shitamachi, low City area. And what I was really impressed with was the degree of expertise that people develop over years of studying something

¹ 博多弁. Hakata dialect local to Fukuoka City, a major city on the island of Kyushu.

² Kansai is a region in the south of Honshu, Japan's main island. The city of Kyoto is in its center.

³ 関西弁. Dialect local to the Kansai region of Japan.

⁴ 標準語. Standard Japanese language used in government, education, etc.

⁵ 津軽弁. Japanese dialect spoken in the western Aomori Prefecture.

and immersing themselves and becoming, in a sense, one with that kind of knowledge. And it is highly aestheticized because it's to make the most delicious thing, to find the most delicious piece of tuna, to make the most beautiful lacquerware, to make ceramics that is -- perfectly embodies the natural materials of the clay that are in a particular area.

And it's not to say that there's one aesthetic. I don't think that there's one overriding aesthetic, but just that there's so many places where people have dedicated themselves to making things and to producing things, including anime, that's just so brilliantly crafted that it rises to a level of aesthetic appreciation that is really impressive. And you just see that across the board. That people dedicate themselves to that kind of work. And it does to me. And it really impresses me every time I look at -- whether it's textiles or architecture or animation or fashion or food. It's just -- every area has these incredibly accomplished, beautiful things that they produce. And for a country, again, that's so small to have gifted so much amazing stuff to the world. That's what drew me, I think, to a lifetime of dedication to Japan. That this was a place that was so deep and so rich that I would never run out of things to be curious about. And I never have twenty-some-odd years later. I've never run out of curiosity for all of the wonderful things produced in Japan.

Yuko Handa 14:44

Gennifer, I do want to ask you a little bit about your work as an art historian in Japan. I know you've done -- you've covered so much in terms of art history in Japan. But can I ask you, what -- of all the things you have been studying so far, what are you most proud of?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 15:07

The area that I think is most interesting, to me, is that interwar period when Japan was very cosmopolitan, very open to the world. There were a lot of possibilities, interesting mixes of culture, and the modern girl was active. This -- it was a time of great social and cultural development. And it seemed to me very understudied. And that's why I dedicated myself to this area. To think more through what Japan's role in the world was as it entered the world, and how it was in conversation with other parts, other countries, other nations. And not so much through the lens of WWII, or thinking through just the war experience, but seeing it on its own terms.

So I've worked on advertising and I've done a lot of projects. I actually have a book project on the history of Japanese modern advertising. But I've published a lot on Shiseido and the Kao soap company, and various kinds of things that are -- have been really overlooked. I suppose my main contribution is looking at things that have been overlooked to some extent. Even though they're in plain sight and everybody recognizes them as things that are important, they haven't necessarily been studied on an academic level. And I think they're worthy of that. So I think that's definitely one of my great contributions, is to look at the overlooked and ask questions about Japan's role in the world rather than seeing it in isolation.

I also wrote a book on the Great Kanto Earthquake. I'm very interested in crisis and disaster and -- which has been a perpetual motif in Japanese culture and civilization. And it has been both destructive and generative. It's been constructive in many ways, dealing with this constant cycle of renewal. And I found the study of disasters -- especially because the book went to publication right as the 3/11 triple disaster of the tsunami and -- the earthquake-tsunami and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor accident were

happening. So it gave a new lens and a new relevance to thinking about the long history of disasters in Japan. And I've worked a lot on that and thinking through it. And certainly not just as a modern development, but also prehistory -- the prehistory of that as well.

Yuko Handa 17:39

You mentioned your interest in the 1920s and 1930s. You know, I think the word that you keep bringing up, which is very interesting, is transformation. Can you delve a little bit deeper into what you mean by 1920s, 1930s transformation, modernization? What does that all mean?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 17:59

To me, the idea of transformation -- and I should probably say, also, this idea of being culturally porous, open to the world, that people -- starting, of course, in the Meiji period. But in the Meiji period, it was done at a governmental level where you went out and you were seeking knowledge throughout the world to try to make a modern nation-state. To try to make Japan an equal in the theater of nations. And then, after the Russo-Japanese war around 1905, you start to get this real shift towards the individual, towards personality, towards mass media, and mass culture. And, Japan really joins this culture of modernity and starts to look outward in a very cosmopolitan way to Moscow, to Paris, to Berlin.

My first book on this avant-garde group called Mavo, was about an artist who went to Berlin. And he went to Germany to study. And also, at that time, learned about Russian constructivism and was really interested in this heady, international, avant-garde kind of development, came back to Japan, saw the current political situation, became a very dedicated leftist thinker, joined the proletarian movement. And so, he localized, he domesticated. He localized the things that he learned in this global context, in this international context of the avant-garde, and brought really interesting things to Japan, but also made them very relevant and local.

So that's sort of what I mean about transformational. Which is not thinking of Japan as an isolated, pure place, but as a place that's always been deeply curious about other cultures, whether it's the Portuguese or the Dutch or the Chinese, of course, Koreans, that Japan is a place where you see this mixing of cultures and its domestication in very interesting kinds of ways. And that's really interesting to me in the modern context. To see that -- to see how it joins this world of modernity, but also has some very distinctive aspects to it. And I love looking at that and the kinds of products that it produces.

And then, if we take that conversation to the post-war period, then we can look at the camera industry. And we can look at all of these other things that Japan joins this world economy and how it contributes. And it doesn't seem so strange and mysterious, because actually, Japan's been doing it for a long time. They were doing it in the teens and the 20s and the 30s. And the war was -- interrupted that global economy. But still, those companies actually were still working through the war years as well. And it makes the story much more coherent about Japan, and its modern experience.

Yuko Handa 20:59

You mentioned Kao and Shiseido a little bit earlier. Can you use them as an example to show us a little bit of -- either the transformation of Japan or the porousness, in terms of like, you know, taking in things from outside and localizing?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 21:13

Shiseido's story is so interesting because they were interested in tapping into a global or world idea of beauty, but also local ideas of beauty as well, such as -- skin whitening was a very big, important part, skincare. In a sense, they created new regimes of beauty. Shiseido was part of a conversation in terms of marketing and creating these really innovative products that were highly aestheticized. Again, they marketed very imaginative, almost fantastical types of boudoir experiences and how to make your toilette or your makeup more aesthetic and beautiful. And they were also interested in new kinds of pharmaceutical techniques to create more rigorously produced products as well. Types of products that were produced, you know, in clinical, -- more clinical kinds of ways. So I would say they were just really innovative, but very much in tune with this new, very lucrative global movement in health and beauty.

And Kao, similarly, Kao was a little bit less on the high end. There was a time when people did not understand the microbiology of bacteria and didn't have the regular routine of washing their hands or using soap. But that's what soap manufacturers did. They produced the rituals and routines of modern hygiene. And they took that into many different spheres, whether it was washing your hair -- shampoo was something that Kao really revolutionized in Japan. And they were at the forefront of marketing. Both Shiseido and Kao and all of these companies -- their advertising and their marketing was incredibly pioneering.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 23:17

But I have to ask, I do know that you have gone back and forth -- actually, then lived in Japan numerous times, not just one time. When would you say was your most memorable, long period of Japan -- that you lived in Japan, and why?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 23:36

Well, I think there were three. And the first was, of course, the year that I spent in Kyoto as a student. And that was my first experience. So I was just fresh and new to absolutely everything and was absorbing it like a sponge and loving every minute of it. Then I went back to study at the Stanford Center. And that's when I discovered my love of writing about modern and contemporary art. And the fact that having Japanese gave me access to a world of culture that I couldn't have if I didn't speak Japanese. And I saw the opportunity to be a bridge, a cultural bridge between the United States, or English speaking world, and Japan, and all of the art that was being produced at that time. And that really was -- a light went off for me that this could be a life's dedication, a life's purpose.

Then I decided to go back and get a Ph.D. in art history and to do that as an academic. And I went back for a year and a half to Japan and lived there for -- in -- right across from the Tsukiji fish market in Kachidoki in this tiny little wooden house. That was such an incredible neighborhood. Whether it's just going to the izakaya⁶ down the street -- and I got to know everybody in that neighborhood, including the 86-year-old woman who made tofu across the street by hand.

⁶ 居酒屋. Japanese bar that also serves various dishes and snacks.

And then, I guess most recently, I went back after I was already teaching at Duke and had my daughter in Japan. I went back when I was seven months pregnant. And my husband and I settled there in Nakano. We lived with a wonderful family on the first floor of their house, the Mori's. And our daughter spent her first 18 months in Japan. And I was working, doing a lot of research during that time, she went to a Japanese hoikuen.⁷ It was a very different Japan because I was there as a young mother and as an academic at the same time. So every experience has been absolutely precious.

One of the great experiences that I had, when I lived in Kyoto, was -- I took the Shikoku pilgrimage with -- one of our professors there was a specialist in pilgrimage and religion and she led us through the pilgrimage sites. We walked the pilgrimage in Shikoku and that was an incredible experience as well.

Yuko Handa 26:00

If you were to give three places that a new Japan -- new to Japan person has to visit, and this person has all the time, and all the money, where would you say this person should go?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 26:17

There is a yakitori place in Meguro that is Nagano style yakitori.⁸ We call him the "yakitori Jedi" because he is the most fabulous chef. It's a tiny little place with one little counter, and it's -- it's sublime. So that to me is somewhere that I would highly recommend. And everybody should have one place like that. One little, delicious, tiny little place with a chef that makes the things that they love. And that's one of the things that I always associate with Japan, is just those really wonderful small places.

But in terms of just absolutely sublime, beautiful cultural places, I think Koyasan is somewhere that everybody should go. And I haven't been in years, but it's just -- it will always stay with me as a memory of somewhere. 100-year -- 300-year-old cedar forest, beautiful temples, really really exquisite, exquisite place. And the journey there is a kind of -- itself is transformative.

I had the opportunity a few years ago to go to the Setouchi Triennale and -- which is in the Inland Sea. And there are islands in the Inland Sea like Teshima, Naoshima, and they have some of the most beautiful vistas. And just doing that -- I thought of it almost like a pilgrimage, traveling from Shikoku and Tokushima. See the Naruto whirlpools, go over to Naoshima and Teshima and see some of the Ando Tadao buildings there. And there is a small capsule that was designed -- I'm going to say it was by Naito Rei, I believe, in Teshima, that is so beautiful. It's this -- just this pristine arc of a structure. And the water comes in through an oculus at the top, and then it drips down and it moves across the surface. And you can just watch these drips within this kind of open structure. I think that's also one of the most sublime places I've ever been. But I could equally tell you three more that I love. But those are just three that come to mind. And there are so many amazing places in Japan.

Yuko Handa 28:51

⁷ 保育園. Nursery school; day nursery.

⁸ 焼き鳥. Chicken pieces (or sometimes beef or pork offal) grilled on a skewer.

If you were to give a message to a young person who's actually thinking, "Oh, should I go? I have this opportunity. I could do a study abroad in Japan or maybe other places." What would your message be?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 29:05

Go.

Yuko Handa 29:05

Why?

Gennifer Weisenfeld 29:06

Well, again, for all the reasons -- I don't think any of the reasons that I was drawn into Japan have changed. I think it's been consistently a fascinating place with kind, wonderful people who will go out of their way to help you in any way. We used to have a joke that if you ask somebody for directions, they would always say, "Well let me take you there." And they would walk you all the way, or they would write out this really elaborate map to take you. So I just think the people are so phenomenal in Japan and have such great senses of humor. They're really kind. They're, as I said, creative, resilient.

The experience -- particularly for an American, it reveals to you your own culture. What you value. And not so much that you're just saying, "Oh this is so different." But it just makes you deeply aware of who you are and what you value and all of the things in the world. You can get that in a lot of different countries. I just think Japan to me has -- it crystallizes so many of those wonderful things. And it's so condensed that you can go and you can see so many varieties of different things.

Yuko Handa 30:20

Oh, this was a beautiful conversation. Thank you so much, Gennifer.

Gennifer Weisenfeld 30:24

It's been a wonderful conversation and it's allowed me to re-experience and relive all the things that I love about it. I feel so grateful to have had this life journey with Japan.

Japan Society Boston 30:41

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END OF TRANSCRIPT