Kume Keiichiro came to Paris in 1886 to study at the studio of the minor academic painter Raphaël Collin. There he met Kuroda Seiki, the son of a viscount who had come to Paris to study law before switching to the study of western painting, and who, with the help of Nomura Yasushi, the Japanese Consul, hatched a plan to shake up the Japanese art world. He opened a temporary atelier in the Japanese Consulate and hired a model in order to paint “Le Lever” (Morning Toilette), which he then brought to Japan in his luggage, in order to exhibit it at the Fourth National Industrial Exhibition, held in Kyoto in 1895. Japan’s first publicly-exhibited nude painting, it sparked a huge controversy, causing many critics to denounce it as pornographic, and to call for its withdrawal. Kuroda, however, was a member of the jury, and was supported by his influential friends, including Nomura, who was by then Minister of the Interior. Kuki Ryuichi declared that he saw “no reason to withdraw it,” although the police ordered the painting to be exhibited with a scarf draped over its lower half for the rest of the exhibition.

Coming to the aid of his friend, Kume published the following article in 


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the *Kokumin Shinbun* while the show was still going on. It is a remarkable Meiji Period document. Kume shows himself to be familiar with many trends in western art, while his arguments in favor of the nude anticipate those made years later by Kenneth Clark. This essay also reveals him to be very much aware of Japan’s international image as a nation with a highly-developed aesthetic sense, a distinction he patriotically seeks to preserve.

Kume Keiichiro, “The Nude is the Foundation of Fine Art” [1895]

**Part 1**

Until recently, the term “*bijutsu,*” or “fine art,” derived from the Latin, *bono artes,* did not exist in Asia. In the three decades since the opening of the country, new things pertaining to the brute necessities of existence have flowed into Japan. Among the first to be imported was battlefield medicine, whose effectiveness made a great impression on ordinary people. These miracles moved them to admiration, which motivated them to learn European languages, and finally led them to discover the fine arts of those countries.

The time between the Philadelphia Centennial International Exposition in 1876, and the First National Industrial Exposition, which took place in Tokyo the next year, was a pragmatic and revolutionary time in which people were preoccupied with thoughts of profitability and commerce. The fine arts were regarded as an element of industry at best and appreciated only for their commercial and industrial potential, thus losing their quintessence. Japanese art dealers looked upon their wares as crafts for export. Although it may seem laughable that the “fine arts” were understood to be finely detailed or old art works, in fact such a viewpoint exists among worldly people in all countries. As the expression “fine art” did not exist in
Asia, even after two decades people cannot break free from the misconception mentioned above, with even the cultured being lost in this idea.

Because the idea of fine art in Japan is still undeveloped, we have to accept the fact that the museum that has been built for the current Fourth National Industrial Exposition in Kyoto has been called the “House of Exquisitely-Detailed Artifice” (seikou no chōkan) by convention. However something bizarre has occurred in the exhibition: these hanging of a nude painting, which should be the foundation of fine art, the first in the history of fine art in Japan, has caused a storm of controversy. In order to make the claim that the standard for fine art should be Asian, the critics need to have studied the art of the past two decades. However, they still have no idea about it. At the present time, Japanese art is well known in Europe, and Japan is regarded as a “land of art.” The unenlightened views revealed by this controversy threaten to take away the shine of this fame. Thus, this abominable news surprised me and encouraged me to show people what fine art should be.

[Aesthetic] feeling (kōkan, “evocation of emotion”) emerges when various images that are inherent in nature are reflected in our brain, but these are not simply reflections of the original, but also the workings of the brain itself. Thus, aesthetic feeling differs from person to person according to their ability, and whether they possess a rough or fine sensibility. When an uncivilized person is delighted by the sight of cherry blossoms in profusion, his pleasure does not originate in their natural beauty, but from the idea that he has found a chance and place to get pleasure out of drinking with his friends there. Similarly, while a person of refined taste might be filled with admiration in front of an aged tree inspired by the essence of nature, the admiration of a wood cutter in the same situation is caused by his
calculations of the amount of fuel it contains. The mechanism by which nature elicits our feeling and how it differs according to the ability of each person to reflect it is like that. *Art that depicts this feeling in a skilful and exquisite way is regarded as “fine art,” which is categorized into five media: painting, sculpture, writing, music and architecture.* I think that it is unnecessary to explain the definition and characteristics of these five arts now. However, I would like to clarify how the naked human body has become the ultimate subject of painting and sculpture, and how those arts can be considered as technologies to create the naked body.

*Pulchrum*, or beauty (*bi*), has long been a thorny issue among scholars, who established aesthetics as a separate discipline within philosophy, and have conducted heated arguments about it ever since. Although philosophers tried to use reason to determine human feeling and to fix the entity of the transcendental principle based on moral principles, their conclusion was that the entity was beyond our comprehension after all, and resorted to tautological definitions. Now I would like to reiterate that the idea of beauty corresponds to the viewer’s level of knowledge and is structured hierarchically.

Innocent children or unenlightened people rejoice at seeing the lively coloring of autumn leaves. However, this cannot be deemed as the experience of beauty by our standards of feeling. When common people find artificial flowers made of colored paper beautiful, it should be rather called “*formosum*” (allurement). We express it usually in Japanese as “*utsukusi,*” which still does not belong to the category of beauty. Natural and artificial flowers resemble each other in form and color, but there are great differences between living and nonliving matter, which influence us very differently. This is the first step into the terrain of beauty. *Even though a flower is alluring, it must show the spark of life in addition. Then it may be regarded*
The Nude Is the Foundation of Fine Art (1895)

as beautiful. Landscapes of mountains and rivers, spectacles of night and day or the four seasons, those are praised because of their natural vitality. No wonder people value such things as the most perfect. We can go even a little further and say that nothing is more perfectly beautiful than the human body, because all of natural vitality is condensed in it. As ever was, the human body is the ultimate product of creation and the fragile petals of plants or the beauty of static landscapes cannot be compared with the beauty of the well grown, sleek and healthy body of a human being in his or her prime.

So far, I have only been talking about the aspect of beauty which appeals to our senses. While there are visual, sensual and corporeal manifestations of nature like the sky and earth or beasts and birds, invisible, the immaterial competences of human beings, such as spirit, feeling, taste, customs, our society and religion represents our second nature. Hence, fine art should depict not only the impression gotten from corporeal nature, but also from immaterial nature. Once the fine arts accomplish this purpose, they penetrate the subtlety and profundity of the human spirit and provide us with a glimpse of something beyond our everyday experience.

Poetry depicts the feeling that we derive from nature by words analyzing it in its entirety at an abstract level, in the course of which the poet must by necessity select his or her words with precision. Painting and sculpture represent our impressions of nature by means of figuration, so the purest and most perfect form must be chosen in a sophisticated way. Among the unlimited number of forms that exist in the universe, the human body is the most satisfying one. When the different parts of an artwork are well related and balanced, with each brush-stroke fitting into the harmony of the whole, and it evokes the highest level of the dignity and beauty of life and an originality of feeling emanates from it, the artwork raises us above the
vulgar and polluted reality in which we are living and is faintly reminiscent of a divine paradise. The endpoint of artistic creation exceeds the expectations of ordinary people and approaches the realm of the “sublime”.

**Part 2**

Thus, when we look upon the realm of beauty, clouds of the sublime are trailing up to the sky and the dust of allurement is blowing on the ground. In between, the human body shines forth with great brilliance. *Allurement gives ordinary people a pleasurable sensation, which however usually fails to establish proper harmony and is not accompanied by aesthetic pleasure. Depending on the development of one's knowledge, which allows people of a certain level of culture to understand and appreciate beauty, the perception of beauty goes from external, sensuous, and physical to abstract.*

For the reasons above, the study of the human body is the basic requirement for painting and sculpture. Once he or she has acquired the ability to depict the human body, an artist has all the phenomena of the universe under control. However, mastering this skill is not possible in a brief space of time, so nude pictures must be held in regard not only for their beauty, but also for their technique. The great significance for fine art consists in the natural body, not in the dressed body. Costume is decoration to someone’s taste and varies according to age and custom. Therefore it recalls us to a certain time and country, and begets in us a realistic feeling, not an abstract vibration. The fact that the human body is covered with unskillful artificial decorations means that natural beauty is hindered by it, while the beauty of the human body exists in the natural body itself. Mundane people might be pleased with that, but sacred fine art scorns this manner of thinking.

To begin with, it was the civilization of ancient Greece that discovered the
beauty of the human body and laid down the foundations of fine art. Greek public morals sang the praises of a sound body to such a large extent that people regarded a body with a chaste and pulchritudinous appearance as divine. Consequentially, the Greeks are thought to have perfected the art of sculpture three thousand years ago. It seems almost strange that they were able to bring forth perfectly fine-featured statues we still cannot match despite of our knowledge of modern techniques. However, if we look into the historical context of the time, it is to be regarded as quite natural. In ancient Greece, a strong build superior to others, athletic prowess and a regal manner were essential criteria to dominate other people. Thus, they exercised great care in physical education. Men who are brought up this way participated in the Olympic Games, to which people gathered from all over the country to show off their bodies. Victory brought not only personal honor, but also honor to their birthplace and their country. This was the kind of society in which they lived. As soon as they recognized something providential in the phenomena of this world, the Greeks employed the human body to give it figuration and regarded every sort of human feeling as a divine response. They dedicated divine and human statues together in temples. Even the broken pieces of statues unearthed at archaeological sites are evaluated as precious things. However, this ancient fine art that reached the peak of perfection followed a course of decline according to the fate of the country itself after the Roman Empire took over Greece. In addition, it was trampled under foot by the invasion of the barbarians from the north and finally destroyed by the introduction of Christianity and lapsed into ruin and almost disappeared during the millenary destabilization in the whole of Europe after that. However, in recent times, the social order was gradually recovered and Christianity came to terms with polytheistic civilization and painting and sculpture gained force again in Italy, the site of the ancient Roman Empire. This period is called the Renaissance of the fifteenth century.
Generally in this period, the actual human body was not esteemed as highly as before; however, the belief that the nude is the foundation of fine art was reinforced increasingly. Also, the study of anatomy enlightened people about the inner structure of the human body and artists mastered this discipline to complement the depiction of the invisible parts of the body. They cultivated a sense of lofty elegance also by studying ancient literature. As a result, a great number of phenomena appeared one after another in many countries. Royalty and titled nobility scrambled to admire fine art and to own it at any price. After all, what was stacked in their palaces and storehouses was none other than mainly nude paintings and sculptures. Fine art developed and changed that way. Therefore, classic painting and sculpture cannot be anything but artworks that depict the nude.

Paintings which depicted the mode of life of ordinary people or pastoral landscapes in the way of Dutch realism had been cast away as vulgar by now, but in the modern age, people discovered the truth of human nature and found a certain elegance in this kind of painting compared to the sloppy academic works of art, and finally that kind of painting came to be appreciated again. At the beginning of this century, the Romantic school came on the scene in France and Delacroix confronted orthodox artists and Corot and Theodore Rousseau brought landscape painting to a new level. Recently there are many new schools of painting such as: Symbolism, Impressionism, Idealism (whose main motives are fantasy), Naturalism (which deals with nature) or Realism (which does not care about ugliness or beauty in its pursuit of truth). These doctrines are divided in many directions and the art of painting depends on the individual technique of each painter, who does not feel compelled to cling to a certain style.

On the other hand, since the traffic between the west and the east has
developed, some French artists have studied the chic and beauty of Japanese painting and have tried to create a new dimension of painting. In doing so the harmony of their artwork was not disturbed, because they never neglected the study of human body as the foundation of fine art, even for a day. It is not unfair when people say that France takes the leading role in the European art scene. These French artists have praised Japanese art as surpassing other Asian fine art, and have bestowed on Japan the title of the “country of art” par excellence. Since the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, the military prowess of Japan has been highlighted and the whole world is paying attention to us. A small island hidden in a remote part of the Pacific Ocean became the object of an eye-opening event. Therefore, everything we do now is related to the prestige of our country. We should be humble and need to perceive the world as it is. There is the good example of China, which has fallen into total disaster because the Chinese were arrogant and held others in disregard. Especially the status of fine art has much to do with the glory of Japan and we have had this honor already before the war. We must take this fact seriously. Indeed, Japanese painting was imported from China during the Tang and Sun dynasties, but this kind of painting got off different colors after the Japanese cultivated it in their own way. However, it is not right for people to call Japan the land of art of the world, although our paintings enjoy popularity in their countries, if we do not know about European art.

As regards painting, apart from fine art generally, I wonder how much the painting of our country at present has made progress, and also if we should not be ashamed of ourselves from a professional point of view or if we have created something which can bear comparison with its European counterparts. I am really afraid, as matters now stand, that our traditional painting and the essence of our painting techniques will be used up and stripped of their value by European countries and we will end up a country
of technically no ability in art. Both adorers of Europe as well as xenophobes, driven by their emotions and deprived of insight, are putting our society on a destructive path.

Our duty today, however, is to study the masterpieces of painting, sculpture and literature that our country brought forth in the past and know well where the uniqueness of their beauty is. At the same time, we must study European artworks in order to bring our art to completion. To this end, we must pave the way to create and develop an aesthetic appreciation of the human body since it is missing in Japanese painting and sculpture.

It is really to be appreciated that the authorities concerned with this ongoing exhibition have accepted the nude paintings without being upset by frivolous arguments. If they had listened to their calls for refusal, then Japan’s fame as a country of art would have been discredited instantly and Japan would have become the laughingstock of Europe, which made me almost break out in a cold sweat. Even if people did not know this, what a shame is it that they have been arguing about whether nude paintings belong to the category of beauty or not, as it makes up the center of fine art! It is still acceptable that someone who is said to know fine art more or less misunderstands this point, but it was going too far when a critic hurled abuse at this nude painting, saying he has no idea about fine art.

Fine art does not denote painting or sculpture generally, but only those works that meet a certain definition of beauty. The deleterious effects of pornography do not come from the painting itself, but from the intention of the painter. Even dressed, pornography is pornography. Much the same is true of nude painting. Some people are shocked by nude paintings and cry out against them, but it is just the behavior of the uncivilized and the uneducated. Their comments reveal their own despicable way of seeing and
are far from understanding how much effort the painter made and what his real intention is. It would be worse than a robber band which disgraces our country. I cannot help but sigh with grief.

In conclusion, I will add a few words to assuage the fears about this kind of painting of obstinate and headstrong critics who are inculpated by their own demons. The fact that the human body is the foundation of painting and sculpture arises from the same principle that posits love between men and women as the basis of poetry. Love is the holiest part of our feeling. There is nothing shameful about poeticizing love. If someone would cast it away as an act that leads to the most shameful of our activities, which we must avoid mentioning, then we must laugh at it as a fully unnecessary reasoning. There are no differences between poetry and fine art.

Since we Asians are accustomed to touch on the love poetry of all ages familiarly, we are not drawn into perversion. However, these critics seeing a nude picture for the first time are behaving like a dog crazily barking at snow which it sees for the first time. They must observe things fairly and not act like people who say that they will not go to an art museum, but in fact complain that the private parts are not depicted precisely enough.

Notes

I would like to thank Professor Sugiyama Masao for his collaboration.
2 The painting was subsequently purchased by the Nomura family, and was destroyed by fire during the Second World War. It exists today only in a postcard reproduction. See Niizeki Kimiko, “Kuroda Seiki et son séjour d’étude à Paris: La rencontre avec Raphaël Collin” in de Kuroda à Foujita: Peintres Japonais à Paris (Paris: fragments international, 2007).