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What Would Hiroshi Sugimoto Do? What Would Museums Do?

Deified Artist and Museum—Hiroshi Sugimoto's History of History

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*1. Carol Duncan,
Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums,
New York and London: Routledge, 1995, 102.

Introduction

The nature of artists, artworks, and art museums and the relationships among them were constructed according to the modern Western ideology of art and museums and have been passed down, in their essential forms, to the present day. Carol Duncan, who reveals the political nature of museums in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, states that the history of modern art is "a cultural construct that is collectively produced and perpetuated by all those professionals who work in art schools, universities, museums, publishing houses, and any other place where modern art is taught, exhibited, or interpreted."^{*1}

The process of constructing art history is continual, and the aesthetic, social, and historical values of artists, artworks, and art

museums are now produced by a variety of phenomena. This essay examines the relationship between artists, artworks, and art museums, as revealed by Hiroshi Sugimoto's exhibition titled *History of History*. This exhibition reveals the inalienable relationships between artists and museums in today's capitalistic society, by delineating the structure that enables artists and museums to enhance their social statuses by deifying one another. Owing to the diverse aspects and characteristics of *History of History* and the artist himself, the content of the exhibition emphasized different subjects, such as "Japanese Art," "Photography," "Architecture," or "Contemporary Art," based on the identity or the mission of the exhibition venue. Thus, *History of History* reveals the social system that evaluates artists, artworks, and museums in the present day.

Hiroshi Sugimoto's History of History

Hiroshi Sugimoto was born in Tokyo in 1948 and traveled to the United States in 1970 to study photography at the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles, California. In 1974, he moved to New York and began producing photographic art and established a Japanese art dealership. His photo series, *Seascapes*¹, *Theaters*², and *Dioramas*³, utilize clear concepts and superb techniques, which have earned him a positive international reputation.

Sugimoto has been presenting *History of History* since 2003. It was first presented at Maison Hermes in Tokyo, followed by the Japan Society Gallery in New York in 2005, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian's Museum of Asian Art in 2006, Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in 2007, 21st Century



Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa in 2008, and National Museum of Art, Osaka in 2009. *History of History* is an exhibition that combines Sugimoto's photographs with his collection of material culture, archeological artifacts, and artworks from different eras and places. For each exhibition, Sugimoto selects and arranges his photographs and objects from his collection.

At the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, for example, the objects presented with his photographs were extremely diverse⁴⁻⁶, ranging from miscellaneous items such as stone rods from the Jomon period, Jurassic ammonites, anatomy charts⁷, space food⁸, medical books, and old *Time* magazines⁹ to a magnificent collection of Japanese art until modern periods. The items from the collection presented in the original *History of History* gradually changed in



1. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Sea of Japan, Rebun Island*, 1996.
Gelatin silver print, H119.4xW149.2cm.
Collection of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa.
2. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Metropolitan L.A., Los Angeles*, 1993.
Gelatin silver print, H42.3xW54.2cm. Private Collection.
3. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Alaskan Wolves*, 1994.
Gelatin silver print, H32.9xW58.4cm.
- 4, 5, 6. Installation View, *Hiroshi Sugimoto: History of History*,
21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, 2008–09.
7. *XIV Planche: Muscles du Dos from Jacques Gautier d'Agoty, Mylogie Complette en Couleur et Grandeur Naturelle*,
1745–48. Color mezzotint, H59.2xW43cm. Collection of Sugimoto Hiroshi.
8. *Space Food from Apollo 11 Mission*, 1969.
Space food with plastic container, H36xW9cm, each. Collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto.
9. *Time Magazine 1926–59*. Collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto.



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subsequent exhibitions to reflect Sugimoto's ongoing activities.

Sugimoto's Collection of Japanese Art

Despite *History of History* displaying diverse objects and artworks, American venues primarily focused on the exhibition's Japanese art, especially its religious and spirituality themes. Okamura Tomoko mentions that Sugimoto's Japanese art collection primarily consists of items considered to be "treasures" that served as objects of religious faith and were once stored in shrines and temples. This is exemplified by *Standing Figure of Juichimen Kannon* (Ekadasamukha)¹⁰, *Miniature Pagoda*¹¹,

and *Female Shinto Deity*^{12,2}. In addition there are many "sujaku" images wherein Buddhist iconography is used to depict Japanese gods or "kami." A group of paintings including *Kasuga Deer Mandala*¹³, *Kasuga Wakamiya Mandala*¹⁴, and *Kasuga Deities*¹⁵ reveals the process of blending Japanese gods and Buddhist deities. Furthermore, Kazuko Kameda-Madar indicates that the religious and spiritual nature of Sugimoto's collection was shaped by the social conditions during the Cold War in the United States between the 1950s and 70s.¹³ During that period, there was a surge of interest and respect for Japanese spirituality in areas such as Zen Buddhism. According to Kameda-Madar, during the Cold War period, it

was necessary to reconstruct Japan's image on a national level to stop the expansion of Communism led by the Soviet Union. This concern led the American and Japanese governments to organize an exhibition in San Francisco that promoted a highly aestheticized image of Japanese art.¹⁴ Subsequently, "beat generations" and "flower children" experimented with alternative spiritual philosophies like Zen Buddhism. This view of Japan as a spiritual country was at its peak when Sugimoto arrived in the United States during the 1970s.

As stated earlier, the spiritual aspect of Sugimoto's collection was particularly focused during exhibitions in the United States. In an interview with Sugimoto, James T. Ulak,



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- 10. *Standing Figure of Juichimen Kannon* (Ekadāsamukha), Heian Period (10–11th Century). Wood, H107.5cm. Collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto
- 11. *Miniature Pagoda*, Nara period (8th Century). Wood, H21cm. Collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto.
- 12. *Female Shinto Deity*, Heian period (12th Century). Color on wood, H: 37cm. Collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto.
- 13. *Kasuga Deer Mandala*, Muromachi period (15th Century). Color on silk, H74.7xW32.7cm. Collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto
- 14. *Kasuga Wakamiya Mandala*, Kamakura period (13th Century). Color on Silk, H76.3xW39.8cm. Collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto.
- 15. *Kasuga Deities*, Kamakura period (13th Century). Sandalwood, diameter 8cm. Collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto.
- 16. Installation view, *Hiroshi Sugimoto: History of History*, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian's Museum of Asian Art, 2006.

the deputy director and curator of Japanese art of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian's Museum of Asian Art¹⁶, stated:

You are internationally known as a great photographer. You have international recognition, great exhibitions throughout the world. If I were someone who did not know your name and looked at your photographs, I wouldn't know you are Japanese. In other words, you have adopted an international vocabulary for expressing yourself with a camera. But this wonderful exhibition you have created, *History of History*, which I take to be a kind of autobiography, goes to a completely different direction. It shows your Japanese roots.^{*5}

*2. Okamura Tomoko, "Hiroshi Sugimoto korekushon suru seishin (Hiroshi Sugimoto Spirit of Collection)," *History of History: Hiroshi Sugimoto*, Tokyo: Shinsozai Kenkyu Sho, 2008, 310–312.

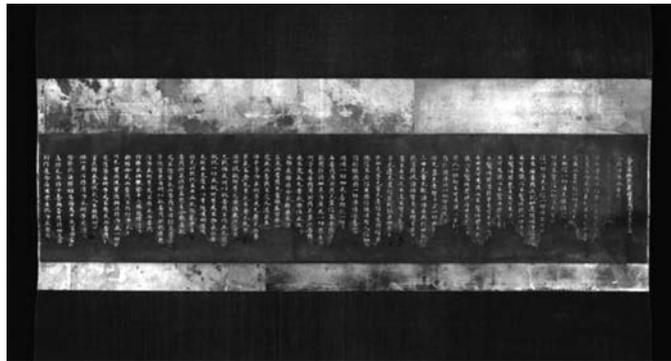
*3. In the lecture titled "Hiroshi Sugimoto's Japanese Art History," Kazuko Kameda-Madar clarified that Hiroshi Sugimoto's collection of Japanese Art favored religious objects that related to the socio-political background of the Cold War period in the United States. Her lecture was presented in a special symposium event titled "Form as *History of History*" at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa on March 20, 2009. See CD-ROM pp. 66–79 in this journal for her thesis.

*4. In 1951, the de Young Museum in San Francisco held a special exhibition of Japanese art. A total of 178 Japanese artworks were imported from Japan in cooperation with the American and Japanese governments. In the lecture, Kameda-Madar noted the exhibition's role as a means of propagating Japanese art as a symbol of peace to the Americans. She cited the article in *Time magazine*, which described the tranquility of Japanese art: "The art of Japan is generally tranquil, not often tragic or violent. It reflects religious traditions and most of all the Japanese love of home country and country-side. Scrolls, screens, and woodblock prints, all highly decorative, are done with meticulous care, formalized refinement of detail and delicate beauty of color which place Japan's among the great art of the world" ("Loan from Japan" *Time magazine*, August 27, 1951).

*5. James T. Ulak's conversation with Hiroshi Sugimoto is available on the following webpage: <http://www.asia.si.edu/podcasts/curatorial/Sugimoto.mp3>



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A similar outlook was evident in the statement of Melissa Rinne, the curator of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. In a public discussion at the opening of the exhibition, she stated:

There are a number of pieces in the show that are of a level rarely seen in the United States, for example, the Shōsoin and Hōryūji textile fragments and the burned sutra of the Nigatsudō... Through the kinds of artworks he has chosen to collect and through the juxtaposition with his own art, Sugimoto has challenged us to think about these early works in a new way with a more active and vested approach, finding in them the same themes of time, spirituality, replication, and

reinterpretation of concepts and imagery that we see in Sugimoto's own photography.¹⁶

This viewpoint of combining unique Japanese art and spirituality with Sugimoto's contemporary photographs and creativity was reinforced in the layout of the exhibition. For example, at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, as visitors moved deeper into the dark and dramatically lit exhibition space, they were first led to the space displaying *Section of the Daihōkōbutsu Kegon Kyō (Expanded Sutra of the Buddha Adorned with Garlands)*; *Nigatsudō Yakegoyō Gire (Section of Burned Sutra from the Nigatsudō)*¹⁷ and¹⁸, followed by the lithographic reproduction of a photograph by Sugimoto, *Principal Image of*

*Worship at Sanjūsangendō*¹⁹. Thus, Sugimoto was presented as occupying a contemporary position in the ongoing history of spirituality in Japanese art.

Photography and Architecture of History of History

In contrast to *History of History* in the American venues, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto emphasized Sugimoto's photographs and ideas on architecture rather than Japanese art and spirituality. In 2007, the Royal Ontario Museum opened the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal building²⁰ designed by Daniel Libeskind for the museum's Institute

17. *Section of the Daihōkōbutsu Kagon Kyō* (expanded *Sutra of the Buddha Adorned with Garlands*); *Nigatsudō Yakegyō gire* (*Section of Burned Sutra of the Nigatsudō*), Nara Period (8th Century). Silver on indigo-dyed paper. H86 x W110cm, each. Collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto.
18. *Section of the Daihōkōbutsu Kagon Kyō* (expanded *Sutra of the Buddha Adorned with Garlands*); *Nigatsudō Yakegyō gire* (*Section of Burned Sutra of the Nigatsudō*) (Detail).
19. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Principal Image of Worship at Sanjūsangendō*, 1995 / mounted on scroll in 2005. Lithography, H71.2 x W92cm. Collection of Hiroshi Sugimoto.
20. Institute for Contemporary Culture, Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, Royal Ontario Museum, Vancouver, 2007 (Architect: Daniel Libeskind).
21. Installation of *Seascapes*, Hiroshi Sugimoto: History of History, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 2007.

- *6. Melissa Rinne's conversation with Hiroshi Sugimoto is available on the following webpage:
<http://www.asianart.org/audio/10-11-lecture.mp3>
- *7. Hiroshi Sugimoto's conversation with Daniel Libeskind at the opening of the *History of History* exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum is reported in *Esquire Japan*, Oct. 2007, Vol. 21, No. 10, 184–191.
- *8. See Matsumiya Hideharu, *Geijutsu S'uhai No Shis'ō: Seiky'ō Bunri To Y'oroppa No Atarashii Kami* (Worship of Art: Separation of Government and Religion and New Belief), Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 2008. I specifically refer to this study for my analysis of the cultural and social phenomena in which Hiroshi Sugimoto (as an artist) has received adulation and, in a sense, become deified, especially in Japan.



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for Contemporary Culture. *History of History*, presented as the inaugural exhibition in the new facility, accentuated Sugimoto's position as a photographer and presented him as an artist with a special understanding of architecture. The display of Sugimoto's representative series, *Seascapes*, drew significant attention and Sugimoto speaks of it with pride. The photographs were positioned on a curved wall in the center of the exhibition space²¹. In deference to his Canadian hosts, Sugimoto made a new print of a photograph titled *Lake Superior* and placed it among the *Seascapes*. The curved wall was designed by Sugimoto himself in response to Libeskind's architecture, which lacked curves. Meanwhile the collection of Japanese art that received

significant attention in the United States was exhibited behind the *Seascapes*, and as a result, it ultimately received minimal exposure. In addition, at the opening, Sugimoto participated in a discussion with the museum director and Daniel Libeskind, which centered on the relationship between photography and architecture that Sugimoto had come to understand through his photography.²⁷

What is History of History and Whose History is being Represented?

As we have observed, the content of *History of History* emphasized different subjects depending on the identity and character of the

venue. In the United States, as seen in the cases of Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian's Museum of Asian Art and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the emphasis was on Japanese art and its spirituality. However, in Canada, its focus shifted to photography and architecture, and Sugimoto was presented as a talented artist with an expertise in architecture. He conversed with experts on traditional Japanese art and the architecture, effortlessly switching fields.

As many studies have clarified, the idea of the museum as a place where spiritual qualities are given importance was based on the modern Western concept of the museum as a sanctuary and art as an object of worship.²⁸ The view of the artist as a divine

genius and an innovative thinker grew out of the modern idea of art and museums. *History of History* shows how the museum and artist effectively reinforce one another's status. In this case, the artist's value is enhanced by presenting the exhibition; meanwhile, the museum maintains its status and increases its value. The two parties skillfully interact, creating a structure which enables them to deify each other. In Sugimoto's *History of History*, this was achieved by comprehensively combining diverse elements such as Japanese art, photography, architecture, and contemporary art.

It is noteworthy that *History of History* is presented in a way that makes it impossible to clearly understand whether the view of history conveyed by the exhibition was Sugimoto or the museum's. In addition, many questions arose: Are the works on display genuine? Were they chosen by the museum or artist? Who arranged them? Furthermore, the exhibited artworks were explained by accompanied text written by Sugimoto, but who was his intended audience? Did the sponsoring institution correlate Sugimoto's text with its own view of history? What was the significance of Sugimoto's view of architecture and his decision to use the curved wall for the exhibition?

None of these questions were elucidated and were left unclarified. Paradoxically, one might argue the necessity of leaving these questions unanswered, since maintaining ambiguity allowed the artist and museum to and elevate one another's value.

Conclusion

In the sacred space of the museum, works of art are relics to be worshipped and the artist, who produces these relics, is given divine status. By presenting these relics, the museum increases its own value and strengthens its identity as a "sacred temple." The artist and the museum, which have emerged through the modern Western concept of

art, become inextricably linked and enhance each other's status. This framework has been reinforced by the overdevelopment of the capitalist economy and the authoritarian and phallogocentric nature of the 20th and 21st century societies. This phenomenon is further strengthened by the tendency for art history and curatorship to secure conventional artistic genres and regional and cultural frameworks into categories for art. The context surrounding Hiroshi Sugimoto's *History of History* is not an exception. If this system of art disintegrated, then what conceptual framework would the artist and museum have? Furthermore, without this ideology, what would Hiroshi Sugimoto and the museums do?⁹

Art needs to be examined from a perspective that rigorously confirms the value of artworks; they should not be judged based on the museum they are exhibited in or their artist. In the *History of History* exhibition at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, the museum focused on Sugimoto's perspective of history. Sugimoto's *History of History* was perceived as an artistic creation that relativized history. This project juxtaposed Sugimoto's artworks with his selected objects. In other words, it included the relativization and juxtaposition of every aspect, including the artist himself.¹⁰ Sugimoto's artistic world, which includes *History of History* and the photographs, is realized through the complete fusion of the self, technique, and the outer world. This can be viewed as the true essence of art in a complex modern society. Thus, this vision is the key for advocating the true value of an artist and his artwork not only for the present but also for future.¹¹

*9. The appreciation of Hiroshi Sugimoto in Japan has grown significantly in recent years. After the Mainichi Art Prize in 1988, he was awarded the Hasselblad Foundation International Award in 2001, 21st Praemium Imperiale Award for painting in 2009, and Purple Ribbon Medal in 2010. Consequently, he has received adulation from many directions. One such example is his involvement in a performance of the traditional Japanese performing art, Jōruri puppet, at the Kanagawa Art Theater. He directed the performance of *Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, a major work by playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon, and created images for the stage set.

*10. For the detailed theme and concept of the *History of History* at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, see Murata Daisuke, "Hanjyūryoku kōzō—Rekishi no Rekishi to iu Katachi (Anti-gravity Structure—Form as *History of History*)," *History of History, Hiroshi Sugimoto*, Tokyo: Shinsozai Kenkyū Sho, 2008, 306–309.

*11. The methodologies of many contemporary art critiques stem from the Western modernist paradigm of art. In the guise of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity, contemporary art critiques seem to recognize and appraise new expressions. However, many of them still maintain the perspective that derives from the dualistic/dichotomy value system and ideology of the modern West. Therefore they only foment dominant and conventional artistic genres and classifications of artistic regions for such unprecedented artistic expressions. Hiroshi Sugimoto's *History of History* has also been subject to such a Western modernist paradigm. The perspective and concept ("an artistic world created through a complete fusion of self, technique, and the outer world") that analyzed Sugimoto's photography and *History of History* in the exhibition at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa was later developed into a thematic exhibition titled "Silent Echoes" at the same museum in 2011. See the detail of the theme and exhibition list at:
http://www.kanazawa21.jp/data_list.php?g=80&d=82&lng=e