

# Voice!

## from Alumni member

### Vol.15 Professor Timon Screech



**Timon Screech** is Professor of the History of Art at SOAS, University of London. He has also studied at several institutions in the EU, Japan and the USA.

He is the author of some dozen books on the visual culture of the Edo period. His PhD was published as **The Lens Within the Heart: The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Later Edo Japan** (CUP 1996).

His best-known work is **Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan, 1700-1820** (Reaktion, 1999; second, expanded, 2009).

His numerous writings have been translated into French, Japanese, Korean, Polish and Romanian.

I have been engaged with Japan since I became obsessed with country as a teenager. Japan was not then the global presence it is today, and living in rural Oxfordshire in the 1970s we were hardly aware of the place, other than from the trinkets that came out of Christmas crackers, or perhaps typewriters (not that many people owned them). My parents were big readers and one rainy day I came across a book on their shelves which I took out to look at. I recall the opening lines still, 'in the court of an ancient prince, the time it matters not when...' This was the *Tale of Genji* in Arthur Waley's famous translation of 1921-33 – the only translation then available (now there are several). I asked my father about it, and he told me he had in fact been in Japan was a serviceman, and had even spent his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in Shimonoseki. I did know it generally, but in those days many people's fathers had war stories, and to be honest we found them boring. I should have asked more, though I didn't. But I did at least listen when my father said had learned some Japanese and if I was interested he would teach me. I took him up on this, and for several years we went through *Teach Yourself Japanese* together. It was fun for him to relive his youth in Japan, mostly spent in Tottori, and it was eye-opening for me.

In due course, I decided to take Japanese at university. There were not many places offering it, so I got in to Oxford. In my first year there the Royal Academy held an astonishing show of Edo art called the Great Japan Exhibition. I travelled to London several times to see it, and decided that I wanted to become a specialist in Japanese art. That was easier said than done, since

no European university taught the subject. However, it was available at PhD level in the USA. I applied without thinking I had a chance, but then came two unexpected strokes of luck. One was that the pound was very low against the dollar, so when I declared our family assets (which weren't much anyway) we appeared almost destitute, making me eligible for full funding. That didn't mean I was admitted, but the second stroke of luck was that an extremely able student from the UK had recently been admitted to study Japanese art at Harvard, and had excelled. That person's tutor erroneously thought I would be off the same block, so there I was: admitted with a scholarship.

On graduation six years later, by another stroke of luck, SOAS created a post in Japanese art, which I applied for and secured. I've been there since 1991 – it will soon be 30 years.

My PhD studies and my work ever since have sought to engage with Japanese visual culture, that is, with objects recognised as 'art', but also those not regarded as such, such as applied objects, or data items such as maps or illustrated books. A division between 'art' and something lower would have been understood in Japanese history, but they did not draw the boundaries as we do, and our categories would seem arbitrary to them. The Royal Academy show's legacy was such that I never strayed from the Edo Period, which is anyway a long and rich time, with a huge variety of issues to engage with. But in the 1980s, the period was always defined by the word *sakoku* (national isolation). I always suspected this was simplistic, and so

the other defining feature of my work has been to see Edo internationally. This might be by addressing 'Dutch Studies' (*rangaku*), or more interestingly, in my view, by looking at subliminal and submerged information. Only later did I discover that the very term 'national isolation' did not exist in the Edo Period, and that '*sakoku*' is actually a 19th century translation from Dutch, which was itself a translation from English, translated from German, as written by a traveller to Japan c. 1700. Of course, Japan in the Edo Period was not wide open, but then where was at that time?

Thanks to various funding bodies I have been able to make frequent research trips to Japan over the years. The JSPS funded a period attached to Waseda University, where I worked with Professor Tan'o Yasunori, whose own research and writing deals with many aspects of Japanese Art. I had met Professor Tan'o before, but the ability to spend an entire year with him, to meet his students and to follow his seminars, as well as taking advantage of Waseda's excellent library, was an exceptional treat. Professor Tan'o and I have stayed in frequent touch, though sadly this is his final year before retirement. This summer we will hold a valedictory symposium for him in Tokyo, and then he will leave Waseda in spring 2020. We all hope and

expect that Waseda will find a worthy successor, to continue his legacy and further Japanese art studies internationally.



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2

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3

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