



The Formation of the Collection and Exhibition History of the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

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Keywords:

The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo; Matsukata Collection; Collection History; Exhibition History; Exhibitions as a Revenue Source

ABSTRACT:

The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo (NMWA), was founded on the Matsukata Collection, assembled by Kōjiro Matsukata beginning in 1916 during his visits to Europe. Around 400 works that had remained in Paris were seized by the French government during World War II and later returned to Japan. The museum, designed by Le Corbusier, opened in 1959 to house this collection and has since expanded its holdings. NMWA has organized over 300 exhibitions, playing a major role in popularizing Western art in Japan and advancing museum practice nationwide. A distinctive feature of its activities is the co-organization of exhibitions with newspaper and media companies, an important source of revenue. The museum now seeks to strengthen its programs by building on its collection, financial resources, and staff, while emphasizing permanent displays. Key challenges include enhancing its international presence and diversifying revenue sources to ensure sustainability.

Il National Museum of Western Art di Tokyo (NMWA) è stato fondato sulla base della Collezione Matsukata, assemblata da Kōjiro Matsukata a partire dal 1916 durante i suoi viaggi in Europa. Circa 400 opere che erano rimaste a Parigi furono sequestrate dal governo francese durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale e successivamente restituite al Giappone. Il museo, progettato da Le Corbusier, è stato inaugurato nel 1959 per ospitare questa collezione e da allora ha ampliato le proprie raccolte. Il NMWA ha organizzato oltre 300 mostre, svolgendo un ruolo fondamentale nella diffusione dell'arte occidentale in Giappone e nello sviluppo delle pratiche museali a livello nazionale. Una caratteristica distintiva delle sue attività è la co-organizzazione di mostre con aziende editoriali e media, che rappresenta un'importante fonte di entrate. Il museo mira ora a rafforzare i propri programmi valorizzando la collezione, le risorse finanziarie e il personale, ponendo maggiore enfasi sulle esposizioni permanenti. Tra le principali sfide figurano il rafforzamento della presenza internazionale e la diversificazione delle fonti di reddito per garantire la sostenibilità.

Shinsuke Watanabe

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Opening Picture:

Fig. 02: Frank Brangwyn, *Portrait of Mr. Kōjiro Matsukata*, 1916, The National Museum of Western Art, Donated by the heirs of Mr. Kōjiro Matsukata (Ex-Matsukata Collection).

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<https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.3034-9699/24551>



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The National Museum of Western Art (NMWA; fig. 1) opened its doors in 1959 and has since drawn remarkably large audiences. In recent years, the depreciation of the Japanese yen has further boosted inbound tourism, with current annual attendance reaching approximately 1.5 million. Given the museum's relatively modest physical scale, this figure positions NMWA among the most frequently visited art institutions worldwide.

NMWA houses the most comprehensive collection of Western art not only in Japan but across Asia. It remains the sole institution in the region providing a coherent overview of Western art from the late Middle Ages through the mid-twentieth century. At present, alongside its permanent collection, the museum regularly organizes three major special exhibitions each year, thereby serving as a central venue for the presentation and interpretation of Western art to Japanese audiences.

The museum's architecture is equally significant: its Main Building and forecourt were designed by Le Corbusier. In 2016, the museum site was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List as part of *The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement*. This designation has further heightened interest among visitors who seek to appreciate the museum not only for its collection but also for its architectural achievement.

The World Heritage designation, in turn, prompted renewed attention to the museum's origins. The institution was established to house a specific body of works—the Matsukata Collection—composed primarily of French art from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. At its inauguration, the museum was often referred to as both “the museum of the Matsukata Collection” and “the museum of French art.” Over time, however, the character of its

Fig. 1: The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.

collection expanded to encompass a broader narrative of Western art history.

This paper introduces this distinctive institution—still relatively little known outside Japan—by examining the formation of its collection and its exhibition history. Part I (by Watanabe) traces the genesis of the Matsukata Collection, the process leading to the museum's establishment, and the subsequent evolution of its holdings from 1959 to the present. Part II (by Kakehi) analyzes the museum's exhibition practices since its foundation, elucidating their development and identifying their defining characteristics.

I. NMWA Collection

I.1. The Formation of the Matsukata Collection

The Matsukata Collection comprises artworks assembled by Kōjiro Matsukata (1866–1950) over roughly a decade between 1916 and 1927. During this period, Matsukata acquired approximately 2,700 works of Western art in Europe. After a complex series of events, a portion of this collection was brought to Japan after World War II and became the core of NMWA. The Matsukata Collection has since become the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, with significant advances achieved in recent years through two major exhibitions and the publication of *catalogue raisonné*.¹ The following section outlines the history of this remarkable collection, drawing on existing scholarship and related studies.

Kōjiro Matsukata, the third son of Masayoshi Matsukata, was educat-

ed in the United States at Rutgers University and Yale University, where he earned a doctorate in law. His father had served as both Minister of Finance and Prime Minister in the Meiji government. Upon returning to Japan, he became the founding president of Kawasaki Dockyard Corporation in Kobe in 1896. Under his leadership, the company diversified into naval shipbuilding, the production of submarines, railway cars, and other industrial products—activities that would later form the foundation of Kawasaki Heavy Industries, Ltd. Matsukata also served concurrently as president of the *Kobe Shimbun* newspaper.

World War I proved to be a decisive turning point for both Matsukata and the Kawasaki Dockyard. Anticipating wartime demand, he stockpiled steel and began constructing “stock boats”—vessels built prior to receiving orders. When war broke out, the global demand for ships surged, and nearly one hundred vessels were sold rapidly, generating immense profits. It was with these profits that Matsukata began to build his art collection, primarily during two extended sojourns in Europe.

During his first stay in Europe as president of Kawasaki Dockyard (25 March 1916 – 25 November 1918), Matsukata was based in London to promote ship sales. There, he met Frank Brangwyn—a painter, decorator, and architect—whose works he purchased in considerable numbers.² Brangwyn became one of Matsukata's most influential advisors on art acquisitions. During this period, Matsukata acquired a large number of works, including

more than one hundred Old Master paintings as well as works by contemporary artists. Brangwyn's *Portrait of Kōjiro Matsukata* (1916; fig. 2) attests to their acquaintance and marks the beginning of Matsukata's serious engagement with art collecting.

In 1918, Matsukata traveled to Paris, where he encountered Léonce Bénédite, then director of the Musée du Luxembourg and later the first director of the Musée Rodin. Although their initial interaction concerned the production of bronze casts of Rodin's sculptures, Bénédite subsequently played a much broader role as Matsukata's advisor in France.³

Most of the Rodin sculptures acquired by Matsukata were new casts commissioned directly from the Musée Rodin. These commissions offered crucial financial support to the newly founded institution. Because the works remained in storage at the Musée Rodin for extended periods rather than being shipped to Japan immediately, some were reassigned to other buyers with Matsukata's consent and later replaced by newly cast versions. Notably, Matsukata was the first collector to commission casts of *The Gates of Hell*. He originally ordered two—one for Japan and one for the Musée Rodin—but the Japanese version was ultimately sold to the Philadelphia collector Jules E. Mastbaum. The version currently housed at NMWA is the third cast. Today, NMWA possesses sixty-one Rodin sculptures, fifty-three of which originate from the Matsukata Collection.⁴

Beyond Western art, he also purchased approximately 8,000 ukiyo-e prints in 1918 from Henri Vever, a

Paris-based jeweler and prominent collector of Japanese art. In the same year, Matsukata extended his travels to Italy, acquiring paintings by Giovanni Segantini and sculptures by Leonardo Bistolfi. By the end of his stay in Europe, Matsukata had acquired more than 1,300 artworks (other than the ukiyo-e prints) which were subsequently shipped to Japan after the conclusion of World War I in 1919. However, many of the works purchased through Bénédite were not transported to Japan and remained in Paris.

Matsukata's second extended stay in Europe, from 14 April 1921 to 10 February 1922, was officially a business trip but is widely believed to have included a covert mission on behalf of the Japanese Navy to acquire blueprints of German U-boat technology.⁵ During this period, he visited galleries in London and Paris, accompanied by the art historian Yukio Yashiro, who later documented the journey. Although Bénédite continued to advise Matsukata, Yashiro criticized his taste as "old-fashioned," referring to artists such as Charles Cottet, Lucien Simon, Henri Martin, and Albert Besnard.⁶ Nevertheless, Matsukata's acquisitions were broad and inclusive, encompassing works not only from France but also from Britain, Italy, and Germany. He also acquired notable examples of contemporary art by Picasso, Matisse, and Bonnard.

Matsukata also followed the recommendations of his Japanese contemporaries: painter Bakusen Tsuchida urged him to purchase works by Gauguin; literature scholar Shōichi Naruse recommended Moreau and Courbet; and Yashiro himself suggested acquiring works by Renoir,



Fig. 02:
Frank Brangwyn, *Portrait of Mr. Kōjiro Matsukata*, 1916, The National Museum of Western Art, Donated by the heirs of Mr. Kōjiro Matsukata (Ex-Matsukata Collection).

Cézanne, and Van Gogh.⁷ Particularly noteworthy is Matsukata's acquisition of thirty-five works by Maurice Denis. Additional purchases in Berlin included tapestries, paintings, and prints.

Among the most significant acquisitions of this period were paintings by Claude Monet. Even before returning to Europe, Matsukata had prepared carefully to obtain works by the Impressionist master. During his stay in Paris, he visited Monet's studio in Giverny at least twice, securing the artist's agreement to sell him a substantial number of paintings. Today, thirty-four works by Monet from Matsukata's former collection are known, of which roughly fifteen are believed to have been acquired directly from the artist.⁸ Twelve of these thirty-four works are now in the NMWA collection.

Matsukata continued to make acquisitions through agents even when he was not in Europe. Between late 1922 and 1923, he acquired thirty-four works from the collection of Danish industrialist Wilhelm Hansen.

A natural question arises: *why did Matsukata collect art?* One frequently cited source is the recollection of Yashiro, who reported that Matsukata wished to offer young Japanese artists—many of whom could not travel abroad—an opportunity to see authentic Western artworks, and that, if the government would not establish a museum for such a purpose, he intended to build one himself. His vision coincided with a broader contemporary movement in Japan advocating the creation of modern museums equipped with public and educational functions.⁹

As an example of a collector contemporary with Matsukata, one may cite the industrialist Magosaburō Ōhara. Like Matsukata, Ōhara sought to provide young Japanese artists who were unable to study abroad with opportunities to encounter original works firsthand; to this end, between approximately 1920 and 1923, he acquired numerous works of Western art in Europe with the assistance of the painter Torajirō Kojima, whose overseas study he supported. Ōhara's collection was housed in the Ohara Museum of Art, which he himself established in Kurashiki, in western Japan, and it remains open to the public today.¹⁰

Matsukata, however, harbored still greater ambitions. He appears to have believed that the appreciation of fine art would contribute to Japan's industrial and cultural development, and accordingly envisioned a museum that could rival those of Europe and North America.

Evidence indicates that he had already commissioned Brangwyn in 1916 to design such a museum, tentatively titled the Kyōraku Bijutsukan ("Sheer Pleasure Arts Pavilion"). By late 1919, a site had been secured, and by 1922, the architectural plans were completed. The proposed building was centered on a courtyard with a fountain, and its exhibition galleries were to be illuminated by skylights (fig. 3). The envisioned collection included not only paintings and sculptures but also decorative arts such as furniture, ceramics, tiles, and carpets. There were even plans to relocate Brangwyn's studio to Japan.¹¹ Ultimately, however, Matsukata's ambitious dream was never realized.

I.2. From the Trials of the Matsukata Collection to the Opening of NMWA

By the early 1920s, the wartime economic boom had reversed into a severe depression, dealing a devastating blow to Japan's shipbuilding industry. The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 further destabilized the financial sector and indirectly triggered the financial crisis of 1927, leading to the collapse of the Jūgo Bank, the principal creditor of the Kawasaki Dockyard Corporation. The company consequently went bankrupt, and Kōjiro Matsukata was forced to resign as its president in 1928. During this turbulent period, many of the artworks Matsukata had previously shipped to Japan were seized by creditors, primarily the Jūgo Bank. Beginning in 1928, the collection was sold through seven major and several minor auctions, the last of which took place in March 1941.

A number of works dispersed during this period remain in Japan—for instance, Manet's *Self-Portrait* (Tokyo, Artizon Museum), Monet's *Haystacks* (Kurashiki, Ohara Museum of Art), and Degas' *Portrait of Manet and Madame Manet* (Kitakyushu Municipal Museum of Art). However, a significant number of works—such as Cézanne's *The House with the Cracked Walls* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art)—were exported overseas. Meanwhile, the approximately 8,000 ukiyo-e prints Matsukata had acquired were not included in the liquidation process; they were later donated to the Imperial Household and eventually incorporated into the collection of the Imperial Museum (now the Tokyo National Museum).



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Fig. 3:
Frank Brangwyn,
*Aerial Perspective
of Kyōraku Art
Museum, Tokyo*,
The National Museum of Western
Art, Purchased
with the assistance
of the 2010
Art Acquisition
Fund.

While this describes the fate of the portion of the collection that had reached Japan, the works remaining in Europe followed a different trajectory. In 1924, prior to Kawasaki Dockyard's bankruptcy, the Japanese government imposed a 100 percent import tariff on luxury goods—including European artworks—under legislation enacted in response to the domestic economic disruption following the Great Kantō Earthquake. As a result, it became difficult to ship the remaining pieces to Japan. Consequently, the works stored in Europe remained there.¹²

The segment of the collection housed in London was kept in the Pantechnicon warehouse, which was tragically destroyed by fire in October 1939, resulting in the loss of approximately 950 works.¹³ Meanwhile, the portion stored in Paris—primarily consisting of works acquired

through Léonce Bénédite—was held at the Musée Rodin, where Bénédite had served as director. However, that same year, with the outbreak of World War II and the subsequent German occupation of Paris, the collection faced renewed peril.

At this critical juncture, Kōzaburō Hioki, Matsukata's representative in Paris, played a decisive role. He removed between 400 and 500 works that had been entrusted to the Musée Rodin and clandestinely hid them in his residence in Abondant, a village on the outskirts of Paris. Following the Allied landing in Normandy on 20 June 1944, fearing bombardment by retreating German forces, Hioki transported the evacuated works back to Paris. During this period, most of the sculptures remained safely at the Musée Rodin. Nevertheless, in December 1944, the French government confiscated the collection as enemy property, in ac-

cordance with wartime policies.¹⁴

Following the confiscation, calls were repeatedly made in France for the collection to be permanently retained in French public museums, given its cultural value. Meanwhile, in postwar Japan, both the Matsukata family and the Japanese government began efforts to secure the collection's restitution. Ultimately, Matsukata's heirs agreed to relinquish all private ownership claims, facilitating diplomatic negotiations between the two nations.

Under the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, the Matsukata Collection was formally recognized as the legal property of the French state. However, in subsequent bilateral discussions, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman expressed goodwill toward returning the collection to Japan. This diplomatic gesture marked the beginning of formal negotiations, which eventually led to the repatriation of most of the works.

According to the final agreement, twenty particularly significant works were retained by France at the request of its national museums—among them Manet's *Woman with a Beer Mug*, Van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles*, and Toulouse-Lautrec's *Justine Duret Sitting in the Garden*—now part of the Musée d'Orsay collection.¹⁵ The remainder of the works were returned to Japan.

The return of the collection involved three conditions imposed on Japan. These included the construction of a museum dedicated to the Matsukata Collection; the retention in France of the cast of Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* commissioned by Matsukata, with the cost of producing a replacement borne by Japan; and the cov-

ering of all transportation expenses by the Japanese side.

In 1954, among several candidate sites, Ueno Park in Tokyo was selected as the museum's location at the request of the French side. The following year, Le Corbusier was appointed as the architect and visited the site in November 1955. His basic design, completed in 1957, was based on his concept of the *Musée à croissance illimitée* ("Museum of Unlimited Growth").

Le Corbusier's initial proposal went far beyond the Japanese side's original request, envisioning a comprehensive cultural complex that included not only an art museum but also spaces for temporary exhibitions and a theater. However, financial constraints made it impossible to realize this ambitious plan. The final design was adjusted in collaboration with his Japanese protégés—Junzō Sakakura, Kunio Maekawa, and Takamasa Yoshizaka—all of whom had previously apprenticed in his studio.

Construction began on 21 March 1958, and was completed on 31 March of the following year; the artworks arrived on 22 April, and the museum opened to the public on 10 June—all on an exceptionally tight schedule. The unveiling of the Matsukata Collection attracted extraordinary public attention; long queues formed daily as visitors eagerly awaited entry. Although only the permanent collection was displayed during the first year, the museum welcomed approximately 580,000 visitors within ten months.

Moreover, as will be discussed later, the collection was also presented in traveling exhibitions throughout Japan, allowing audiences nationwide

to see the Matsukata Collection that had finally returned home after decades.

I.3. The Collection After the Opening

Although NMWA was originally established to house the Matsukata Collection, it soon began to receive donations of artworks unrelated to that collection, marking an early step in its transformation into a broader national institution for Western art. Among the most notable of these early contributions was Chaim Soutine's *Mad Woman* (P.1960-0001), formerly in the Shigetarō Fukushima Collection, donated shortly after the museum's opening. In 1965, the Yamamura family contributed a distinguished group of twentieth-century paintings, while between 1960 and 1978, the painter Ryūzaburō Umehara donated numerous works, including oil paintings by Renoir and Picasso, a pastel by Degas, and several examples of classical sculpture.

In the years immediately following the museum's inauguration, the acquisition of artworks through purchase was extremely limited due to severe budgetary constraints. The first fiscal year in which an acquisition budget was formally allocated was 1962, during which three paintings—all formerly part of the Matsukata Collection—were acquired: Giovanni Segantini's *Bagpipers of Brianza* (P.1962-0004), *Venus and Cupid* (P.1962-0003), then attributed to an anonymous artist but now classified within the sixteenth-century Emilia school, and Carlo Crivelli's *St. Augustine* (P.1962-0005), listed at the time as *Portrait of a Bishop*. The latter two works represented the

museum's first acquisitions of Old Master paintings.

In 1963, sculptures by Aristide Maillol were acquired in conjunction with a special exhibition devoted to the artist. Subsequently, the museum pursued the acquisition of works not directly associated with Matsukata but produced during the same general period—namely, the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. A major policy revision in 1968 enabled the museum to acquire Old Master paintings dating as far back as the Renaissance.¹⁶ Meanwhile, its acquisitions of modern art also continued, though limited chronologically to works created before 1920, in order to avoid overlapping with the collecting scope of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

Initially, acquisitions were funded through the Agency for Cultural Affairs' budget for purchasing National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties, after which the works were transferred to NMWA via administrative reallocation. From 1981 onward, however, the museum began acquiring works using its own independent budget. Supplementary national budgets in 1978 and 1998 further enabled the acquisition of significant works that would otherwise have been beyond financial reach. Since the early 2010s, the Japanese government has provided an annual special acquisition fund to the Independent Administrative Institution National Museum of Art, which oversees seven museums (five of which actively acquire works). This financial framework has allowed NMWA to maintain a consistent and sustainable acquisition program.

During this period, the museum also continued to recover and receive donations of works originally from the Matsukata Collection. Notable examples include the 2001 donation of six tapestries that had been sold at the 1929 auction, and the 2017 acquisition of approximately two hundred works that had remained unsold during earlier liquidation and later entered a private Japanese collection. In addition, the museum's scope expanded through significant new donations beyond the Matsukata holdings—most prominently, the Hashimoto Collection (donated in 2012), consisting of roughly 870 rings, and the Naitō Collection (donated in 2015 and 2020), comprising medieval to Renaissance manuscript leaves. These donations substantially broadened the scope of the museum's collection into areas previously underrepresented.

As a result of sustained collecting efforts over more than six decades, the museum's holdings have expanded dramatically since its founding¹⁷:

These figures attest to the institution's evolution from a museum dedicated to a single donor's collection into a comprehensive repository capable of presenting a panoramic survey of Western art—realizing, in an expanded form, Matsukata's original vision of public access to Western masterpieces.

Since 2001, the museum's collection strategy has been articulated in successive five-year medium-term plans. While the first four plans (2001–2020) largely reiterated the same priorities, the fifth plan (2021–2025), released in April 2021, introduced substantial revisions that reflect broader disciplinary trends and institutional reorientation.

Year	Paintings	Drawings	Prints	Sculptures	Decorative Arts	Books	Reference Works	Total
At Opening (June 1959)	196	80	26	63	–	–	5	370
As of March 31, 2025	503	326	4,416	105	823	240	270	6,683

Comparison of Collection Policies¹⁸

Phases 1–4 (2001–2020):

NMWA will enhance its holdings of modern French art centered on the Matsukata Collection, strengthen its collection of early modern European paintings, and systematically collect European prints, thereby enabling an overview of the development of Western art from the late Middle Ages to the early twentieth century.

Phase 5 (2021–2025):

NMWA will strive to enrich the collection with works from essential periods and regions necessary for a systematic and comprehensive overview of Western art from the Middle Ages to the first half of the twentieth century, while also actively collecting works by female artists. Regarding the Matsukata Collection—the foundation of the museum—acquisitions will be guided by the results of ongoing research. Furthermore, the museum will systematically collect works of diverse styles and subjects to enable a comprehensive survey of European print history.

Compared with the previous plans, which defined the chronological scope as “from the late Middle Ages to the early twentieth century,” the fifth plan expands this range to begin in the Middle Ages and to include the first half of the twentieth century. Geographically, the emphasis has shifted from “modern French art” to encompass the whole of Europe, leading to a further diversification

of acquisitions from regions absent in the Matsukata Collection, such as Northern Europe and modern Spain. Recent acquisitions reflecting this broadened scope include Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s *Lake Keitele* (P.2021-0001), August Strindberg’s *Inferno* (P.2022-0001), and Joaquín Sorolla’s *The Drinking Jug* (P.2022-0002).

Equally significant is the inclusion, for the first time, of an explicit institutional commitment to the active acquisition of works by women artists, reflecting recent developments in art-historical scholarship and curatorial ethics. In line with this policy, recent acquisitions include Camille Claudel’s *Perseus and the Gorgon* (S.2021-0001), Lavinia Fontana’s *Portrait of Antonietta Gonzales* (P.2024-0004), and Fede Galizia’s *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (P.2024-0005).

Through these developments, NMWA has continuously redefined the contours of its collection while maintaining its foundational identity rooted in the Matsukata legacy. In doing so, it has evolved from a postwar diplomatic gesture into a leading institution that not only preserves but also critically interprets the history of Western art in Japan and across Asia.

II. NMWA Exhibitions and Displays

II.1. Classification of Exhibitions and Displays

Since its opening in 1959, the exhibitions and displays organized by NMWA can broadly be classified into five categories:

A. The Collection (Permanent Display): Exhibitions displaying works from the museum's collection.

B. Exhibition: Small-scale presentations composed primarily of works from the collection, often held in The Collection Gallery.

C. Museum-organized Special Exhibition: Exhibitions featuring mainly borrowed works from external collections, organized and financed solely by the museum.

D. Co-organized Special Exhibition: Large-scale exhibitions primarily composed of borrowed works, co-organized with media companies or other partners.

E. Touring Exhibition / Joint Exhibition: Exhibitions held at other institutions utilizing works from NMWA's collection.

These formats have evolved in response to societal changes and the museum's expansion and renovation projects. The following sections outline this evolution by era.¹⁹ For convenience, exhibitions B through E—held for limited durations of a few months—are collectively referred to as “Temporary Exhibitions,” while categories C and D are collectively termed “Special Exhibitions.”

II.2. Evolution and Characteristics

(1) Main Building Period (Opening to 1970s)

Established as a facility for displaying the Matsukata Collection, NMWA initially presented only a Permanent Display. Its first temporary exhibition, *Masterpieces of the Ex-Matsukata Collection* (1960; fig. 4), commemorated the museum's

first anniversary and assembled approximately 200 works, including pieces from the ex-Matsukata Collection that had been dispersed across Japan. Subsequently, the Main Building began hosting special exhibitions approximately once or twice per year.

Notable exhibitions from this period include landmark shows realized through government-level collaboration, such as *La Vénus de Milo* (1964), held to commemorate the Tokyo 1964 Olympic Games, and *La Joconde* (1974), made possible through negotiations between the Japanese and French governments. In several cases, NMWA assumed curatorial responsibilities for exhibitions held at the Tokyo National Museum, also located in Ueno Park.²⁰ These included *La Joconde and Art français 1840–1940* (1961–1962), which introduced the development of modern French art through approximately 480 works on loan from the French government.

(2) After the Completion of the New Wing (1980s–1990s)

In May 1979, the New Wing—offering approximately 1,500 m² of exhibition space—was completed, doubling the museum's total display area. This expansion enabled simultaneous presentations: the Main Building continued to exhibit the collection, while the New Wing hosted special exhibitions, increasing their annual frequency to two or three.

A defining feature of this period was the intensification of international exchange with museums and specialists abroad, supported by Japan's economic growth. This fostered the realization of more ambitious and



Fig. 4:
Exhibition
Catalogue of
*Masterpieces of
the Ex-Matsukata
Collection.*

academically grounded exhibitions. Notable examples include *Japonisme* (1988), jointly researched and organized with the Musée d'Orsay and presented at the Grand Palais in Paris before its Tokyo showing, whose catalogue received critical acclaim; *Vincent van Gogh* (1985) and *Space in European Art: Council of Europe Exhibition in Japan* (1987), both of which were accompanied by international symposiums.

Meanwhile, the proliferation of art museums across Japan and the increasing accessibility of overseas travel heightened public interest in

Western art. Leveraging the promotional capacity of co-organizing media companies, many exhibitions during this period attracted more than 300,000 visitors. A notable peak was reached with *Great French Paintings from the Barnes Foundation* (1994). Following its presentations at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, the co-organizer, *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, assembled 13 sponsors and launched an intensive promotional campaign that drew an extraordinary total of 1,071,352 visitors.²¹

(3) After the Completion of the Special Exhibition Wing (1998–2010s)

In December 1997, the Special Exhibition Wing (approx. 1,500 m² of exhibition space) was completed underground in the forecourt of the Main Building. This addition enabled the museum to present The Collection in both the Main Building and the New Wing, while hosting up to three special exhibitions annually in the new facility. Prior to this, the Matsukata Collection had been displayed in the Main Building and other holdings in the New Wing. The new configuration integrated the Main Building and the New Wing into a single, chronological presentation tracing the history of Western art. Furthermore, from 2001 onward, the museum regularly organized two to three small-scale Exhibitions each year within the Prints and Drawings Gallery as part of the permanent display area.

Notable exhibitions of this period included the inaugural *Claude Lorrain and the Ideal Landscape* (1998), *Georges de La Tour* (2005), and *Vilhelm Hammershøi: The Poetry of Silence* (2008)—all of which introduced artists previously unseen in major Japanese exhibitions—as well as *Henri Matisse: Processus / Variation* (2004), distinguished by its clear thematic focus and rigorous research. Among the most significant undertakings was *The Matsukata Collection: A One-Hundred-Year Odyssey* (2019), organized in celebration of NMWA's 60th anniversary (fig. 5). This exhibition marked the first comprehensive presentation of the Matsukata Collection at NMWA since 1960 *Masterpieces of the Ex-Matsukata Collection* exhibition,

synthesizing six decades of curatorial scholarship in an exhibition, catalogue and *catalogue raisonné*. It reaffirmed that both the Matsukata collection itself and its sustained study constitute an integral part of NMWA's mission.

The museum also hosted a number of exhibitions serving diplomatic and cultural exchange objectives, including *Il Rinascimento in Italia: La civiltà delle corti* (2001), a central event of *Italia in Giappone 2001*, and *Skagen: An Artists' Colony in Denmark* (2017), held to commemorate the 150th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Denmark and Japan.

Another major milestone of this period was the 2016 inscription of the Main Building and its forecourt as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This brought renewed attention to the museum's architectural heritage and resulted in a marked increase in attendance for The Collection.²²

(4) Post-COVID Period and Forecourt Reorganization (2020–)

Beginning in October 2020, the museum closed for approximately eighteen months for renovations to the Special Exhibition Wing and the forecourt. Upon reopening in April 2022, The Collection display underwent updates. While maintaining its chronological narrative, the museum introduced small-scale thematic presentations titled *Collection in FOCUS* across various sections, highlighting works through in-depth art historical interpretations, as well as broader perspectives including conservation and conservation science.

The COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated a global trend toward



Fig. 5: Installation view of the entrance area of *The Matsukata Collection: A One-Hundred-Year Odyssey*. Photo by NMWA.

organizing exhibitions based on institutional, local and domestic collections—a shift evident at NMWA as well. Representative examples include *Manuscripts from the Naitō Collection in the National Museum of Western Art* (2024), centered on a major private donation, and *La Bretagne, source d'inspiration: regards de peintres français et japonais* (2023), which presented approximately 160 works on the theme of Brittany, France, drawn almost entirely from collections within Japan.

At the same time, large-scale international loan exhibitions have re-emerged. *Monet: The Late Waterscapes* (2024-2025), composed mainly of loans from the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris, attracted 807,566 visitors, attesting to the public's enduring interest in Western art.

(5) Exhibitions Held at Other Museums

Following the museum's opening in 1959, numerous requests were received from across Japan to host the Matsukata Collection. In response, the touring exhibition *The Matsukata Collection of the National Museum of Western Art* was presented twenty-three times between 1962 and 1977, beginning at the Hakutsuru Museum in Kobe, where Matsukata had established his business base, and was enthusiastically received nationwide.²³

During the 1980s and 1990s, instead of the Matsukata Collection exhibitions, the museum endeavored to contribute to regional cultural enrichment by sending exhibitions featuring works from NMWA's own collection, such as the *Max Klinger*

and *The French Modern Painting, from the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo*. It also participated in the *Agency for Cultural Affairs Traveling Exhibition*, organized jointly with other national museums. Since the 2000s (2003–2024), this initiative has evolved into the National Museum of Art Touring Exhibition, through which each national museum in turn has organized an exhibition for regional art museums. NMWA has participated in this program approximately once every five years.

In 2023, two new nationwide initiatives were launched by the National Center for Art Research—established within the National Museum of Art—to collaborate with museums throughout Japan utilizing works from national collections, including those of NMWA. *Collection DIALOGUE* aims to foster dialogue between collections by combining works from a national art museum with those of a host institution to reveal new interpretive possibilities. *Collection PLUS*, meanwhile, enriches regional collection exhibitions by integrating a small number of works from national holdings into local displays to create new, thematically focused presentations.

Looking back over its history, NMWA has consistently presented exhibitions falling into the following broad categories:

- (1) cultural-diplomacy exhibitions realized through intergovernmental collaboration;
- (2) high-quality scholarly exhibitions developed through global museum networks and academic research;

- (3) exhibitions introducing artists and works not yet widely known in Japan; and

- (4) large-scale exhibitions co-organized with media partners to foster broader appreciation of Western Art.

A further characteristic of the museum's activities has been the publication of bilingual catalogues for nearly all special exhibitions, ensuring both scholarly rigor and archival permanence. Moreover, at a time when art museums were still scarce in Japan, NMWA contributed to the enhancement of regional culture through touring exhibitions of its collection, and in later decades, through collaboration with museums nationwide, it has continued to play a vital role in the development of museum practice across the country.

II.3. Special Exhibitions as a Revenue Source

While the previous section discussed the cultural and curatorial significance of exhibitions, their financial role must also be considered. In the initial budget for fiscal year 2023, operating subsidies accounted for approximately 77% of total income, with self-generated revenue making up the remaining 23%. Although the precise proportion of admission fees within self-generated income is not publicly disclosed, it is reasonable to assume that they represent a substantial share. Since income from off-site exhibitions does not accrue to NMWA, current admission revenue derives solely from The Collection (including small Exhibitions) and Special Exhibitions.

Since 2017, the museum's admission system has consisted of two categories: The Collection (500 yen for adults) and Special Exhibitions (1,600–2,300 yen for adults). A ticket for a Special Exhibition also grants same-day access to The Collection. As indicated in Figure 6, Special Exhibitions have generally attracted larger audiences than The Collection, while visitors to The Collection comprised nearly half of total attendance only during the COVID-affected fiscal years 2022–2023.²⁴ Furthermore, in fiscal year 2023, approximately 46% of The Collection visitors entered using Special Exhibition tickets, whereas only 28% paid specifically for The Collection (adults and college students) (figs. 7, 8).²⁵ Considering both ticket prices and attendance figures, it is evident that revenue from Special Exhibitions plays a crucial role in sustaining the museum's overall financial stability.

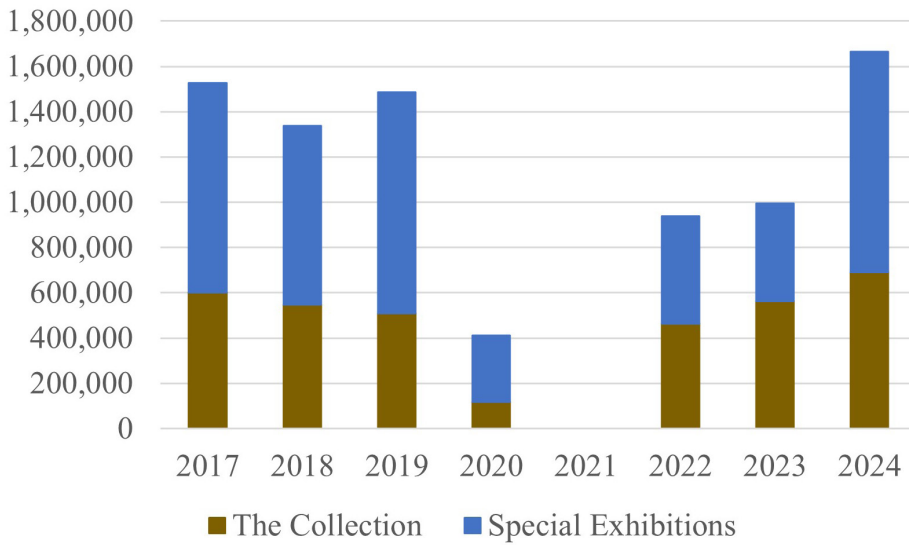
II.4. The Situation Surrounding Special Exhibitions

NMWA's Special Exhibitions comprise Museum-organized Exhibitions funded from the museum's own budget and Co-organized Exhibitions mounted in partnership with media organizations. Although such collaborations are rare in Europe and North America, they have been a well-established practice in Japan since the postwar era.²⁶ Media companies—particularly newspapers—have long produced and hosted art exhibitions as part of their mission of cultural contribution and corporate social responsibility. In the 1950s, they were able to take advantage of privileges such as maintaining overseas offices and

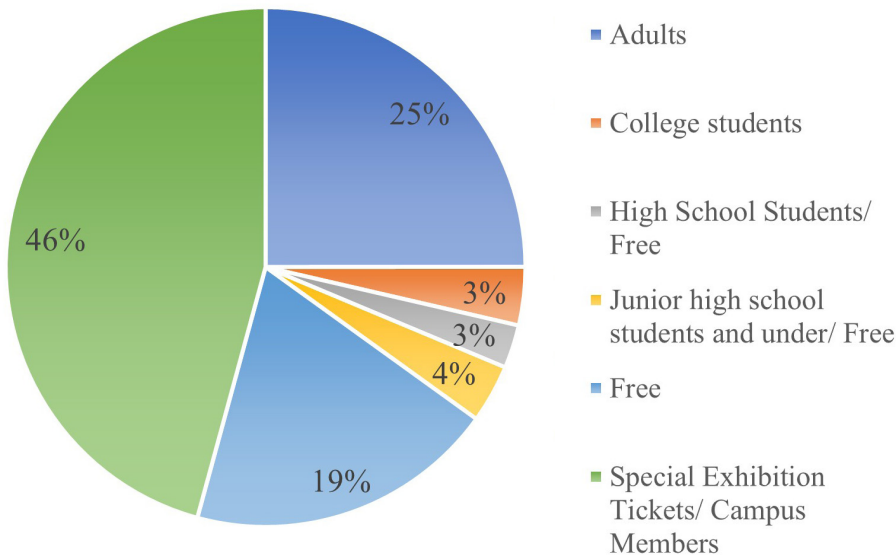
enjoying greater flexibility in foreign currency usage.²⁷ Additional benefits, including enhanced visibility, increased circulation, exhibitions as original news content, and opportunities for reader engagement, also contributed to the expansion of these ventures.²⁸ NMWA has also held many co-organized exhibitions since its first, *Masterpieces of the Ex-Matsukata Collection* (1960), held in partnership with *The Asahi Shimbun*.²⁹ This system, initially led by newspapers, came to include television stations from the 1970s, and as for NMWA, the first exhibition co-organized with a broadcasting company was the *Vincent van Gogh* Exhibition in 1976, co-organized by *The Tokyo Shimbun*, *The Chunichi Shimbun*, and *Chubu-Nippon Broadcasting Co., Ltd.*

Under this framework, nearly all exhibition expenses are borne by the co-organizers—typically media corporations—who also receive the majority of the associated revenue.³⁰ While these companies assume the financial risks, they also recognize the significance and benefits described above. For the museum, this arrangement allows it to present large-scale, high-quality exhibitions and secure a stable income stream without incurring significant financial risk. In this sense, NMWA's partnerships with mass media have played an important role in expanding Japan's audience for Western art.³¹

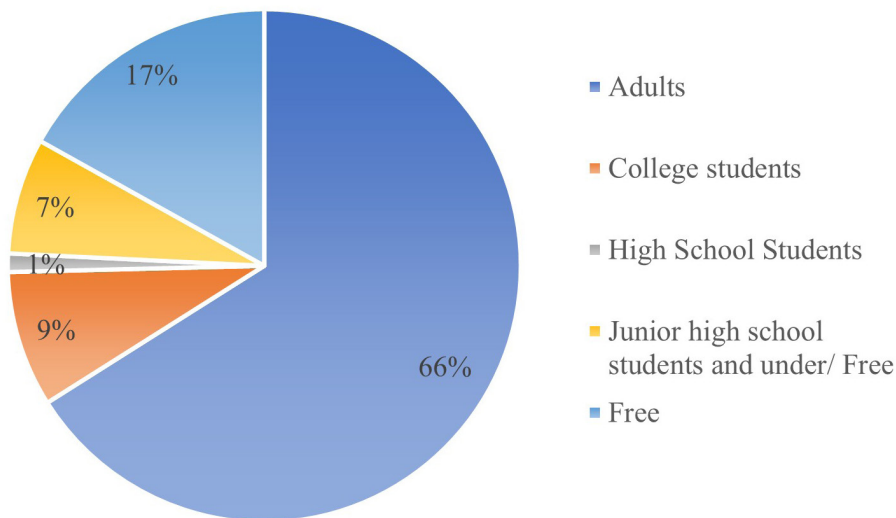
However, since the 2000s, transformations in the media landscape driven by the rise of the internet, changes in the environment surrounding the department store industry which functioned as an art exhibition venue in Japan, and



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Fig. 6: Visitors to the NMWA, FY2017-FY2024.

Fig. 7: Visitors to The Collection, FY2023.

Fig. 8: Visitors to Special Exhibitions, FY2023 .

budget cuts affecting local public museums—have altered the perspectives of co-organizers. As Kawahara notes, there has been “a stronger tendency to pursue business success more rigorously, rather than promoting cultural advancement as before.”³²

Traditionally, NMWA maintained a schedule of one Museum-organized Special Exhibition and one or two Co-organized Special Exhibitions annually. Among its notable Museum-organized Special Exhibitions were *Maillol* (1963), which was the first exhibition in Japan to introduce the master sculptor, *American Paintings 1730–1960: A Selection from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd* (1982)—Japan’s first comprehensive survey of American painting for 250 years—and *Rhetorik der Leidenschaft – Zur Bildsprache der Kunst im Abendland: Meisterwerke aus der Graphischen Sammlung Albertina und aus der Porträtsammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek* (1999), organized for the NMWA’s 40th anniversary and later toured to the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg. Nevertheless, because of budgetary and staffing limitations, since the 1980s most Museum-organized Special Exhibitions consisted primarily of prints and drawings borrowed from a single source. Following the museum’s conversion to an Independent Administrative Institution in 2001, and the resulting reductions in its annual budget, all Special Exhibitions held between fiscal year 2011 and 2022 were Co-organized Exhibitions.³³

The COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in 2020, revealed structural vulnerabilities in this model. For media

companies bearing the financial risk, the visitor capacity limits imposed to prevent infection meant capped admission revenues, rendering large-scale exhibitions unfeasible. Moreover, the museum’s main demographic — middle-aged and older visitors — was particularly affected by health concerns. Although attendance began to recover after the pandemic, rising transportation and labor costs, combined with the depreciation of the yen, have made exhibitions relying heavily on international loans increasingly risky. NMWA had perceived signs of this prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it came to a renewed recognition of the fact that Co-organized Special Exhibitions—which had long occupied a vital place in its revenue structure—could not be expected to continue on a sustained basis.³⁴

Relying exclusively on Co-organized Exhibitions also had operational implications. In such collaborations, the co-organizer typically undertakes comprehensive management of the entire project, assuming responsibility not only for publicity—including the use of their own media platforms—but also for a wide range of practical operations such as loan negotiations, transportation and insurance arrangements, ticketing, merchandise production and sponsorship coordination, while the museum concentrated primarily on curatorial work, on-site operations, and facility management. Consequently, NMWA had limited opportunity to build institutional expertise in producing large-scale exhibitions with international loans independently.

In response, and prompted by the pandemic, NMWA has re-evaluated its exhibition strategy and resumed organizing Special Exhibitions funded and produced internally.³⁵ Based on meticulous curatorial research and with curators' perspectives, these exhibitions—such as *Imaged and Imagined: Spain Seen through Prints from Japanese Collections* (2023), composed entirely of works from domestic collections, and *Does the Future Sleep Here? – Revisiting the Museum's Response to Contemporary Art after 65 Years* (2024), the first collaboration with contemporary artists since the museum's founding—represent the museum's renewed commitment to autonomous, research-driven exhibition-making.

II.5. Future Exhibitions

To ensure the sustainable continuation of museum-organized exhibitions, a robust financial foundation is indispensable. In 2025, NMWA established “The National Museum of Western Art Shibahara Keiichi Fund” through a donation of 500 million yen from the Japanese businessman Mr. Keiichi Shibahara, dedicated specifically to supporting future exhibition initiatives. Furthermore, since 2022, the museum has implemented structural reforms to enhance its exhibition management framework: (i) the establishment of the Office of Development and External Affairs, which assumed part of the exhibition production process, such as marketing, promotion and sponsorship, and (ii) the creation of new professional positions, including Registrar, Exhibition Manager, and Fundraising Officer.

These reforms represent an important step toward addressing a long-standing structural challenge faced by the national museums as identified by the Council for Cultural Affairs: “In large-scale exhibitions borrowing works from overseas, there exists an unavoidable structure of financial and personnel dependence on external organizations.”³⁶ The next challenge will be to accumulate institutional expertise in organizing special exhibitions and to ensure the continuity of such expertise amid frequent fixed-term employment and personnel transfers.³⁷

Several years after the pandemic, collaborative proposals from media companies have begun to recover. It remains valuable to pursue high-quality exhibitions through such partnerships, utilizing the extensive experience and networks built by media companies as co-organizers, while also reaching a broad audience. As NMWA continues to accumulate in-house experience in producing special exhibitions, it will be better positioned to “explore appropriate and effective forms of organic collaboration with media companies,” as recommended by the Council for Cultural Affairs.³⁸

At the same time, strengthening The Collection display is a strategic priority. By leveraging the research achievements and international networks of its curators and other staff, the museum can enhance the value of its permanent display—the only one in Asia offering a comprehensive overview of Western art history. Doing so is expected not only to diversify and stabilize admission revenues, which have long

depended heavily on special exhibitions, but also to stimulate other museum activities, including the museum shop, café, and sponsorship programs—thus acting as an institutional driver.

In conclusion, NMWA's trajectory—from its origins as a facility for the Matsukata Collection to its present role as a museum uniquely dedicated to Western art in Asia—illustrates its steady development in both collections and exhibitions. Since opening, its collection has expanded nearly twentyfold, it has organized more than 300 exhibitions, and total attendance, including The Collection displays, has reached approximately 48 million visitors, or about 51 million when off-site exhibitions are included. Adapting continuously to changes in the social environment surrounding museums, NMWA has contributed both to the fostering of an understanding of Western art and to the advancement of museum activities across Japan. Looking ahead, as Japan's sole national museum specializing in Western art, it will continue to fulfill its mission through acquisition, exhibition, and programming—continually redefining the nature of its collection and exhibitions in step with the times.

Acknowledgments:

The authors wish to express their sincere gratitude to Ms. Joy Yonebayashi for her careful proofreading of the English manuscript.

Endnotes:

- 1 Major recent publications on the Matsukata Collection include: Kobe City Museum 2016; Kawaguchi, Jingaoka 2018; Kawaguchi, Jingaoka 2019; Jingaoka 2019.
- 2 Matsukata owned 80 oil paintings, 111 drawings, and 386 prints by Brangwyn.
- 3 For the relationship between Matsukata and Bénédictine, see Mathieu 2016.
- 4 On the Rodin sculptures in the Matsukata Collection, see Buley-Urbe 2002. For the *Gates of Hell* casts commissioned by Matsukata, see Mabuchi 2019.
- 5 See Yashiro 1958, p. 73, among other sources.
- 6 Yashiro 1972, p. 208.
- 7 Yashiro 1972, p. 205.
- 8 Jingaoka 2019, p. 17.
- 9 Oya 2010, p. 229.
- 10 For studies that examine the Ōhara Collection in comparison with the Matsukata Collection, see Miyazaki 2007, pp. 269-278; Kajiya 2020, pp. 279-280. For the Ōhara Collection, see also Minato 2002, p. 142.
- 11 For Matsukata's museum concept, see Minato 1984; Minato 2002; Oya 2010.
- 12 Kawaguchi 2017, pp. 9–10.
- 13 Kawaguchi 2017.
- 14 On the postwar disposition of the Matsukata Collection in France, see Lacambre 2019.
- 15 Other works retained in France include four by Gauguin, one by Courbet, three by Bonvin, three Cézanne watercolors, one watercolor by Moreau, one by Picasso, two by Soutine, and one by Marquet. Renoir's *Parisiennes in Algerian Costume or Harem* (P.1959-0182) was initially included on the list of works not to be returned, but was removed following repeated requests from the Japanese side. For further details on the circumstances surrounding the collection's return, see Taruki 1987–1989.
- 16 For NMWA's acquisition policy regarding Old Master paintings, see Kawase 2025.
- 17 This table is based on NMWA 2025 and NMWA 2026.
- 18 The medium-term plan is available (in Japanese) at the following site (accessed 25 February 2026): https://www.artmuseums.go.jp/corporate_info/gyoumu/chuki_keikaku.
- 19 In writing this chapter, the author drew extensively on NMWA 1989, NMWA 2009a and NMWA 2009b.
- 20 In the case of *La Joconde*, the venue was selected as the Tokyo National Museum because plans for a concurrent *Cézanne* exhibition at NMWA were already underway, and the Tokyo National Museum was considered more suitable for accommodating large visitor numbers, given its spacious forecourt and efficient internal circulation. Agency for Cultural Affairs 1975, p. 6.
- 21 Suyama 2023, p. 298.
- 22 Compared with an average of approximately 320,000 visitors to The Collection during fiscal years 2011–2015, attendance reached approximately 710,000 in fiscal year 2016 and about 600,000 in fiscal year 2017.
- 23 At the time of opening, the museum internally adopted a policy to decline requests for lending works from the Matsukata Collection for the time being. Instead, after a period devoted to organizing the works, one or two touring exhibitions would be scheduled each year at appropriate times, when deemed suitable. Until then, even individual works would not to be lent. Kamon 1968, pp. 168–169.
- 24 Fig. 6 is compiled from NMWA 2019; NMWA 2025, p. 58; NMWA 2026, p.66.

- 25 Fig. 7 and 8 are based on NMWA 2025, p. 58.
- 26 Co-organized exhibitions between national museums and media organizations have continued since the *Henri Matisse* Exhibition held at the Tokyo National Museum in 1951 and have persisted into the twenty-first century. Agency for Cultural Affairs 2025, pp. 12-13.
- 27 Suyama 2023, p. 300.
- 28 Kawahara 2025.
- 29 When NMWA presented the Matsukata Collection exhibition off-site, it created an optimal exhibition space within the Main Building, marking the beginning of co-organized exhibitions. Taruki 1987-1989, vol.2, pp. 158–159.
- 30 Agency for Cultural Affairs 2025, p.26.
- 31 Conversely, the disadvantages of co-organized exhibitions have also been noted. For example, the emphasis placed by co-organizers on revenue generation tends to increase promotional workloads and results in demanding negotiations at each stage of preparation, placing considerable strain on the responsible curators. Mabuchi 2021.
- 32 Kawahara 2025.
- 33 In 2001, as part of the central government's administrative reforms, NMWA, together with the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto; and the National Museum of Art, Osaka, became an independent administrative institution under the National Museum of Art. The transition was expected to enable more flexible and autonomous management, including the introduction of external funding.
- 34 Mabuchi 2021.
- 35 The museum's budget was not increased; rather, exhibitions were realized through reallocations from other projects or by securing independent sponsorship support.
- 36 Agency for Cultural Affairs 2025, p. 12-13. The Council for Cultural Affairs is responsible for research and deliberations on important cultural matters in response to requests from the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology or the Commissioner for Cultural Affairs.
- 37 Staff at the National Museum of Art are broadly divided into administrative and research personnel. Administrative staff are hired centrally by the headquarters and undergo cross-functional transfers every two or three years to gain wide-ranging institutional experience. In addition, a fixed-term specialist system exists for roles such as fundraising. Research positions include both permanent appointments and fixed-term research fellowships (three to five years). At NMWA, the total staff consists of 32 full-time (including fixed-term) and 14 part-time members (as of July 1, 2023).
- 38 Agency for Cultural Affairs 2025, p. 12-13.

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