

**PUBLIC SELECTION BASED ON QUALIFICATIONS AND INTERVIEW FOR THE AWARDING OF NO. 1 EXPERIENCED GRANT LASTING 24 MONTHS FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH PURSUANT TO ART. 22 OF LAW NO. 240/2010 AT THE DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, LITERATURES AND CULTURES (A.R.F. 10/N3 - CENTRAL AND EAST ASIAN CULTURES - A.D. L-OR/22 - JAPANESE AND KOREAN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES (TYPE B)**

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**RESEARCH PROJECT**

**Bunten to geijutsu (Bunten and the Fine Arts, 1912) Natsume Sōseki's view of modern Japanese art. Analysis of contents, translation and critical edition of the text**

**Research structure:** Department of Foreign languages, literatures and cultures

**Duration of the grant:** 24 months

**Scientific Area:** 10 - Antiquities, philology, literary studies, art history

**Academic recruitment field:** 10/N3 - Central and East Asian cultures

**Academic discipline:** L-OR/22 - Japanese and Korean languages and literatures

**Scientific Director:** Prof. Giuliano Bernini

**Objective:**

While writing novels and short stories, Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) also published editorials and essays on different topics. In 1912 he wrote for the Asahi newspaper a long article in twelve instalments entitled Bunten to geijutsu (Bunten and the Fine Arts). The text explains Sōseki's general views on the nature of art, the role of contemporary art and artists and discusses the work of artists on display at the sixth Art Exhibition, organized by the Ministry of Education from October 13 to November 17, 1912. Bunten is in fact the abbreviation for Monbushō Bijiutsu Tenrankai, "The Ministry of Education Art Exhibition". Sōseki is not, as he makes clear in his article, a professional art critic. He is an amateur who records his own spontaneous impressions. Nevertheless, the theoretical part is of great interest for understanding the state of art at his time and his personal view of art, noticeable also in his fictional works. Despite its importance, the article has attracted relatively little attention. Hence this research project aims to:

- study Bunten to geijutsu in order to point out the author's theoretical approach to modern Japanese art within the artistic and cultural context of the Meiji era;
- study Bunten to geijutsu in the wider context of Sōseki's oeuvre;
- translate Bunten to geijutsu and provide a complete set of notes for a possible critical edition in the future.

**Theoretical framework:**

This research project takes into consideration topics already discussed in critical studies concerning the influence of visual arts in Natsume Sōseki's fictional works (Yoon, 2015; Haga, 1990), but aims to clarify the theoretical framework expressed in Bunten to geijutsu. It will develop further the studies of Takashina (1990) and Kagesato (1980) to point out the author's personal view of Japanese modern art and its relationship with his literary narratives, suggesting new interpretations of the latter.

**Research project description:**

Painting and visual arts played an important role in the creation of modern Japanese literature. Natsume Sōseki, one of the most representative authors of the Meiji era (1868-1912), looked to painting for inspiration.

As an amateur painter himself, he had a passionate interest in the visual arts, from traditional Japanese artists to modern Western-style painters and Western artists such as the French Impressionists. He particularly liked the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites. He read John Ruskin (1819-1900) extensively -

his library contained the five-volume edition of *Modern Painters (1843-1860)* - and he cites Ruskin's aesthetics in his *Bungakuron (Theory of Literature, 1907)*.

Also, he made several references to art and artists in his stories. For example, he threaded the symbolism of *The Hireling Shepherd (1851)* by William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) into the tapestry of one of his masterpieces, *Sanshirō (Sanshirō, 1908)*. When Mineko bows her eyes on Sanshirō's face, he is reminded of the English word "voluptuous", used by his professor of aesthetics to describe the paintings of John Baptiste Greuz (1725-1805). However, while such references to famous painters or works of art in his novels have attracted the interest of many critics, not only in Japan, surprisingly little attention has been paid to Sōseki's observations on the Japanese visual arts of his time. His interest for contemporary Japanese art urged him to write in 1912 an article, *Bunten to geijitsu (Bunten and the Fine Arts)*, on the sixth art exhibition organized by the Ministry of Education of the Meiji government. The Bunten exhibitions, along the lines of the French Salon, were intended to present three different art categories: nihonga (Japanese-style modern painting), yōga (Western-style modern painting) and sculpture. An important change had come about in the organization of the Bunten exhibition held in 1912 - two sections for nihonga instead of one - and the exhibition attracted far more visitors than any previous exhibition. The poet and sculptor Takamura Kotarō (1883-1956) also reviewed it. In his article Sōseki explains his ideas on the nature of art, incidentally reflected in his stories, and discusses the role of Japanese contemporary art. He also takes into consideration the potential conflict between society and the artist. In his view a talented artist must be able to face resistance from society and still be willing to express his own personality: a conclusion prefigured in his essay *Bungei no tetsugakuteki kiso (The Philosophical Foundations of Literature, 1907)* and close to the one reached in *Watakushi no kojishugi (My Individualism, 1914)*. In view of the deepening conflict between society and the artist/intellectual in Meiji Japan, *Bunten to geijitsu* shows that Sōseki's insights into his time were profound.

**Key-words:**

Sōseki, bunten, Japanese literature and art

**Planned timing and schedule of activities:**

Preliminary Phase (1 year): Bibliographic study, theoretical and methodological setting of research

Phase 1 (6 months): Translation of the text, writing of the commentary on the text

Phase 2 (6 months): Writing of a paper based on the research results

**Originality and expected results:**

Through the analysis of *Bunten to geijutsu* the proposed research project seeks to make a significant contribution to the study of Sōseki's aesthetics and its relationship with the author's fiction. In addition, the translation of *Bunten to geijutsu* would be the first in Italian.

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