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Ayelet Zohar’s *Curious Case of the Camel in Modern Japan: (De)colonialism, Orientalism, and Imagining Asia* is a welcome addition to the growing body of animal-related scholarship about Japan. The existing work in this field is focused primarily on animals that have a close connection with some aspect of Japanese culture or society: whales, deer, dogs, monkeys, wild boars, et cetera. Zohar takes this line of inquiry in a different direction with her titular “curious case” of an animal that is neither native to Japan nor central to historical or contemporary cultural practices. Given its seeming unimportance, the relative frequency with which camel imagery is found in Japanese cultural materials of the last several centuries is worth exploring. Zohar does so skillfully in this beautiful and readable book, with fascinating stories and incisive interpretations of art, artifacts, and fiction.

What she finds in over four centuries of camel imagery is a reflection of the transformations of Japanese identity as defined through a process of understanding the self in relation to a particular Other. The title of the introductory chapter, “Camels: A Metonym for Asia in the Japanese Imagination,” perfectly encapsulates the book’s fundamental argument: that the visual depictions of camels in Japan symbolized attitudes about Asia that changed with perceptions of Japan’s own place in the region and the world. Zohar demonstrates the changing ways in which camels represented an Other that ranged over time from distant and exotic to familiar and subordinate, then hazily connected through long tradition. The camel is, therefore, “a tool for reading ... how national and colonial ideologies in Japan, from the eighteenth century onwards, position the Japanese nation-state in relation to the West, as well as how Japan’s views of Asia change” (p. 6).

The introduction includes analysis of an image of a camel inlaid on a lute that came to Japan during the Nara period, but the book’s focus is on the sixteenth century to the present. In the first chapter, addressing encounters with some of the
earliest European visitors, Zohar analyzes a pair of screens depicting camels and other animals being led by foreign peoples off a Portuguese ship. This context of “strange objects and unfamiliar humans” helps to associate the camel with the exotic “world of foreignness” (pp. 16-17), while the realist depiction of the animals suggests that the artist viewed a live camel. Later Edo-period drawings, copied from a Dutch natural history, were not only realist but also scientific in nature, reflecting a new scientific paradigm gaining ground with growing interest in knowledge imported from European sources.

After demonstrating the importance of foreign knowledge from Portugal and then the Netherlands, Zohar turns to the wide variety of visual and narrative depictions that proliferated in the years after two camels arrived in Nagasaki in 1821, tracing the evolution of these images from official recordings meant to be scientific and accurate to the romanticization of the creatures through misemono displays, souvenirs, and tales that connected them to themes of enduring love or assigned them protective powers and medicinal properties. The variety of materials and great assortment of images is one of the strengths of this chapter, as it builds a layered picture of the many meanings that people of the time attached to camels. An 1827 picture book, for instance, emphasized foreignness and exotica by associating camels with foreign caretakers and accoutrements. In contrast, other artists of the time (such as Maruyama Ōshin and Nakai Rankō) combined methods of Chinese literati painting with Western-style copperplate technique to produce realist paintings of “cute and affectionate animals” whose human-like traits “create an immediate intimacy with and closeness to the animals” (p. 79). As the latter example shows, changes in the depiction of camels were not only a matter of symbolism and the artists’ feelings about Asia but also the result of changing methods and styles. Around this time, imported European artworks carried with them the Orientalist sentiments of their producers, and camel depictions became part of the broader association of Japan with the modern, scientific West, in contrast to “ancient” and “traditional” Asia.

Representations of camels continued to move in that direction across the turn of the twentieth century, as Japan’s military victories against China and Russia changed popular perceptions of the nation’s place in the international order. Zohar analyzes this change within the context of rising nationalism and development of new artistic styles, including the inception of what would become known as Nihonga. With Japan’s imperialist expansion into China in the 1930s, camels were deployed as labor for the empire, which transformed them from exotic curiosities to “hardworking beasts of burden” (p. 105), serving as a means of transportation for tourists in Japan and for the military in northeast China. In this way, Zohar explains, the camel came to signify the expansion of Japanese identity from a marine nation to a terrestrial empire. This chapter does find some exceptions to standard wartime depictions, such as the paintings of Maruki Iri, whose visual and tactile focus on camels provided rare apolitical images.

The final chapter makes an important point about postwar nostalgia in finding both change and continuity with wartime aesthetics in the postwar years. Zohar argues that the romanticized views of an idealized Asia in Hirayama Ikuo’s paintings and murals of the Silk Road echo early Shōwa Pan-Asianism. By presenting a nostalgic view of Asia as a site of peaceful Buddhist connections, Hirayama’s images miss an opportunity to reckon with the past by concealing the violence of imperialist expansion and the bitter hatreds that resulted. Zohar notes a similar missed opportunity in the final project she discusses in the book, Noguchi Rika’s 2007 photo series, In the Desert. Situating Noguchi within “a generation known for their reluctance to relate to political and social matters” (p. 141), she faults the artist for maintain-
ing a distant, neutral position vis-à-vis her subject—the camel-breeding industry in the United Arab Emirates—and thus echoing past artists’ Orientalized depictions, instead of using her photographs to lay bare the human stories behind them.

This book offers a fresh perspective on representations of Japanese identity and perceptive readings of key examples of the numerous visual and narrative materials featuring camels from over four centuries. It is marred only by some small rhetorical flourishes with an outsized impact. First, given the extensive focus on the importance of international connections throughout the Edo period, the chapter 2 title, “Entering Closed Doors,” is somewhat jarring. Using the metaphor of “closed doors” foregrounds an outdated image of Edo Japan as “shut up” simply for the purpose of calling it into question and knocking down (yet again) the already battered sakoku straw man. Second, the personification of “Japan” as the subject is an easy shorthand (that all Japanologists must use from time to time), but its consistent use at points throughout the book has the effect of obscuring agency. For instance, in explaining that the camel is a metonym for Asia, Zohar states, “Japan positions itself beyond and above the continent of the ‘primitive’ and ‘undeveloped’” (p. 4). Later, in analyzing depictions of camels in displayed in zoos, Zohar writes that such displays were “one of the methods Japan used to signal its superiority over Asia and to emerge as the leader of the continent after having been a devoted follower for centuries” (p. 98). Such statements suggest an intentionality on the part of some unified entity. While camels can be seen as part of the propaganda of Japanese empire, the erasure of agency muddles the story. I suppose the argument is partly about the ways artists both respond to and help form a zeitgeist, but also about how we should understand their art in the context of the times. However, assigning responsibility to “Japan” allows for such questions to be glossed over.

That said, this is a lovely book that will be enjoyed by anyone interested in animal studies, art history, or the formation of national identity in modern Japan. The copious images, large and in vibrant color, are not only a pleasure to look at but also an essential part of the book’s arguments, as the main points of every section are supported with visual evidence.
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