EAST IS EAST, and West is West, but, Kipling's pronouncement at the height of the British Raj notwithstanding, the two great regions of the world have been meeting artistically and intellectually for a long, long time. Long enough, at least, for American modern artists to have eagerly soaked up some of the defining philosophic and esthetic principles of the once-exotic "Orient."

That premise lies at the heart of "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989," now on view at the Guggenheim Museum in New York [through Apr. 19]. The exhibition's title is taken from a 1977 book of the same name, a collection of "cut-ups" by the Beat writers William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, whose spontaneous method of composition, using randomly selected texts and images (including Gysin's pseudo-Arabic calligraphic squiggles), paralleled American artists' unpredictable blendings of art-making approaches and techniques, derived from Asian sources, which often yielded results that are more than the sum of Eastern and Western ingredients. Very big—and some critics have suggested, somewhat unwieldy—"The Third Mind" goes way beyond familiar, art-history factoids about 19th-century Japanese woodblock prints, with their quirky perspectives and saturated colors, striking wide-eyed French Impressionists with a coup de foudre. Instead, with some 260 works by 114 American and Asian-American artists, the show focuses on instances in which U.S.-based practitioners have explored inspiring ideas from Japan, China, India and other parts of Asia—primarily through translated texts or the sharing of personal travel notes and research—and incorporated them into their own practices.

"The Third Mind" charts that contact, over more than a century, right up to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, which made possible a new era of rampant globalization. The recent upsurge of economic power in the East—last September, China became the U.S. government's biggest creditor—is probably not something that Alexandra Munroe, the principal curator of "The Third Mind," could have foreseen when she began developing the exhibition a decade ago. However, as part of the cultural-political backdrop against which this survey has been unveiled, the trend contributes greatly to the show's timeliness. Moreover, Munroe's presence on the Guggenheim's curatorial staff signals the art establishment's recognition of Asia's impressive rise. A specialist in Japanese modern and contemporary art, Munroe was appointed the Guggenheim's first-ever senior curator of Asian art in 2006, becoming (according to Guggenheim officials) the first curator in her field in any major modern- or contemporary-art museum in the U.S. or Europe.

In part, that appointment reinforces the museum's penchant for international programming as a means of promoting its global institutional brand. But it also recognizes Munroe's past curatorial achievements in her field, including the organization of "Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky" (Yokohama Museum of Art and Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, 1994-95), "Yes: Yoko Ono" (Japan Society, New York, 2000) and—in collaboration with artist Takashi Murakami—"Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subcultures" (Japan Society/Public Art Fund, New York, 2005). Even as "The Third Mind" records what Munroe recently referred to as...
RESPONDING TO EASTERN IDEAS, WHISTLER, DOW AND CASSATT ABSTRACTED THEIR SUBJECTS INTO GEOMETRIC SHAPES AND FLAT COLOR PASSAGES THAT EVOKE THE AMBIGUOUS DEPTHS OF UKYO-E.

In the 1870s, after U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry's "black ships" sailed into Tokyo Bay and forcibly opened Japan to the West, even more Buddhist-centered ideas about phallic implications and the transcendence of the physical body were filtering out from isolated island communities. In 1875, U.S. Army Lieutenant Charles Loring Elliott published his observations of Japanese art and society, providing an introduction for Western artists to the aesthetic qualities of Japanese art. In 1877, the American artist T. W. Wood visited Japan and wrote about the beauty of Japanese art and culture, influencing many American artists to seek out new forms of expression.

In the late 1870s, the American painter Winslow Homer visited Japan and was inspired by the country's artistic traditions. He created a series of paintings that were admired by other American artists, including James McNeill Whistler. In 1880, Homer exhibited his work in London, where it was well-received. This exposure to Japanese art had a significant impact on Homer's later work, which became more abstract and expressionistic.

Another important figure in the development of American art during this period was Mary Cassatt. Born in Pennsylvania, Cassatt moved to France in 1877 and became involved with the Impressionist movement. Like many other American artists of her time, Cassatt was drawn to the beauty and simplicity of Japanese art, which she admired for its economy of line and its emphasis on flat color. She created a number of paintings and prints inspired by Japanese themes, which were widely admired and collected by American connoisseurs.

The "Third Mind" includes a small section on Asian-related currents in modern poetry and dance theater. In 1913, for example, a year after the posthumous publication of Fokine's Russian ballets' scores and Japanese Art, the ballet scholar's widow asked Ezra Pound to edit his remaining manuscripts, including his writings about Japan's Noh theater and his translations of Chinese classical poetry. Inspired by this material, Pound began to develop a new kind of poetry in English. Coinciding and marked by free verse, it influenced T.S. Eliot's composition of The Waste Land (1922), the great modernist poet that incorporates references to ancient Hindu scriptures. W.B. Yeats, moved by Fokine's Noh material, wrote a play. At the same time, the boxer's brief stay in England in 1913, featured the Japanese performer Noh Kato. The exhibition contains a black-and-white photograph made around 1915 by Arthur Wesley Dow, showing Kato in a Noh costume from the play. In 1923, he introduced the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi to choreographer Martha Graham, Noguchi's set designs for Graham's groundbreaking productions like Frontier (1925), seen here in a 1925 film clip, brought his characteristic austerity to the modern-dance stage.
example, in the late 1930s, in dialogue with abstract painter Mark Tobey and perhaps most famously in New York, in the late 1950s, with artists who went on to form the event-oriented Fluxus group, several of whom (including Dick Higgins, George Brecht and Jackson Mac Low) took Cage's music-composition course at the New School for Social Research. In some of its most vivid displays of Asian technical influences on American music, the "Third Mind" presents a large sampling of abstract works inspired by East Asian calligraphy. Examples include Tobey's "white writing" paintings; Franz Kline's broad-brushed, black-on-white canvases; Robert Motherwell's slashes of black and colored lines on Japanese paper; and from his "Lyric Suite" (1965); and Bruce Marden's ink-on-paper "Cold Mountain Studies" (1988-90), which interpret classical Chinese texts (their characters written on brushes in vertical space) in eloquent, wiggly-squiggly forms. In 1966, critic Clement Greenberg charitably claimed that none of Ab-Fu's big guns, "least of all kîhe,' had left more than a cursory interest in Oriental art." However, "The Third Mind" properly argues that East Asian calligraphy may well have been the most pernicious influence on several generations of American abstractionists. For example, Philip Guston's black-ink-on-paper drawings from the early 1950s hold close to the mass-building and composition-shaping he employed in his abstractions of that time. Likewise, sculptor David Smith's twig-thin, abstract forms in bronze evoke the simultaneously


Right, George Giog- Giacometti's "Square" and Henry Moore's "Crouching Figure," c. 1950. Images courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Fine Art, London.

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That Asian—metaphysical, purge-your-self-and-pay—attention on attention, that heightened awareness of the so-called real external world and of the inner world of the spirit at the same time—courses through "The Third Mind" and finds its apotheosis in certain works of art whose subject appears to be consciousness itself. These include one of Ad Reinhardt's block paintings from the 1950s, which he described as "pure, abstract, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relativity, disinterested;" a Yayoi Kusama "Infinity

Beast poetry in college and later got to know Beast poet Allen Ginsberg personally. Through such encounters, she became familiar with Buddhist thought and embraced it herself. The legacy of earlier generations of American artists who had looked to Asia for inspiration, Anderson recently observed, came "directly from Buddhism," and, simply put, "always placed an emphasis on paying attention." Thus, the roots of Minimalist art: "I'm surprised that it was never described as 'American Buddhist art,' because a lot of the artists were Buddhists." Their works, Anderson added, fostered "ways of looking at the ordinary and being able to suspend time." The influences came from another place, and that place, ultimately, was India—from the fox and the power of meditation. Included in the exhibition as both an installation and a performance site is La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's Dream House (1963-present), a sounds-and-light environment in which an endless electronic drone and colored lights
MUNROE’S EXHIBITION TRACKS THE DISSOLUTION OF TRADITIONAL ARTWORKS FROM THEIR PHYSICAL FORMS AS PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS, OR SCULPTURES INTO LITTLE MORE THAN EPHEMERAL EVENTS OR THEIR DOCUMENTATION.

Above, Linda Montano mourning the death of her husband in a homemade, chart-taking rite that taps into Hinduism, Buddhism and Gnosticism. Less effectively, Arni Hamilton’s metaphor for the literal transmission of influences from East to West, the sculptural installation human carriage (2003), reprezently sends things chopped up, bound together pages of print whipping down the entire length of the Guggenheim spire on a metal rail, occasionally ringing bells as they pass.

The exhibition ends with Tetsujiro Hasei’s documentation of his emblematic Punching the Time Clock on the Hour, One-Year Performance (1981-85), in which the New York-based, Taiwanese-American performance artist, unfurled like a woman, dissolved in (meanwhile) every hour on the hour, every day, for one year. Still photos and a time-lapse film, together capturing his hair growth and mounting fatigue, and 1981 daily time-punch cards bear witness to Hasei’s endurance for the sake of an artwork that was so intangible as its subject itself, the passing of time.

It’s a work that offers the most dramatic illustration of Munroe’s thesis that Asian notions about the nature of reality and what aesthetic experiences could or should be ultimately led many American artists to abandon the physical artwork altogether. It might also be a question for Pieck’s postmodernists: where is Marci DuChamp in all of this? Don’t conceptual art’s aailed European founder celebrate the conventional work of art, replacing the hallowed art object with the primary of its motivating idea nearly a century ago?

“Of the artists in the exhibition had documented the ways in which Asia or with Asian ideas,” Munroe noted. “Cage wore Asia on his sleeve, like we know about Zen Buddhism. But DuChamp did not express interest in Asia, and his gesture was not one about transcendentals, but rather one of anti-art, criticizing the established art system.” By contrast, Cage and other American artists whose works “The Third Mind,” examined as deeply look to Asia for inspiration and allowed their findings to change their attitudes and creators in what Munroe calls “spiritually uplifting and ever-questinynhill ways.” Such notions, she points out, are anathema to the iron-leaning, pome docurers invited to DuChamp.

Munroe suggested that “The Third Mind,” which opened as President Barack Obama took office, reflects a “Haye interpretation of America’s cultural identity, one that is more aligned with the United States’ Pacific coast and with Asian cultures, and that sees Obama making a historic move for inclusiveness beyond the traditional white establishment.” Now, however, in the Internet and globalization era in which, as Robert Irwin once remarked, art is no longer made “art” but merely proceeds “culture,” are Americans really all that much more aware of Asia—its people, cultures, history, and politics? Yoko Ono observed: “I think Asia is still a mystery element in Western life, and that’s okay in a way.”

For Arliss Knowles, that enigmatic quality of Asia represents something “timeless and eternal.” “When people need that, they go get it,” she said. “They find it, and it’s always there.”


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