

# Charles Phelps Taft Research Center at the University of Cincinnati Center Fellowship Grant Application

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Each section (I-IV) should be placed at the start of a new page. All required materials must be included in a single document, uploaded to the electronic submissions system, no later than 5PM on the published day of the deadline. Intradepartmental review and two external letters of support are required for this program. Applicants should submit their application with enough time to receive all letters of support prior to the close of the deadline. Taft does not accept an obligation to review applications that have not received the required letters of support by the close of the deadline.

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## I. General Information

- a. Name: XXXXXXXX
- b. M#: XXXXXXXX
- c. Department: Asian Studies/Department of German Studies
- d. Position: A
- e. Project title: "A New Realism: Modern Japanese Art Criticism of the Interwar Years" (tentative)
- f. Potential external funding that might arise from this project:
  - Japan Art History Forum First Book Subvention Prize (\$4,000 maximum)
  - Short-term Research Travel to Japan, Association for Asian Studies (\$5,000 maximum)
- g. Intended results of a funded research, e.g., concrete plans for publication or conference presentations:
  - I have been invited by Brill to submit the full manuscript.
  - I will present my findings at international venues such as the College Art Association conference or the Association for Asian Studies conference.

## II. Taft Grant History of the Last Five Years

Note: I was not eligible for the Taft grant prior to 2015 because my tenure home was in the College of DAAP.

2019            Taft International Conference Grant (\$2,700)

                  Taft Research Support Grant (\$3885.50)

2018            Taft Competitive Lecture Grant (\$2,606)

2017            Taft Research Support Grant (\$6,338)

2016

### III. Project Proposal

I am in the advanced stage of a book manuscript, “A New Realism: Modern Japanese Art Criticism of the Interwar Years,” which reveals that naturalistic oil painting evolved into an artistically eclectic style and a powerful ideological tool in pre-WWII Japan. My analysis of these realist painters will highlight their complex roles in the art milieu as well as interwar Japanese society at large. One was Proletarian Realism (Fig. 1), a Japanese equivalent of Soviet Socialist Realism, by painters affiliated with the Communist Party. Their works represented the exploitation of the working class in a strongly literal manner to awaken it to the economic disparity and class hierarchy in Japanese society. The other was then known as “New Realism,” which was a genre painting that portrayed the Westernized middle-class lifestyle in an eclectic style, combining naturalistic representation and the Fauvistic colors and strong two-dimensionality (Fig. 2). Both the practitioners and leftist critics regarded these types of realism as more inclusive and accessible than avant-garde art, which allegedly jeopardized the figurative art and alienated the majority of exhibition goers (Fig. 3). New Realist painters expected to counteract the elitism of avant-garde art and revitalize naturalistic painting as a wholesome, effective means of promoting social equality.

By focusing on the re-emergence of realism during the 1930s, my text foregrounds the significant transition in modern Japanese visual culture. When Western-style painting was first introduced to Japan in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was linked to empiricism and utilitarianism; by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it gained recognition as a legitimate mode of artistic expression that urged the Japanese to re-examine their art, the artists’ individuality, and their role in a modernizing nation-state. In the next few decades, newer art movements such as Cubism and Futurism eclipsed the intellectual and artistic cogency of realist painting to the audience. Proletarian Realism, while short-lived as a movement, renewed interest in realism both inside and outside the leftist milieu during the interwar years. At first, it served as the means of propaganda for the Communist Party; however, it came to inspire some mainstream artists to re-evaluate realism as an artistic style. Their images of laborers won critical acclaim (Fig. 4), while others, such as Yasui Sōtarō (fig. 2), began to re-adopt it in more innovative ways, acknowledging that

realism was not merely a conservative mode of painting. I will examine this major transition in the role of realism in modern Japan and the role of art criticism therein.

This study takes a close look at the production and reception of Proletarian Realism and New Realism by using the critical commentary by professional writers and the artists whose images they discussed. Particularly important is the Association for the Critics of New Art, a progressive group of critics who viewed their writings not only as a commentary on contemporary art but also as a means of social critique and self-expression. I treat its members' publications as an independent body of work, carefully contextualizing them and highlighting their agency. Although it is an atypical approach to modern Japanese art history, it will be an effective way to uncover the dynamic intellectual dialogue between artists and critics that gave rise to Proletarian Realism and New Realism. These writers' work also reveals that becoming an oil painter or an art critic in prewar Japan required a major re-examination of their cultural and intellectual identities.

## Chapter Outline

### **Part One: Proletarian Realism**

#### Chapter One: Neo-realism as the Precursor of Proletarian Realism

- Transition from avant-garde art to politically radical figurative art
- Disharmony between the anti-bourgeois ideology and the Post-Impressionist style

#### Chapter Two: Proletarian Realism (1929-1934)

- Discovery of the subject matter
- Residual Cézannism
- Slogans: "Activization of Subject Matter" and "Bolshevization of Art"

### **Part Two: New Realism by "Fellow Travelers"**

#### Chapter Three: Maeta Kanji's Analytical Realism

- Philosophical basis: French Materialism and Courbet's Realism
- 3 Fundamentals of Maeta's Realism
- Cézanne's concept of *Réalisation*
- *Two Laborers* (1923) and *Carpenter's Family* (1928)

#### Chapter Four: Hashimoto Yaoji's Humanitarian Realism

- The Rise of the "Social School"
- *A New Shift* by Hashimoto Yaoji
- Hashimoto's ideological transition

#### Chapter Five: Tsuda Seifū's New Realism

- Emphasis on the immediate, neutral, unbiased portrayal of objects
- Ideological controversy over *New Parliament* in fall 1931

#### Chapter Six: Broader Repercussions New Realism

- Realism Tea Party: an open forum to discuss realism as a vehicle for social commentary
- Special feature article on "Theme Art"
- Arrests of artists Tsuda Seifū and Ozaki Saburō

This manuscript will make significant contributions to my field because it rectifies the imbalance in the scholarship on modern Japanese art history. The dominant narrative of modern Japanese art history has focused on two prominent realist movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, perpetuating a misconception that realism went through a lapse until it was given a highly public outlet in war documentation painting during the 1940s. My research contextualizes the re-adoption of realism in interwar oil painting. Furthermore, this study has the potential to serve a broader audience outside Asian art history. It critiques the meta-narrative of modern art history by shedding light on the unique relationship between realism and modernism in Japanese art. Research on modern Western art and literature often posits realism and modernism in a dichotomous relationship. However, my manuscript offers a new, non-Western perspective, revealing that modernism and realism were equally relevant vehicles for social commentary to artists. It will also reveal parallels to similar calls for realism in contemporary Western art, such as the American Scene and Neue Sachlichkeit, spotlighting the ways in which realism, one of the most universal artistic styles across cultures, was enlisted to address social issues specific to various regions in the world.

In addition, this project fits with my established record of research in a crucial way. I have been researching pre-WWII Japanese art history with special concentration on art criticism for the last sixteen years. I was fortunate to have participated in some of the landmark publications in the field, such as the fall 1995 issue of the *Art Journal*, which was the first extensive coverage of modern Japanese art history in an English-language scholarly journal, and *Since Meiji: Perspectives on the Japanese Visual Arts, 1868-2000* (2011), the first survey book on modern and contemporary Japanese art to be published in English since 1974. My research of modern

Japanese art criticism has addressed a variety of topics, but realism, identity, and modernity have been the consistent themes. This study is the culminating project that addresses the interplay of these topics.

Serving as a Taft Center Fellow would enable me to move forward my project, which is inherently multi-disciplinary. Not only does it address the history of art, it also intimately deals with the history of thought, particularly Marxism, and issues of representation, identity, and modernity, which have relevance to a wide range of disciplines. Furthermore, because it addresses the globalization of modern Japanese art, it has implications beyond Asian Studies. Interaction with Center fellows in different disciplines would push me to consider different avenues of investigation, which would no doubt enrich my research. This experience would no doubt contribute to my other major project at the moment, which is the collaboration with various faculty members in A&S to develop the interdisciplinary, trans-national center for cultural studies. The Center Fellowship would also be valuable for me because of my professional history in Arts and Sciences, to which I transferred from DAAP in 2015. Since my current unit has only three research-active faculty members including myself, I very much look forward to scholarly interaction with colleagues with overlapping research interests at the Taft Center. In particular, believe I would be able to contribute to the multi-disciplinary intellectual environment at the Center through my background in visual analysis. As an art historian specializing in modern non-western art, I hope to bring to the table, as it were, a pair of eyes that sees things that the others may not.

I have been invited to submit a full manuscript to Brill. By fall 2020, I will turn in the copyedited manuscript to the editor, and by the end of 2020, I will obtain copyright permissions. I also intend to conduct additional research in Japan in order to address the reviewers' feedback. I plan to apply for grants to cover both the copyright fees and the research trip. I expect to submit a revised final draft by spring 2021 and form a panel for a conference presentation in early 2021.



Fig. 1: Otsuki Genji, *Labor Funeral*, 1929. canvas.



Fig. 2: Yasui Sōtarō, *Portrait of a Woman*. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 3: Okamoto Tōki, *Untitled*, 1923. canvas.



Fig. 4: Hashimoto Yaoji, *A New Shift*, 1931. Oil on canvas.





