Teenage Tokyo: Youth and Popular Culture in Japan

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(a kitchen and laundry) were separated from it. Archibald and Molly McCrea substantially changed the house in the 1930s by raising the roof to add a third floor, enlarging the dependencies, and linking them to the main house. The McCreas were advocates of the Colonial Revival, a movement that romanticized the colonial past. Its followers selectively identified aesthetic elements and values to suit their own times. Colonial revivalists not only adopted 18th-century architecture and furnishings but saw themselves as heirs to colonial patterns for society and politics as well.

Once in the house, the visitor is overwhelmed with anecdotes about the Burwells, McCreas, and others who lived in or visited the house. Although the stories about the 18th century may well be inventions of the Colonial Revival, this is not how they are presented. One such story is the tale of the "refusal room," the room where marriage proposals to Mary Cary from George Washington and to Rebecca Burwell from Thomas Jefferson are said to have been rejected, because in both cases the women felt that the men would not amount to anything.

As the visitors are taken through each room, the interpreter describes how the room looked or was used during the Burwells' time and how it changed under the McCreas. Change is the dominant theme for all the rooms, with the exception of the spaces once occupied by the household staff. Visitors are told that in both the 18th and 20th centuries the household staff was all Black—slaves in the 1700s and wage laborers with few opportunities for advancement in the 1930s. This statement is one of few links made between the mansion and the slave quarter exhibition.

The interpretation of the house attempts to integrate the people who lived there and their activities with the architecture and furnishings. But these people are presented as individuals, not part of a much larger context. No attempt is made to address the larger social and political character of the Colonial Revival, which in its praise of America's colonial heritage actively discriminated against many ethnic minorities and immigrants.

The exhibition program at Carter's Grove is an ambitious effort to interpret 400 years of history. It combines archeological and architectural sites with reconstructions, museum displays, living history, and audio and video programs to create three historical vignettes. Despite individual weaknesses, each vignette is a self-contained activity that conveys important ideas. Taken together, they form three disparate experiences that are philosophically unlinked to a major theme. The common bond that unites them is the location—Carter's Grove—where all these events and activities actually took place sometime in the past. This association alone, however, is not enough to make the museum experience a coherent one.

Given Colonial Williamsburg's reputation as a leader in public interpretation of American life, new ways are likely to be found to improve conditions in specific exhibitions and in connecting them. It is also likely that the next phase in the interpretation of this rich historic resource has yet to unfold.

Teenage Tokyo: Youth and Popular Culture in Japan. A multimedia exhibit at the Children's Museum, Boston, MA. *Leslie Bedford,* exhibition developer. *Dan Spock,* exhibition designer. *Ryoko Tokunaga,* exhibition coordinator. Opened April 12, 1993.

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The Children's Museum in Boston has a national reputation for innovative exhibits in science, social studies, and creative arts. One of its better-known components is its Japan Program, which has been part of the museum since its founding in 1913. Harvard University located its East Asia Outreach Program at the museum in 1976, and in 1979, a full-scale urban merchant house was installed to provide a glimpse of domestic life in an older neighborhood of Kyoto.

The current exhibit, "Teenage Tokyo," moves in a very different direction. It is an ambitious and laudable attempt to characterize contemporary Tokyo through the sensibilities and tastes of teenagers as a mass-mediated, fast-paced, and highly commercialized youth culture. (It should be noted that the exhibit's target "teenager" is rather narrowly a *young* teenager—in particular, a junior high school student.) To East Asianists, it is a welcome alternative to the more common Orientalizing emphasis on "folk arts" and "traditional life." Because the show is a powerful vehicle in the museum's active school and community outreach network, both teachers and museum professionals should find it an instructive example of how exhibits can be related to educational extension programs.

"Teenage Tokyo" was conceived and developed over six years by the director of the museum's Japan Program, Leslie Bedford. The museum has dedicated 3,500 square feet of space on its fourth floor for the exhibit, which will remain for three years. It will then be reorganized as a traveling exhibit for other American museums.

The flow of the exhibit takes the entering visitor from a downtown Ginza subway platform onto an actual Tokyo subway car for a noisy simulated trip to the upscale commercial-residential center of Shibuya. Disembarking, one's senses continue to be assaulted with the noise and neon of several garish window displays—discount consumer electronics, teenage weekend fashions, and such current consumer fads as the Chibi Maruko Chan product line, fast foods, and so on.

From there, the visitor proceeds down a hallway "street" of life-size color posters of Japanese teenagers, each introduced with a brief autobiographical statement. Their various profiles will surprise and educate anyone whose notion is of a conforming and homogenous Tokyo youth population. At the end of the picture gallery are several full-size figures with face cutouts, allowing visitors to put themselves in the uniform of a department store employee, junior high school student, sushi chef, and the like. There is also a six-foot tall replica of a sumo wrestler, against which kids can test their strength by trying to push it back on its track. Fun perhaps, but to this nonteenager, it smacks more of a carnival sideshow than museum exhibit. Indeed, its point is unclear; among sports, sumo is not particularly popular with teenagers. Unfortunately, the sport that is—baseball—is relegated to a small, unimaginative display case of souvenir items that is easily ignored by visitors. The designers might better have applied their considerable talents to baseball, perhaps by surrounding the artifacts with a video monitor showing the national high school tournament, scenes of team practice, and professional games at Tokyo Dome.

At that point in the exhibit, one has a choice of direction. If one continues straight and around to the right, one enters a series of interactive activity corners, suggestive of the game arcades, coffee shops, music parlors, and other hangouts of Tokyo teenagers. Popular music is presented in the form of a "karaoke box," a soundproof box where visitors can record and play back their favorite pop tunes—a lucrative boom in Japan today. There is also a video jukebox for selecting and viewing music videos that are currently popular in urban Japan. A language corner has a computer that leads a visitor through phrases, body language, and common onomatopoeic words; a second monitor prompts U.S.-Japanese comparisons in teenage life ("why is someone popular in class?").

An animation area features the comic books and television and movie cartoons that so thoroughly infuse the worlds of teenagers (and adults) in contemporary Tokyo (and which have been so influential in U.S. and European animation art). A computer, for example, is programmed so the visitor can design animation sequence. There is also a 25-minute selection of seven famous postwar cartoons, from the famous Tetsuwa Atom that began in 1963 through a current delight, the robot cat Doraemon. And there is a generous sample of actual Japanese comic books lying about (not chained down), with an inviting space in which to browse through them. When we were there, they were all being read in the familiar hunched-over, book-in-the-face manner by Japanese teenagers—who were visitors themselves but could have easily been living exhibit statues. (Among the very creative curricular materials prepared to accompany the exhibit is a comic book done in the style of a Japanese comic book, which portrays four students at a Tokyo junior high school. It was written by an American comic writer, Jo Duffy, and illustrated by Japanese comic artist Takashi Oguro.)

If one turns the other direction from the picture gallery, one "heads home," which is to say, one passes neighborhood shops, a school display, and vending machines on the way to "Tetsuo's Room." This is a full-scale study room of a 16-year-old boy and his younger sister and brother in a Tokyo apartment. It uses a technology called "Object Theater" to animate the room's furnishings, toys, and other items in a sound-light show that narrates the daily routines of the siblings. The visitors I spoke with found it quite effective; in fact, I think that it creates identifiable and situated characters, who could have been used more extensively throughout the exhibit to integrate its various sections.

Perhaps unavoidably, the exhibition is awkwardly oriented in the museum. My family and, it seemed, most other visitors on that crowded Saturday approached the fourth-floor exhibit via the museum's main central stairway. Thus, we came first upon Tetsuo's Room. It was only later that I realized the exhibit's intended entrance—the subway platform—had to be approached from a poorly marked south staircase.

Nonetheless, this is an intelligently and imaginatively conceived effort to convey the vibrancy of Japanese teenage life—to speak *from* the activities that engage their enthusiasms (and their cash) *to* the interests and concerns of young American visitors. It is not, and obviously not intended to be, a critical commentary on teenage life in 1990s Tokyo. The junior high school theme conveniently avoids the tracking that takes place by means of the high school entrance exam. Delinquency, parental pressures, gender stereotyping, and other disturbing aspects of adolescent experience are muted. Nor does the exhibit draw attention to the enormous economic interests that shape consumer life and teenage style in contemporary Japan—the huge publishing houses, multinational recording companies, and other media conglomerates; the prohibitively expensive real estate market; the concentrated powers of the large advertising agencies and department store chains; and the distortions of Tokyo-centrism in the society at large.

Nor does it reflect much on its chosen premise of a "global popular youth culture." The exhibit developer, Leslie Bedford, argues sensibly that it is possible "to teach about another culture through the things we have in common, rather than the things that are different" (Boston *Sunday Herald*, April 3, 1992, p. 41). However, the recent video documentary, *The Japanese Version* (Center for New American Media, 1991), and Joseph Tobin's edited volume *Re-made in Japan* (Yale University Press, 1992) demonstrate just how complex and contentious is Japan's "domestication" of global style and commodities. The comic book, for example, is a shared medium, and yet what comics convey and how they convey meanings vary importantly across the two societies. Only the more thoughtful teenage visitors will be provoked to ponder those differences and their cultural implications.

The Circle of Life: Rituals from the Human Family Album. *David Cohen*, ed. San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1991. 248 pp.

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This is a folio-size book of photographs, commercially produced in a splendid layout, with nearly adequate text to accompany the images. Assembled by editor David Cohen, the book deals with life-crisis rites. Its four parts follow the standard trajectory: "Birth and Childhood," "Initiation and Adolescence," "Marriage and Adulthood," and "Death and Remembrance."

Aiming to affirm the human family, the book follows squarely the tradition of sentimental photography of Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* (Simon and Schuster, 1957). The result, however, is more sophisticated. Here anthropology is marketed to a public questing for symbols and meaning. The point of view is that we may have no religion or several but we *must* have rites of passage, a tenet with which I wholeheartedly agree. We neglect ritual to our peril. Thus, for example, we see a secular retirement party touchingly captured as a retiring executive, seated at a table, is surrounded by his office staff.

These photographers may be professionals, but they are not professional ethnographers. The coverage, while worldwide, is not that of an ethnographic atlas, nor, indeed, is there much distribution across levels of sociocultural organization. But there is an ongoing contrast between civilized and modern and primitive. Western customs, including erstwhile Soviet rites, get full play.

I have defined language as a set of catalytic messages that govern how systems go about processing matter and energy to maintain themselves, and, eventually, their species (*Cultural Anthropology*, Collegiate Press, 1992). Our relevant languages include the genetic code, nonverbal gestures and vocalizations, speech, writing, the graphic arts, photography, and now, electronic communications.

How does this volume use the language of photography? It is a collection of stills; thus, it captures moments of rituals. There are very few sequences of shots. Therefore, rituals are caught in single frames that stand for the entire lengthy process. The best thing about the book is, indeed, its movement through the life cycle, the way the various segments move into each other. One theme that emerges, perhaps unwittingly, is the symbolism of white in female clothing. We see it in first communion dresses, then bridal ones. Indeed, the bridal shot repeated to represent marriage in the square of four shots on the cover is also reminiscent of death, for the bride has covered her face with a shroudlike white veil, and is pushing against it with a white-gloved hand. Again, under "Death" we see an unmarried Romanian peasant woman, arrayed like a bride in her coffin, with a young man saying wedding vows by the corpse so that she may not be buried "unfulfilled." Later we see an infant in Ecuador prepared for burial in white clothes. These shots do