

Ernest Francisco Fenollosa

1853–1908

Orientalist and Art Critic



Ernest Francisco Fenollosa was an art historian, professor of philosophy and political economy, and curator of Asian art. He was the son of Manuel Fenollosa, a classically trained Spanish musician, and Mary Silsbee, a member of a prominent family in Boston, Massachusetts. After graduating from Harvard in 1874, Fenollosa studied philosophy and divinity at Cambridge University before he enrolled in the art school of the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston. In 1878 Fenollosa was invited to travel to Japan and teach political economy and philosophy at the Imperial University in Tokyo. During his years in Japan, Fenollosa helped to preserve the Japanese traditional arts that had been neglected in the nation's drive towards modernization. He also played a role in founding the Tokyo School of Fine Arts.

While completing the first inventory of Japan's national treasures, Fenollosa discovered ancient Chinese scrolls that had been brought to Japan centuries earlier. This finding inspired him to study Chinese art and calligraphy. He eventually concluded Japanese and Chinese painting emerged from the same aesthetic tradition. The emperor of Japan decorated Fenollosa with the orders of the Rising Sun and the Sacred Mirror. While he was in Japan, Fenollosa converted to Buddhism and changed his name to Tei-Shin.

Fenollosa returned to the United States in 1890 to serve as curator of Oriental arts at the MFA. During his tenure he organized the MFA's first exhibition of Chinese painting. He significantly advanced the study of Asian art in the United States and published *East and West: The Discovery of America and Other Poems* (1893) and *Masters of Ukiyoe* (1896), among other works. Fenollosa sold his own art collection to Charles Goddard Weld (1857–1911) with the condition that it would eventually go to the MFA, thus endowing the museum with one of first significant Asian art collections. In 1895 Fenollosa was ousted from his position as curator at the MFA after his scandalous divorce and immediate remarriage to Mary McNeill Scott (1865–1954). Fenollosa returned to Japan in 1897 as professor of English literature, only to return to the United States three years later.

Fenollosa passed away in 1908 in London en route to Japan. His ashes are buried at the Mii Temple in Kyoto. Prior to his death, Fenollosa had finished a draft of the two-volume *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, which his widow finalized and published in 1912.

Literature

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