The Japanese No-Body

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At the outset, a few preliminary remarks are needed to delimit the framework within which I shall develop the argument, prolegomena which must be kept in mind throughout:

• As for the time frame set down in the title of this conference, the view adopted here extends far beyond the past two centuries, as far back, in fact, as literary and pictorial evidence allows, including the Heian period that means. We thus have testimony ranging over a millennium, that shows how the body has been represented, or lets us infer how it seems, or looks, to have been perceived at the time. Such material allows us to follow the sequence of conceptional change in the long run, and to surmise how the mental and pictorial representation of the body changed in the transition from tradition to modernity.

• I shall also sidestep the field set down in the title, “literature”, and instead choose anthropology, more precisely its recent “cognitive” branch which is concerned with how phenomena are perceived on the most basic level, that of immediate perception. On the basis of the same textual and pictorial evidence, we can show up, by way of comparison with other times or civilizations, the differences between now and then, try to interpret what they seem to manifest—and what they may be due to.

• Furthermore, I shall consider the way the body is perceived or, at least, appears to have been perceived in the past, on the basis of “cultural relativism”. The basic tenet of this hypothesis is the assumption that the language of a people or, for that matter, also non-linguistic modes of expression such as painting, sculpture, architecture, etc., conform to the way this particular people perceives and conceives the world it lives in.

• Cultural relativism being at the outset a linguistic theory, I shall, within this framework, try to point out how the grammatical unnecessariness, if not absence, of personal pronouns and the gender distinction between male and female in Japanese and other Far Eastern languages, reflects on the way the body is represented, or not, in verbal and in pictorial forms of expression.

Our point of departure for looking backwards in time is a citation of In Praise of Shadows, a famous essay published in 1934 by Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886-1965), in which we find the presence of women described in the following way:
The body, legs, and feet are concealed within a long kimono... a woman of the past did indeed exist only from the collar up and the sleeves out; the rest of her remained hidden in darkness... her body shrouded day and night in gloom, her face the only sign of her existence... But in the past this was sufficient. For a woman who lived in the dark it was enough if she had a faint, white face—a full body was unnecessary.

Tanizaki speaks about the late Meiji and Taishō eras, but what he is observing may be shown to be true of any previous period of Japanese history for which we have literary, pictorial, and social as well as linguistic, conceptual and behavioural testimony.

These reminiscences immediately recall the Tale of Genji / 源氏物語, the famous novel from the beginning of the 11th century, which Tanizaki translated into modern Japanese. And indeed, in the no less famous illustration from a century later, the Tale of Genji Scroll / 源氏物語絵巻 (ill. 1), all we see of the nobles of the Heian court are their faces and perhaps part of their hands.

III. 1. A scene from the Yadorigi Chapter of the Tale of Genji Scroll (between 1120-1140).
An eloquent illustration of another of Tanizaki’s insights goes:

Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty. Our ancestors made of woman an object inseparable from darkness... They hid as much of her as they could in shadows, concealing her arms and legs in the folds of long sleeves and skirts, so that one part and only one stood out—the face.

And indeed, the images of the Genji Scroll (ill. 2) show exactly that. Judging from both these images and the text of the tale, the modern viewer can not but be surprised by the degree of disincarnation and distance, not to say abstraction, with which the person as such appears to have been perceived in that world.

Ill. 2. The Tale of Genji Scroll (between 1220-1240), a scene from the Takekawa Chapter.

The same text and illustrations reveal some other idiosyncrasies relevant to our topic.

First and most important of all, there is no explicit mention of the physical body as such. As one reviewer of Genji translations remarks:

One reason that physical contact between men and women is hardly ever described in “Genji” is that courtly lovers almost never saw one another clearly, and certainly not naked; full nudity is rare even in traditional Japanese erotic art. Women of the upper class sat hidden in murky rooms, behind curtains, screens, and sliding doors. For a respectable woman to be seen in daylight, especially standing up, instead of reclining in an interior, under many layers of clothing, would have been provocative beyond belief. Women were shielded by curtains even when they spoke to male members of their own family. A male suitor could be driven wild by the sight of a woman’s sleeve spilling out from underneath a shade, or by the mere sound of silk rustling behind a lacquer screen.

身 / mi, the word used occasionally, though rarely, by contemporary writers (Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shōnagon and other female authors), designates not the anatomical body but rather the living person (oneself) or, implicitly, the first person (I, me) as a whole, including one’s physique, status and condition, one’s moral character. The same ideogram may also stand for 身 / mukuro, denoting more specifically the trunk: the body with or without the limbs, but excluding the head, hands and feet—in other words the invisible part, but also the inanimate, dead, corpse. Another term used to describe a person physically is 姿 / sugata, but, again, in olden times this mostly denotes “appearance, mien, countenance, bearing...” Of the two words now used for “body”,

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karada and shintai, both appear in the late Middle Age in the same sense as mukuro, “trunk”, or “corpse”, i. e. the insignificant parts of the body.

The subject of the Genji Scrolls is obviously, and exclusively, the circles in contact with the court. This means that the tale and the images give us a picture of only a limited part of society, and an exceedingly small one at that. Objectively seen, the most important element in the depiction of the denizens of the capital is the apparel, and its social dimension is obvious. Japan is no exception to the nearly universal rule that the higher the social class, the more the body is garbed, and vice versa. If we take a close look at two other scroll paintings from the same Kamakura Period, the The Illustrated History of the Ishiyama Monastery (ca 1325) and the Life of the Holy Man Ippen (1299), both painted in the more realistic Yamato style, we find the craftsmen, here carpenters (ill. 3), more or less covered in upper and lower garments, whereas the workmen have their torsos bared and the labourers go about their menial tasks in not much more than a loincloth. Further down the social scale, the destitute and the outcasts (ill. 4) are seen covered in rags barely covering their loins. At the lowest extremity are the cadavers, stripped of everything, as are the sinners in pictures representing the Buddhist hells who are being tortured as punishment for their wrongdoings (ill. 5). At the pinnacle of society, the members of the imperial family, in their most subdued garb of the Buddhist prelate (ill. 6), are nothing but a face. In fact, we may say that the face alone is the person, the rest of the body being devoid of individuality and significance, and therefore not mentioned, not singled out. The body is neither an existing subject nor an object of attention. Since we hear of no taboo concerning the fleshly body–such as that which exists in the Christian faith where it is the cause of the original sin, the root of evil–this disregard cannot be ascribed to any negative attitude either.

Ill. 3. The Illustrated Scroll of the Ishiyama Monastery (ca 1325), Carpenters at work on the construction of the monastery.
Ill. 4. The Illustrated Tale of the Holy Man Ippen (1299). Beggars and cripples.

Ill. 5. Tales of the Monks' Hell 沙門地獄草子 (12th-13th c.).
What about three-dimensional representations of the human figure, of the fleshly body in particular? A quick overview of the statuary of the Heian and Kamakura periods—reputed for its high degree of realism—shows that images in the round do not expose any more “skin”—except for a particular kind of icon of the Buddhist faith. As a matter of fact, apart from a very small number of likenesses of so-called shintō deities (神像 / shinzo: ill. 7) and effigies of (what the Westerner would classify as) “profane” personages, the overwhelming majority of sculptures represent the deities and saintly persons of Buddhism. The exceptions are the icons figuring some male personages, buddhas and bodhisattvas whose attire reveals their Indian origin (ill. 8). Most of that subcontinent being of subtropical or even tropical monsoon climate, the traditional appearance for men is either with the upper body uncovered, like the two attendant bodhisattvas of this triad in their princely attire, or with the monk’s tunic draped over the left shoulder only, leaving the right shoulder and the chest bare, as is the case in this image of a buddha in characteristic monk’s attire (ill. 9). This peculiarity is therefore a matter of cultural origin, for even though a figure may personify Asaṅga, a monastic of Indian descent (ill. 10), it shows in reality a monk of Japan, a country where the climatic conditions command a different dress, and so the representation reverts to the attire fully covering the body, as worn by the contemporary local monastic.
Ill. 7. Effigy of the legendary Empress Jingū (神功皇后) as kami. 12th c.

Yakushi-ji, Nara.

Ill. 8. The Yakushi Triad.

Yakushi-ji, Nara.

13 The buddha-body (ill. 9) reveals no sign of personality and is, on the contrary, entirely symbolic. The depiction of the exposed parts—head, torso, arms, feet—obeys the grammar of canonical iconography. In Buddhist scriptures first translated into Chinese in the 3rd century, the Buddha’s body is described as presenting thirty-two primary
and eighty secondary marks. Among the distinctive signs expressed in this Bhaiṣajyaguru (jp. 薬師 / Yakushi) figure, are the round protrusion at the top of the head called the “topknot of flesh” (sk. uṣṇīṣa), the eyelids covering the pupils above and below, the elongated ears, the square cheeks, the three folds of the neck, his chest “full like a lion’s”, his harmonious and soft palms, and his fully rounded heels. The skin is supposed to be of golden colour, and so it originally was, since we know that this icon was gilt during the latter half of the Tenpyō era (729-749).

Ill. 9. The Buddha Yakushi (薬師如来 Bhaiṣajyaguru). The main icon of the Yakushi Triad.
Ill. 10. The Indian monk Asaṅga (jp. Mujaku 無着). Wooden sculpture, life-size, by Unkei, 1212.

Now, to realize the idiosyncrasy of the Japanese manner of representing—not to say perceiving—the body, we need to juxtapose a typical example with a specimen just as representative of another, very different civilization.

Let us choose, for commodity’s and brevity’s sake, an image from classical Greece: the “Lance Bearer” / gr. Doryphoros (ill. 11). To gauge how archetypal this sculpture is, it is enough to know that it was also called the “Canon”, for Polykleitos (5th century BCE) created this image of a young man to set down in absolute (i.e. universal) terms the ideal measure, the standard for the representation of the human body as such. And in practice the Lance Bearer has remained the epitome of the European idea, and ideal, of man, for well over two millennia (ill. 12, 13, 14). For reasons of convenience—and irrespective of the fact that some sixteen centuries separate the two—let’s take the sculptor Unkei’s (1150-1223) statue of the above mentioned Mujaku (Asaṅga) as a point of comparison on the Japanese side (ill. 10). It does not matter that the subjects represented are also very different, for we are concerned with the exterior aspect only.
III. 11. The "Lance Bearer" (Doryphoros), Roman marble copy of the original bronze statue by Polykleitos, (ca. -440).

Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.


Public domain.

Galleria dell'Accademia, Firenze.
However incongruous the comparison may seem, on the most basic level these two figures exemplify all the essential differences between the Japanese and the European conceptions of the physical body (ill. 15).
Let us start with the most obvious and superficial aspects. Whereas, in Mujaku’s case, most of the body is covered in clothes—in the Japanese monk’s garb—it is, on the contrary, in full display in the Greek image. The Japanese body, with the exception of the face, is unremarkable, insignificant and reduced to being a support for the countenance, while on the other side the body is in reality the “core”, the subject of the representation. Here, the focus is on character, appearing in the dignified face of the Indian Buddhist monk and philosopher, there on the impersonal anatomy of a young man.

The first thing that strikes the eye in comparison is the ephebe’s nakedness, emphasizing that the point of the portrayal is the body as such, with all the qualities that classical Greek culture assigns to it—as systematized by Polykleitos in his Canon. Here the subject is not a person but an idealized physique, specifically that of an 18 to 22 year-old young man, “the flower of man”.

When I say nudity, I am deliberately not using the word nudity. One of our colleagues in Chinese studies pointed out a few years ago that the nude is impossible in China, an impossibility which historical evidence shows to extend to other Far Eastern cultures like Japan and Korea as well. If we understand by “nude” the naked human figure seen as an independent object of study and artistic representation (in the case of a drawing, painting or sculpture called an “academy”), then indeed we do not find any nude there until the end of the 19th century, when the first Japanese artists who had studied the Western manner in European art academies, brought the subject back home.

Another patent feature of the Greek effigy is the male’s genitals. Polykleitos is said to have fashioned a female counterpart to the Lance Bearer, in the shape of an amazon.
in all surviving female nudes of antiquity, the genitals would have been equally treated. Since Japanese representations of the human figure show the person fully clothed, this part of the anatomy is neither expressed nor even suggested.

There is, of course, the all too notorious exception of what is now called 春画/shunga (ill. 16), pictures in which the sexual organs are on the contrary the centre and subject of illustration, rendered in striking detail. The Westerner may be somewhat surprised to learn that such depictions seem to have coexisted with the Genji monogatari picture scrolls. That is, if we trust the art historians, who ascribe the original version of the Tale of the Brushwood Fence to the same end of the Kamakura period. The feature that makes this genre of ukiyo-e an exception to the rule is the blatant exaggeration in size and naturalism of both the male and female genitals, to the point where the preposterousness of the scene renders it laughable. The comical, jocular character of these images is apparent in the name of warai-e（笑絵）, “humorous” or “parodic pictures”, as they were traditionally called (shunga being a modern, neutralised term modelled after the Chinese counterpart). The subject of this genre is therefore not the (almost always only partially denuded) body as such, but the scene of erotic play, focused, entertainingly, on the sexual organs in particular.

Ill. 16. Image from the "Tale of the Brushwood Fence" (Koshibagaki zōshi), end of 12th c. The earliest extant version (Idemitsu Museum, Tokyo) dates from the 13th c.

The fact that in Western images the genitals are clearly and realistically figured—a concomitant of the body being observed naked—, whereas in Japanese representations they are generally not manifest, is consistent with the tenet of linguistic relativity that considers this difference as the concrete expression of the elementary male/female gender distinction characteristic of Indo-European languages on the one hand, with, on
the other, the absence of this grammatical category in Far-Eastern languages. As a matter of fact, there are extremely few pictorial or literary mentions, let alone explicit descriptions, of the male or female sexual organs up to the 19th century, with the exception of the erotic, predominantly illustrated, literature just touched upon. As already mentioned, such verbal or pictorial description of the genitals does not pretend to be factual, but is meant to be amusing, cause for laughter. This clearly is the case of a scene in another late Heian scroll painting (ill. 17), the *Stories of Disease and Deformity* from the end of the 12th century, where the revelation of a person’s hermaphroditic condition is obviously the cause for a prankish laugh.


I am far from positing that gender demarcation is entirely nonexistent, but am just trying to demonstrate that it is as indistinct as grammatically inexplicit. We couldn’t have a more patent illustration than these two sets of representation of the primordial couple from both extremities of the Eurasian continent: the biblical Adam and Eve (ill. 18) on one side, and Izanami and Izanagi, the primordial pair of the Japanese creation myth, on the other (ill. 19). The nakedness of the Western couple, apart from the concealed genitals, is presented in the Scriptures as a sign of man’s original, paradisiacal condition. In contrast, the Japanese pair is dressed in court attire. The reason why the primordial pair, in comparison with its European counterpart, is represented in its ordinary state, clothed, may be that nakedness has here no special significance... is not an issue, in other words. The face being, idiosyncratically, the only distinctive feature of the physique, the Western observer unfamiliar with the Japanese physiognomical and vestimentary codes, will find it not easy to distinguish readily
between the male and the female person. A difficulty which he is also confronted with when trying to individualize the comparatively indistinct features of the personages in the much earlier *Tale of Genji Scroll* (ill. 20).

Ill. 18. *Adam and Eve*, two panels of the Ghent Altarpiece by Jan van Eyck, 1430-1432. Ghent, Belgium
Ill. 19. *Izanami and Izanagi*, the primeval couple learning “how to” from the mating play of two birds. One of the earliest pictorial representations, a woodcut print of the late 18th c.

Public domain.

Ill. 20. Yūgiri and his wife Kumoinokari. Scene from the *Yūgiri* Chapter of the *Genji monogatari emaki*.

Public domain.

24 This indistinctness is evident not only in figurative representation, but also in the much less fictionalised medical realm. In the Sino-Japanese worldview, the body is an integrated system in a state of flux, in which vital energy circulates along conduits, feeds and is transmuted in the five organs and six viscera (ill. 21). Apart from the womb, the inner organ of reproduction, the male and the female body are outwardly not significantly differentiated, the genitals and the female breasts not clearly represented. By comparison, Leonardo da Vinci’s study of the female anatomy (ill. 22) represents in every respect the exact contrary.
Ill. 21. 仰人明堂之圖 (Gyōjin meidō no zu), 側面明堂之圖 (Sokumen meidō no zu), 伏人明堂之圖 (Fukujin meidō no zu), 腔腑明堂之圖 (Zōfu meidō no zu): ‘Views of the human body seen from the front, from the back, from the side, and of the viscera’. The four basic schemata of the energy conduits and neuralgic points of the human organism according to Sino-Japanese medicine. Four Japanese diagrams of the mid-Edo period (ca. 1750). Scroll paintings, ink on paper.
This brings us to another conspicuous difference in the two conceptions of the body, the anatomical dimension (cf. ill. 11). Of the half-denuded male and female bodies that Japanese imagery occasionally depicts, none shows an anatomically detailed and naturalistic rendition of the muscular relief. By emphasising *anatomically correct*, we can exclude what appears to be an exception, figures like the two Guardian Kings / 仁王 / Niō posted at the entrance of some great Buddhist monasteries (ill. 23). Their musculature is anatomically farfetched and exaggerated, intended as it is to make a show of force and—in keeping with their role as guardians of the temple precincts and the devotees—, thereby to scare away malignant spirits.25
In traditional Sino-Japanese medicine we hardly hear of dissection until the second half of the 18th century, and even after that another century has to pass until the local physicians started to take serious interest in the study of the muscles and the bones. Up to the end of the 19th century, when Japanese artists went to study in European art academies, representations of the body stay flat and essentially two-dimensional (ill. 24). Whereas, if we compare Utamaro’s bathing girl with Ingres’ contemporary “Grande Baigneuse” (ill. 25), or, even more obviously, if we look at the Lance Bearer, we immediately realize that, as a principle, the Western painter and sculptor are conscious of, and render, the smallest details of the bone and muscle structure underlying the skin.

Ill. 25. La « Grande Baigneuse » (1808). Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, oil on canvas.
27 We know that the Lance Bearer represents an athlete, in the flower of his age. His well-developed musculature is indicative of intense physical activity, not only in view of the male citizen’s fitness for battle, but also for athletic competition—a culture and a spirit that, under the motto mens sana in corpore sano, was pompously revived by the Third Reich for the 11th Olympic Summer Games held in Berlin in 1936 (ill. 26).


28 In Western civilization, physical training in order to hone the body for a specific activity (warfare), performance (sports) or other purpose (hygienics, body building, etc.) has been practiced, encouraged and appreciated since Greek antiquity. To all appearances, the Doryphoros’ physique is not innate but purposely and methodically shaped, through exercise and callisthenics. There is nothing to this extent in Japan, or in other Far Eastern countries for that matter. Not that there haven’t been any physical or even sport-like activities, like the game of kemari / 蹴鞠 (ill. 27), horse-racing or hunting, all widely practiced by courtiers. However, for none of these physical activities—not even the training of soldiers and warriors for fitness and skill in handling weapons—do we hear of any bodily training intent on the development of physical strength. It is not until the Conscription Law was introduced in 1873 that recruits for the imperial army had to undergo a medical check for physical fitness.
Ill. 27. Kashiwagi at the ball game kemari. Scene from the Wakana Chapter, as illustrated in the Genji monogatari gajo by Tosa Mitsunobu (ca 1510).

One of the rare cases (ill. 28) of a Western aesthetics of the body having subsequently found favour in certain circles of modern Japan, is the Shield Society / 楯の会 / Tate-no-kai: the militia created and epitomised by Mishima Yukio (1925-1970), an amalgam of physical and mental discipline, body building, martial arts and military spirit.¹⁴

(There is, in this connection, a very promising study to be envisaged on the association, and blend, of one and/or the other, of—primarily male—attitudes towards: body building, callisthenics, eugenics, martial arts, weaponry, warfare, apparel and uniforms, race supremacy, nationalism, not to say fascism...)

Finally, we arrive at what may be the most important, nay essential, difference between the traditional Western and the Far Eastern way of perceiving the human body. In comparison with the classical European conception, the Far Eastern view seems to be devoid of one fundamental dimension: the aesthetic appreciation of the physical body as such—apart from immaterial aspects like bearing, posture, demeanour, “perfume” and other ephemeral qualities. Considering the Lance Bearer again, Polykleitos actually created the *Canon*—i.e. the statue itself—as the epitome of ideal beauty, of beauty divine, of perfection. As such, the image had to be consummately realized, not just all around (ill. 29), from any angle of view, but also in all its parts, taken separately as well as in relation to each other. In Far-Eastern media of expression, however, there is no trace, whether in written nor in pictorial form, of the concomitant idea of bodily proportion, let alone of harmonious proportion. The young athlete’s body incarnates the laws of contemporary Pythagorean mathematics (ill. 30), the properties of the golden ratio spelling out universal perfection and beauty in the harmonious relation of all the individual parts with each other.
The Canon lays down, for example, that the head is to measure one eighth of the height of the body, one third of the chest, one fourth of the length between the hip and the base of the foot, and so forth. The concept of the harmonious relation between all things, of harmony being expressible in mathematical terms, is a uniquely European paradigm that has endured to this day and has even been extended, with the rediscovery of classical Greek and Roman culture in the Renaissance, into architecture, cosmology, philosophy, religion and, of course, the pictorial and plastic arts (ill. 31). The concept reaches Japan in the last third of the 18th century (ill. 32), through the painting manual of the Flemish artist Gerard de Lairesse (1641-1711), who, in this respect, illustrates his *Het groot schilderboeck* (1707) with the drawings of Albrecht Dürer’s treatise on bodily proportion. The pictures are taken over without significant
alteration in Morishima Chūryō’s [Redhead Miscellanea]18 (1787), the Japanese adaptation of Lairesse’s treatise (ill. 33). To see a Japanese body depicted in the Western manner, as a nude, one more century has to pass until the first paintings of the subject appear in the country by the end of the 19th century. From that time up until today even, the view of the body in terms of mathematical harmony of proportion, of such a thing as an ideal or beautiful body, does not seem to have found a substantial application in Far Eastern cultures—not even can one detect any unequivocal reference to this kind of aesthetics.

Ill. 31. The Canon of Proportions. Drawing of Leonardo da Vinci after the Roman architect Vitruvius Pollio, also called the “Vitruvian Man”.

Galleria dell’Accademia, Venice
32. The proportions of the male and the female body. From Gerard de Lairesse's *Le grand livre des peintres, ou l’art de la peinture* (1787).

33. The Japanese version of the proportions of the male and the female body as it appears in Morishima Chūrō’s *Kōmō zatsuwa* [Redhead Miscellanea], 1787.

To put things simply, in a very condensed form, let me conclude by stating, in abstract terms, that the body, at least the part Tanizaki calls 胴體 / dōtai, the trunk, or torso, seems to have occupied up to the end of the 19th century very minor, if at all, a place in Japanese consciousness.

In other words, the physical body as such has not been an independent object of awareness, attention and reflection, and hence of verbal description or pictorial representation. All evidence indicates that it has existed only as an integral element of the person, not being considered apart, having no objective reality of its own.
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NOTES

1. What is more strictly called the principle of linguistic relativity, also known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, has been elaborated, from the 1930s on, by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), inspired by the linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir (1884-1939). The elemental claim is that a speaker’s worldview pervades his perception and cognition, impregnating his native culture’s notions and language; a people’s language and other modes of expression are thus relative to its worldview—and vice versa. See CARROLL John B. (ed.), Language, Thought, and Reality - Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1956.

2. TANIZAKI Jun’ichirō 谷崎潤一郎, [In Praise of Shadows] / In’ei raisan, HARPER Thomas and SEIDENSTICKER Edward (trans.), Sedgwick, Leete’s Island Books, 1977, with other editions since. The quotation is from the section “The woman of old”, p. 28-30 passim.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.


6. 石山寺縁起絵巻 / Ishiyama-dera engi emaki.

7. 一遍上人絵伝 / Ippen shōnin eden.
8. What owes Hanazono this characterized portrait, is not his imperial body, but his clerical person.


10. With the sole exception of Maruyama Ōkyo’s (1733-1795) little-known anatomical studies of the human figure, as he represents it in “true to nature”-style in his three picture scrolls entitled [The True Manner of Depicting the Human Body] / 人物正写惣本 (1770), treasured by the Tenri Library.

11. An early version of the 小柴垣草子 / Koshibagaki zōshi is rather wishfully attributed to Fujiwara no Tame’ie (1198-1275) for the text, and to Fujiwara no Nobuzane (1176-1265) for the illustration. The oldest extant copy, in the Idemitsu Museum, is said to date from the 13th century. The narration is based on the scandal that shook the court towards the end of the 10th century, recounted in the Jikkinshō (1252), of the affair between a vestal princess and a soldier of the guard.

12. In our particular context it is not insignificant that the Herculean build of these guardian kings qualified as “strongmen” / 力士 / rikishi, is supposed to derive from the Greco-Buddhist image of the “Vajra Bearer” (Vajrapāṇi), a type itself hearkening back to the “club-bearing” Herakles figure as attested in 2nd century Gandhāra.

13. The Germanic cult of the body has its perfect illustration in Leni Riefenstahl’s still and motion pictures officially commissioned for the 1936 Berlin Olympiad, published in book form as Schönheit im Olympischen Kampf (1937) and as a film entitled Olympia - Fest der Schönheit (1938). Not to mention the sculptor Arno Breker (1900-1991) epitomizing, both in spirit and in form, the Greco-Roman Renaissance of the Third Reich (see ill. 14).

14. Mishima’s obsessive preoccupation with his body would indeed have been a most fitting topic for this symposium. The dust jacket cover of Mishima’s Sun & Steel (Kodansha Intern., 1970) with a photograph by Shinoyama Kishin, is the very epitome of this spirit. The just mentioned photographs by Leni Riefenstahl as well as Arno Breker’s effigies (ill. 26 and ill. 14 respectively), and, more generally, the spirit reigning in Germany in the first half of the 20th century regarding the physique as resumed in the Third Reich’s conception and staging of the 1936 Olympics, are too close in spirit to Mishima’s attitude towards the body for not to have served as an inspiration for a number of his phantasies. In regard to the former, see WintHER Fritz, Körperbildung als Kunst und Pflicht, München, Delphin Verlag, 1919; or the classic SUREN Hans, Mensch und Sonne - Arisch-olympischer Geist, Berlin, Scherl, 1936.

15. With the exception of the woman’s hair, by far the body’s most valued, and often mentioned physical attribute.

16. Vitruvius does mention the existence of a written treatise, but the actual Canon is the effigy itself, in its three-dimensional materiality.

17. The latter ultimately going back to Polykleitos’ Canon as revived by the Roman architect Vitruvius of the 1st century BCE.

18. 森島中良 (1756-1810), 眠毛雑話 / Kōmō zatsuwa.
AUTHOR

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Josef Kyburz is a senior research fellow of the French Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), now retired. His research and concomitant publications have been based on fieldwork in both Japan and Korea, as an ethnologist, focussing on popular creeds, beliefs, customs and objects of "religious" nature. His most recent work on Japanese paper charms (ofuda) has appeared in Ofuda - Images gravées des temples du Japon (2011) and Ofuda - Amulettes et talismans du Japon (2014). In parallel, he has turned his reflection, from the point of view of cultural relativism, on the modes of perception of such basic elements as, here, the body, in a comparative East-West perspective.