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Cultural Context | RISD President

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Cultural Context

by
John Maeda
RISD's President

I GREW UP IN SEATTLE'S Chinatown—later renamed the “International District”—which was where people resettling in the city from all over Asia set up shop. My parents came from Japan and ran a tofu shop there. When you're surrounded by something as a child, it never registers as anything out of the ordinary. It's just your reality.

So I never really noticed “Asian culture” until a major exhibition toured the country after President Nixon's momentous trip to China in 1972. It highlighted four groundbreaking Chinese inventions: gunpowder, the printing press, papermaking and the compass. As a boy, I found it remarkable that these innovations are all credited to the Chinese, especially when the dominant political rhetoric at the time dismissed Asia for its “copy-cat” culture. The facts and the stereotype seemed at odds.

Growing up, I experienced another Asian-American stereotype—namely, the assumption that I would have a gift for math. When my teachers told my parents that I excelled at both art and math, my father would proudly proclaim to anyone who would listen that his son was good at math!

THE BEAUTY OF JAPANESE DESIGN

After pleasing my parents by earning bachelor's and master's degrees in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at MIT, I went on to study art and design in Japan at the University of Tsukuba, a Bauhaus-influenced school

When renowned Chinese artist and RISD parent **Cai Guo Qiang** visited RISD last year, President Maeda learned that they share a common alma mater: the University of Tsukuba, an art school near Tokyo.



outside of Tokyo. Though located in Asia, its European methods made it a truly cross-cultural experience. When contemporary Chinese artist **Cai Guo Qiang**, a RISD parent, visited campus last year, he told me that he, too, is a Tsukuba alum, though he left the year before I arrived.

In Japan I worked as a graphic designer for print and digital media in the years when the computer had recently emerged as a design tool and the Internet was just beginning to take off. My mentor there was master designer **Ikko Tanaka**, who operates as fluidly across cultures as across commercial and non-commercial work. So I was able to take what I had learned about computing in the US and situate it within notions of art and design in contemporary Japanese culture.

Japanese design has always been about the pursuit of perfection and celebrating the sacred in the everyday. These days I also think a lot about Japanese pop culture—from the self-sacrificing spirit of Tora-san to the “existential warrior” ethos of Gundam—and how it forms a rich cultural context for Japanese creativity. Historically, the Japanese had always been about winning the battle, performing super-human feats, dying for the cause. After World War II, though, the country had to rewrite this national narrative to dampen the glory of war and transition to a culture of peace and prosperity. Yet it still held on to this notion of going to the edge—and of extreme dedication and perfection. I think that lies at the foundation of modern Japanese design.

WE NEED ART

For millennia cultures throughout Asia have seen art and design as “need to have” not just “nice to have” components of human existence. And now the entire world is waking up to the need to incorporate art and design back into our education system and our lives—a notion that we have been reinforcing here at RISD through our many STEM to STEAM initiatives (see newsbit to the right and on page 59).

RISD itself is an international hub of creativity, with students from more than 56 countries represented on campus and faculty pursuing projects on every continent (see pages 52-53). Alumni living in 86 countries around the world—including the many

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mentioned in this issue of *RISD XYZ*—continue to show us just where and how art and design are making a huge impact globally. And every time I travel, I am reminded of just how far RISD reaches and how much we have to offer the world.

Art and design remind us to look at things from different angles and to value what is unique about ourselves and our culture. They transport us across generations, societies and ideologies. And in a world where the centers of commerce increasingly look the same wherever we go, art connects us with what is authentic, true and unique.