

Q&A with Joan B. Mirviss

Tell us about your professional journey? What inspired you to pursue a career in this field?

Since childhood, I have been entranced by all things Japanese so in 1973, as an Art History major, Japan seemed like the ideal destination for me. Syracuse University offered an academic summer program that focused on ceramics, traveling from west to east over the course of an entire summer-- I was smitten. Upon returning to the University of Wisconsin, I enrolled in a museum training program, which led me to graduate school in Japanese art history at Columbia University.

During this time, I was hired by a New York gallery to exhibit of Japanese woodblock prints (ukiyo-e) at antique fairs run by Russell Carrell. I was seduced by the excitement of handling, sourcing, researching, gambling on, and buying a wonderful work of art, and then selling it to the ideal, trusting client, in a process not unlike "match-making," and, decided to forgo a doctorate and instead open my own business.

After incorporating my business in 1977, I began regular travels to Japan, London, and Paris, where I lived for three years, and amassed an inventory of Japanese prints and paintings. Meanwhile, I continued to exhibit at Russell's top fairs. Four years later, I was astonished to receive an invitation to participate in the prestigious Winter Antiques Show, and have gratefully remained an annual exhibitor for over 40 years. So, in a very significant way, it was the antique show circuit that lured me into the business side of art. I owe so much to the confidence and support offered by Russell to such a fledgling dealer.



As a woman in a historically male-dominated industry, what challenges have you faced, and how have you overcome them?

As a young woman starting out as a dealer in Japanese art in the late 1970s and 80s, I faced immense challenges both in the West and especially in Japan. Being foreign, female, and young, seasoned Japanese dealers initially doubted my experience and expertise in navigating the world of Japanese painting, where fakes were prevalent. Every interaction was a test, requiring careful selection and diplomacy to establish credibility. A miscalculation in selection or blunder in manners could undermine my business dealings with that firm for a generation.

Navigating cultural and gender dynamics added further complexity. Even something as simple as dining could become a trial, as I experienced during a memorable

dinner with 10 male Japanese print dealers at a Kyoto restaurant specializing in turtle cuisine, said to be an aphrodisiac. However, with time, relationships evolved, and I now enjoy more respectful and amicable interactions with the next generation of dealers in Japan, where my gender is no longer a barrier to being recognized as a seasoned expert.

What Are Some Of The Most Rewarding Aspects Of Your Career?

Today my focus is predominantly on the burgeoning field of contemporary clay art in Japan, I find this aspect of my business to be the most personally rewarding. Working with living artists, offering them new challenges and opportunities has been incredibly exciting.

As a woman, I have been able to use my gender to successfully provide support to Japanese women artists in what is typically a very male-dominated and controlled field. By promoting their work and arranging exhibitions of their work in my NY gallery, in on-line publications, on zoom panels, and, of course, at fairs, I have succeeded in building interest and a market for American and European collectors, curators, and the press. Equally gratifying is the opportunity to influence both the financial and artistic trajectory of Japanese artists by showcasing their work in prestigious institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum.



How do you think you can best support the next generation of women art dealers?

I am a strong proponent of getting art history students face-to-face with the art, through travel abroad and seeing as much art in situ as possible. Power Point slides in a darkened classroom and illustrations in glossy art books are woefully insufficient resources for honing one's judgment. For over thirty years, I have supported travel by graduate students at three universities. Additionally, I have hired scores of undergraduate and graduate students for research projects, essay writing, and cataloguing, as panel participants, and even to work at The Winter Show.

After all, employment with a serious, well-respected gallery, hopefully in an art center like New York, can afford ambitious young art historians endless opportunities to network with the high-and-mighty in their field, both academic and commercial.

Some of my former interns and assistants have continued in academia, becoming professors or college administrators, some became curators and even museum directors, and a few entered the realm of art dealing, which of course, also requires business acumen and financial resources. I am very proud of them all and not surprisingly, the vast majority have been women.

What woman has been a trailblazer in the industry and has helped bring scholarship, expertise, and visibility to a particular field?

Professor Miyeko Murase, my former teacher at Columbia who eventually retired (after teaching for 34 years) to work many years as curator at the MET. Now, one month shy of 100, is still researching and writing. She both educated and inspired scores of graduate students, with her dual emphasis on the art itself and connoisseurship; so many of her former pupils are now themselves, professors, curators, museum directors and even art dealers.

What advice would you give to aspiring women looking to enter the art field?

Only if you are already blessed with good taste and a refined eye and have some serious understanding of the relevant art form, should you seek employment in your field. However, only mentorship by an experienced and respected figure in the field, at which time you can observe and learn about authenticity, provenance, quality evaluation, condition analysis, market trends, and other key issues, will enable you to attain success and prevent expensive and complete failure as a professional in the field.

She should also seek to develop important learnable skills that would make you an attractive candidate to any future employer:

- Wizardry with digital photography and image processing
- Mastery of graphic programs such as In-design, Illustrator
- Some familiarity with basic bookkeeping like Quicken
- Understanding of database management
- Decent writing skills
- Ability to research on-line and knowledge of social media
- People skills...any business training you can get: how to read a spread sheet, management skills, organizational skills

All of this makes for a great resume!

