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**Feminizing Art in Modern Japan:
Noguchi Shōhin (1847-1917) and the Changing Conceptions of Art and Womanhood**

Abstract

The 1890s marked a significant transformation in the conception of the women's relationship to art in modern Japan. Strikingly, Okuhara Seiko (1837-1913), who fascinated early-Meiji critics as a distinctly "masculine" female painter, suddenly retired from the art world in 1891 at the very moment that another female painter, Noguchi Shōhin (1847-1917), experienced a sudden rise in popularity, becoming celebrated as a "feminine" ideal. Significantly, Shōhin's success seems to have been intimately imbricated with the new conceptions of art and womanhood that were taking shape at this moment. As women became tied to the domestic sphere of the home, art increasingly was seen as essential to women's fulfillment of their socially prescribed roles as wives and mothers. Many cultural critics asserted that art enhanced women's feminine virtues and refined their taste, enabling them to cultivate their homes as microcosms of the state. Moreover, at the turn of the century, debates concerning women's wage employment led some artists and educators to propose ways in which women could utilize art to contribute to the state; meanwhile, others sought to employ art to promote women's independence. Importantly, Shōhin participated in these debates by appropriating the notion of women as "innate teachers" and extolling art instruction as a socially acceptable occupation for women. Examining both the personal and public construction of the figure of "Noguchi Shōhin," I argue that this artist's (auto)biography and hagiography served as sites through which cultural critics debated and promoted new conceptions of art and gender in late-Meiji- and early-Taishō-period Japan.