



FOUJITA TSUGUHARU, 《猫のいる自画像》 *Autoportrait au chat (Self-Portrait with Cat)*, 1926, oil, pen, and ink on canvas, 80×60 cm. Courtesy the Fondation Foujita and ADAGP, Paris.

The “Preface” of the exhibition opened with *Self-Portrait with Cat* (1926) by Foujita Tsuguharu, a beautifully rendered exercise in self-fashioning by the Japanese French painter. Establishing narratives of identity while negotiating modes of artistic expression with public appeal—a balancing maneuver that is a central theme in the exhibition—Foujita here presents himself to his French audience as a pensive, mysterious artist in his studio, surrounded by fine Asian brushes and his beguiling feline. Foujita’s work was joined by other portraits, including two particularly arresting self-portraits by Chinese artist Pan Yuliang and Singaporean painter Georgette Chen. These works embody conflicting perceptions, where the artist’s self-representing gaze mediates or even subverts the reductive Eurocentric gaze toward the imagined “other.”

The following section, “Workshop to the World,” highlighted the impact of makers from Asia who made significant aesthetic and material contributions to the Art Déco movement in Paris. Frequently unacknowledged for their craftsmanship and labor, the predominantly Vietnamese artisans, such as Tran Dinh Nam and Nguyen Thi Lien, who made the fashionable lacquerware of the period, were given recognition, with their names and birthplaces appearing alongside works credited to Japanese artist Hamanaka Katsu and Swiss French painter and sculptor Jean Dunand. The influence of Asian material culture was explored through items from the Cartier collection, including a *portique* clock designed by the company in 1927, which was inspired by a Japanese Shinto gate and made from nephrite (jade)

and onyx. The use of materials with significant connections to Asia not only influenced the styles, forms, and aesthetics of decorative pieces in vogue at the time, but also shaped Parisian audiences’ expectations of Asian art and artists.

The notion of Paris as a place of opportunity and inspiration was the focus of the section “Sites of Exhibition,” which observed how Asian artists positioned themselves within the competitive Parisian art scene. Japanese painter Itakulla Kanae’s 《赤衣の女》 (*Woman in Red Dress*) (1929), rendered in a mix of flat forms and vibrant color, demonstrates a mastery of blending classical oil painting with avant-garde and modernist aesthetics. Nearby, a selection of Impressionistic works by Georgette Chen pay homage to compositions by Van Gogh and Cézanne in Provence. Arriving in France with a sense of modernism that had already started to develop, Asian artists treated Paris as a place to further experiment with new ideas and methods, as well as a prestigious site for conversing with art historical precedents.

Tracing this eventful 20th-century timeline in Parisian history through a selection of over 200 artworks and 200 archive pieces, this exhibition raised compelling propositions about how these pioneering makers from Asia positioned themselves in the city, to an audience who very likely held specific expectations of their creativity. The survey painted a dynamic picture, emphasizing not only the often-overlooked impact of Asian artists but also the poignant and less examined perspective of how they navigated the rich, multifaceted, yet highly complex city during its most significant period in modern art history.

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## City of Others: Asian Artists in Paris, 1920s–1940s

### National Gallery Singapore

The place that the French capital holds in popular imagination as well as in art historical narratives is a formidable one, with no period in the city’s history as infamous as the first half of the 20th century. Over five years of research—and three years of curatorial work—culminated in the National Gallery Singapore’s ambitious “City of Others: Asian Artists in Paris, 1920s–1940s,” which approached the city’s indomitable epoch from the perspective of the Asian artists who lived, worked, and were inspired there. Various understood as foreigners, artisans, students, and colonial subjects, they encountered the city as an arena fraught with anxiety and judgement, yet rich in opportunity and artistry.