

# Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members  
Receiving Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by  
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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# Yoshiaki Shimizu



Yoshiaki Shimizu retires this year, after more than 25 years of teaching Japanese art history at Princeton. Yoshi is a man of many aspects: the Tokyo-born son of a Japanese scholar of English philology, he is now a naturalized American who studies Japanese art; art historian, museum curator, and painter; and teacher of a generation of scholars who occupy major academic and museum positions. Yoshi has been at the crossroads of Japan, the United States, and art for more than half a century.

Born in 1936 and raised in Tokyo and also rural Kyushu (where his family fled to escape American bombing during World War II), Yoshi moved to the United States in 1953. He attended St. Paul's School in New Hampshire, where his interest in art first emerged; indeed, he graduated with prizes in art (receiving an oil paint set) and in public speaking—the first signs of promise in two areas that later conjoined in his career as a teacher of art history. He then matriculated at Harvard University, but after his sophomore year left to spend several years traveling and studying art in New York, Boston, and Europe. He returned to Harvard in 1961, took his first art history and East Asian studies courses, and completed his degree in 1963. He returned to Japan for the first time since leaving 10 years earlier and visited the key sites of early Japanese art and architecture in Kyoto. He received his M.A. at the University of Kansas in 1968, writing a pioneering thesis on the 18th-century painter Itō Jakuchū; the senior Jakuchū scholar in Japan, Tsuji Nobuo, recently remarked on the trailblazing nature of Yoshi's research, conceding that Yoshi had taken up Jakuchū even before he had.

That same year, Yoshi moved to Princeton to continue his graduate studies under the famed Japanese scholar Shūjirō Shimada, who had recently come to Princeton and made it a key center for the study of Japanese art history. Yoshi focused his studies on Muromachi-period ink painting, Shimada's own specialty, and authored a Ph.D. thesis on the monk painter Mokuan Reien—the first comprehensive study in any language of this central figure in the Chan-Zen “apparition painting” mode. While finishing his thesis, he co-authored, with the late Carolyn Wheelwright (\*81) (and with contributions by other Shimada pupils), *Japanese Ink Paintings from American Collections: The Muromachi Period: An Exhibition in Honor of Shūjirō Shimada*, a massive book cum catalog for an exhibition in honor of Shimada at the Princeton University Art Museum.

After finishing his graduate studies, Yoshi carved out a professional career that bridged the academy and the museum—deploying in equal measure the sensitivity to the object of a curator and the analytical tools transmitted by Shimada (himself a curator, before coming to Princeton), all informed by his training as an artist. He took up a teaching position at the University of California–Berkeley in 1975, and within three years was granted tenure. In 1979, he left Berkeley to become the curator of Japanese art at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. During these postgraduate years, in the early 1980s, Yoshi began to publish a series of innovative essays on a wide range of topics: narrative paintings by the Chan monk painter Yin Tuoluo, seasonal paintings and poetry in early Japan, workshop management of the Kano painting studio, an essay on Zen art that was provocatively entitled “Zen art?” and a host of others on equally diverse themes that are still read and cited widely today. In 1984, he co-curated (with John Rosenfield, emeritus, Harvard University) a major exhibition of Japanese calligraphy at the Japan Society in New York.

In 1984, Yoshi returned to Princeton as professor of art and archaeology and took up the position that was formerly held by his teacher, Shūjirō Shimada, and a steady stream of young art historians came to study under his tutelage. At Princeton, Yoshi continued to publish on a wide range of art historical subjects and to curate major museum exhibitions. Most notable was an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 1988, titled *Japan: The Shaping of Daimyo Culture 1185–1868*. A blockbuster in scale and groundbreaking in intellectual scope, it examined the dual ambitions of premodern Japanese warriors to excel at both the arts of war, as reflected in arms and armor and all that the warrior class did with those tools, and the arts of peace, as represented by paintings, lacquer, calligraphy, and other visual arts that the warriors either commissioned or produced themselves. His publishing outside the museum context continued unabated and with continuing impact, perhaps most famously in his essay titled “The Vegetable Nehan of Itō Jakuchū,” a revolutionary study of a painting by the artist featured in his Kansas M.A. thesis. The painting shows the often-depicted Nehan scene, the expiration of the historical Buddha, in novel fashion: the parts normally played by all manner of sentient life, including human, animal, and the Buddha, are taken by vegetables. Yoshi convincingly argued that the painting, previously interpreted as a parody, is tied to the Tendai Buddhist concept that all plants have a Buddha nature, and that Jakuchū refashioned the Nehan theme as a solemn response to the death of his brother, who headed the family’s greengrocer business in Kyoto.

Yoshi served as chair of the Department of Art and Archaeology from 1990 to 1992, and in 1992 was named the Frederick Marquand Professor of Art and Archaeology. His presence in the department has been marked by his wonderful, droll, but penetrating and often revealing sense of humor, which seems to represent

the way that he looks at this world. He has continued to broaden his scholarly range, issuing essays on the 18th-century realist painter Maruyama Ōkyō, on the collecting of Japanese art in America, and on ink painting. In 2007, he served as senior curatorial adviser for *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan*, an exhibition at the Japan Society in New York, co-curated by his students Gregory Levine and Yukio Lippit.

To mark the occasion of his retirement, a two-day symposium this April at Princeton gathered friends, family, and colleagues to hear scholarly papers delivered by virtually every professional historian of Japanese art he taught at Princeton (and one at Berkeley). As these varied papers showed, Yoshi has modeled in his scholarship and teaching principles that have well served his students: his insistence on the central importance of the object, his rigorous analyses of the written evidence, and his attention to the craft of writing itself. Speaking of Yoshi to open the festivities, his colleague in Chinese art, Jerome Silbergeld, likened the attempt to characterize this multifaceted individual to blind men describing an elephant, so varied in its aspects; projected on the screen was a 19th-century print by Hokusai depicting a huge elephant with some dozen men clambering over and exploring it with their hands. The audience approved.

This spring, the Princeton University Art Museum hosted an exhibition titled, “Memorable Encounters From Hōnen to de Kooning: In Honor of Yoshiaki Shimizu.” Reflecting the numerous art interests of this many-sided man, the exhibition contained not only premodern Japanese and Chinese paintings, prints, and sculptures related to Yoshi’s scholarly work, but also more recent objects, such as modern Japanese ceramics, a lithograph by Willem de Kooning, and, as well, a small watercolor titled *Self-portrait*, dated 1957–58, and a large, colorful oil painting, titled *Untitled*, 1991, both by one Yoshiaki Shimizu.