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The love for the production of musicals lives on through research and education

Although she works in the Faculty of Science and Technology, Araki teaches courses on the history of Western art at the Hiyoshi, Yagami, and Mita campuses of Keio University. She has carved out a unique niche for herself. Her research has won awards such as the Premio Daria Borghese, and her courses are also popular among students from departments other than the Faculty of Letters, such as Engineering. The source of this success? Araki says it started with musicals.

I heard that your interest in Western culture started with musicals. How did that happen?

When I was in middle school, I was really impressed by a performance I saw of the Takarazuka Revue. Of course, I was fascinated by the performances of the top stars like Yūki Amami and Maki Ichiro. I also loved the huge dresses of the female characters and the aesthetics of the world they were portraying. That play planted the seed for my interest in Western culture.

I know that you joined the choir in high school and went on to participate in musicals after graduation, but can you describe what that was like?

When I was in my third and final year of high school, my choir performed *Elisabeth* at the school's annual cultural festival. Since many of us wanted to continue performing after graduation, some of the original members got together and worked on a musical production. We acted on the stage about once a year. Sadly, the group stopped performing around the time that I started working at Keio.

You claim that these musicals have also been useful in your research and teaching, right?

Exactly. The goal of making a musical is to entertain the audience. I put everything even into little details in the process

of putting together a musical. I've found that this also works very well when I'm looking at artworks, analyzing them and writing academic papers. In musical productions, not only do I get to stand on stage, but I have often been entrusted with directing the actors, making rehearsal schedules, etc. In doing so, I devised ways to ensure that all members, with different levels of acting ability, could enjoy the performance while striving for a more advanced performance. These experiences have been invaluable when it comes to my classroom management skills.

What made you decide to pursue a career in Italian art history?

I had always enjoyed appreciating paintings and traveling, but the main reason was that I loved the Western art history classes taught by my supervisor, Prof. Yoshinori Kyotani (then at Kyushu University, now at Gakushuin University). Professor Kyotani respected my unique character and encouraged me to grow and follow my own path. Thanks to him, I was able to develop into the free thinker that I am today.

Did Italian art history present any difficulties for you as a Japanese person?

It was quite a task, but I particularly remember an incident during my first presentation in the first year of my Ph.D. program at the Sapienza University of Rome. One of the professors asked, in front of everyone, mind you, "Exactly how long have you been studying in Italy? Your presentation doesn't make any sense." The topics I discussed in that presentation ended up in a book that I published, which, I might add, would go on to win the Premio Daria Borghese.

It seems like it would be difficult to get anyone to appreciate your work with that kind of prejudice around. How did things change for you to get to where you are today?

When I felt that I had hit a wall with the instruction I was receiving at the Sapienza University of Rome, I stopped going to the university for about a year. At that time, an art historian told me about a one-year scholarship at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. I applied for the scholarship, even considering quitting Sapienza University if necessary. That was when things finally fell into place. I began to study with Prof. Salvatore Settis, an authority in the world of art history, and worked on my research in peace for a year. Prof. Settis was quick to evaluate my work. When he read about my achievements in Pisa, he said that it was "excellent research." Then, when I gave my subsequent presentation at the Sapienza University of Rome my supervising



faculty member, Prof. Curzi, was incredibly enthusiastic. This got the ball rolling again and opened the door for me to finally complete my doctoral dissertation.

You say that your research is “artwork first” and that you try not to get too caught up in established theories or common interpretations that other researchers have published while respecting them, could you elaborate on why this is?

The artwork is the main character in art history. I think it is important to discard my own preconceptions and try to observe what is in front of me as it is. In the classroom, I frequently use games to help students practice “eyes for art” to improve their ability to grasp visual information. Students are very surprised at how much fun they have and ask to do them more often. If you are interested in experiencing these games for yourself, I would love to see you enroll at Keio and take my classes. I can guarantee that it will change the way you see the world, and I think that these skills can also be applied by students in the Faculty of Science and Technology when they have to analyze their experiment results.

I am happy to say that many students have told me, “Before, when I went to art museums, I had no idea what to look for, so I usually left there without taking much time. Now, I can spend three or four hours completely immersed in my observations, and the next thing I know, it’s closing time!” As a teacher, this is the best feedback you can get.

Is there anything you keep in mind when you give lectures?

I always try to remember to remain neutral and not to impose my own assumptions, even in my teaching activities. If I had to describe my teaching style, I would say that I try to have a “philanthropic” approach, where I love all my students equally. The first step in writing academic papers is always to rely on my intuition. I feel that I am drawing on a skill set that is completely separate from “rote learning.” If possible, I also want my students to acquire some of these skills while they are still in college. To encourage this, I try to incorporate classroom activities where students are able to converse and create together, rather than just me talking at them all the time. I try to create an atmosphere in the classroom where students can openly exchange ideas.

I want to equip the next generation with the skills needed to research art history

Fumika Araki

Specializes in the history of Italian Renaissance art. She majored in art history at Kyushu University’s School of Letters and later received a master’s degree from the Department of Art Studies in the Graduate School of Humanities at the same university. In 2012, she received her Ph.D. in art history (Storia dell’arte) from the Sapienza University of Rome. In 2013, she began a postdoctoral position at the University of Tokyo through the JSPS Research Fellowship for Young Scientists. In 2015, she joined Keio University’s Faculty of Science and Technology (Department of Foreign Languages and Liberal Arts) as an assistant professor. She was promoted to her current position in 2022. She received the “Foundation Award” from the Kajima Foundation for the Arts in 2013 and the “Premio Daria Borghese” in 2022.

Is this part of what you had in mind when you started the marbling workshops (as seen in the research introduction)?

Ultimately, despite all the difficulties and frustrations I encounter, I really enjoy my research in art history. Learning should, first and foremost, be fun. I try to incorporate playful elements into teaching. However, if I do this by making students draw or dance, for example, those who are not good at the given task may feel at a disadvantage. Marbling, on the other hand, is not a matter of skill. It is a technique that anyone can enjoy and feel satisfied with their final product.

Recently, I have been working together with Prof. Masayuki Kohiyama of Keio University’s Department of System Design Engineering to experiment with sustainable initiatives that incorporate disaster prevention, citizen science, and art. For example, if disaster prevention maps or guides only say “this place is dangerous,” readers may be intimidated and shy away. However, by incorporating art into the process, it may be possible to raise awareness while also having the participants enjoy learning about disaster preparedness.

I would like to create opportunities to hold workshops not only for Keio University students, but also for people of all ages in Japan and overseas. We may visit some of Keio’s affiliated schools sometime soon. I look forward to meeting everyone when we do.

◎ Some words from students . . . ◎

● When I looked at class surveys filled out by students, I found a rare example that said this class is worth taking. It’s incredible that she makes new discoveries that overturn established theories and argues in a way that even those of us without special knowledge can understand. I thought that the class was great because it made you think.

Prof. Araki is very kind and receptive to other people’s ideas, so she helped create an atmosphere where it was easy for students to share their own interpretations and opinions. She also gave a lot of feedback on our group work. (This is a paraphrased summary based on conversations with two students.)

(Interview and text writer: Yuko Hiratsuka & Kaori Oishi)

For the full text of this interview

<https://www.st.keio.ac.jp/en/kyurizukai/>

