

UMassAmherst

Fine Arts Center

ALEX KERR IN CONVERSATION: **Lost Japan**

Moderated by:

Anne Prescott, Director Five College Center for East Asian Studies

Junko Oba, Associate Professor of Music, Humanities, Arts, and Cultural Studies,
Hampshire College

Wednesday, February 10, 7 p.m. ET

Live Virtual Conversation



The UMass Fine Arts Center is supported by the New England Foundation for the Arts through the New England Arts Resilience Fund, part of the United States Regional Arts Resilience Fund, an initiative of the U.S. Regional Arts Organizations and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, with major funding from the federal CARES Act from the National Endowment for the Arts.

UMass Amherst occupies the traditional land of the Nonotuck tribe. We would also like to acknowledge our neighboring Indigenous nations: the Nipmuc and the Wampanoag to the East, the Mohegan and Pequot to the South, the Mohican to the West, and the Abenaki to the North.

Co-presented with the support of the [Five College Center for East Asian Studies](#)

BIOGRAPHIES

ALEX KERR: About me

I've lived most of my life outside of America, largely in Japan and Thailand, both of which I think of as "home". My great passion is the traditional arts and environment of East Asia which I believe have so much to teach the world. Growing up in a Navy family, I lived in many places, from Naples Italy (my first language was Italian), to Honolulu and Washington DC. My family came to Japan in 1964, and after that I came and went constantly for summers, vacations, and forth, eventually majoring in Japanese Studies at Yale.

I went on afterwards to do Chinese Studies at Oxford. In my final year there in 1977 I ran out of money, and seeing that I could earn £50 if I won a prize for an essay, I submitted one on the subject of Tibet, then (and now) a deep personal interest. This essay won the Oxford Chancellor's English Essay prize, the first time it had been awarded to an American. While it took another decade before I began writing again in earnest, this was the beginning of my writings, which today I think of as my main occupation.

When I finally finished college education, I took up a job in 1977 at the Oomoto Foundation in Kameoka, on the outskirts of Kyoto. For the next twenty years I helped to manage the Oomoto School of Traditional Japanese Arts, and also worked as translator for Oomoto and many other Japanese religious groups (Shinto and Buddhist) at world inter-religious conferences.

During the period that I was at Oomoto, I had great freedom to spend time away from the headquarters, giving me the chance to explore my interests in Kabuki, Calligraphy, Art Collecting and so forth, experiences which I wrote about in the book *Lost Japan* (1993 Japanese, 1996 English).

Art collecting began as a hobby (I started with old Edo-period printed books), but in time came to be an occupation when I found that I had become an art dealer. I continue to collect and sell Japanese paintings and calligraphy, expanding into Thai crafts and modern design, as well. In order to repair and mount the old scrolls and screens which I had collected, I set up a mounting studio, first in Kyoto, and now in Bangkok, Thailand. We use glues, papers, and brocades from Japan, while the work is managed by an experienced Thai staff trained by a classical Kyoto mounter.

In 1984, there was a fateful meeting with Trammell Crow, founder and chairman of Trammell Crow Company, leading Dallas real estate developer. I began as advisor to Trammell's art collection, but later ended up managing the company's operations in Japan during the "bubble" years of the late 1980's and early 1990's. This background in business proved very helpful in writing my later book *Dogs and Demons* (2001 English, 2002 Japanese) which tried to combine a study of finance and the bureaucracy with cultural issues — to show that Japan's modern malaise arises from the same causes in all these fields.

My first trip to Thailand was in the mid 1970's as a student, but I began visiting in earnest in the late 1980's when I tried to get Trammell Crow Co to invest in Bangkok. I became so interested in the arts of Southeast Asia in general and Thailand in particular that in 1997 I moved my base from Kyoto to Bangkok. I now live about half the year in my home in Kameoka, and the other half in an apartment in Bangkok.

In fact, since the "move" I've ended up spending even more time in Japan than I had before. The reason is that the issues in *Dogs and Demons* have now come center stage in Japan, and I'm now involved in many different activities: speaking at various events in Japan and elsewhere, and consulting for provincial Japanese towns and cities that want to improve their environment. Since 2004, I've restored about 25 houses in Kyoto, Iya Valley, Ojika Island (Nagasaki prefecture) etc., and my team and I are now working on similar projects in other towns.

Meanwhile, I continue managing the Origin Program of Traditional Asian Arts. The Oomoto program was unique, and in the process of running it we developed a unique way of teaching traditional Japanese arts to modern people. After 1997 I revived the program outside Oomoto, and I now run the program in three places: as "Origin Program" in Bangkok and Chiangmai, Thailand (for Thai and Lanna traditional arts), and as the "Kyoto Program" in venues in and around Kyoto (for Japanese traditional arts).

My leisure time is spent listening to music, watching theater, and when I have time and a bottle of Shiraz wine and a good friend with me, then I spend an evening doing calligraphy. When just nine years old, I attended a school near Washington DC that introduced children to Chinese characters, and I fell in love with writing them. Ever since then I've been writing Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, and this is still my great joy.

For a complete listing of books and publications by Alex Kerr please [click here](#) or visit his website: [Alex Kerr.com](http://AlexKerr.com)

Anne Prescott (Moderator) is Director of the Five College Center for East Asian Studies at Smith College. She manages programs to support teaching about East Asia in K-12 schools and builds relationships among faculty members and programs at the college level. Anne also leads study tours to East Asia.

Junko Oba (Moderator) is Associate Professor of music at Hampshire College, and holds a B.A. from International Christian University, Tokyo, Japan and an M.A. and a Ph.D. from Wesleyan University, where she trained as an ethnomusicologist and sound recording archivist. Her research interests include traditional and contemporary Japanese music cultures; performative identity politics in Asian diasporas, especially in Brazilian expatriate communities in Japan; national and nationalized identity performances in the trans- and post-national world; music and collective memory construction; and organology and music instruments building.

Upcoming events:



**Alex Kerr in Conversation: Japanese Arts and Popular Culture
Tuesday, February 16, 7 p.m. ET**

Best-selling author and Japanese cultural expert Alex Kerr returns to discuss visuality, language, and space in traditional Japanese arts, calligraphy, and design. Further discussion on anime, manga, and contemporary pop culture will take place with Bruce Baird, Associate Professor of Asian Languages and Literatures at UMass. Free but registration is required.

**Stitch n' Bitch Community Craft Night with Kristina Wong
Wednesday, February 24, 2021 7 p.m. ET via Zoom**



A “Stitch 'n Bitch” is a gathering of crafty folks where they talk, listen, and work on needlecraft together. Sometimes these gatherings become a space for laughter, resistance, self-care, community building, and organizing. Meet and sew with the rock-star volunteers from Kristina’s Auntie Sewing Squad, a national collective of volunteers of all genders who will take newcomers through the activity of making their own hand sewn mask and share what sewing means to them in this time. Beginners and other crafts welcome!

Free but registration is required.

In the 2020-2021 season, the Asian and Asian American Arts and Culture program celebrates its 27th year with a renewed mission to present the artistic and cultural heritages and living practices of Asia (broadly defined) and the Asian American experience as a lens to promote intercultural dialogue and social engagement for our local, virtual, and broader audiences.

For more information about these and all UMass Fine Arts Center Events and to get your ticketing link please visit:

fineartscenter.com