

Inoue Yasushi (1907-1991) was one of the great post-war Japanese authors, whose prolific output comprises some 50 novels and 150 short stories. Despite his productivity (he only began working as a novelist at the age of 42, following a career as a journalist) only a handful of his works have made it into English. British and American publishers have until recently only been drawn to the historical fiction for which he dedicated most of his writing career, but his oeuvre also includes a number of works which deal with the harsh realities of

post-war Japan. Thankfully Pushkin Press have recently published three works (two novellas and one collection of short stories) which fall into this latter category and these are reviewed together here.

Also reviewed in this issue is one of our own publications, Sophie Richard's *The art lover's guide to Japanese museums*, while Mike Sullivan covers both the Raindance Film Festival and Kobayashi Kentaro's one-man show, *Mr Potsunen's Peculiar Slice of Life*.

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(Image: Mochizuki Gyokusen, *Black Bull*, late Edo-Meiji period, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Clark collection)

## Bullfight by Inoue Yasushi

Pushkin Press (2013)

ISBN: 1782270000

Review by Chris Corker

*Bullfight* won Inoue the Akutagawa Prize – considered the most prestigious Japanese literary award – in 1949. This was only his second published work in a prolific career that saw him go on to write fifty novels and one hundred and eighty novellas. In a personal and thoughtful afterword included in this edition, the author tells us that, while he wrote this book in his forties, he believes that he was even then a green author, with much still to learn. He does, however, say that this work was one of the fundamental pieces of his career, and left an indelible mark on his later books.

During the aftermath of the Second World War, in a decimated Osaka, Tsugami, editor-in-chief of a small newly-founded newspaper, agrees to sponsor and arrange a bullfighting contest. Over the months that follow he becomes consumed with the event and, with problems arriving in droves, he begins to question whether or not his business partners are trustworthy, fearing that the event will become a failure. As a backdrop to this story is Tsugami's relationship with the war widow, Sakiko, who, as her conflicted feelings for him intensify, is not sure whether she would like to see this venture succeed or destroy him. This relationship has more depth than the usual cruel ice-queen-at-home scenario that is prevalent in some Japanese literature. Tsugami has, as Sakiko calls it, 'an unsavoury side' that is stirred up by any type of challenge. She believes that this new challenge is not only somewhat in bad taste, but also immoral. She also knows that Tsugami's nature will not allow him to back away. The narrator comments also that:

'When someone put a knife to Tsugami's neck, it was in his nature to press his own blade to the antagonist's, to keep pressing it in, watching the sharp edge; then, after the agitation of the moment had faded, he would look back in disbelief at what he had done.'

The content and theme of the story may naturally lead us to draw comparisons with Hemmingway, but this is not a story about the attraction of sport, or the

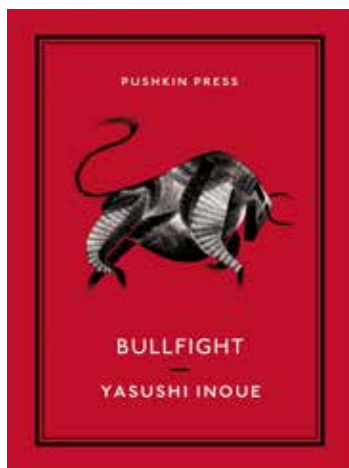
psychology of a sportsman. It is not the bullfight itself that drives Tsugami – very few of the central characters take any interest in the matches once they begin – but a need for distraction and a means to push on and away from the defeat that is apparent all around them, even if it is through further, third-party aggression.

There is a strong feeling of a reluctance to 'pass the torch' to the younger generation throughout. An old and shrewd business man, Okabe, is treated with suspicion by Tsugami, but he is dismissive of another businessman, Miura, representative of an even younger generation. Tsugami is stuck in an unfortunate twilight, unwilling to trust the older generation that guided them to their current predicament, or believe in the new generation, personified by Miura, who he sees as brash and reckless. This tension is representative of Japan after the Second World War, where the younger generation were becoming disillusioned with their elders. For Japan, who had for so long relied on a strict code of filial piety, this was a marked evolution, and one with which everyone was comfortable. This tension and anger did, however, create some of the country's best recognised authors.

Just as it is now impossible to read *The Great Gatsby* as anything but a metaphor for the start of the Great Depression, it is difficult to view *Bullfight* as anything other than a metaphor for the Second World War, and the clues are frequent throughout the novella. While the higher-ups manipulate common opinion and generate enthusiasm for the bullfight, no-one is thinking about the economy or their unmet daily needs. In all of this fervour, the characters also completely forget about the bulls, the perfect representation of the soldier, who are being made to fight for everyone else's peace-of-mind. This is summed up brilliantly as, when two bulls fight to a vicious stalemate, the crowd is asked to clap if they wish them to continue until one is defeated or killed. As soon as the bulls have finished fighting and they have fulfilled their purpose, Okabe is already to be found choosing those that would be suitable for food.

Echoes of the war are inescapable for the characters. On New Year's Eve, Sakiko and Tsugami take time to listen to the temple bells, in a scene that resembles an air raid:

'They heard the bells being struck at regular intervals, nearby and far away, their countless reverberations all layering and colliding, echoing into each other, flowing like a hundred streams through the crisp midnight air.'



These dual-layered moments of normality and concealed peril are a constant in the book, acting as a haunting echo that haunts the protagonists.

The translation is very clear and easy to read. A lot of the dialogue is quite casual, possibly an attempt to represent the Kansai dialect, which is often considered more direct than its Tokyo counterpart (the relationship is actually very comparable to the traditional English north and south divide – Osaka traditionally being seen as friendly but uncouth by Tokyo citizens). This Pushkin Collection edition, intended to feel comfortable in the

hand, is of a fine quality, with a textured cover and thick, high quality paper.

Overall, this novella is a good way to spend a few hours. It is rich with imagery and meaning that few novels can manage. You may not relate to the rather selfish characters, but you will find some of them amusing and others pitiable, while the story flows very nicely to the open ending that is somewhat inevitable – in no small way due to the uncertainty of the times – from the first page. All in all, a good read. §

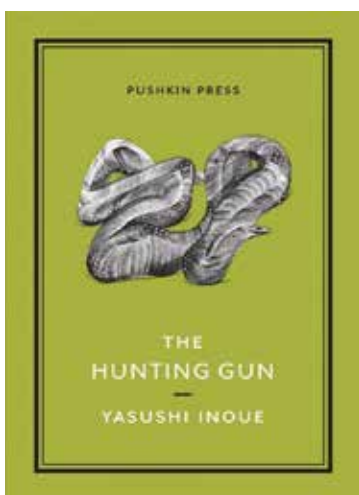
## The Hunting Gun by Inoue Yasushi

Pushkin Press (2014)

ISBN: 9781782270010

Review by Lucy Kikuchi

*The Hunting Gun*, published in 1949, marked the start of Inoue Yasushi's career in fiction after many years of working in journalism and publishing. And what



a fine start it was. Although Inoue comments in the afterword that his breakthrough novellas *The Hunting Gun* and *Bullfight* 'carry within them... [a] youthful ungainliness', this seems an incredibly modest appraisal. The novella is beautifully written and credit must be given to Michael Emmerich who has done full justice to Inoue's work with an elegant translation.

The story revolves around three characters: a husband (Misugi), his wife, his lover, and his lover's daughter. Letters written by each of the women to Misugi offer three different perspectives on his affair, each in turn (mis)interpreting events, conversations and characters. A word of warning here, though: the synopsis written on the inside sleeve of the Pushkin Press edition reveals what is, perhaps, a little too much plot detail; avoid this and you may further enjoy the high level of intrigue Inoue weaves into the plot.

Perhaps one of the main themes of *The Hunting Gun* is the disappointment of love. This is not only true for a husband or wife, but lovers, mothers and daughters, and young people who are yet to experience 'love'. Shoko, the daughter of Misugi's lover, is at a young age devastated to learn that romantic love is flawed, and Inoue suggests at certain points throughout the story an air of disappointment

surrounding the relationship between herself and her mother.

Inoue writes most of the novella through the voice of women who comment on a 'woman's suffering' or who claim to be 'reaping the punishment... due as a woman incapable of enduring the pain of loving'. Inoue examines the complexities of love from the female perspective (especially for women of this era) and although Misugi is given a voice, he is always aloof, and his emotional state mostly inscrutable.

As a story set in early postwar Japan, the language between characters is more formal than we would expect today, but in a way that properly reflects the customs of the day. At times, the prose feels almost archaically poetic: 'Oh, what humility! The modesty of a new wife of twenty, so pristine only the curving lines of a work of pure art could express it', but Inoue's words are a joy to read. A *tanka* (a form of Japanese poem), which Emmerich translates masterfully, offers a moment of bitter poignancy as Misugi's wife describes her feelings of rejection. The use of language is at times breathtaking.

As the story unfolds and the component parts slip into place, you may be left wanting to reread *The Hunting Gun*. Since it is only one-hundred and twelve pages, this is easy to do, and there is enough depth to the story and expressiveness to the writing to make a second read equally as satisfying as the first. §

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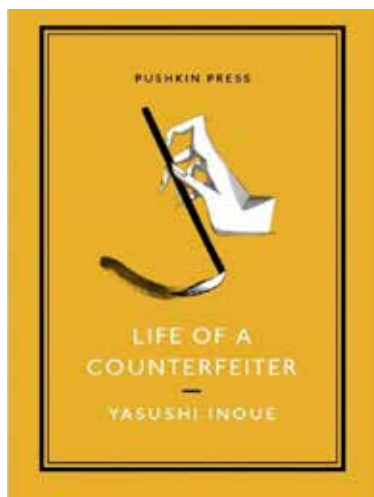
## Life of a Counterfeiter by Inoue Yasushi

Pushkin Press (2014)

140 Pages

ISBN-10: 1782270027

Review by Chris Corker



The three stories collected in *Life of a Counterfeiter* take place, like Inoue's celebrated *Bullfight* and *The Hunting Gun*, shortly after the war; defeat is still an open wound, and the future a grim prospect, although again like *Bullfight* the war rarely appears as more than an unspoken backdrop, alluded to implicitly in the social climate and sometimes in subtle but striking imagery such as a firework display.

The titular 'Life of a Counterfeiter' is the longest of the three pieces, with both 'Reeds' and 'Mr Goodall's Gloves' being brief meditations on memory and the seemingly insignificant moments that affect lives. Running through these stories is a nostalgic yearning for more prosperous times. Inoue does incredibly well to infuse these seemingly event-less stories with meaning, lent extra weight by his refreshing sense of economy.

'Life of a Counterfeiter' sees a journalist tasked with completing an autobiography of the late, lauded artist Onuki Keigaku. The journalist struggles with starting the work and, aside from assembling a slapdash timeline, cannot muster the energy to continue. When, after 13 years, an invitation to the anniversary of the painter's death arrives and the journalist is forced into action, he finds that it is instead Hara Hōsen, a friend and notorious counterfeiter of Keigaku's, that captures his interest.

As the journalist stumbles upon more of Hōsen's forgeries, he finds an equal, if not greater, beauty. When he then uncovers a rare original, he is mesmerised. What begins as a simple tale of hagiography becomes an ode to the under appreciated artist.

In 'Reeds', another (or perhaps the same) journalist reads a story in the newspaper of a man who discovered his lost son, only to find the boy has no recollection of him. This leads the journalist to doubt his own memories and to seek to confirm them with his parents, but his efforts are in vain. This story is rich with philosophy on the subjective nature of memory

and man's need to create a shared history in order to give life significance.

'Each of us holds one or two cards that have been in our hands for years, who knows why, while the cards that should have been paired with them have disappeared.'

The protagonist, unable to verify his hazy childhood memories, is left to doubt his own version of the truth ('I hold one card in my hand but my parents have lost its pair'). Recalling a particularly old memory, featuring a kindly, beautiful girl, the protagonist learns that it is his Aunt Mitsu, who died when still young. Having known her as a woman of ill-repute, he inquires with his family and re-analyses his own memories. Over time, his opinion of his aunt evolves and he is left with the belief that, although Mitsu died young, she created many ripples in the world that will ensure she is remembered.

'Mr Goodall's Gloves', set during the Meiji restoration, is the only story in this collection to feature a Westerner. A tale where small actions have deeper significances, it tells the story of a young boy living with his grandmother – another woman of questionable repute – who enjoys telling him stories about his grandfather and the man he idolised. As the grandmother ages and ails, her stories take on a tone of nostalgia. What begins, however, as another portrayal of the ordinary citizen's awe for the great, slips beautifully into an intimate portrayal of an isolated woman bringing up a child alone. When, one day, the child finds a pair of gloves that are too big to fit the hands of anyone in the village, the grandmother tells him the story of her encounter with Mr Goodall.

Sometimes meandering to and fro so that it is hard to believe there could be a common theme amongst the author's whimsical strokes, *Life of a Counterfeiter* always manages to reassemble its wayward parts and create an instinctual poignancy, a feat that only goes to illustrate Inoue's skill. Still a relative unknown outside of Japan, many critics consider him to be woefully underappreciated. On this showing it's hard to disagree.

A note on the edition: The Pushkin Press series is incredibly well-presented and impeccably designed. At just the right size to be held comfortably, and with high-quality paper and a pleasantly textured cover, they really are a joy to read. The translation here is also near faultless and is in line with Inoue's economy. §

## Fuku Chan of FukuFuku Flats

directed by  
Yōsuke Fujita

2014, UK premiere at the  
Raindance Film Festival.

110 minutes

Review by Mike Sullivan



Fujita Yosuke is a director who was first introduced to British audiences via his first feature film *Fine, Totally Fine* (全然大丈夫), a 2008 comedy hit. It has become representative of a new kind of quirky Japanese comedy, which in some ways is personified by actor Arakawa Yoshiyoshi, who features in a supporting role in Fujita's *Fuku-chan of FukuFuku Flats*. Fujita worked in theatre for a long time before his first movie, and has since followed it up with *Saba* and *Quirky Guys and Gals*, films which he both wrote and directed.

*Fuku-chan of FukuFuku Flats*, again both written and directed by Fujita, has quite an unusual background. There were four production companies involved, one of which was the UK's Third Window Films – a film distributor famous for bringing the best, and the latest, Asian cinema to our screens. The involvement of Third Window Films along with other international companies means that this film is guaranteed an international distribution once it is released on DVD.

Arakawa brings his usual comedic performance to *Fuku-Chan*, but full credit has to go to the main star, Oshima Miyuki. For most Japanese people she is famous as a comedian from the Morisanchū trio, but for those outside Japan she remains relatively unknown. Oshima plays the eponymous *Fuku-chan*, a man in his 30s, and her performance is such that unless you knew who she is, you would never know the actor were a woman. During the Raindance Film Festival Fujita took great pleasure in the success of this deception.

Fujita apparently had Oshima in mind when he wrote this story, and if she hadn't agreed to do the movie then he wouldn't have gone ahead. The making of the film was presaged by a public event in which Oshima – with the help of Mizukawa and Arakawa – had her head shaved.

The movie itself is a compelling offbeat comedy. We are introduced to Fuku-chan via his interactions with his colleagues and friends, and we can see he is just

a nice guy. His best friend attempts to set him on the road to meeting the right woman, but unfortunately Fuku-chan suffers from acute shyness, and comedy ensues. Meanwhile Chiho (Mizukawa) wins an award in photography and is aiming to go professional. Their lives appear to be completely unrelated but they are brought together as the film develops into a nuanced exposition on childhood bullying and its long-term effects.

At nearly two hours long, the film is sometimes tedious, although the story itself is simply captivating. You can't help but root for Fuku-chan, laugh at the comedy that ensues from what should be perfectly normal events, and feel genuine sorrow for a traumatic event in his past which has clearly hobbled his future. This movie makes us smile at its moments of silliness, but is undercut by a dark statement about how the carelessness of children can pierce deep into someone's soul. It is a movie about the sheer joy of a smile, and about atoning for your past mistakes, and the ending leaves us with questions worth thinking about. [S](#)

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## Mr Potsunen's Peculiar Slice of Life

Kobayashi Kentaro

Leicester Square Theatre,  
3-4 February 2015

Review by Mike Sullivan



Kobayashi Kentaro (小林賢太郎) is a famous Japanese comedian and performer who first came to the attention of the world in a series called *The Japanese Tradition* seven years ago. In these videos Japanese culture and tradition were amusingly reinterpreted for the benefit of foreigners. Kobayashi is well known for being a talented mime performer, manga artist and more. In 2012 he had a tour in France with his character Mr Potsunen which was documented by NHK in *The Art of Laughter* and this year he has returned to tour not just in France but also for two exclusive nights in London with *Mr Potsunen's Peculiar Slice of Life*.

He has realized the entire show by himself, which includes writing the story and performing all of the parts in it, and it is unhindered by any language barriers; Mr Potsunen himself rarely speaks, while some lines of text in Japanese are accompanied by an

English translation. It is a credit to Kentaro that he has created a show which can be understood by anyone without the need for descriptive dialogue or text.

Leicester Square Theatre recently hosted the amazing SIRO-A, and this intimate stage allowed the audience to really see Mr Potsunen up close. Unsurprisingly it was a packed house and it was with baited breath that the audience waited for the show to start. As Kobayashi came on stage it was possible to see a touch of nerves, his hands shook a little, but he quickly took us into his world.

The stage itself just consisted of a projection screen with a space in front; the screen was used for videos, pictures and text, while Kentaro mimed a lot of actions in front of the screen. For this show there was also a *kuroko* (person in black) dressed in traditional clothing from kabuki theatre who moved some props and performed as some props, most amusingly as a camera.

It is hard to imagine the immense pressures of doing a solo show with so few props, but as a consummate artist he handles it well and this combines well with the fascinating character of Mr Potsunen. In his lonely life he is surrounded by creativeness and marvels, and this story begins with his interest in insects. Using a projection screen, which is an important component for Kentaro's shows, the insects evade his net and ultimately start flying at him.

One of the central aspects of the story is of a firefly like insect which Mr Potsunen does capture and look

after. Taking it back to his home it shows a penchant for drinking sake before falling asleep. Throughout the show it gradually gets bigger and bigger, while Mr Potsunen goes through peculiar events which showcase each of his talents.

He mimes putting together an incomprehensible mechanism with the instructions shown on the screen, at other times elaborate art created by Kentaro on the screen represent the world that Mr Potsunen lives in while towards the end we see a video of the famous finger walking that often appears in Kentaro's shows. As an ingenious device to show journeys which can go over bridges, up mountains, down into the depths of oceans and more, Kentaro uses his hand to 'walk,' 'jump' and 'swim.' This is accompanied by the rather addictive music which is a staple of all his shows.

It is hard to provide an example with which to compare his show. Some of the animation on the screen is reminiscent of Monty Python and his interaction with the animation is along the same vein as SIRO-A, but the story itself is all its own. At times it is almost dreamlike with a slightly sinister figure wearing a noh mask of an old man, but at nearly all times it is comedic.

At just over an hour it feels a little short, but considering that it is a solo performance it is enough time for him to take us into Mr Potsunen's world and experience his amazing adventures. One can only hope that he will be back again soon and for more than two nights. §

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## The art lover's guide to Japanese museums

By Sophie Richard

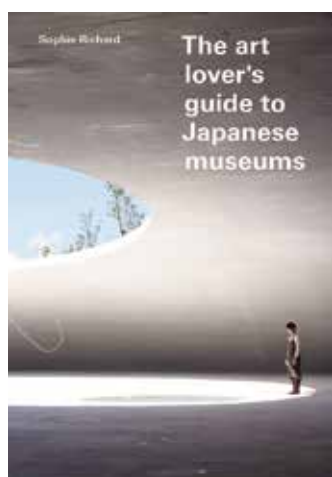
The Japan Society (2014)

176 pages

ISBN: 978-0-9559977-1-6

Review by Jenny White

Sophie Richard's *The art lover's guide to Japanese museums* is a seductive and accessible introduction to Japanese art, from its ancient beginnings to its current shape, and the spaces in which it is displayed. Hitherto, the sheer number of these museums has proved a daunting and somewhat intimidating challenge for the visitor with no prior knowledge of Japanese culture and limited time on their hands. So, where does the art lover begin?



Sophie encourages us to leave our preconceptions at the museum entrance, along with, in some cases, our shoes, as she takes us by the hand on a personal journey to over fifty national, local, public, and occasionally private, art museums and houses. She strikes a fine balance between imparting enough information for us to understand why this work of art or that building is significant, and leaving us with sufficient space to feel our own response. The overseas visitor may not stray far from the main Honshu Island, where most of these museums are based, however visitors to the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum on the island of Shikoku are rewarded with 'A place of harmony between the traditional Japanese buildings where [Isamu Noguchi] lived and worked, and the gardens and surrounding mountains'. Interviews enhance our understanding of the aims of this museum: 'in the curator's view, the feeling of the place is the most important'.

In Japan, the art museum (*bijutsukan*) as a place for art is a relatively new (post-war) concept. Before the economic bubble of the 1980s the home of Japanese art was mainly in the *shōsōin* (treasure houses) of shrines and temples. The 1980s saw a national boom with ninety new museums founded in 1988 alone. Museum construction was a symbol of civic pride; huge amounts of public money were allocated, world famous architects were commissioned and museum building provided jobs, competition and moreover, a local identity. 'Nagi MOCA is a cutting-edge municipal museum founded in 1994 to put the isolated town of Nagi on the map [...T]he building itself is a work of art', Sophie explains. In Europe we saw something similar in the 'Bilbao effect', as the northern Spanish industrial town was transformed by architect Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum. Nowadays, Japan is home to over a thousand art museums, with fine examples in every prefecture, ward and metropolis.



Arakawa Shūsaku and Madeline Gins, Sun Room

In the rush to build these museums, curators and local communities weren't always consulted: 'Mayors and prefecture governors are more interested in the size of the building than its content', complains Isozaki Arata, architect of museums in Japan and around the world. 'In Europe, a museum is primarily a collection with curators. In Japan, it's first and foremost a building.' However, in the last twenty years, Japanese art museums have quietly built up and refined their collections and modified their construction to allow art, people, and buildings to more readily co-exist. Their curatorial displays are now some of the best in

the world and a radical shift has taken place; curators have realised it's not enough to be a scholar – one also has to reach out to the local community – and that publicly or privately funded, the museum is a public space. The last – and previously elusive – piece of that jigsaw is to extend that accessibility to the overseas visitor.



Ryūkoku Museum, Kyoto

Sophie's book is unique in achieving this, with her description of both the collections and their interaction with the museum spaces, which themselves are often significant examples within the oeuvres of international and Japanese architects. The design of the book is clean, uncluttered and subtly colour-coded by area, with museum and thematic indexes, sections on the Imperial family, *mingei* folk art and the tea ceremony, and a useful timeline. Sophie warns us that displays are often rotated with the seasons, so you may not see the 'signature' art work of any one museum on your visit but even so, you will be treated instead to a delightful and unexpected discovery in its place. Museums are often 'destinations' off the beaten track, and so Sophie's commentary is balanced with helpful hints on the extent of English spoken in the area, other museums easily overlooked nearby, and museums' names in Japanese script – the latter a gentle aid to the reader who is beginning to

decipher this 'Empire of Signs', and useful for showing a local if you are lost along the way!

In her fluid summary 'Looking at Japanese art' we learn of the aesthetic significance of the tea ceremony, and that art and craft, unlike in the West, are on the same aesthetic and spiritual continuum. Indeed, this thread runs throughout Japanese art and architecture from its earliest religious beginnings to the work of contemporary artists such as Sugimoto Hiroshi, Miyajima Tatsuo and architect Aoki Jun, who was keen to reflect the nearby ancient Jōmon archaeological site in his contemporary design for the Aomori Museum of Art.

Sophie's commentary considers the holistic cultural experience of the area as essential to the enjoyment of the visit. For example, a visit to the Hara Museum, built in 1938 by Watanabe Jin as a rare example of Bauhaus influence, includes an account of its unusual architectural heritage. She encourages us to visit the museum's annex in Shibukawa, built by Isozaki Arata; describes the quality of installation of the work

by artists Tabaimo, Kusama Yayoi, and Olafur Eliaasson; and concludes by suggesting a dip in the outdoor hot spring at Ikaho Onsen and a dinner comprising the delicious udon noodles available nearby. Sounds like a perfect day!

This is essentially a book of stories, written in the universal language of art, and one that will do much to increase your understanding and enjoyment of the artworks, the space, and the local environment on your visit to any museum. It will make a significant contribution to the Japanese art world by introducing new audiences to the county's museums, and the stories that lie within. Furthermore, the intrepid art lover, now emboldened and inspired, can venture north and south of the Japanese archipelago and discover new art, galleries, and museums outside conventional guidebooks. If that art lover is you, do not keep the secret to yourself. Let Sophie know of your discoveries, and the aim of this elegant and fascinating book will have then been achieved. §



Entrance of The Japan Folk Crafts Museum