

TAKAHIRO IWASAKI: REFLECTION MODEL

NGV INTERNATIONAL

29 APRIL – 1 OCTOBER 2023

NGV

This fact sheet provides information on the exhibition *Takahiro Iwasaki: Reflection model (Itsukushima)* to support the study of VCE Art Making and Exhibiting – Unit 2, Area of Study 1 and Unit 4, Area of Study 3.

For a more detailed overview of exhibition preparation, presentation and conservation of artworks in exhibitions at the NGV, refer to [Exhibiting Artworks at the NGV](#)¹.



ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

This temporary exhibition that showcases Takahiro Iwasaki's *Reflection model (Itsukushima)*, 2013-2014, alongside two historical Japanese screens, *Itsukushima screen* and *Wakanoura screen*, both produced during the late 17th century.

Reflection model (Itsukushima) is an intricately detailed sculpture of Japan's iconic Itsukushima Shrine, located on the small island of Miyajima. Commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria in 2013, this work forms part of the *Reflection Model Series* by contemporary artist Takahiro Iwasaki.

The series focuses on Japanese sacred buildings and their reflections on water. Playing with this striking visual relationship, Iwasaki constructs precise three-dimensional models that combine the actual building with its reflection to create a single, complete form. *Reflection model (Itsukushima)* is the largest work in the series. Iwasaki's sculptures pay homage to these historic buildings and their architects, who employed the reflection of the buildings in the water to create an otherworldly vision of paradise of Nirvana – a floating world freed from gravity..

The exhibition is collection-based, meaning it comprises works belonging to the NGV. Complementing *Reflection model (Itsukushima)* are two Japanese historical screens that depict the revered and spiritual sites of Itsukushima Shrine, as well as the Wakanoura Shrine, another renowned place of Shinto pilgrimage. Their inclusion provides context around Itsukushima's place in Japanese history and culture as subjects in art and design and its significance as a site of spiritual expression.

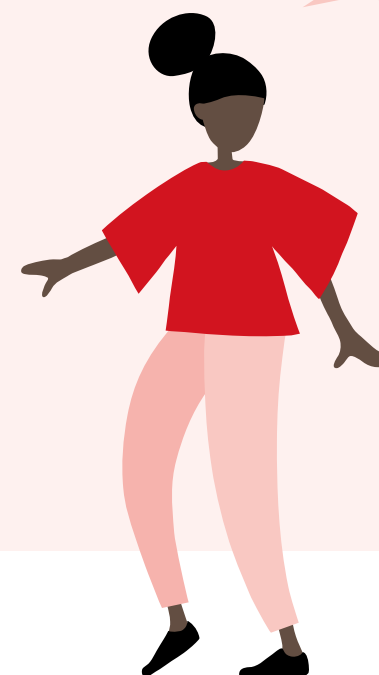
EXPLORING THE GALLERY

Consider the three works displayed in the space. Why do you think these three works have been displayed together?

What do you immediately notice about the way the artworks are presented in the gallery space?

What mood or feeling does the space generate? What gives you this impression?

How are the artworks kept safe in the gallery space? What conservation strategies do you see as you walk around the exhibition?



KEY WORKS



REFLECTION MODEL (ITSUKUSHIMA)

Itsukushima Shrine, along with its famed *torii* gateway, is one of Japan's significant spiritual sites. The Shinto shrine is constructed over tidal flats, and as the tide rises, it appears to float on the water's surface. The shrine is celebrated as one of the country's *Nihon Sankei* (the most celebrated sites) and has been the subject of many luxurious golden screen paintings and woodblock prints.

In *Reflection model (Itsukushima)*, Iwasaki expresses his spiritual connection to Itsukushima shrine, which is located close to where the artist was born and raised. As cited on the didactic panel in the exhibition, Iwasaki writes, 'I have been waiting for...my artistic process (to) mature... and ripen...to a suitable level before embarking on such a massive and important project'.²

A work of such scale presented structural challenges for both the artist and the Gallery due to its size and fragility. Iwasaki employed the age-old Japanese concept of *Jyugoseino* (durability found in flexibility), which has been crucial in creating earthquake-resistant buildings. When suspended, the fourteen parts of the sculpture nestle into each other, but the pieces do not lock into place. In this way, the model can move without creating stress points or risking breakage. Constructed from a traditional building material (untreated cypress wood) the model's colour will change and mature with age. Iwasaki's attention to the expertise and ingenuity that Japanese carpenters have developed over countless generations makes this work a celebration a continuation of this ancient craft.

WAKANOURA SCREEN

The *Wakanoura* screen depicts a bird's eye view of the famous location for poets, Wakanoura Shrine, which is located on the coastline south of Osaka. Like Itsukushima, Wakanoura is renowned as a place of travel and Shinto pilgrimage. Both locations have also been the subjects of historical chronicles from as early as the ninth century. From early poems and legendary tales, *meisho* (famous places) became popular to visit for travellers and pilgrims of all social classes.

Japanese folding screens, known traditionally as *Byōbu*, were initially used for the practical purpose of blocking drafts in the home. Over time, they became increasingly decorative, and evolved into beautiful multi-panel artworks that conveyed the status and wealth of their owners.³

In this depiction of Wakanoura Shrine, we see a vibrant scene of springtime festivities, including an archery competition, people picnicking under cherry blossom trees, others carrying portable shrines and numerous parading samurai.



(left)
Takahiro Iwasaki
Reflection model (Itsukushima) 2013 (detail)
from the *Reflection model* series 2001–
Cypress, adhesive
(a-b) 139.0 x 783.0 x 864.0 cm (variable)
(installation)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 2014
2015.77.a-b
© Takahiro Iwasaki, courtesy of the artist
and ARATANIURANO

(right)
Japanese
Wakanoura late 17th century
from the pair of six panel folding screens:
ink, gold paint, pigments on gold leaf on
paper, lacquer on wood, silk, brass,
copper, paper
110.0 x 271.2 (image) (each)
124.5 x 285.0 cm (overall) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased with funds donated by Baillieu
Myer AC and Sarah Myer, 2022
2022.55.a-b

ITSUKUSHIMA SCREEN

Like *Reflection model (Itsukushima)*, this screen displays Itsukushima Shrine. Similar to Iwasaki's sculpture, this scene depicts a moment at high tide, during which the shrine's *torii* gate (lower centre) is surrounded by water and visitors can pass through the gate by boat. They then arrive at a pier that serves as an entrance to the main shrine. Throughout the *Itsukushima* screen, we see pilgrims promenading along the shrines elevated walkways, with some wealthier patrons being transported in palanquins. Various shops sell traditional items such as tea, kimono fabric and umbrellas. To the side of the shrine, we can see several deer grazing under pine trees. These deer are iconic to Itsukushima and are sacred messengers of Shinto gods.



JAPANESE

Itsukushima late 17th century
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2022.55.a-b

KEY TEAM MEMBERS

NGV CURATORIAL TEAM

Wayne Crothers, Senior Curator, Asian Art
Sunita Lewis, Curatorial Project Officer, Asian Art

EXHIBITION DESIGN

Dasha Tolotchkov, Designer

CONSERVATION

Ruth Shervington, Senior Conservator of Paper
Holly McGowan-Jackson, Senior Conservator of Frames and Furniture

CURATORIAL RATIONALE

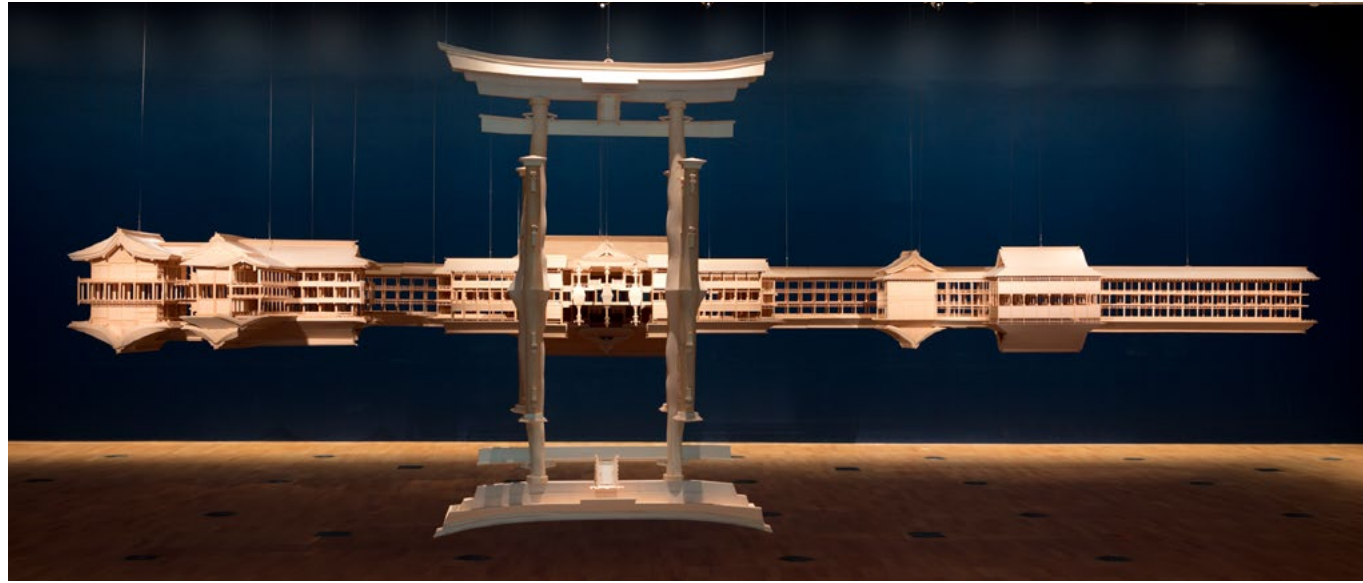
This is the second time Takahiro Iwasaki's *Reflection model (Itsukushima)* has been displayed at the National Gallery of Victoria. The first installation took place immediately after acquiring the artwork in 2014. For its debut presentation, the model was displayed on its own in the Asian temporary gallery. The work was displayed in a minimal, white gallery space and lit brightly, emphasising the model's construction and its delicate detail. Its display in this space under bright light gave the work an ethereal quality – almost like a spaceship suspended in time and space.

Since the work's first presentation, Iwasaki has received considerable recognition, representing Japan at the Venice Biennale in 2017 and exhibiting globally. The 2023 display comes almost a decade after the sculpture was first commissioned. Wayne Crothers, the NGV's Senior Curator for Asian Art, wanted to present this major work, offering a different visitor experience to its initial display. In contrast to the initial display under bright lights and against white walls, the work is displayed in a darkened room with deep blue walls, illuminated by soft light to evoke a night visit to Itsukushima by moonlight – both of this world and otherworldly. The inclusion of the two historical screens contextualises the model as an important theme in art throughout Japanese history and creates a dialogue between historical and contemporary art.

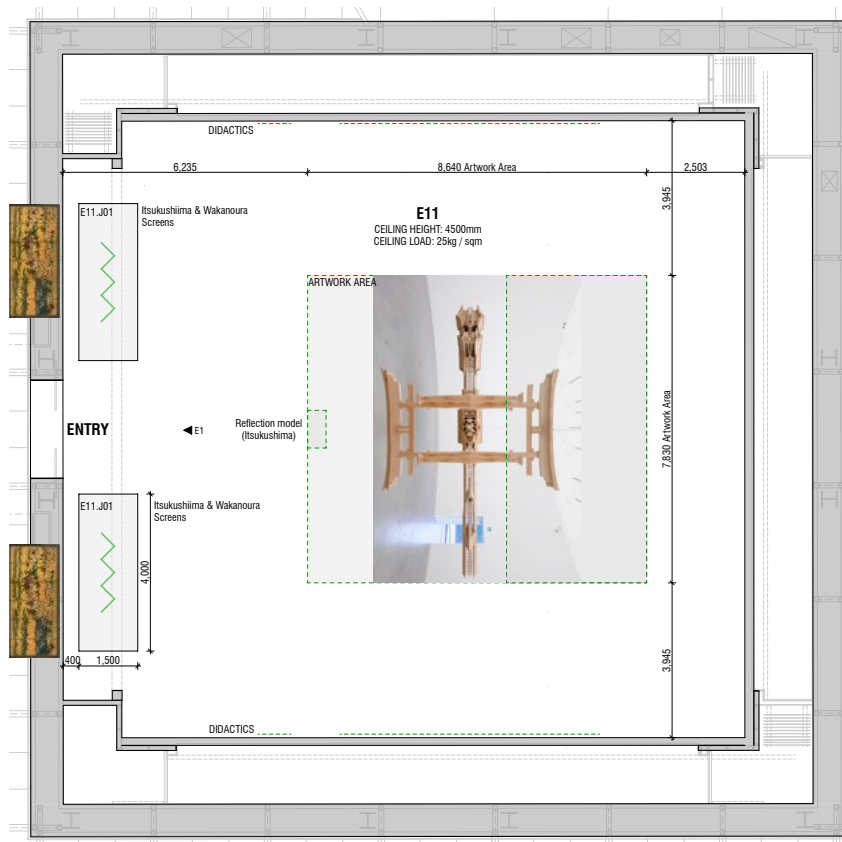
When discussing how audiences might view the current display, the artist, Takahiro Iwasaki considered recent events such as the war in Ukraine and the Covid 19 pandemic. These events have resulted in a dramatic increase in the cost of materials and transport. 'It is almost impossible to transport a Reflection model of this scale overseas currently...we don't know if things will return to how they once were.'⁴

Iwasaki wants audiences to '...consider the rarity of the work...(and to) ponder ...a shrine floating on the water that exists on the other side of an ocean.' He also wants to see *Reflection model* as '...another version of the actual Itsukushima Shrine...(which lives) on its own and in a different timeline and space.'⁵

EXHIBITION DESIGN



Installation view of *Reflection model* as seen from the entrance of the Gallery



Installation floor plan prepared by NGV Exhibition Design

The exhibition occupies the temporary Asian Gallery on Level 1 of NGV International. Takahiro Iwasaki's *Reflection model (Itsukushima)* is positioned in the middle of the room, with each of the fourteen components suspended from steel cables. The sculpture faces the entrance to the exhibition, so that when visitors enter the Gallery, they encounter the artwork just as they would if they were visiting Itsukushima Shrine on Miyajima Island in real life. They first pass the standalone torii gate closest to the entrance before moving on towards the shrine itself. On either side of the entrance, facing the sculpture are the two historical folding screens, positioned to complement the central contemporary work of art.

When considering the layout of the space, the Exhibition Design team wanted to ensure that Takahiro Iwasaki's work stood out as the key work in the exhibition, and that the sculpture had plenty of space around it for audiences to circumnavigate the room. The work is intended to be interactive, and space is left to allow visitors to wander around and view the artwork from many angles. Iwasaki invites audiences to '...enjoy the changes in perspectives in the space; the relationship between themselves and the model in space. Trying to change the perspective by sitting down, walking around the model and walking close to it.'⁶ With nothing obstructing the view of the sculpture, the layout creates uninterrupted sightlines and photo moments for visitors as they engage with the work from multiple angles.

It is for this reason that the two folding screens have been placed in front of the sculpture, at the entrance, rather than behind it. The placement of the screens allows *Reflection model (Itsukushima)* to be viewed first and foremost, then the screens come to the attention of the visitor after the initial sighting of the model. The screens stand upon individual platforms placed a short distance from the Gallery wall.

The walls of the Gallery have been painted a deep blue (Dulux Ahoy) to mimic the colour of the night sky. This colour choice was inspired by the beautiful translucent deep blue colour of the sky experienced during the hour following dusk. When the shrine is illuminated by the moon, the reflections in the water below take on a very different emotional ambiance. To create the visual illusion of moonlight the sculpture has been illuminated with spotlights from above. A challenge for the Exhibition Designers was to generate enough light to spotlight the sculpture without creating shadows below, which were deemed a distraction to the viewer's experience of the artwork.

To allow audiences to move freely around *Reflection model (Itsukushima)* and view it without obstruction, the Gallery chose not to put physical barriers in place to protect the sculpture from interference. Instead, spot lit signage directing visitors to take care navigating the sculpture and refrain from touching the artwork are positioned on the floor of the Gallery at the front, rear and sides of the installation.

Keeping in line with a simple and unobtrusive approach to exhibition design, wall text have been kept to a minimum and applied directly to the surface of the walls with computer cut vinyl (CCV). Artwork labels and didactic panels have been placed around the Gallery in a symmetrical fashion, complementing the notion of 'reflection' explored in the exhibition. This concept is further celebrated in the exhibition title text, in which the graphic design team subtly reflected the title using a more transparent vinyl. The wall text is displayed in both English and Japanese to give context to the artwork's cultural origin as well as engage members of the Japanese community and those studying Japanese.

TAKAHIRO IWASAKI ITSUKUSHIMA REFLECTION MODEL ITSUKUSHIMA REFLECTION MODEL



(above) Computer generated render showing the placement of the *Wakanoura* and *Itsukushima* screens at the entrance of the exhibition
(below) Computer generated render showing the placement of didactic panels in English and Japanese

CONSERVATION CONSIDERATIONS

REFLECTION MODEL (ITSUKUSHIMA)

Reflection model (Itsukushima) comprises fourteen constructed parts made of timber, including Japanese Cypress (both solid wood and veneered wood, which is a thin wooden coating) and basswood plywood, with no surface finish or varnish. The wood remains sensitive to changes in the atmosphere's moisture content and tends to swell in conditions of high relative humidity (RH) and shrink when the relative humidity is low. To prevent such changes, NGV galleries are maintained with moderate and stable environmental conditions. This includes maintaining humidity levels at 40–60% RH and a temperature of approximately 20 degrees Celsius \pm 2 degrees.

Prior to the exhibition, the fourteen pieces of the sculpture were stored in custom-built crates that included packing material and stillages (support frames). Before installation commenced, each part of the model was inspected by a conservator in storage. Several parts were brought into the NGV Frames & Furniture Conservation Studio for minor repairs to secure loose components and small areas of lifting veneer. These repairs were undertaken using the same type of adhesive that the artist used in the construction of the piece and special light-weight clamps were used to hold the parts in place while the adhesive dried.



Storage crates for individual components of *Reflection model (Itsukushima)*.

17TH CENTURY WAKANOURA AND ISTUKUSHIMA SCREENS

Each of the historical screens on display comprises six panels. They are made from delicate materials, including a wooden framework, lacquer coated wood to make the outer frames, silk brocade fabric for the surrounding mounting, light-sensitive pigments painted on paper and gold leaf. Under the painted surface, each panel has a lattice like-timber structure that is covered with numerous sheets of paper, applied to each side of the framework. Similar to *Reflection model (Itsukushima)*, the screens are vulnerable to movement and warping from changes in atmospheric humidity, because they also include uncoated soft wood. As the paper covering the hidden lattice structure within the screen is vulnerable to splitting or distortion if there are to dramatic changes in climatic conditions, the Gallery displays the screens in an environment where humidity and temperature can be carefully monitored and controlled. Due to the fragile nature of the pigments on the surface of the screens, they are also exhibited under lighting at levels of no more than 50 lux.

The panels of each screen remain unglazed so they can be folded easily or collapsed when being repositioned or stored. However, this also means that the screens can be easily damaged or even punctured if handled incorrectly or interfered with while on display. To minimise this risk, each screen has been placed on a platform and positioned just beyond arm's reach. Each platform bears a written reminder to not touch the screens.

When they are not on display, the screens are folded and stored in individual custom-built cases essential for physical protection, preventing exposure to light, dust, and insect damage. Each box is lined with archival paper and contains foam pieces to both cushion the screen and prevent abrasion.



Visitors at Reflection Model Supporters Event, July 2023. Image: Carmen Zammit

PLAN YOUR OWN EXHIBITION

How could you plan the presentation of Takahiro Iwasaki's *Reflection model (Itsukushima)* for display in the Gallery? Explore other works of art and design in the NGV Collection and follow these steps to develop your own concept for the display of Iwasaki's artwork:



NOTES

- ¹ National Gallery of Victoria, 'Exhibiting Artworks at the NGV', 2023, NGV, Victorian Government, https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/school_resource/art-making-and-exhibiting-at-the-ngv/
- ² Wayne Crothers, 'Takahiro Iwasaki's Reflection model (Itsukushima)', NGV, Victorian Government, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/takahiro-iwasakis-reflection-model-itsukushima-2013-14/>, accessed 20 Jul. 2023.
- ³ Ruth Shervington, 'Unfolding' Japanese Screens, 2019, NGV, Victorian Government, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/unfolding-japanese-screens>, accessed 11 July 2023. Essay by Ruth Shervington, Senior Conservator of Paper, National Gallery of Victoria.
- ⁴ National Gallery of Victoria, 'Takahiro Iwasaki', NGV Magazine, Issue 40, May/June 2023, p.71
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- [Exhibiting Artworks at the NGV](#) resource for teachers and students of VCE Art Making and Exhibiting: Exhibiting Artworks
- [Takahiro Iwasaki: Reflection Model \(Itsukushima\)](#) exhibition page
- [Takahiro Iwasaki's Reflection model \(Itsukushima\), 2013–14](#) essay by Wayne Crothers, Senior Curator, Asian Art, National Gallery of Victoria
- ['Unfolding' Japanese Screens](#) essay by Ruth Shervington, Senior Conservator of Paper, National Gallery of Victoria

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