In 1907, the Mitsukoshi department store established its art section to display and sell the art of prominent contemporary artists. The establishment of the official annual salon Monbushō Bijutsu Tenrankai (Ministry of Education Art Exhibition) in that same year was likely the most immediate and significant impetus for department stores to decide to deal in the art trade. Following Mitsukoshi’s lead, a number of other Japanese department stores opened art sections one after another. The stores claimed that they would contribute the cultural cultivation and refinement of the nation by providing expanded opportunities for all Japanese to collect and appreciate the arts. Despite open access to art sections of department stores, however, their primary customer was the rising urban middle class, who purchased art for the interior decoration of their new homes. This talk examines how the new middle class achieved mastery of the tasteful consumption of art crucial to the generation of social distinction and class identity through the art sections of department stores, and how department stores in turn capitalized on the cultural aspirations of their upwardly mobile customers.

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