By the mid-nineteenth century, when Victorian England was singing the praises of the material prosperity resulting from the success of the Industrial Revolution, the “Aesthetes” appeared. Criticizing excessive commercialism and utilitarianism, they insisted on the importance of lives filled with beauty. This movement first emerged among avant-garde artists in London. Through their lives and works, they realized a new sense of beauty, and their followers grew in number. The popular trend called “the Aesthetic Movement” took shape.

*Art for Art’s Sake: The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900* was Japan’s first comprehensive introduction to this movement. A traveling exhibition, it began with *The Cult of Beauty* in London in April, 2011, which in subsequent years was presented in Paris and San Francisco. Highly praised in every country, this exhibition included not only oil paintings produced by the Aesthetes and other examples of fine art but also applied arts such as furniture and personal ornaments. These works were displayed together in the same spaces in the first attempt to convey, comprehensively, the lifestyles of the movement’s followers.

For our exhibition, we invited former Victoria and Albert Museum curator Stephen Calloway to curate it. Painstaking care was taken to maintain the original concept while carefully adapting the content to the spaces available in our museum. One hundred forty oil paintings, watercolors, drawings, pieces of furniture and decorative objects were assembled from collections in the UK and Japan, including works never before displayed in Japan, to illustrate the unique aesthetic that avant-garde artists ranging from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Oscar Wilde pursued.

Tremendous effort went into the preparations to ensure that the works were displayed in a way that clearly illustrated, through specific works, how what began with lifestyle embraced by a handful of avant-garde artists became a popular movement. For the sake of Japanese visitors who might be unfamiliar with Victorian society and the context in which this movement occurred, masterpieces of Aesthetic paintings were introduced along with fine examples of products of the industrial arts made in the same context. This effort was facilitated by the Mitsubishi Ichigokan Museum, Tokyo, itself, a building designed by English architect Josiah Conder, completed in 1894, and permeated with the atmosphere of late nineteenth century Britain. There are, moreover, specific reasons why this exhibition and this building were so complementary. In the year 1876, when Conder, then in his mid-twenties, set out to travel to Japan, the Aesthetic Movement was at its peak in Britain. London streets were filled with buildings in the Queen Anne style characteristic of Aesthetic Movement architecture, and that was the style in which Conder designed the Mitsubishi Ichigokan.

Since the Aesthetic Movement is not widely recognized in Japan, and the theme of the exhibition was a transient, popular phenomenon, we anticipated difficulty in attracting visitors. Thanks, however, to a publicity tie-up with another museum holding a Pre-Raphaelite exhibition during the same period, the number of visitors far exceeded expectations. Close cooperation with its co-sponsors also contributed greatly to this exhibition’s overall success.