EXOTIC ANIMALS IN JAPANESE ART:
CURATION, COLLABORATION AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING USING LIBRARY EXHIBIT SPACE

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THE PROJECT
The goal of this project was to give students practical experience designing and curating an exhibit in the main gallery of the BYU Lee Library. In place of a final research paper, students in a senior-level Japanese course collaborated with teaching faculty and subject librarians to produce the exhibit “Japanimals”, showcasing illustrations of exotic animals imported to Japan during the 16th-19th centuries. These illustrations come from rare Japanese books and scrolls in the Harry F. Bruning Collection housed within Special Collections.

THE ASSIGNMENT
Students wrote entries for all exhibition item labels. This required them to translate relevant passages from historical texts from classical Japanese into English.
They participated in organizing the content of these materials and overall themes into a visual layout for the exhibition space. They worked with the professor, the subject librarians, and the Lee Library’s exhibit design student assistants.

THE FINAL CLASS EXHIBITION: FOUR THEMES

- SHIPS TRANSPORTING EXOTIC ANIMALS TO JAPAN
- EDO-PERIOD STREET SHOWS
- EXOTIC BIRDS IMPORTED TO JAPAN
- EXOTIC ANIMALS IMPORTED TO JAPAN

QUESTIONS GIVEN TO STUDENTS
- What do you know now that you didn’t know at the beginning of the semester?
- What was the most valuable part of the Japanimals exhibit project for you personally?
- What was the biggest challenge you faced while working on the Japanimals exhibit?

EXPERIENCES SHARED BY STUDENTS
A sentiment raised repeatedly by students was that, for the first time, they were able to experience what it means to produce actual scholarship, rather than merely synthesize what is already known. They were creating rather than just consuming scholarship.
Some mentioned how they enjoyed working towards a “visual” final product for their research. They felt that the exhibit was a rewarding public display of their efforts which could be shared with family, friends, and library patrons.
Several students expressed how their confidence in reading difficult Japanese and classical materials improved substantially over the course of the semester. One student of Japanese heritage mentioned how he could now make sense of a hanging scroll that had been in his family for a few generations.
Some were surprised how different and difficult classical Japanese was from the modern language in which they were quite proficient. They realized the limitations of their knowledge of Japanese language and culture, and gained a greater desire to pursue further studies on their own (life-long learning).