2025/2026 Japanese Language Program for Specialists in a Cultural and Academic Field

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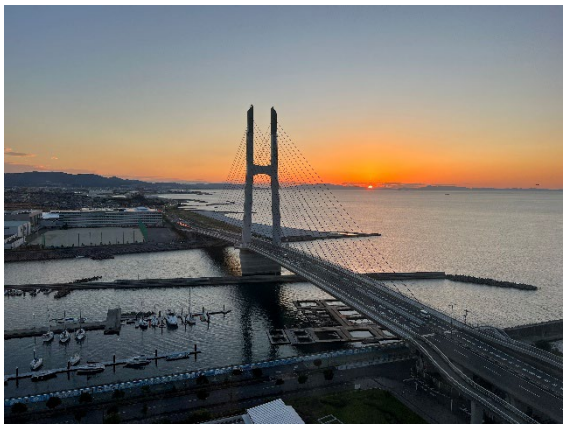
At present, I am a doctoral candidate in Art History at the University of Maryland with a specialization in Japanese art. Within my specialization, I research modern art, particularly nihonga painting, and for my dissertation am focusing on mid-twentieth century nihonga painters who worked outside of the conventional bounds of nihonga, producing "avant-garde" works that challenge the ways that we, as viewers, think about nihonga, nationalism, influence, and authenticity.

As a researcher in the US, the difficulties with researching Japanese art are firstly associated with the distance. Significant materials, as well as most works of modern Japanese art, are located within Japan. If a Japanese museum or institution displays an exhibition related to my research, it's rare that I am able to see it unless I already have plans to be in Japan. And of course, the language barrier further complicates the situation. Before attending the Japan Foundation's Program for Specialists in Cultural and Academic Fields, I was particularly concerned about my speaking abilities.



When the JF Program was shared with me by a colleague, I knew that this program, which synchronizes language learning and research, would be a perfect fit. And to my delight, I received an acceptance letter and headed off to Japan in fall 2025. The Japan Foundation Japanese Language Institute in Kansai, or the Kansai Center, where I spent six months living and studying, is located in southern Osaka prefecture in a small city near the

airport called Tajiri. My first morning at the center, I couldn't believe the incredible view of the surrounding neighborhood, the water, and the mountains from my 17th floor room. Every night, I got to watch the sunset over Osaka Bay from my room.

The Kansai Center was the perfect place to focus entirely on Japanese language study and research. Living in a small fishing town 45 minutes away from Namba station in Osaka city made for a calming environment with minimal distractions. Each participant had their own private room and bathroom, meals and cleaning were taken care of for us, and the library remained open until early evening. There were eight other participants in my cohort, all from different countries with a variety of research interests related to Japanese studies. Although we did not meet or even know about each other until the first day of the program, we quickly became close friends. Their liveliness and their humor energized me through the most tiring weeks.

It is really thanks to my incredible senseis that I learned so much Japanese. Participants took a variety of classes—integrated Japanese, kanji, presentation, conversation, and academic writing, to name a few—all of which were quite engaging. My personal favorite was the kanji class; although I could recognize many of the characters prior to taking the class, the senseis deepened my understanding of the characters' meanings and introduced me to related vocabulary that you wouldn't find in a typical Japanese textbook.

We were kept busy with presentations on a variety of topics that extended well-beyond our research. Initially, this horrified me, but over time I became able to speak in front of my colleagues and senseis without consulting notes. In November, when it became my turn to speak on a topic of my choosing, I delivered a short presentation on American Thanksgiving that ultimately resulted in my cohort celebrating an unconventional, multicultural Thanksgiving the following week, complete with pumpkin pie. For our formal

presentation class, we wrote and presented on our research topics constantly. Before each presentation, the senseis would sit with us individually and edit our script, which helped me identify my frequent mistakes. My vocabulary mistakes were often quite funny, so I enjoyed the time spent reading over my writing with my sensei, who corrected me with patience and good humor.

Outside of class, the center organized cultural activities for us, such as attending a Noh play and a trip to the historic sites in Sakai City. My favorite by far was a visit to an elementary school, where I got to speak with students who enthusiastically guided us through their morning class routine. Most importantly, the center provided ample support for our research. We were taken to institutions like the National Diet Library Kansai-kan in Nara prefecture and the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto. The librarians at the center acquired us endless books through the Interlibrary Loan and did frequent demonstrates on how to use various Japanese research databases.

Weekends were always free, and we had many Fridays and Mondays off for national holidays or simply for independent research. Because of the center's advantageous location in the Kansai region, I took many daytrips to Kyoto and Nara to see not only modern art exhibitions, but also the significant works and sites of Japanese art history within the region. I even managed to make it all the way to Ise Shrine in Mie Prefecture and back to Tajiri in one day. Twice we were given a full week off from classes to freely travel and conduct independent research, for which the senseis and staff helped us prepare. During my first research trip in December, I met with curators and saw works in storage at the National Museum of Modern Art Kyoto and the Maruki Gallery for the Hiroshima Panels in Saitama prefecture. My visit to MoMAK fortuitously coincided with the opening reception for "#WhereDoWeStand—Art in Our Time" later that evening, so I got to stay and network with professionals in the region.

During my February independent research trip and any free weekend, I traveled within and outside of the Kansai region, to Tokyo four

times, to Sapporo, Shizuoka, and Kanazawa, among others, to visit as many permanent collections and art exhibitions as possible. I was incredibly lucky that my trip to Japan coincided with an exhibition related directly to my dissertation topic, “Nihonga Avant-Garde: Kyoto 1948-1970” in February and March of 2026. Before receiving my acceptance to the JF program, I had resigned myself to missing it, so I was thrilled when I realized I would be able to attend. Another highlight was that a few of my colleagues also visited this exhibition in their free time, allowing us to have enriching discussions about the art.

It is clear that everyone at the Kansai Center really cares about their job and enjoys interacting with people from around the world. Thanks to my six months in Japan, I can speak much more confidently and read materials related to my research with significantly more ease. I am incredibly thankful for the opportunity to participate in this program and meet so many hardworking and interesting people.