

Hannelore Vandepoel - September 2024

Introduction

Hello! My name is Hannelore Vandepoel. I graduated with a Master's in Visual Arts and I also obtained a degree in education from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, graduating in 2018. I have been working as a painting teacher and visual artist in Antwerp, Belgium since then.

Last year, I was honored to be selected for the MEXT scholarship. I arrived in Japan this past April and recently completed a six-month Japanese preparatory course at JASSO language education center in Tokyo. I am excited to start in October as a research student at the Graduate School of Fine Arts, at the painting department of Tokyo University of the Arts (Tokyo Geidai).

In this report I will share my personal experiences in these past 6 months in Japan, and during the Japanese Preparatory Course at JASSO.



When I first arrived in Japan, I was fortunate to witness the Sakura season. The river near my dorm, lined with sakura trees, left a beautiful impression of my first weeks here. The walks along the river and a local kissaten (coffee shop) helped me find some grounding in those first weeks and my neighborhood quickly became a familiar place. Now, as autumn begins, the change from summer was almost immediate on the day of the autumnal equinox.

Though much of my first semester was spent in classrooms, studying Japanese, I was still surrounded by many wonderful and new cultural experiences. Just living in Japan immerses you in its vibrant culture. During Golden Week (a collection of national holidays starting with “*Showa No Hi*”, the birthday of the former Emperor Showa), I took the opportunity to escape busy Tokyo and experience the countryside. I joined an event organized by an organic farmer aimed at reconnecting people with rural life. We helped on the farm, enjoyed local food, and hiked. This way I gained a deeper appreciation for the efforts to revitalize interest in Japan's countryside. It was a great way to make new connections, including meeting Japanese people.

After my second month in Japan, I was able to meet with my professor and fellow students at Tokyo Geidai. The group welcomed me as one of them, and they even prepared a place for me in their studio. I was lucky to have had the chance to already work there a few times and to get to know the people and the university. I was also invited to participate in the exhibition at the yearly art festival, *Geisai*. It was an amazing experience: mikoshi made by first-year students, a huge exhibition with so many great artists and an inspiring atmosphere.

I also attended welcome events organized by MEXT and the Belgian Embassy, it was great to share experiences with other Belgian students. Later on, I also connected with Guillaume who is another MEXT student studying in Kyoto while he was visiting Tokyo.



Japanese Preparatory Course at JASSO

I participated in the six-month long Japanese preparatory course at JASSO Japanese language education center, which offers language and cultural training for international students.

I stayed at their dorm which was convenient and budget-friendly. The student office was a big help with all the necessary paperwork (health insurance, residence card, bank account..). Living in the dorm also shaped the opportunity to really get to know people from all around the world. Many of them were also MEXT students that will go to different universities around Japan after the course.

At JASSO, a placement test determines in which class you are placed. Classes consist of around 15 students, and typically there is one classroom teacher who teaches half a day, the other half being taught by different teachers depending on the day and subject. We practiced vocabulary, kanji, grammar, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, primarily using the school's own study materials. Depending on your major you would also get specific courses that prepare you for your university studies. For example, for graduate school, you learn to write and talk about your research plan in Japanese. Other students might get math, English, or physics lessons. We were also being stimulated to try the JLPT exams. My teacher gave mock exams and specific exercises similar to the JLPT. Finally, there were also school trips at JASSO. We visited Kawagoe and learned about tea in Saitama where we also experienced tea picking.

The overall JASSO experience provided me with valuable insights into the structure of Japanese institutions and work environments, which feel quite different from those in Belgium. It was definitely a period with many challenges, as the European languages are so different from Japanese. Looking back, the studying was intense and at times very demanding, but I am proud of myself for having handled the challenge well and thankful for the opportunity to intensely study Japanese during this period. I am now even more motivated to continue studying. While my Japanese level is still not where I want it to be, it is very rewarding being able to have small conversations with fellow students. And I was surprised when I could even have an entire conversation with the taxi driver that helped me move out of the dorm! In the end, being able to speak basic Japanese definitely already helps me in my everyday life.



Final thoughts

This first semester has already been incredibly valuable. I've met many interesting people and had the chance to experience Japan and learn a lot by being fully immersed in everyday life here. I am very thankful to further develop my art practice here in Japan, as I believe art and culture are powerful bridges for connection and understanding. I am excited to continue exploring this potential during my research at Tokyo University of The Arts.

For anyone considering studying in Japan, I highly recommend applying for the MEXT Scholarship. When you open yourself to new experiences and connections, amazing things can happen. This journey will challenge you, but it will also help you grow in ways you can't yet imagine. My final advice is to embrace the unknown and stay open to everything Japan has to offer. Good luck, and go after your dreams!

