

The Japanese Influence in Late Nineteenth Century British Art, 1862-1880

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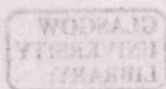
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The Japanese Influence in Late Nineteenth Century British Art, 1862-1880

In the latter half of the nineteenth century Japanese art exerted a considerable influence upon English ceramics, metalwork, industrial arts, interior décor and furnishing, fashion, music and literature. British artists, craftsman and designers were inspired by the simple forms and naturalism found in Japanese art. Japanese art offered something new and novel to the British, who were looking for new means of producing art that was neither industrial nor recalling earlier styles. In other words, the opening of Japan's ports to the West can be strongly linked to an opening of British art and design in the sense that the novelty of Japanese art provided the British to more means of fashioning and decorating their art.

The purpose of this exhibition and catalogue is two-fold. First, it is meant to demonstrate the Japanese influence in British art and design by comparing Japanese goods with British-made wares and designs. Secondly, it is meant to demonstrate the ways in which the opening of Japan affected British society. Within twenty years of the opening of Japan's ports, there was a craze in Britain for things Japanese or Japanese-inspired. This response, prompted by the leading artists and intellectuals of the day, led to the rise of the English Aesthetic Movement and the idealistic view of "art for art's sake". In many ways, the craze for Japanese goods, or Japanism, inspired a whole new way of looking at and responding to art, beauty, literature and society within Britain.

The exhibition is arranged into three main groupings: British designs incorporating Japanese motifs, British adaptation of Japanese design and style, and the

Japanese influence in the Victorian interior and related ephemera. Unlike the French and Americans, the British were not heavily influenced by Japanese woodblock prints, though correlations can be made between woodblock prints and British designs. Generally speaking, the British use of Japanese form and décor is restricted to the decorative arts rather than the fine arts. It was in the planning and decorating of rooms, however, where the Japanese influence is most notable. There were a number of ways in which the interior could be decorated. In most cases, however, the simple placement of blue-and-white china and fans within the interior was just enough to have an “aesthetically” pleasing home.

Total Word Count: 10,371

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The impact of Japan on the decorative arts in England in the second half of the nineteenth century was quite dramatic. British artists were looking for new sources of inspiration and found ideas in nature and in earlier medieval styles. They were seeking something new, something different, a new way of making art. Tired of machine-made wares and bored with reviving earlier styles, artists began to produce wares that were “true to the materials”, functional, and of highly skilled craftsmanship. With the opening of Japan’s ports in the 1850’s, more Japanese arts and crafts were exported to the West. Almost immediately, Western artists were amazed at the novel designs, fantastic colors, and wonderful decorative motifs employed by the Japanese artisans.

In Britain, the Japanese influence passed through three phases, each of which conveniently falls into a decade. In the 1860’s, the interest in Japanese art was a matter for individual collectors and enthusiasts, both in England and in France. It was during this period when Whistler produced his earliest Japanese-inspired paintings, when Godwin made furniture designs based upon the furnishings he observed in Japanese woodblock prints, when Rossetti designed a Japanese bookbinding, and when a few amateurs began to collect lacquer, porcelain, small, utilitarian Japanese objects, such as inro and netsuke, and, especially woodblock prints.

During the 1870’s, there began a passion for things Japanese. It became very fashionable to own Japanese wares, or at the very least, wares that resembled Japanese-made goods. The fashion for things Japanese was in full swing amongst the informed, intellectuals of the day. Artists such as Whistler wore kimonos regularly and everywhere

one looked there were traces of the Japanese influence. Interior design and designs for furnishings were based upon Japanese “principles” and color schemes of solid yellows, whites, greens, reds, and orange became popular. Along with the new means of designing interiors and decorating one’s home, came a new set of attitudes towards art, beauty and aesthetics.

Before long, the beauty found in nature and in Japanese art became a matter of highly intellectualized and pretentious thought amongst the “informed”. This new way of viewing and appreciating art was part of a movement in Britain called the Aesthetic Movement. The appreciation of Japanese art quickly became synonymous with the Aesthetes and what had been a movement became a craze in the 1880’s. All the fashionable, properly “aesthetic” homes contained elements of Japanese decor. From blue-and-white porcelain vases on the mantelpiece to Japanese fans hung on the walls, there was a great demand for things Japanese.

The ideas espoused by the Aesthetic Movement were firmly rooted in natural forms free from any moral, social or political purpose. Art was something to be enjoyed and appreciated. The Aesthetes believed in the concept of “art for art’s sake”, also hinted at by William Morris, the great naturalist.¹ Another inspirational leader in the purity of art was the gothic revivalist William Burges, an avid collector of Japanese woodblock prints. As much as he was inspired by the architecture of thirteenth-century France, he admired the purity and naturalism of Japanese art. Rather than gaining inspiration directly from either gothic or Japanese art, “what appealed to Burges was his

¹ Mervyn Levy, *Liberty Style: The Classic Years: 1798-1910*, New York: Abrams, 1986, p. 20.

romanticized view of the conditions which produced it".² After visiting the 1862

International Exhibition, Burges wrote:

"To any student of our reviving arts of the thirteenth century an hour or so a day or two spent in the Japanese Department will by no means be lost time, for these hitherto unknown barbarians (Japanese) appear not only to know all that the middle ages knew but in some respects are beyond them and us as well."³

The natural beauty and charm, even the romantic feeling, Burges found in Japanese art also appealed to the leaders of the Aesthetic Movement, including Whistler, Godwin (one of Burges's students), and Oscar Wilde. With a dazzling flourish of wit, aesthetic essay, and grandiose postures and gestures, the Aesthetic Movement had its own attitude, its own momentum, and even its own vocabulary. In the Japanese arts, as opposed to the revivalist styles, the aesthetes found new ideas and motivation. They wanted to improve society with a fuller understanding of beauty and aesthetics. More so, the aesthetes attempted to educate the public to beauty, something they found lacking in their industrialized, urban society.

Prior to the International Exhibition of 1862, there was a small trickling of Japanese goods into Britain. Even before the American Commodore Perry sailed into Edo's harbor in 1853 and secured trading rights for the Western powers, Japan granted limited trade agreements with the Dutch and Chinese in the port of Nagasaki.⁴ Most of the goods that trickled into Britain before 1853 were woodblock prints (used as wrapping

² Elizabeth Aslin, *The Aesthetic Movement: Prelude to Art Nouveau*, London: Elek Books Ltd, 1969, pp. 80-81.

³ Aslin, op. cit., p. 81.

⁴ Lionel Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement*, London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1996, p. 30.

paper) and other small items such as sword guards and lacquer boxes. In 1854, however, after the Americans negotiated trade treaties with Japan, arts and wares of all kinds began to appear in America and Europe.

Even with the limited trade agreements Japan had with the Dutch and Chinese until the 1850's, "at the 1851 Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace a very limited number of Japanese items was shown, as was the first recorded English textile influenced by Japan entitled "Japanese spots and honeycombs"⁵. Several years later, in 1854, the first real exhibition of Japanese goods was held at the Old Royal Watercolor Society in London. The exhibition featured "a singular cargo of curiosities, furniture, bronzes, porcelains, silks and paintings, very curious and very attractive"⁶. Though this seems to have been the first large display of Japanese wares in London, it had fairly little impact. Even in the press of the time there is no suggestion that the exhibition was an event of any significance.⁷

The dismal turnout for the 1854 exhibition did not deter others from admiring and collecting Japanese art. Distinguished men like William Burges and Edwin Godwin avidly collected Japanese prints while other, less notable figures collected Japanese curios, such as lacquer boxes, inro and netsuke. Even in 1859 when Whistler moved to London and brought with him his collection of Japanese vases and prints, the interest in Japanese art was limited.

Public interest in Japanese art did not occur until the 1862 International Exhibition held in London. Intended to show the progress Britain had made in industry

⁵ Lionel Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement*, London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1996, p. 30.

⁶ Adrian J. Tilbrooke, *The Designs of Archibald Knox for Liberty and Company*, London: Ornament Press, 1976, p. 53.

⁷ Aslin, op. cit., p. 80.

and art in the eleven years since the Great Exhibition of 1851, the display that gaided the most attention was the Japanese presentation. Included in the exhibition was a Japanese courtyard where over 600 works of art were displayed. Sir Rutherford Alcock, Britain's first Consul in Tokyo, personally selected the wares to be shown.⁸ Visitors, such as William Burges, were amazed at the grace and craftsmanship of Japanese art.

Following the 1862 exhibition there arose in Britain a great interest in Japanese art, culture and society. To the British the Japanese were far and distant, and images of Japan conjured up romantic, nostalgic sentiments. "To the popular mind Japan was the distant and exotic land, a place unspoiled by industry and urbanization"⁹.

The British interest in Japan was also inspired by the similarities that existed between Britain and Japan. Both Britain and Japan were island nations, each ruled by a monarch. "Both had ties to agriculture, with Japan, a pre-industrial rural society, embodying qualities Britain had lost in the wake of the Industrial Revolution".¹⁰ Words, such as "singular", "mysterious", and "timeless", were used by British writers to describe Japan, or, at least, how they perceived life in Japan. It didn't take long, however, for British attitudes towards Japan to change.

The change in opinion towards Japan came about as the British gathered more truths about Japan. After the opening of Japan to Western trade, Japan quickly adopted Western ideals and became an industrialized society. Japan was no longer the idyllic society the British clamored for. "With the 1868 restoration of the emperor came the destruction of many Japanese traditions and the change to Western style, such as realism

⁸ Jeremy Cooper, *Victorian and Edwardian Décor: from the Gothic Revival to Art Nouveau*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1987, p. 116.

⁹ Kenneth W. Luckhurst, *The Story of Exhibitions*, London: The Studio Publications, 1951, pp. 130-131.

in art and the replacement of kimonos with suits”.¹¹ The adaptation to Western culture concerned the British because Japan had now become a competitor as it rapidly industrialized. As a result, “the British responded by censoring new information, which in turn increased the idealization of old Japan, and by distancing themselves from the new Japan in order to deny unpleasant parallels with Britain”.¹²

The British fascination with Japan was deeply rooted in idealized images of pre-industrialized Japan. Despite their obsession with “old” Japan and things Japanese, the British did not see themselves as equals, but as being superior to the Japanese. As much as Japanese art inspired them, it also challenged them with artistic styles and motifs that were unfamiliar. For example, the perspective, drawing techniques and bold colors of Japanese woodblock prints generally did not have an impact upon the British. Even Christopher Dresser referred to prints as “quaint” and “charming”.¹³ The British were not accustomed to the flatness of plane, rendering of forms, or lack of chiaroscuro in woodblock prints. Unlike the French, British artists were reluctant to experiment with the new techniques and possibilities presented to them in the woodblock prints.

When the 1862 International Exhibition came to an end, some of the exhibits were disposed of at public auctions while others remained in the collection of the Department of Practical Art, the forerunner of the present-day Victoria and Albert Museum. The firm of Farmer and Rogers disposed of the Japanese goods in their sales rooms. In 1863, a young Arthur Lasenby Liberty became manager of their Oriental Department. After serving with Farmer and Rogers for twelve years, Liberty opened his own shop on

¹⁰ Linda Gertner Zatlin, *Beardsley, Japonisme and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 24-25.

¹¹ Zatlin, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹² Zatlin, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

Regent Street. "At first, Liberty stuck religiously to imported wares and fabrics, then proceeded to allow objects of eastern origin such as silver kettles, cutlery and smaller furniture to be sold but only if over-stamped with the appropriate Liberty and Company mark and label".¹⁴

Guided by his own sense of taste and first-hand knowledge with high quality Japanese wares, Liberty was careful to stock goods that would appeal to the British market. In his first years of business, Liberty included amongst his customers William Morris, John Ruskin, Edwin Godwin and James Whistler. Liberty's personal taste and awareness was cultivated by his contact with Japanese wares. Ever the businessman, Liberty strove to meet the demands of his customers, even when the mania for things Japanese cultivated a demand for cheap and exotic possessions.

The early fascination with things Japanese resulted in a demand for small curios and Japanese knick-knacks, "especially if they were the superb quality small objects in which Japanese workmanship excelled".¹⁵ Items of this sort often included lacquer inro, or medicine boxes, and netsuke carved in marvelous shapes of ivory or wood, tsuba (metal sword guards) and other sword furniture in which collectors absorbed themselves.

The craze for things Japanese in the late 1870's and early 1880's led to what some have called a "westernization" of Japanese art. More directly, the Japanese exported wares that were suited to the tastes of the British market. In 1876, Godwin reported in *The Architect* on 23 December 1876 that "the fans of ten years ago are for the most part lovely in delicate color and exquisite in drawing, but the great majority of fans today that

¹³ Zatlin, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁴ Levy, op. cit., p. 55.

¹⁵ Oliver Impey, *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977, p. 185.

have come under my observation are impregnated with the crudeness of the European's sense of color, and are immeasurably beneath the examples in both qualities mentioned". A few years later, in 1880, in his book, *Grammar of Japanese Ornament*, Thomas Cutler also lamented the decline in the vibrancy of Japanese art. Cutler concluded that Japanese art had "culminated [and has] shown all that it is capable of producing".¹⁶

Despite the decline in artistic quality as noted by Godwin and Cutler, the craze for Japanese things escalated in the late 1870's and 1880's. "In Japan it was quickly realized that what the West wanted was cheap rubbish, but rubbish that looked exotic and oriental".¹⁷ Japan earned a reputation for producing cheap and shoddy goods for export to the West. Ivory carvings of great intricacy, gawdy fans, and appalling pieces of pottery and porcelain were shipped by the boatloads. "Worst of all, perhaps, were the ceramics: Satsuma ware and its innumerable imitations, encrusted with dirty red and ochre warriors picked out in gilt, in a taste which was unthinkable for the domestic market but considered, in the West, to be old Japanese wares".¹⁸ Like Liberty, who supplied the British with the cheap bric-a-brac they demanded, so did the Japanese who provided the British market the sorts of cheaply made, but exotic-looking, wares they craved.

Other Japanese warehouses were established in various parts of London, "most notably was a distinguished but short-lived venture in Farringdon Street started in 1879 by Christopher Dresser".¹⁹ Other stores, such as William Whiteley's, Swan & Edgar, and Debenham's, created oriental departments. The majority of these ventures were more concerned with fashionable dress than with Japanese objects. It is to Liberty's, however,

¹⁶ Zatlin, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁷ Impey, op. cit., pp. 185-186.

¹⁸ Impey, op. cit., p. 186.

¹⁹ Aslin, op. cit., p. 82.

that “main credit must go for maintaining the flow of high-quality Japanese blue-and-white porcelain, bronzes and lacquer objects collected by the followers of the Aesthetic Movement in the 1870’s, as well as the cheap fans and toys of the 1880’s”.²⁰

^{INFLUENCE}
The Japanese in the arts: Dresser, Godwin & Whistler

As noted earlier, the influence of Japanese art in Britain is most notable in the decorative, rather than the fine, arts. Artists in Britain were inspired by Japanese designs and decorative motifs because it provided them with alternative outlets for artistic creativity and expression. Whether they copied Japanese forms or arbitrarily incorporated Japanese motifs into their wares, the British strove to emulate something that was new and unique, something that was hand-crafted, not machine-made, and something that could be appreciated for its own sake.

In most cases, British artists and craftsmen incorporated Japanese-based motifs and decorative patterns onto their wares, especially in the silver and ceramics industries. Though many of these wares were mass-produced, the desired effect was to have goods that did not resemble or look like machine-made wares. Factories such as Worcester, Wedgwood and Minton produced porcelain that resembled Japanese wares. Using patterns based upon fans and adapting the bold asymmetrical patterns of Japanese wares, the ceramics industry mass-produced wares that quickly became commonplace and rivaled even the Japanese prototypes. A number of decorative patterns, motifs and, even, forms could easily be replicated in ceramics. “The Japanese style rapidly took over the avant-garde ceramics market, leaving less fashionable products to reflect the taste of

²⁰ Aslin, op. cit., p. 82.

Louis XVI, the Adam Brothers, and eventually the ornate extravagance of the Third Rococo”.²¹

For innovative designers, such as Christopher Dresser, there were endless possibilities in the forms and techniques his designs could emulate. Whether he chose to simply replicate Japanese shapes or to embellish his designs with Japanese motifs, Dresser chose designs that were natural and easy to produce. He experimented with Japanese, and oriental, techniques, and replicated the designs and patterns into his own creations. Among his most prolific designs are those that emulate oriental cloisonné.

Dresser was one of the few artists to travel to Japan to directly observe the production of wares, to learn techniques and styles, and to instruct the Japanese on appropriate British taste. When he returned to England in 1876, Dresser brought with him new ideas and designs. Dresser worked in a variety of media-ceramics (for Watcombe, Minton, Old Hall, etc.), glass (for James Couper), silver (for Elkington, Hukin and Heath), metalwork (for Perry, Chubb, etc.), textiles and wallpapers (for Crossley, Jeffrey, etc.). He also made designs for furniture, but documented examples are quite rare. “The reason for this concerns the fact that, unlike most other major interior designers of the period, Dresser was not a qualified architect and therefore had no established affiliations with particular builders or architects”.²²

As with the ceramics industry, the silver industry was quick to respond to the demand for Japanese designs and soon produced goods in the Japanese taste. “Between 1870 and 1890, a number of articles, such as tea sets, trays, cigar cases and card cases,

²¹ Robin Hildyard, *European Ceramics*, London: V&A Publications, 1999, p. 106.

²² Cooper, op. cit., p. 131.

were decorated with birds, butterflies and blossoms in an oriental manner".²³ The use of Japanese-style décor was fairly limited in silver. Decorative motifs and patterns were usually formed with engraving or chafing techniques, or are minimally applied to handles and legs in bamboo or plant forms.

Many of the silver wares produced in Britain during this time have a pearl finish and are parcel-gilt. Among the leading manufacturers of Japanese-influenced silver are the firms of Elkington and Company and James Dixon and Sons. The firm of Hukin and Heath of Sheffield also manufactured wares in silver, but employed the electroplating process. For most of the silver produced in the manner, the Japanese influence was limited to engraving or chafing. Japanese metal wares were hardly, if at all, reproduced owing to their lack of function or appreciation in the British market.

The most curious of all influences is the Japanese inspiration in furniture designs. Traditional Japanese interiors contained little or no furniture. Towards the end of the 1860's, furniture design took a different turn, away from the traditional gothic, heavy oak designs of the 1840's and 1850's. The publication of *Hints on Household Taste*, written by Charles Lock Eastlake in 1868, was a decisive move towards a simplification of furniture and interior design. "Eastlake preached a new kind of studied simplicity and his teaching was to the younger and more intelligent of the Victorian middle class a breath of fresh air".²⁴ Eastlake's ideas were very influential with designers such as Edwin Godwin, Thomas Jeckyll and Christopher Dresser.

During the 1870's, architects such as Charles Voysey and Godwin produced designs for furniture utilizing Japanese "principles". Inspired by the interior treatments

²³ Vanessa Brett, *The Sotheby's Directory of Silver: 1600-1940*, London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 1986, p. 40.

they observed in woodblock prints, they adapted the simplicity of forms and made them suitable for British interiors. “By the time Aesthetic Movement had established itself, so had the concept of art furniture, as opposed to ordinary or commercial furniture”.²⁵ Art furniture discarded the heaviness of Victorian furniture in favor of a defiant spindliness and purity of form. Originally designed in dark or black colors, early art furniture was made of baywood, basswood or black walnut. In the late 1870’s and throughout the 1880’s, furniture made of bright mahogany and satinwood became very fashionable.²⁶

Without a doubt the most influential designer of this sort of furniture was Edwin Godwin. Godwin’s designs feature simplified forms and limited décor. He favored designs that were elegant and functional, light yet structurally sound. “Godwin’s determination, developed from his appreciation of oriental culture, that domestic design should be as light as is consistent with strength [and] in these high pressure nervous times that the common objects of everyday life should be quiet, simple and unobtrusive in their beauty”.²⁷ As well designing furniture, Godwin was also an innovative interior designer. As with other designers such as Richard Norman Shaw and Thomas Jeckyll, Godwin’s plans reflect the idea that “interior decoration and furniture design should be based upon what were believed to be Japanese principles, rather than on superficial forms and ornamentation”.²⁸

The wider significance of Godwin’s contribution to the history of interior design lies, however, not so much in his interior schemes, but in the designs he produced for

²⁴ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Furniture: A Concise History*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1997, p. 150.

²⁵ Lucie-Smith, op. cit., p. 150-152.

²⁶ Lucie-Smith, op. cit., p. 152. It should also be noted here that the evolution of the Anglo-Japanese style had its roots in the design and production of art furniture.

²⁷ Cooper, op. cit., p. 120.

²⁸ Aslin, op. cit., p. 79.

commercial manufacturers of furniture, textiles, and wallpaper. "After the failure of his Art Furniture Company of Covent Garden in 1867, an advertisement announced its willingness to supply at ordinary trade prices, domestic furniture of an artistic and picturesque character".²⁹ Despite the closure of Godwin's business in the late 1860's, there was considerable interest in household décor and unique schemes with oriental and Japanese influence throughout the 1870's and 1880's.

In England there was a proliferation of magazines, journals and publications devoted to interior design, furnishing and taste. The popularity of magazines, such as *Harper's Bizarre*, *Punch* and various other trade and design books helped to spread the taste and appreciation for things Japanese within the aesthetic interior. Even with the interest in Japanese designs and wares, the Aesthetic style was a mixture of styles, including Gothic and Elizabethan.³⁰ The Aesthetic Movement did not, however, require its adherents to furnish their houses anew with Japanese wares. "A mingling of antiques and Japanese decorative objects was an entirely acceptable formula, and the Aesthetic interior shades off into something that was merely 'artistic in a general sense'".³¹

All these different styles of decoration current in the second half of the nineteenth century, from the humblest to the grandest, had one thing in common-namely, the crowding of more and more furniture and objects into each room. "Even 'aesthetic' interiors in the Japanese style were overlaid with a plethora of fans, samurai swords, shawls, and lacquer boxes."³²

²⁹ Cooper, op. cit., pp. 120 and 129.

³⁰ Susan Lasdun, *Victorians at Home*, New York: The Viking Press, 1981, pp. 104-105.

³¹ Lucie-Smith, op. cit., p. 153.

³² Alan & Ann Gore, *The History of English Interiors*, Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1991, p. 161.

Though the adherents of Aestheticism also affected to despise commercialism and machine-made wares, most of the items they cherished were commercially produced. Catalogues were easily available to consumer and various designers and shops all strove to produce wares suitable to the tastes and fashions of the Aesthetes. "The enormous increase in mass production of furniture, textiles and wallpaper meant that individuality had to be expressed not only by the arrangement and choice of such things, but also by the multitude of knick-knacks and objects, resulting in the extraordinarily cluttered interiors associated with this period".³³

The American-born painter, James McNeill Whistler, one of the most prolific artists active in England during the second half on the nineteenth century. Though the Japanese fine arts, in the form of woodblock prints, did not heavily influence the fine arts in Britain, the woodblock print had a profound effect on Whistler. He was fascinated with the distinctive beauty of Japanese art, especially the woodblock prints. The flat planes, the high angles and perspectives, the bold, flat colors, and the techniques of the Japanese artist greatly inspired him.

One of the first painters to use Japanese-style techniques, Whistler created works that were highly comparable to the images he observed in woodblock prints. Imitating the perspective and tonal qualities of the Japanese, Whistler's paintings reflect the subdued, restraint of Japanese art. Among his most profound Japanese-inspired works are his night-pieces, which he called 'Nocturnes'. So innovative was the new style that the art critic, John Ruskin, wrote in 1877: "I have never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."³⁴ Whistler

³³ Gore, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

³⁴ E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1995, pp. 531 & 533.

successfully sued Ruskin for libel. Both Ruskin and Whistler were dissatisfied with their surroundings and industrialization. "While Ruskin hoped to lead his countrymen to a greater awareness of beauty by an appeal to their moral sense, Whistler tried to instill the idea that artistic sensibility is the only thing in life worth taking seriously."³⁵

Overall, the impact of Japan upon British art was quite significant. Whether looking for new sources of inspiration or seeking new means of creating art, British artists and craftsmen found exciting alternatives in Japanese and oriental art. The new, younger middle class was no longer interested in reviving old styles. They wanted something different, something that would challenge their senses and provide them with images of the past, deeply rooted in sentimental nostalgia. Japanese art also provided the intellectuals with a new vibrancy for appreciating crafts rather than art, and for the unrestrained freedom of natural forms they found in Japanese art.

Designers, craftsmen, and artists, such as Godwin, Dresser and Whistler, were inspired by the forms, motifs and techniques they encountered in Japanese art. Whether imitating a traditional, Japanese folk ware or heavily embellished with Japanese motifs, the British wares were made for the sake of their beauty without concern for historical, moral and social relevance. They wanted an art that was free of meaning so that the work of art itself can be appreciated, more than the meaning of its symbols and decorative motifs. They found in Japan art forms that were unique, free from European meaning, and heavily inspired by natural plant and animal forms. For the British taste, the opening of Japan's ports created within Britain a new opening, an awakening to new forms and creative expression inspired by Japan.

³⁵ Gombrich, op. cit., p. 533.

The Exhibition & A Discussion of the Plates and Figures Used

This exhibition is divided into three categories: first, British-made wares borrowing Japanese motifs, secondly, British-made wares made in response to Japanese designs or principles of design, and thirdly, goods representative of 'art for the millions'. Some of the items displayed may fit into two, even all, of the categories mentioned. The Japanese influence was very strong during the late nineteenth century and can be found in a number of media, including glass, ceramics, silver, fashion and its accessories, and even in the performing arts, such as *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan.

Group I

The objects displayed in Group I feature both Japanese and British examples. The Japanese objects chosen contain decorative motifs commonly borrowed by British manufacturers. The British, unlike the Japanese, did not associate symbolic meanings with the motifs they borrowed from the Japanese. For the Japanese, however, the motifs employed into their art were very symbolic.

In Plate 1, a porcelain sword rack, the object is decorated with a bird perched on a cherry blossom branch. A fairly common Edo period motif, the swallow in Japanese lore is a symbol of tenacity and preservation, and the cherry blossom is a common plant in Japan. To the British, the motif was rather pleasant and appeared quite frequently in a

number of designs and media. Plate 2, a Minton charger, and Plate 3, a 'bronze-glass' dish by Thomas Webb and Sons, borrow the perched swallow motif. The motif can also be found in Figure 1, a silver card-case, Figure 2, as an embellishment for a cabinet, and in Figure 3, amidst other common Japanese motifs, bamboo and fans.

The image in Plate 4, a sake bottle decorated with a cranes and bamboo, is also another common decorative feature in Japanese art. Cranes are considered to be symbols of strength, tenacity and immortality. Bamboo, another common plant form, is called one of the Four Gentlemen, along with the plum, the orchid and the chrysanthemum. "These four plants were used as models for calligraphy practice and served as a transition for the literati from the written word to pictorial imagery. Because each plant is so different in shape and character, it is a significant test of one's ability with a brush to be able to render them with proper balance and clarity, let alone with artistic individuality."³⁶

Cranes and bamboo, like swallows and cherry blossoms, were common motifs used by the British as well. Like the tea pot shown in Plate 5, the crane and bamboo motif is engraved into the bodies of the wares and bamboo leaves and reeds are imitated on the handles in the tea service seen in Figure 4. Even in Japanese art, common motifs occurred regularly and, as in Britain, were transposed into various media. For instance, the kimono shown in Figure 5 is decorated with cranes flying above a stream.

Not so much a common motif in Japanese wares, fans were used as interior embellishments, as can be seen in Plate 6, or used in ceremonies, as can be seen in Figure 6. The British, like the Japanese, also incorporated fans in their interiors and emulated the fan even in their fashion accessories, as can be seen in Plate 7, or superbly worked into the shape of a tray as seen in Figure 7. In Britain, fans became very

³⁶ Penelope Mason, *The History of Japanese Art*, New York: Pully N. Abrams, 1974, p. 287.

important, fashionable accessories to the aesthetic interior, regardless if the fans were folding, frond-shaped, or circular.

Group II in Plate 11. The decorative motif used on this vase is similar to the earlier crane and floral seen in Plates 4 and 5.

The objects displayed in this grouping reflect the British use of Japanese forms and their response to what they believed to be Japanese principles of design and construction. The stimulus for the British understanding of Japanese principles can be traced to woodblock prints. Within the prints the British observed simplistic forms of design, singular color schemes, a flatness of plane, and subdued tonal qualities. Elements of Japanese design were most profound in men like Godwin, Dresser and Whistler.

Plate 8 features a 6th century stoneware flask. A fairly common form to replicate, the British adapted this form into wonderful flasks and so-called 'moon vases', as can be seen in a design by Christopher Dresser shown in Plate 9. In his design for this moon vase, Dresser not only replicated an ancient Japanese form, he also tried to imitate Japanese and oriental-style cloisonné patterns with the use of enamels. Because of its simple shape, the flask was widely copied by the British ceramics factories, such as the Royal Worcester Porcelain Company, as seen in Figure 8, and the pilgrim flask seen in Figure 9.

Prior to 1871, the Japanese sparingly used enamels in their wares. They preferred to employ cloisonné patterns of metal wares or other materials. The vase shown in Plate 10 is an example of a Japanese craftsman using cloisonné enamels to decorate the surface of the vase. The motifs used are floral, prominently featuring a peony and iris. Rather common in Japanese, the peony is used to decorate the coffee service shown in Figure 10,

³⁶ Penelope Mason, *The History of Japanese Art*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993, p. 287.

while in Figure 11, an iris is displayed on a woven, matted bamboo motif. In response to the Japanese vase, Elkington & Company employed a champleve technique to design the vase seen in Plate 11. The decorative motif used on this vase is similar to the earlier crane and floral seen in Plates 4 and 5.

The delicate rendering of the peony in Plate 10 is highly comparable to a woodblock print of pink and red peonies by Hokusai, as seen in Figure 12. The delicate outline of the petals in the print can easily be transposed onto the vase and used as a pattern for the cloisonné work.

The corner cabinet featured in Plate 11 is based upon a design by Edwin Godwin. Godwin was heavily influenced by what he referred to as 'Japanese principles' and found favor in the simple, elegant but sturdy forms he observed in woodblock prints, such as can be seen in Figure 13. Included in this print is a table, screens and trays, all of which Godwin made designs from in the Anglo-Japanese style. One of Godwin's most famous designs is the 'Drone Cabinet', seen in Figure 13. Along with his designs, Godwin also provided suggestions for placement, the types of wood to be used, and the methods by which the woods used should be stained and cut.

Another of Godwin's Anglo-Japanese designs, the chair shown in Figure 14 is rather elegant and simple in form and construction. Meant to resemble the spindly characteristics of Japanese table legs and trays, the chair leans back to provide additional comfort.

It is interesting to note that traditional Japanese interiors contained very little or no furniture, as can be seen in Figure 15. In this print, the only furnishing in the interior is a three-shelved set atop a short, rectangular table upon which people can also sit. The

sparseness of furnishing and décor within Japanese is surprisingly very influential in Britain. Other designers, such as Owen W. Davis, also designed furniture in the fashionable Anglo-Japanese taste in the 1870's. Some of his designs can be seen in Figure 16, which shows an interior setting printed as an advertising catalogue of furnishings produced by James Shoolbred and Company of Tottenham Court Road.

Another type of furniture produced during the late nineteenth century was the so-called 'Art Furniture', which was also very popular as interior treatments. An example of art furniture can be seen in Figure 17, a chair designed by Christopher Dresser. Using ebonized and gilded mahogany, Dresser's design is both sturdy and based on Japanese forms, comparable to the chair seen in Figure 16.

Another inspiration with oriental and Japanese origins is the folding screen. Used by the Japanese as room dividers, to provide privacy or to prevent the escape of warm air, folding screens were common elements of the Japanese interior. The Anglo-Japanese version of the folding screen as seen in Figure 18 is highly decorated. Included on each of the screen's panels is a Japanese-style painting, using birds and branches as decorative elements. After chairs and other smaller items of furniture, screens were highly sought after for their charm and beauty.

Another designer who was heavily influenced by the Japanese use of natural forms is Thomas Jeckyll. Most of Jeckyll's designs are made out of cast iron and use the sunflower, his favorite flower, as the main decorative element. His favorite means of patterning the sunflower was to feature prominent centers, entirely surrounded by pointy petals, and leaves pointed downward. His most famous design was a cast-iron screen of

sunflowers made for the 1876 Philadelphia Exposition, an example of which can be seen in Figure 19.

In keeping true to the material qualities of cast iron, Jeckyll also made designs for stoves, ovens, boilers, fireplaces, including surrounds, grates, examples of which can be seen in Figure 20, and andirons, a set of which can be seen in Plate 13. In most of his designs he used the sunflower as the main decorative element. As can be seen in the fireplace surround and grate in Figure 20, he also used sunflower patterns without the leaves, and also employed fret-like patterns within the grating and wall attachments.

The Poynter Room, seen in Figure 21, located in the Victoria and Albert Museum is a fine example of incorporating various media and Japanese-style motifs. The grill was manufactured in 1867 by the firm of Hart, Son & Peard. Its mantle is decorated with stylized peacock and sun motifs, and its doors are embellished with floral and matted patterns. The tiles surrounding the grill were made by the firm of Minton, Campbell and Company and use alternating designs of sunflowers and leaves. And, in the stained glass windows, made by Crace and Company, peacocks are used. Taken as a whole, this room is strongly shows the Japanese influence in the 1860's, before the Aesthetic Movement of the 1870's and the 1880's craze for things Japanese.

Another design by Christopher Dresser, a teapot shown in Plate 14, is based upon a form common in Japan. Inspired by the tea ceremony, Dresser wanted his designs to be practical and functional. His use of simple, functional shapes combined with Japanese elements, however, did not prove to be very popular with British consumers. In part basing the shape of the teapot on the wares used in the Japanese tea ceremonies, Dresser

adapted their forms and tried to make them suitable for British use. As can be seen in Figure 22, the circular form of the food dish inspired Dresser's design for the teapot.

In another example of Dresser's extrapolating Japanese wares and techniques, the stirrup vessel shown in Figure 23 demonstrates Dresser's interest in the decorative patterns and functional aspects of the Japanese folk arts. In this example, Dresser imitated the Japanese of mottled glaze and with a simple handle attached to the vessel, the vessel was durable and functional, yet simple in design and décor.

When it comes to making direct observations between an art form and an artist (or craftsman), one can hardly deny the innovative means in which Whistler emulated the styles and techniques he observed in Japanese woodblock prints. He cherished his private collection of Japanese decorative items and was fascinated by the images he saw in woodblock prints. Direct correlations can be made between Whistler's paintings and woodblock prints. For Whistler, the prints offered to him a new freedom of expression.

He was captivated by the angular, flatness of the prints, their strong emphasis on vertical rather than horizontal lines, the bold, yet flat colours, and the overall tonal quality of woodblock prints. In Figure 24, a woodblock print of a Japanese beauty, the woman is represented standing and dressed in an elaborate kimono and highly made up. In comparison to this print, Whistler's paintings, *The Princess of the Porcelain Countries*, seen in Figure 26, and *The White Girl*, seen in Figure 27, imitate the representative qualities as accomplished by the Eizan, the artist who designed the print. In each of these three works, the subjects are shown full-length, facing to the left, and dressed in flowing, long garments. The emphasis on verticality is strong in all three works, and each of the

In this painting by Grimshaw, Japanese fans and trays are hung above the

figures represents a beautiful, young woman. In tonal quality, Whistler comes very close to imitating Japanese tones.

Whistler was inspired by the landscapes and other images he observed in woodblock prints. The woodblock print shown in Plate 15 contains images of people running across a bridge during a sudden shower. The bridge, an example of which can be seen in Plate 16, is used by Whistler in his series of 'Nocturnes', and becomes an important motif for him. In his 'Nocturne' series, Whistler represented Old Battersea Bridge in a number of ways. In one of the images he includes rockets falling from the bridge while in others, he merely represents figures of men and boats near the bridge. The various images of Battersea Bridge are taken in the evening, and Whistler came under attack by leading critics of the day for his innovative paintings, not intended to represent but to be appreciated.

Group III

The items displayed in this grouping reflect the influence of Japan in the Victorian interior. During the 1870's and 1880's there developed in Britain a craze for things Japanese. Anything that resembled Japanese design or style was in great demand. Fans, porcelain, screens, tapestries, wallpaper, furniture and even fashion were heavily sought after. An example of a cluttered, but very Japanese-influenced, interior can be seen in Figure 27. Included in this interior is everything that would make a home properly and aesthetically pleasing. Another image of an aesthetic interior can be seen in Figure 28. In this painting by Grimshaw, Japanese fans and trays are hung above the

doorway, blue and white porcelain chargers, vases and dishes decorate the table tops and mantels, and included in the interior is a fine example of art furniture, a Queen Ann style chair painted with Japanese motifs.

A charger, such as the one seen in Figure 29, could be placed along the wall or above the fireplace for a decorative effect, or a fine piece of blue and white porcelain, such as the example in Figure 30, can be placed upon a dresser, cabinet, buffet or table-top. There were endless possibilities of how the interior could be decorated and made fashionably aesthetic. Just as the Japanese replicated decorative motifs in various patterns, so did the British. An example of this borrowing can be seen in the Sunflower Vase made by Thomas Webb and Sons, seen in Figure 31. Borrowing Jeckyll's favorite design, the sunflower, along with the lily, seen in the pair of vases shown in Figure 32, quickly became the of choice for the Aesthetes.

The interior of the Victorian homes, however, also required the ladies to look fashionable and be adorned in the latest accoutrements, such as the Fan brooch seen in Plate 7. Though some fashionable personalities took to wearing traditional Japanese kimonos in Britain, the Japanese influence was usually limited to embroidering floral patterns into the underlying layers of silk or to simply wear fashionable accessories in the Japanese taste. Such accessories included brooches, earrings, combs, fans, parasols, necklaces and rings. Almost any Japanese decorative element could be rendered into metalwork and made into a proper fashion accessory.

An afternoon dress, such as the one seen in Plate 18, is decorated Japanese-inspired floral motifs and layers of silk. In comparison to a kimono, such as the one seen in the woodblock print shown in Plate 17, the afternoon dress is highly comparable. Both

garments are made of layers of silk, each has various layers held together with “dress” accessories, each is decorated with peony and chrysanthemum motifs sewn into exterior and interior layers of silk, and each garment is long, billows at the end, and trails behind the wearer. Though tailored to properly suit the Victorian lady, the afternoon dress is indeed a fine work of craftsmanship.

During the 1880’s, especially, the craze for Japanese things in Britain resulted in the production of cheaply made wares having oriental and exotic motifs. To the general public, as long as the goods looked foreign and exotic, the goods were quickly bought. Two examples of the cheap, but charming, wares produced during the craze of the late 1870’s and early 1880’s are the vases shown in Plates 19 and 20. The vase shown in Plate 19 is a press-molded vase made by Sowerby & Company. The creamy color of the vase was referred to as “patent ivory queen’s ware”, perhaps because of its closeness in color to Wedgwood’s patented creamware. The vase shown in Plate 20 is a press-molded, opalascens glass also made by Sowerby & Company. Vases like this were inexpensive ornaments made in sophisticated colors and patterns resembling more refined, upscale goods. Vases like this were described at the time as ‘art for the millions’, easily accessible and widely available.

Glossary

- Aesthetes:** followers of the Aesthetic Movement, who believed in the concept of 'art for art's sake', the opposite of an Aesthete is a Philistine, who favored art that revived earlier styles and held symbolic social, moral or religious meaning
- Aesthetic Movement:** an artistic movement that developed in England in the second half of the nineteenth century and it's followers sought to rejuvenate with a return to natural forms, free from any social, political, or moral meanings, its followers are known as aesthetes, the movement is fairly synonymous with Japanism in England
- Anglo-Japanese:** this term refers to the types of furnishings designed and produced in England during the second half of the nineteenth century, the designs were based upon Japanese principles of design, leading designers in the Anglo-Japanese taste include Edwin Godwin, Richard Norman Shaw, and Thomas Jeckyll
- Art Furniture:** refers to furniture made during the heyday of the Aesthetic Movement, usually such furniture was black and ebonized, and its design was simple, rectilinear and lightweight, with slender, turned uprights and shallow-carved ornament
- Champleve:** a technique of decorating surfaces where the metal is removed and enamel colors are applied to areas where the removed was removed
- Cloisonne:** a technique of decorating surfaces where the cells, or cloisons, are created from strips of metal and applied to the surface in an outline to contain enamels in place so that the enamels do not run together while firing
- Edo:** also known as the Tokugawa Period, this period lasted from 1615 until 1868 and is named Edo after the name of the city where the Tokugawa shogunate held court
- Inro:** a Japanese term, refers to small medicine boxes fashioned out of metal, wood, or ivory which were often carried on the person
- Netsuke:** a Japanese term, refers to the tiny objects of ivory or wood used as counterweights for small pillboxes (inro) hung from the waist sash of a kimono during the Edo period

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Exhibition Group I: Objects Made in Britain with Japanese-style Décor

The objects in this group demonstrate the British use and borrowing of Japanese motifs. The motifs, as used by the British, were designed to resemble the decorative patterns and images as employed by Japanese artisans. For the Japanese, however, the motifs incorporated into their wares are highly symbolic and meaningful. For example, the crane or heron is symbolic of long life and immortality. A common motif in Japanese art, cranes can be seen standing, in flight or “dancing”. For each occurrence, there is associated meaning. Another common motif in Japanese art is bamboo. Bamboo is considered to be one the Four Gentlemen, one of the four noble plants along with plum, chrysanthemum and orchid. Each plant has it’s own structure and was used by the Japanese as models for calligraphy practice. To accurately render each plant was a skillful test of balance and clarity.

For British designers and craftsman, these motifs had little or no significance. In British wares, motifs were arbitrarily placed and used simply as decorative elements. Little or no regard was given over to the symbolic meanings the Japanese associated with the decorative figures, animals and plants incorporated into their art.

6. Fan mounted as a hanging scroll, cover on gold and silver paper, decorated with bamboo and grass patterns; designed by Ogata Kōrin, Edo Period c. 1820, Detroit Institute of Arts #79.65; 2.
7. Brooch, gold, fashioned in the design of a Japanese fan with bamboo and insects designs, c. 1860; Victoria and Albert Museum #M.182-1976.