

# The reasons of European and American fascination of Japanese Art since the late 1880s

Vincent Aubriot – 3 June, 2019

*1580 words*

It is commonly admitted that this fascination towards Japanese arts is called Japonisme (or Japonism depending of the country) around the world. The effects of Japonisme are visible even today, as a lot of art works have more or less strong influences of Japanese styles. But, the reasons of why the Europeans and Americans have been fascinated with Japanese art are not well known. To know more about it, we need to focus on the 1860-1900s, where lies the roots of this fascination that is still ongoing in our modern society. Thus, today's essay will try to provide an answer to why Europeans and Americans have been fascinated with Japanese art, and especially since the late 1880's. I personally think that this fascination is due to the fact that this was, at the time, the discovery of a new culture that came from a then not-so-known country that just opened recently to the world, due to various pressures from other countries that were willing to start commercial exchanges with Japan. The massive appearance of various artworks then gave curiosity for this art style to European and American people. Furthermore, France and United States of America were the main countries that were interested of Japanese arts, and gave it a boost in both areas of the world for a wide spread.

The first evidence supporting this vision appears in an essay called « Le Japonisme en France dans la seconde moitié du XIXème siècle à la faveur de la diffusion de l'estampe Japonaise »<sup>1</sup>. In this document, the authoress expresses the fact that, even if it was possible to find some pieces of Japanese Arts in France, and especially in Paris where some curiosity shops opened in 1862; the fascination for the Japanese Art truly began with the Exposition Universelle of 1878, where Japan was represented at a large scale, and where French people were attracted by Japanese arts, and especially by Ukiyo-e, porcelains, horticulture, and several other works. The Ukiyo-e were originally cheap and colorful prints that are so easily findable in Japan that some are even used as wrapping for more valuable objects, and before being massively exposed, they were a subject of interest for European artists that were fascinated by how those paintings were produced.

Then, this phenomenon slowly started to take over the other adjacent countries in Europe, such as Italy, where Japanese art was first introduced through Fashion. Laura Dimitrio, in her essay about "The beginning of Japonisme in Italian Fashion"<sup>2</sup>, gives hints about how Japonisme appeared in Italy, and especially through Italian Fashion, by pointing at the fact that since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Italian women of middle and upper social classes were importing Kimonos from France, who were imported from Japan beforehand, in order to wear them at home, as they were more comfortable and way more fashionable than traditional clothes. They were then produced directly in Italy, but the

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Thirion, 'Le japonisme en France dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle à la faveur de la diffusion de l'estampe japonaise' in, 'Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises, Volume 13, Numéro 13' (Paris, 1961) pp 125-126

<sup>2</sup> Laura Dimitrio, 'The beginning of Japonisme in Italian Fashion', [https://www.kci.or.jp/en/research/dresstudy/pdf/H\\_D63\\_DIMITORIO\\_The%20Begining%20of%20Japonisme%20in%20Italian%20Fashion\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.kci.or.jp/en/research/dresstudy/pdf/H_D63_DIMITORIO_The%20Begining%20of%20Japonisme%20in%20Italian%20Fashion_ENG.pdf) accessed 20 May, 2019

traditional Japanese design and decorative motifs were kept. The wide spreading of this fashion trend was amplified by the arrival of opera and theater plays with Japanese themes from France, that were using Japanese clothing.

Another document about “Japonism in Fashion”<sup>3</sup> describes the fact that this Japanese influence of Fashion by the Kimono described in Italy was also something that happened in other countries of Europe and in America. But, this time, this influence was not only due to the opera and theater plays mentioned on the previous paragraph, but also due to various paintings from James Whistler and Claude Monet, respectively American and French painters, among others, that were depicting real and colorful Kimono. Those works appeared in fashion magazines both in Europe and in America around the Exposition Universelle, and then started the trend of the Japanese style.

The theater plays based on Japanese themes and works that we talked about earlier appeared by the end of the 1880s, and were another reason that explains this fascination for Japanese arts. The objective was, instead of representing the authentic Japanese theater experience, to appropriate Japanese style, arts and crafts Europeans were fascinated about and to relocate them in a Western context to close the gap between the two cultures. Various artists, such as Astruc, Gallet, Busnach and Liorat, among others, have written a whole series of plays based on things that fascinated them in Japanese Art. Those works were for a lot of them major success, and they were really popular with the population. It is said that this contributed to the “triumph of ‘Japonisme’”, and helped Europeans to fantasize more about Japan and its artworks.<sup>4</sup>

As for America, the Japonism trend was mainly due to direct influences from the Exposition Universelle that happened in France, the leader of the wide spread of the movement, and also from expositions of imported Japanese crafts that took place on 1876 in Philadelphia. However, despite the fact that this exposure was the starting point of the whole American Japonisme, only Japanese crafts were displayed, so it only concerned the decorative arts and interior design at the time.<sup>5</sup> Interest for Japanese prints only happened way after those events, around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when American artists started expressing interest for the aesthetics and the simplicity shown in different Japanese artworks, while they were already popular in France ever since the 1880s.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Akiko Fukai, ‘Japonism in Fashion’,

[https://www.kci.or.jp/research/dresstudy/pdf/e\\_Fukai\\_Japonism\\_in\\_Fashion.pdf](https://www.kci.or.jp/research/dresstudy/pdf/e_Fukai_Japonism_in_Fashion.pdf) accessed 23 May, 2019

<sup>4</sup> CHIBA, YOKO. “Japonisme: East-West Renaissance in the Late 19th Century.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1998, pp. 1–20. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/44029769](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029769)

<sup>5</sup> Barrett, Marie-Thérèse. “Japonisme in the West.” *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1993, pp. 101–108. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2385468](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2385468)

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Capua, ‘Japonisme and Japanese works on paper: Cross-cultural influences and hybrid materials’ in ‘Adapt & Evolve 2015: East Asian Materials and Techniques in Western Conservation.’ (London, The Institute of Conservation: 2017), pp. 28–42

In opposition to this vision, another essay called “A Pure Invention: Japan, Impressionism, and the West, 1853 – 1906”<sup>7</sup> is stating the fact that this fascination is mainly due to the fact that artists began representing a vision of Japanese art that was already obsolete, and thus that Europeans and Americans were being attracted to a kind of art that has already started to decline, as Japanese artists were already moving to Western style arts imported at the same time their arts were exported to the rest of the world. To express his opinion, the writer insists on the example of the ukiyo-e and it’s fading after the opening of Japan towards the rest of the world to express his opinion. But the fact that whole parts of Japanese arts managed to survive through times and achieved to reach our era denotes that the core of the Japanese arts was relying on more than just the ukiyo-e that the writer pictures in his essay.

This point of view depicts the basis of an important cultural revolution that took over the world in less than 20 years, and is still very active nowadays. If Japonism did not happened at that time, the concept of art as we know it right now would certainly be way different, as Japanese arts inspired various artists in Europe and in America, and gave various, innovative ideas to people. Fashion would be different too, as Kimono were massively Imported and produced for Western at-home usage, and the materials were reused in order to make different clothing. Also, through the production of art pieces and clothes, Japonism probably had an incomputable effect on the industry of Europe and America, such as in Italy, where industries started producing kimono for Italy’s usage by following the design and decorative motifs disposition of the Japanese ones, thus mobilizing resources and manpower on those industries.

To conclude this essay, we saw through this small discussion that the fact that Europeans and Americans have been fascinated by Japanese arts starting the late 1880s is definitely due to the curiosity shown towards this newly-discovered art style that was disclosed massively only at the same time, and it’s fast spreading through the main areas. Beforehand, it was possible to find some imported pieces of art like clothing and ukiyo-e in some curiosity shops, but their popularity rose after the Exposition Universelle and the massive exposure gave to Japanese arts at the time. Then, by the use of opera, theater, paintings, fashion, and a lot of other forms, Japanese Arts were able to make their way in European and American territories, where they were particularly appreciated. We also saw that even if the core of the fascination for Japanese arts, the Ukiyo-e, quickly became unused by Japanese artists and only remained as “remains from a revolved past for Europeans artists”, this fascination easily found another way to grow and reach our modern era through crafts and living arts (theater, opera, and more modern supports nowadays.).

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<sup>7</sup> Amir Abou-Jaoude, ‘A Pure Invention: Japan, Impressionism, and the West, 1853 – 1906’ [https://www.nhd.org/sites/default/files/Abou-Jaoude\\_Paper.pdf](https://www.nhd.org/sites/default/files/Abou-Jaoude_Paper.pdf), accessed 20 May, 2019