



**Civilizations** 

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Special Issue **2017**Dialogue between Civilizations



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# Viewing foreign countries, their peoples and cultures: What was the reason for Japonism in the West?

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#### Introduction

Loving one's own country should be taken for granted. If the love is not an exclusive one, the word "patriotism" might be acceptable. Nevertheless, no country exists as a singular phenomenon, and neighboring countries exert a mutual influence. Due to the development of traffic and communication throughout history, globalization is now a common term, which is used in the field of technology and exchange of commodities. People now have much more opportunity for travel. However, is the increased cosmopolitanism of our days also relevant when we speak of the understandings or/and misunderstandings of the lifestyle, society and cultural customs, and values of other civilizations that have been developed quite far from our own? Japonism is one such phenomenon in which people encountered another civilization and incorporated it into their own.

#### A positive view of Japan

My foremost concern is what exerts influence on the perception of other civilizations. Is perception always that of one individual? Is it possible to interpret it as that of the civilization to which the individual belongs?

The first state was Greece, a country in the Eastern Mediterranean, the height of whose civilization about 2500 years ago influenced the development of European culture. This early Greek culture was in its turn dependent on the influence of the Middle East, which passed on many achievements, such as literacy, the first democratic entities, and a wide range of art and thinking. To refer to non-Greeks, the Greeks used the word *barbaros* (in Greek writing,  $\beta$ άρβαρος). This was a neutral expression meaning "of a different culture," which might be compared with the Japanese word *gaikokujin*  $\beta$ E $\lambda$ , or "people from outside." Over the course of time, however, the word became pejorative and came to include the connotation of depreciating or devaluing others who do not belong to one's own country. The term "barbarian" today has the negative meaning of not sharing one's culture.

However, throughout history, there have been positive views on others as well. Since Japan is in the subject of my paper, allow me to open a book entitled *Japonica* [Note 1], by a certain Edwin Arnold, a British writer who visited Japan during the Meiji period. He spent Christmas of the year 1890 (Meiji 23) in Kyoto. In his book, he quotes some comments of his European predecessors who had been able to visit Japan earlier than he had. Arnold begins this list with Saint Francis Xavier, who lived in Japan with a mission of propagating Christianity

for around two years in the middle of the sixteenth century, during the Sengoku period. Francis Xavier's conclusion about the Japanese people was "This nation is the delight of my soul!" He thought they were the best people he ever had the chance to live with.

Arnold quotes Will Adams, an Englishman who came to Japan on board a Dutch ship as a pilot-major. This was about 60 years later, at the beginning of the Edo period: "The people of the Island of Japan are good of nature, courteous above measure and valiant in war. Their justice is securely executed without any partiality upon transgressors of the law. They are governed in great civility. I mean, not a land is better governed in the world by civil policy."

A third person Sir Arnold mentions is a German physician, Engelbert Kaempfer, who stayed in Deshima in the service of the Dutch East India Company for a few years at the end of the seventeenth century: "The Japanese are bold, heroic, very industrious and endured to hardships ... [they are] great lovers of civility and good manners, and very nice in keeping themselves, their clothes and houses clean and neat. [...] As to all handicrafts, either curious or useful, they are wanting neither proper materials, nor industry and application, no need for masters from abroad. They rather exceed all other nations in ingenuity and neatness of workmanship." Arnold places these quotations at the beginning of his book to support his own positive view of Japan.

These quotations are all from well-known figures. I wondered whether such views could be found also as to be those of nonentities? As a historian who also sees history from the perspective of non-authorities, I have looked into the records of the ordinary lives of the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker, whose sentiments are usually not to be found in the materials found in archives and libraries. While looking for such sources, however, I came across a postcard of an unknown visitor to Japan, written in 1910 from Tokyo. The writer was apparently in his thirties and on a grand tour; his father was still active as an engineer in a charcoal mine on the Austro-Hungarian border.

"Dearest parents!" the young man wrote in German. "This Japan! The people here are not yet really immersed into our culture—unfortunately but in many respects fortunately. They think and feel different than we. But there is one thing they are quite a way ahead of us: the sense for beauty, equally for cleanliness and neatness. Anything here is charming, graceful, delicate. If you could see the tiny and sublime trees—of course similar to our trees but miniaturized. In a small bowl a really cute garden. I am wondering how the people here are able to think about such a beauty. Lafcadio Hearn found exactly the right words for this country and the people here. He understands this land profoundly, his genius makes any other description useless."

It is just a postcard, and yet it speaks volumes. The young man had apparently prepared himself by reading the works of the British writer Lafcadio Hearn [in Japanese *Koizumi Yakumo* 小泉八雲], who was a long-time resident of Japan, before his journey. A number of Hearn's writings on Japan were translated into many other languages. The German version was the

most Japonist, since the translator was like-minded and had his work supported by the illustrator Emil Orlik, a member of the Viennese painters' society Secession, who visited Japan a few years earlier, in 1900/1901. What a triangle! The nameless sample of the postcard's author (his signature is unfortunately not legible, although I tried to transcribe it. A few years later the charcoal mine was closed and the family moved from the village nearby to somewhere else), a famous European writer with an English father and a Greek mother, who lived and died in Japan, and an artist who was representative of the Austrian Japonism movement. Cultures go beyond borders!

#### A dream turning into real pictures—Chinoiserie

Having an interest in a certain country and its culture is not just an individual phenomenon. It can produce a public movement or even a fad to adore or respect a different culture.

If we were to provide an overview of the history of Europe in consideration of the relations to other civilizations, it would encompass three main cultural areas in different epochs respectively. First, there was Chinoiserie (East-Asia) in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, second came Orientalism (Near East & Northern Africa) in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the last, Japonism (Japan), was in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The expression Chinoiserie signifies China first of all, but in fact it applies more or less to East Asia as a whole, because people in Europe could not easily distinguish between Chinese and Japanese arts. If you examine the catalog of the exhibition entitled "China and Europe. Understanding China and Chinese fashions in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries" (1973, Berlin) [Note 2], you will find that many items from outside Chinese borders were regarded as a part of the Chinese culture in Europe. The Chinoiserie period clearly was quite an extensive phenomenon, and it influenced all the countries of Europe, without any exception. There are two main reasons for this.

First, many European powers traded with China and shipped artistic products to Europe. Canton was the most important harbor in those days. Certainly, it was used for business, but it also had a role in fulfilling the wishes and expectations of certain circles of European buyers. The main reason for this fashion was the enthusiasm for such exotic decoration at aristocratic residences in every country of Europe. There was no palace, no estate, no aristocratic mansion without any items called Chinese.

Let us examine one example, the two so-called Chinese cabinets next to the large ceremonial room in the baroque palace of Schönbrunn in Vienna. The walls are decorated with blue-white porcelain. When these two cabinets were refurbished a few years ago, the curators discovered that about the one half of each of them was of Chinese make and the other half was of Japanese manufacture. Japanese kilns produced items in a Chinese style, which were then shipped by Dutch traders from Nagasaki to Europe. Since importation from both China and Japan was quite expensive, European potteries started to imitate Chinese and Japanese

porcelain. Thus, the Wiener Porzellan-Manufaktur was founded in 1718, following the Meissen, and it produced porcelain in an East Asian style, which was then followed by porcelain manufacture in other countries.

The second reason why Chinoiserie became popular in the West has a likewise comprehensive answer. Japan closed its doors to other countries at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and excluded all foreigners, with the exception of a handful of Dutch traders. Not much information reached the West from Japan. China remained open. Europe had a very positive view of Chinese Confucian society. This positive view came to Europe via the Catholic Jesuit missionaries in China, who held in esteem Chinese society and the education of civil servants within the administration. Many Jesuits dressed like mandarins. Since they were trustworthy intellectuals, French philosophers such as Rousseau or Voltaire of the then-young Enlightenment judged Chinese values to be so rational that Europe could learn from them. That was the reason why Chinese people were not regarded as barbarians at that time.

However, Europe did not necessarily acquire knowledge in a proper or rational way. The contention and competition of the European powers and their imperialistic and aggressive demeanor toward China at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century made both sides hostile, which caused consequent setbacks. They both adopted an incorrect attitude. Enthusiasm disappeared. Suddenly, China was a backward country and the Westerner was the master.

#### Orientalism. A double-edged sword

Oriental art is also called Islamic art in Europe. The expression will admittedly continue in this sense in our museums, although in the last decade the word Islam has become a word of conflict due to political and ideological changes and diverse encounters and mutations between the Near East and the West. It is generally not used to denote a religious conception, though religion is a common value, but rather to bridge a number of different areas, from Iran (Persia), Turkey (the Ottoman Empire), Arab countries, and the whole of Northern Africa and combine these countries and their shared cultural background.

In fact, in spite of the diversity of its peoples and the vastness of its territory, the Orient was seen always as the cradle of European civilization. This applies foremost to the Mesopotamian region, the so-called Holy Land (Palestine), and the lands along the Nile. The West was thoroughly aware of its origin there. This remained in the mind of the people in the Roman or Christian cultural environment when, for various historical reasons, there was a parting between the Orient and Occident, when access into its inner regions were almost impossible and the Ottoman Empire tried to extend its military power into European soil. Nevertheless doings and dealings with Europe continued, and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Ottoman Empire opened its doors to the West. The imagination and interest of writers and artists increased. Many of them visited one or another region on a grand tour in the process of their maturation, and they brought back readers and connoisseurs the visual objects they produced

traveling from their imagination [Note 3].

Usually European artists looked or traveled into those regions where their native countries had been politically involved (such as Spain, France, and Great Britain) or where it was easy to travel to. From the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century information became more easy of access. Mozart composed the opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail (The Abduction from the Seraglio*), first performance in 1782, or the *Zauberflöte (Magic Flute)*, popular since its premiere in 1791. More and more belles lettres were translated into European languages, among them poems by the Iranian poet Hafez. Missions from these Islamic countries visited Europe. European Imperialism was also not less influential.

Thus, the so-called Near East became attractive for European artists, and many average people decorated their dwellings with Oriental artifacts. This exotic furniture and pictures with unknown landscapes were completely different. Last not least there was a voluptuous touch that aroused the imagination. A husband surrounded with four wives? Is that believable? A nobleman, a pasha, with as many ladies as he could afford in his harem! Exotic? No, erotic! The best examples were provided by the French painter Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), though he never traveled to the Orient. His contemporaries and todays connoisseurs might be delighted by these paintings depicting scenes of beauties, wearing just turbans on their heads, relaxing after a seraglio's bath.

One of the best known Orientalist painters was the Austrian artist Carl Leopold Müller (1834–1892), known as "Orient-Müller" or the "Egyptian Müller," because in the second half of his life he spent a great deal of time in Egypt on his many travels and painted the country and the people of the area of the Nile almost exclusively. Captivated by the magic colors and the completely different atmosphere of the Orient, Müller created above all landscape studies flooded with light. In a letter from Cairo dated October 1877 to a painter friend in Vienna he called Egypt a wonderland and Germany boring. He wrote with melancholy that from this sunny country he would have to return into the Viennese winter. In January 1881, he wrote from Assuan (Upper Egypt) to his sisters in Vienna that to see the people there was a joy. Returning home in the evening he felt benumbed from the many surprising impressions. Thus, the only wish he has is to paint pictures to fairly mirror the enchantment spread over all nature [Note 4].

With his Oriental paintings, he established his famous reputation. The subjects of his paintings extended his fame, above all among the British clientele, who competed to acquire his works of art. His paintings are still sought after today. They are of a distinctive coloristic quality. It is not surprising that in 1890 he was elected principal of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna.

The problem of so-called Orientalism is that this movement was not free from cultural conceit. Looking at foreign authentic assets, extracting them from their social context and using them as toys for European eyes, reducing the foreign culture to what we want to see and not

what really was the fact. At least, one point is comprehensible—the true and candid phantasy to look at the other.

In his often-criticized book *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon 1978; translated into many languages), Edward W. Said (1935–2003) touched on exactly this point, that Western Orientalism had been for centuries a manifestation of imperialism. He mentions a "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture," originating from a long tradition in the Western countries of false, romanticized images of the Middle East. Here, the dialog has not yet ended.

The love for the Orient was equaled and accompanied by a contempt, since the Orient is, as it was apparently said, lacking freedom. Human beings should be aware how little they know of themselves or their others, although they think they know. Would that apply also to the imagination in the field of Japonism?

#### Japonism. The third movement in Europe to esteem art from abroad

The opening of Japan by an American armada in 1853 and 1854 was a kind of an earthquake. Quite a few other Western countries had been thinking of forcing Japan to widen her doors for commercial exchange, since Japan with her large and well-educated population would be a welcome market for Western industrial products. The United States were ahead by a nose, and other European countries followed. At the beginning the Japanese government was not amused. The ruling aristocratic class, the samurai, acquired as a result of this political pressure and the advanced military power of Western countries an aversion and disgust, that culminated also in hostile encroachments. A difficult decade followed within the Japanese society over how to answer this strain from outside. Since it was clear that Japan would never win a war, they decided to turn the tables.

To become as quickly as possible par with Western politics, treated as equal as an independent country, they accepted the so-called Unequal Treaties with the Western powers. The opening was rapid. Western onlookers rubbed their eyes in disbelief. They wanted only a market, the rest should remain a tiny, obedient society. Thus, the perception and awareness of Japan became intense for both the Western power politicians and the Western artists who wanted to save Japan's cultural tradition within their written or painted opera.

To close the gap in technology, the military, and other kinds of knowledge and learning Japan, set aside its former isolation policy. It would no longer pursue seclusion as it had for about 200 years, but it would be outgoing with the West. Hundreds of Western engineers, academics, and professionals were invited—of course with the expenses paid by the Japanese government—and likewise hundreds of Japanese students were sent abroad, also with their bills paid.

Japan came nearer to the West than the West had expected. Just as Japanese culture was, Japanese values and Japanese art were in a kind of a flux as East started to flow to West. In this

connection, of course also related to the economy, since it had to whip into shape the budget of the state in order to bear the substantial costs of modernizing the country, Japan appeared strikingly in the West. It participated in the fourth World Fair in Paris in 1867 and the fifth in Vienna in 1873. In Vienna, they exhibited items related to arts, crafts, and industry as well as agricultural products; Japan was emerging as a modern and self-conscious state. In 1868 (the first year of Meiji) a new government was established on top of the Japanese state with the new Emperor Mutsuhito, or Meiji, dispatching a large delegation of 70 men to Europe.

At the Paris World Fair Japan was still the outgoing government of the shogun, the then military leader, as well as two domains—the principalities of Saga and Satsuma. Nevertheless it was an important event within the history of art, with a special relation to Japonism. There is no clear date for when the first Western artist was attracted by Japanese art and created a piece of art influenced by Japanese style or Japanese taste, because even before this time, Western travelers published books and essays on Japan lauding the sense of beauty of that country. But what we know is that all the pieces of art the Japanese side exhibited prompted excitement, praise, and curiosity, influenced collectors, and made Japanese art known to the wider public. It is not inaccurate to state that this event in Paris was a quite influential starting point for Japonism in the West. This was when Japanese woodblock prints started to be popular in Europe.

To be more concise, we must distinguish so-called fine art from applied art. How to use the surface of a painting or etching and how to employ the space, these are one side of the coin, but since in course of industrialization in Europe many new products were invented, and these products also needed some design, many questions were open. Do all these items also require a sense for beauty?

The German physician and polymath Engelbert Kaempfer, cited in *Japonica*, answered this 300 years ago: "As to all handicrafts, the Japanese do not need masters from abroad. They rather exceed all other nations in ingenuity and neatness of workmanship." Such insight and cognizance contributed to the fact why in London the Victoria & Albert Museum (at first called Museum of Manufactures) and in Vienna the Museum for Applied Art (*Museum für Angewandte Kunst*) were established—to provide expert samples to European artists and craftsmen. Samples from outside Europe, but with the greatest tendency for handicrafts and design from Japan. Our craftsmen in Europe had a lot to learn!

Japonism was learning, even when it was combined with curiosity or with a kind of naïveté. In May 1900, the princess Pauline Metternich, the foremost lady of Viennese society, organized a three-day charity event using the giant main building of the World Exhibition, where the Japanese had shown their arts and crafts in 1873. Hundreds of ladies sold Japanese items, and souvenirs from Japan or in Vienna printed picture postcards with Japanese motives, and all the ladies were dressed in kimonos. The event was called Kirschblüten-Fest (Hanami Festival). The least of those kimonos were bought in special shops dealing with artifacts from

Japan. Most of the dresses were handmade, either by the ladies themselves or by a Viennese tailor. The newspapers excelled each other in reporting, citing also the ladies' name, which lady had the most beautiful kimono and festival finery, even decorating the hairs with tangerines or other ingenious panoply. What a love for Japan!

To explain the fascination of Japonism in arts and crafts one would need illustrations. For this I would cite in a footnote a few publications in English for further reference [Note 5].

The Art of Japonism is found everywhere in the Western world. From the 1860s onwards, culminating around the turn of the century, in parallel with Art Nouveau until the 1920s. Certainly, this art is not really Japanese, but it expresses the attraction of Japan. Some artist traveled to Japan, some artists did not. This makes no difference. The main asset is the feeling. The American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), who lived mostly in Paris and in London, was never in Japan but he really understood the Japanese sensibility and easily combined it with Western art, to determine the essence of Japanese aesthetics and smoothly transferring Japanese style into European art, without merely copying it. Comparing the woodcut print by Utagawa Hiroshige depicting a night scene at Kyōbashi (a sheet from the series *Meisho Edo hakkei* [*Hundred famous views of Edo*]) and the inspiring painting by Whistler "Nocturne: Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge" (1872/75) on the River Thames speaks for itself. The point of view, the extract, the true and individual composition could not be better.

No less important is the French artist Henri Rivière (1864–1951). His series transferring the *36 Views of Mount Fuji* by Katsushika Hokusai into a series of *36 Views of the Eiffel Tower* (*Les Trente-six Vues de la Tour Eiffel*, printed between 1888 and 1902), is one of the best examples of true and concise Japonism—art without copying.

Many Japonist artists traveled to Japan. During the Meiji–Taishō era, ten artists from Austria alone visited Japan to absorb the atmosphere on-site and to create their works, as well as ten renowned artists from England and many other countries.

One of these Western artist-travelers, who visited Japan on two journeys, was the Australian born Mortimer Menpes (1855–1938), an ardent Japonist who wrote an autobiographical book about his experience in Japan. He notes there an interesting comparison between the sense of beauty in Japan and that of the Western art world [Note 6]: "Japan might be said to be artistic as England is inartistic. In Japan art is not a cause, but a result—the result of the naturalness of the people [...] everywhere is to be found the all-pervading element of art and beauty. A rainy day in Japan is not, as it is in London, a day of gloom and horror, but a day of absolute fascination."

#### From Chinoiserie to Japonism, or Japonoiserie?

The cultural unity of Europe is owed to nothing other than the continual exchange of spiritual achievements, aesthetic currents, ideas, movements in art, sense of style, convictions, and

values, as well as religious faith to which neither the Alps nor seas could oppose obstacles. Thus, the entire Mediterranean space was in some way incorporated into European history, since progress from antiquity indirectly via the Islamic education fertilized the continent—enrichment by takeover. The Orient never was far away, so that the Near East or Middle East has been continuously been familiar to the West and a kind of a nostalgic desire. Thus, the Orientalism movement in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is comprehensible, since there was in those two centuries not much fear of the political and military danger of the Orient, as there had been before.

In spite of the seafaring which allowed colonial Europe to stride over all inhabited continents in a few centuries and extended its knowledge, meetings with the more distant regions of our globe primarily remained economical, not a spiritual factor. Europe was good enough for herself. In fact, the regions over the sea did not move so near. There were only two exceptions, whose roots could not be geographically further: those currents from the Far East which we call Chinoiserie or fashion for China, an aesthetic fascination which excited educated Europe in the 17th and 18th century, as well as Japonism, which arose from China's neighbor, a fashion for Japan, which in the world of Western art caused an aesthetic ardor through five decades and even longer, arousing the enthusiasm of many artists and art lovers all over Europe.

Japan and China are, in spite of their geographic proximity, astonishingly different in respect to language, culture, and values. But among other criteria they share an obvious similarity. A view from outside underlines these common characteristics: arts and crafts originating from China or Japan were beautiful and well made: porcelain, lacquerware, paper, silk. All these things were valuable and exotic as well. No matter what one knew about these countries, these items were so miraculous, because even the Jesuit missionaries reported and praised their culture, education, and governance. China quite positively influenced the French philosophers of the Enlightenment, who saw a model country that European civilization could learn from. The enthusiasm went sky high. However, most of the reports could only be believed, not checked, a perfect world was created: a romanticized picture Europeans created themselves, a picture which could not be corrected by reality at all. The right ground for dreams to grow!

In case of Japan it was something different. What was seen until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a fairyland with ancient culture, suddenly changed within a few years to an advanced state. Society modernized itself, and the country stepped more and more perceptibly onto the international stage. Until that time, Japan had been such a lovely country, underlined by phantasy, being wonderfully, incredibly, and gracefully put together, a counter-image of Europe, a Europe that did not expect rapid changes or an approach to the West that was not thought of and all the more not wished. The Japonism movement in some ways should be seen as Japonoiserie, since the art did not matter, but in many cases, it had Japanese-like properties and requisites in a specific way, as an expression of amazement. In this marveling over Japan there is a hopeful continued existence of the traditional Japan and not of the modern transforming

world. This tradition was created by the onlookers from the West, not from what they saw, but what they wanted to see according to their own images and imagination. There was a mixture of the recognition of the courageous and unmistakable successful Japanese ascent within the concert of the nations, at the same time based on a longing to adhere to a picture on Japan, dismissing its actual progress and reifying a traditional Japan. It is necessary to have a dream.

#### Notes

- [1] Sir Edwin Arnold: Japonica. With illustrations by Robert Blum, New York 1891
- [2] Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlösser und Gärten. *China und Europa. Chinaverständnis und Chinamode im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert.* Ausstellung im Schloß Charlottenburg, Berlin 1973.
- [3] Gérard-Georges Lemaire, *The Orient in Western Art.* With a preface by Geneviève Lacambre. Köln 2005 (transl. from French: *L'univers des Orientalistes*. Paris 2000)
- [4] Adalbert Franz Seligmann (Ed.): Carl Leopold Müller. Ein Künstlerleben in Briefen, Bildern und Dokumenten. Wien-Berlin-Leipzig-München (Ricola Verlag): 1922, pp. 142/143, 175.
- [5] IVES, Colta Feller: *The Great Wave. The Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Prints.*New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art & New York Graphic Society, 1974
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Meiji Period. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2013

[6] Mortimer Menpes: *Japan. A Record in Colour.* Transcribed by Dorothy Menpes. London: Adam & Charles Black, 1901, p. 39/40. Menpes visited Japan two times, 1887 und 1896; the book contains 75 coloured picture prints he had painted in Japan.



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