

...Tracing Japonisme and the Way It Influenced Western Art

Art History

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One of the world's most beloved series of paintings, Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, of which a magnificent triptych adorns the walls of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is considered an epitome of Impressionism. Reproduced ad infinitum and present from textbook covers to mugs and stationary, these ubiquitous images come from a part of history when the modern world found itself enchanted with light, nature, and transience and, above all, with **Japan**.

While the contemporary world enjoys the sublime beauty of Monet's paintings, many are unaware that perhaps they would not have come to be, at least not in their present alluring form, if the American Commodore Matthew C. Perry had not sailed into Edo Bay, Japan, in 1853. Before his arrival, the country adhered to the strict *sakoku* (closed country) policy, making its culture virtually invisible to the rest of the world. Forcing Japan to sign two commercial treaties that opened its two ports to trade, Perry also unlatched the doors for Japanese culture and art to come pouring over Europe, mainly through the harbour at Le Havre in France.

Soon after, Japonisme, a term coined by the French critic Philippe Burty in 1872, became one of France's most dominant and enduring aesthetic movements.



Left: Alfred Stevens - La parisienne japonaise, 1872, painting, La Boverie museum, via [Creative Commons](#) /

Right: Vincent van Gogh - The Blooming Plum Tree (after Hiroshige's Plum Park in Kameido), 1887, via [Creative Commons](#)

The Poetry of this World

The aesthetic movement of Japonisme inspired a profound turn in European visual culture; from artists such as [Vincent van Gogh](#), [Mary Cassat](#), and [Toulouse-Lautrec](#) to designers, architects, and jewellers, every sector of visual arts and design became immersed with new visual forms, leading to two distinct styles from the late 19th and early 20th century: [Art Nouveau](#) and [Art Deco](#).

The imports from Japan familiarized Western audiences with Japanese culture, and the rush of interest was soon bolstered with

the first formal exhibition of Japanese arts and crafts. The event took place in the Japanese pavilion in Paris during the World's Fair of 1867 and included a showcase of the eastern country's cultural richness with fans, kimonos, lacquers, silks, ukiyo-e, and other bric-à-brac completing the display.

Among the first importers of Japanese decorative arts in Paris was the art dealer Siegfried Bing. He sold them in his shop La Porte Chinoise and promoted them in his lavish magazine *Le Japon Artistique*, published from 1888 to 1891.

Commenting on the interest and the specific aesthetics foreign to Europe, the jeweller Lucien Falize compared it to poetry. "They have taught us," he said, referring to the Japanese, "the poetry of this world."



Left: Claude Monet - Madame Monet en costume Japonais, 1875, painting, Impressionism, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, via [Creative Commons](#) / **Right:** Claude Monet - Garden in Giverny with the Japanese footbridge and the water lily pool, 1899, painting, via [Creative Commons](#)

Japonisme and the Emergence of Modernism

Among multiple objects from Japan that flooded Europe at the time — including various iron swords, fans, bronzes, ivory netsuke toggles from a kimono's belt, and porcelain — were also woodcut prints or ukiyo-e, which demonstrated that everyday, transient subjects could be represented in decorative and sublime ways.

These 'pictures of the floating world' were a popular art form in Japan during the Edo Period (1615-1868) and were associated with urban districts used for entertainment. Usually depicting popular actors and courtesans, they also represented landscapes and well-known Japanese sites. Arriving in Europe initially as a packaging material to protect imported porcelain, they immediately attracted European artists.

At the time, Impressionists and other modernists were trying to upend art from Western traditions, searching for new inspirations elsewhere. Japanese art and design provided this much-needed refreshment, although not all works of Japonisme show equal rejection of Western standards. As James Whistler's painting *Caprice in Purple and Gold* or **Alfred Stevens's** *La parisienne japonaise* show, some artists preferred to incorporate elements from Japan through objects and clothing instead of radicalizing their visual language.

In contrast, Van Gogh, Monet, Cassatt, and other artists from Impressionist and Post-Impressionist circles explored **aesthetic aspects** of the new culture, flattening their pictorial planes, introducing bright colours, and odd perspectives, which liberated them from the demands of academism. The neo-classical perfectionism epitomized by Ingres was already becoming passé, so Japan's opening proved fortuitous.

However, the interest in Japanese art, and ukiyo-e specifically, did not happen in a vacuum and followed earlier European fascinations with Middle Eastern and Chinese decorative arts, known as Chinoiserie and Turquerie. In the future, Japonisme movement will

slide into the background as new objects of interest will become African and Oceanic art, influencing avant-gardists.



Left: George Hendrik Breitner - Girl in a White Kimono, 1894, via [Creative Commons](#) / **Right:** Mary Cassatt - Woman Bathing (La Toilette), 1890–91, copies the style of Japanese woodcut prints, via [Creative Commons](#)

Japonisme in Decorative and Performance Arts

While many artists, such as Manet, Degas, and Monet, collected prints, artisans focused on design and tried to transform interiors and exteriors in line with the new style. French designers tried to emulate Japanese interior design, while ceramic producers began decorating their objects with images deriving from the East.

French painter and printmaker Félix Bracquemond created some of the earliest expressions of Japonisme. He encountered Hokusai's prints in 1856 in the shop of Auguste Delâtre and, inspired by them, later made etchings showing flora and fauna. The etchings were transferred on white faïence for the ceramic and glass shop owner, Eugène Rousseau, who commissioned Bracquemond to design a tableware service. The sets proved so popular that they were

continuously produced until 1938 and helped cement the status of porcelain as art.

The representations of nature on Japanese decorative objects also influenced jewellery makers who incorporated new pictorial language for pendants, earrings, and brooches. At the same time, Monet created a Japanese-style water garden at his estate in Giverny.

Bing's *Le Japon Artistique* promoted art and design, but also poetry, history, architecture, and Japanese theatre, leading to the staging of plays such as *Kosiki*, the comic opera originally called *Mikado*, and *The Geisha*. Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* comes from geisha dramas that flourished during Japonisme.

Finally, as the interest in Japonisme waned, its main protagonists in France turned to new artistic forms. Bing transformed his shop into *Maison de l'Art Nouveau*, celebrating the new style whose subject heavily relied on flora, fauna, and asymmetry, showing a clear Japanese influence. Early in the 20th century, elements of Japonisme merged with Art Nouveau, the impending Art Deco, and Modernism, with perhaps the best examples of this style being forms comprised of lacquered panels, created by furniture designer Eileen Gray in collaboration with lacquerware expert Sugawara Seizo.





Left: Kakiemon teapot, an example of Japanese export porcelain, 1670–1690, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, via [Creative Commons](#) / **Right:** James Tissot - Young Ladies Looking at Japanese Objects, 1869, via [Creative Commons](#)

The Influence and Legacy

While the present moment is highly critical of cultural appropriation, more than a century ago, these concerns did not preoccupy artists. The French obsession with everything Japan represented a combination of commerce, respect, and appropriation and happened in the midst of the European country's colonial expansion in Southeast Asia and North Africa.

As the art historian Gabriel P. Weisberg explains, *"The French were drawn to the seclusion of Japan; it appealed to their sense of exclusivity. They saw strength but also restraint in the Japanese, and they were driven to combine those elements with French tradition and make something new."* While Chinoiserie marked the Rococo period, Japan's visual codes became harbingers of European 20th-century Modernism. There was also a shift in philosophy; the respect for the natural world, drawing from Shintoism, subtly replaced Christian undertones of European art.

The Japanese's simple techniques and depictions of everyday life seemed new and fresh compared to styles from the previous periods. It provided artists with tools to forge Japonisme but also to usher European art into the Modernism we know today.

Featured image: James McNeill Whistler - Caprice in Purple and Gold: The Golden Screen, 1864, female figure shown surrounded with ukiyo-e prints, painting representing Japonisme movement, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian, via [Creative Commons](#)