

LOOKING EAST

Western Artists and the Allure of Japan



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Ingram Gallery

In the mid- to late 1850s, the island nation of Japan ended two centuries of self-imposed isolation when it signed treaties opening its ports to trade with Britain, France, Russia, and the United States. As Japanese prints, albums, and objects began to arrive in Europe and North America in unprecedented quantities, a craze for all things Japanese set in among collectors, artists, and designers. Known by the French term *japonisme*, the phenomenon created a radical shift in Western taste toward Japanese aesthetic principles. *Japonisme* played a prominent role in the major movements of Western art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, among them Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Art Nouveau, and influenced everything from architecture and furniture to book illustration and painting.

Looking East: Western Artists and the Allure of Japan illuminates the myriad of different ways that American and European artists responded to their new exposure to Japanese art and culture. As a sign of their own cosmopolitanism, Western illustrators, painters, photographers, and printmakers staged their compositions with elegant oriental props. Japanese fans, kimonos, lanterns, screens, umbrellas, and vases are especially common in French painting. In search of better design, Western decorative artists, including Louis Comfort Tiffany and the Newcomb College potters (fig. 2) in the United States, appropriated Japanese forms, along with characteristic flora and fauna motifs such as irises, chrysanthemums, and butterflies. The more austere side of the Japanese aesthetic encouraged the pure, reduced lines of early modern architecture and furniture produced by Josef Hoffman of Austria and Frank Lloyd Wright of the United States.



Fig. 1

Japanese color woodblock prints called *ukiyo-e*, or pictures of a floating world, in particular set the Western imagination on fire. They focus on the transitory nature of life, a poetic idea that is inherently bittersweet. Their themes include annual festivals celebrating the blossoming of flowers, flirtatious geishas dancing in elegant kimonos, actors performing in Kabuki theater, and majestic Mount Fuji under a variety of weather conditions. *Ukiyo-e* combine unusual points of view and asymmetrical compositions with decorative patterning and delicate colors—all of which made them a revelation to Western artists trained to order the world around them according to single-point perspective. Japanese prints inspired American and European artists by giving them new ways of seeing. In Japan *ukiyo-e* sold for about the same price as a bowl of rice and initially they were nearly as affordable in the West. From the 1860s onward, prints by Japanese masters such as Utagawa Hiroshige and Katsushika Hokusai were avidly acquired in Europe and the United States, so much so that today the largest and best collections are found outside Japan.

The French Impressionist Claude Monet's collection of more than 200 Japanese prints was unmatched in quality or quantity by that of any other painter of this period. He looked to them as a source of inspiration throughout his long career, and even based the gardens at his country home in Giverny, France, on *ukiyo-e* landscapes. Monet's humpback foot-bridge arching over light-reflecting water, which was so often the subject of his paintings (fig. 1), is similar to the one seen in Hiroshige's *Bamboo Yards, Kyōbashi Bridge* (cover). Monet's gardens at Giverny can still be visited today and serve as an enduring reminder of the allure of Japan for Western artists.

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Fig. 2

Illustrations: Cover: Utagawa Hiroshige I. *Bamboo Yards, Kyōbashi Bridge*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, Edo period, 1857. Woodblock print. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, 11.2635; Fig. 1: Claude Monet. *The Water Lily Pond*, 1900. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Given in memory of Governor Alvan T. Fuller by the Fuller Foundation, 61.959; Fig. 2: Joseph Fortune Meyer for Newcomb Pottery. Vase, ca. 1902. Glazed earthenware. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Laurie Crichton Memorial Fund, 1980.226; Back cover: Katsukawa Shunkō II (Shunsen). *Butterfly and Peonies*, Edo period, ca. 1830. Woodblock print. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Porter Sargent, 49.1276. All photographs © 2014 MFA, Boston

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