

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: EDO PRINT ART AND ITS WESTERN  
INTERPRETATIONS

Elizabeth R. Nash, Master of Arts, 2004

Thesis directed by: Professor Sandy Kita  
Department of Art History and Archaeology

This thesis focuses on the disparity between the published definitions and interpretations of the artistic and cultural value of Edo prints to Japanese culture by nineteenth-century French and Americans. It outlines the complexities that arise when one culture defines another, and also contrasts stylistic and cultural methods in the field of art history.

Louis Gonse, S. Bing and other nineteenth-century European writers and artists were impressed by the cultural and intellectual achievements of the Tokugawa government during the Edo period, from 1615-1868. Contemporary Americans perceived Edo as a rough and immoral city. Edward S. Morse and Ernest Fenollosa expressed this American intellectual disregard for the print art of the Edo period. After 1868, the new Japanese government, the Meiji Restoration, as well as the newly empowered imperial court had little interest in the art of the failed military government of Edo. They considered Edo's legacy to be Japan's technological naïveté.

EDO PRINT ART AND ITS WESTERN INTERPRETATIONS

by

Elizabeth R. Nash

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
2004

Advisory Committee:

Professor Sandy Kita, Chair  
Professor Jason Kuo  
Professor Marie Spiro

©Copyright by

Elizabeth R. Nash

2004

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My experience studying art history at the University of Maryland has been both personally and intellectually rewarding. I will miss the lively discussions in the small seminars and feel privileged to have studied with some truly fine budding scholars.

In addition to the memorable classes, there have been countless precious experiences outside of the classroom for which I am deeply grateful. I was fortunate to have had an internship at the National Gallery of Art working for Dr. Arthur J. Wheelock, Jr. at the very beginning of my graduate career. Dr. Sharon Gerstel introduced me to the library at Dumbarton Oaks. I was able to accompany Dr. Jason Kuo to Oxford, England and hear him lecture at the opening of the Michael Sullivan Gallery of Modern Chinese Art at the Ashmolean Museum. Thank you, Dr. Kuo, for your detailed reading of my thesis. Dr. Spiro's passion for Roman mosaics and insistence that her students be included in important conferences in Baltimore and at Dumbarton Oaks gave me a look at the behind the scenes reality of exhibits and conferences. Thank you, Dr. Spiro, for your support of my thesis and guidance in constructing a professional life, post-university. Thank you, Ken and Kiyoko Hitch, for introducing me to your outstanding collection of Modern Japanese prints.

I also wish to thank the many librarians and staff who have shown great patience and friendship, specifically Amrita Jit Kaur of the University of Maryland library, Karen Schneider, librarian of the Phillips Collection, Reiko Yoshimura, head

librarian at the Freer Gallery and Kathy Canavan, of the art history graduate school at the University of Maryland.

Above all these experiences, it has been my greatest privilege to have studied Japanese art under Dr. Sandy Kita. His intellectual agility and depth of knowledge made every discussion fascinating and his passionate commitment to his students make him an outstanding professor. Thank you so very much, Dr. Kita.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations.....	vi
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1 – Nineteenth Century French Discovery of Edo Prints</b>	
Introduction.....	3
Early writings on Japan available in France.....	3
Massive exportation of Japanese art in the 1850’s and 1860’s.....	7
French “discovery” of Edo prints in the 1850’s.....	9
Voyages to Japan by French intellectuals in the 1870’s and 1880’s.....	11
French intellectual inquiry into Edo art.....	13
Publication of French research about Japan.....	13
French description of Japanese culture in nineteenth century publications.....	17
French promotion of Japanese art internationally in the 1890’s.....	25
Conclusion.....	27
<b>Chapter II – American Version of Japanese Aesthetics</b>	
Introduction.....	28
American experience with Japan in the 1850’s and 1860’s.....	29
Foreign reaction to Japanese attacks.....	32
American experience in Japan in the 1870’s and 1880’s.....	36
American intellectualization of Japanese culture, a step beyond appreciation.....	41

Ernest Fenollosa, the “Boddhisattva of Art” .....	43
Fenollosa’s description of Japanese culture.....	45
American promotion of Japanese art in the 1890’s.....	50
<b>Chapter III – Reception</b>	
Introduction.....	54
Edo prints and the Western definition of fine art.....	54
Popular culture in Edo prints and the Western definition of fine art.....	57
Edo art and the new role of craft, or industrial art, in the West.....	58
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	61
Illustrations.....	66
Bibliography.....	80

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Engraving from Von Siebold's Nippon Archiv zur Beschreibung von Japon, 1831. 4-5/16 X 5-29/32 inches (11 x 15 cm.). L. Nader, del. Leiden, Courtesy Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde. Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, et al., Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art 1854-1910, (Cleveland, 1975) p.2.
2. Landscape from the Manga, volume 7. Woodcut 9 x 11 ½ inches (22.9 x 29.2 cm.) Katsushika Hokusai. Leiden, Courtesy Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde. Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, et al., Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art 1854-1910, (Cleveland, 1975) p.3.
3. Pages from Hokusai's sketchbook, Manga, 1814-1878. Woodcut, 9 x 6-1/4 inches (22.9 x 15.9 cm.) Newark Public Library. Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, et al., Japonisme: Japanese Influenced on French Art 1854-1910, (Cleveland, 1975) p.23.
4. Pages from Hokusai's sketchbook Manga, volume 7. Woodcut 9 x 11 ½ (22.9 x 15.9 cm.) Newark Public Library. Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, et al., Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art 1854-1910, (Cleveland, 1975) p. 22.
5. Cover from Le Japon artistique, April 1889. Private Collection 13 ¼ x W 9 ¼.” Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900, (New York, 1986) p. 14.
6. Cover from Le Japon artistique, August 1889. Private Collection 13 ¼ x W 9 ¼.” Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900, (New York, 1986) p. 20.
7. Suzuki Harunobu, “Mitate no Kinko,” 1765. Color woodblock, 28.5 x 20.5. Publisher unknown. Reprinted from Gabriele Fahr-Becker, Japanese Prints, (Cologne, 1994) p. 64.

8. Torii Kiyomitsu, "The actor Nakamura Tomijuro I as a female dancer," 1753. Color woodblock, 311 x 142 cm. publisher: Okumura han. Reprinted from Charlotte van Rappard-Boon and Lee Brusckke-Johnson, Surimono: Poetry & Image in Japanese Prints, (Leiden, 2000) p. 14.
  
9. Utagawa Toyokuni I, "Ichikawa Danjuro VI in a *Shibaraku* role," 1825, Color woodblock, 196 x 179 cm. Reprinted from Charlotte van Rappard-Boon and Lee Brusckke-Johnson, Surimono: Poetry & Image in Japanese Prints, (Leiden, 2000) p. 136.
  
10. Utagawa Toyokuni I, "Ichikawa Danjuro VII as Sukeroku," 1825, Color woodblock, 198 x 183 cm. Reprinted from Charlotte van Rappard-Boon and Lee Brusckke-Johnson, Surimono: Poetry & Image in Japanese Prints, (Leiden, 2000) p. 137.
  
11. Utagawa Toyokuni , "Ichikawa Danjuro V on a kite," 1824, Color woodblock, 198 x 172 cm. Reprinted from Charlotte van Rappard-Boon and Lee Brusckke-Johnson, Surimono: Poetry & Image in Japanese Prints, (Leiden, 2000) p. 135.
  
12. Suzuki Harunobu, "Sagimusume," 1766. Color woodblock, 28.9 x 21.6" Publisher unknown. Gabriele Fahr-Becker, Japanese Prints, (Cologne, 1994) p. 61.
  
13. Torii Kiyonaga, "Ten Views of Tea-stalls: Tomigaoka," 1783. Color woodblock, 25.2 x 18.7" Published by Nishimuraya Yohachi. Reprinted from Gabriele Fahr-Becker, Japanese Prints, (Cologne, 1994) p. 95.
  
14. Utagawa Kunisada, "Preparation for a Picnic," 1840, Color woodblock, 193 x 130 cm. Reprinted from Charlotte van Rappard-Boon and Lee Brusckke-Johnson, Surimono: Poetry & Image in Japanese Prints, (Leiden, 2000) p. 53.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis studies the published interpretations of Japanese prints of the Edo period by nineteenth-century French and Americans. It contrasts the favorable French appreciation of Japanese woodblock prints of the Edo period and their value to Japanese culture as a whole, with the critical depreciation of the Edo prints by the nineteenth-century Americans and later American scholars.

The disparity between the French and the American interpretations of Edo prints published during this period has received less scholarly attention than the exploration of “Japanese influence on French”<sup>1</sup> and American art. However, this disparity offers an excellent opportunity to contrast stylistic and cultural art analysis or methods in the field of art history and to observe the complexities that arise when one culture defines another.

This thesis not only compares the different Western interpretations of Edo print art, but it enriches the scholarly understanding of the many forces that were at play during the nineteenth century, when both French and Americans published their versions of Japanese art history for the first time, with different interpretations of the cultural value of Edo prints within Japanese culture.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Weisberg et al., Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French art 1854-1910 (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1975) xi.

The French admired the cultural and intellectual achievements of Edo, evident in the prolific and technically sophisticated print culture of the period and its relationship to literacy and book publishing. The relationship of prints to the fine art tradition of Japan created what the French termed “the democratization of fine art.” They considered Edo prints to be valuable as art objects as well as examples of excellent craft. They also enjoyed those elements of popular inspiration particular to this art.

The nineteenth -century American viewpoint differs dramatically from the French. American intellectuals maintained that Edo prints were a vulgar art form, primarily depicting courtesans and actors, unique to the period and distinct from the refined, aristocratic and at times, deeply religious, national artistic heritage of Japan known as *yamato-e*. This viewpoint assigns artistic merit based on high art, or fine art, criteria. Nineteenth-century Americans were actually less impressed, intellectually, by the elements of superb craftsmanship and popular inspiration of the Edo prints because of the criteria used. Post World War II American interpretations of Edo print art echoed the earlier nineteenth-century American interpretations.

Since most of the major collections of Japanese prints of the Edo period are now found outside of Japan, in Europe and in America, due to the intense exportation of the prints in the nineteenth century, Western scholars will continue to play an important role in determining the cultural and artistic significance of these collections. The delicacy of that task is evident in the diverse, earlier interpretations of Edo prints by Westerners.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Nineteenth-Century French Discovery of Edo Prints**

### **Introduction**

Before Edo prints were “discovered” in France in the mid-nineteenth century and championed for their artistic merits, they were already known in France through travel journals published by Swedish and Dutch authors as early as the mid-eighteenth century. After the initial introduction to Edo print art in travel journals, there was a subsequent passionate “discovery” of Japanese art in France in the mid-nineteenth century, at the time “Japanese art [began pouring] into France.”<sup>2</sup>

The frenzy to collect Japanese art, particularly print art, which began in France in the 1850’s and 1860’s, was known as *japonisme*. The frenzy was followed by voyages to Japan by French collectors and intellectuals, particularly art critics and writers in the 1870’s and 1880’s. These voyages led to the publication of intellectual articles about Japan, Japanese aesthetics and Edo prints in the 1880’s and 1890’s, with the research assistance of Japanese art dealers residing in Paris such as Tadamas Hayashi and Jijima Hanjuro.<sup>3</sup>

### **Early writings on Japan available in France**

Early European travel journals, documenting voyages to Japan, often included artistic prints from Edo. These journals reached Europe long before Japan’s official opening to broader trade in 1853. Although Japan had been closed to foreign trade since 1639 by the policy known as *sakoku*, or ‘closed country,’ the Dutch, as well as

---

<sup>2</sup> Weisberg xi

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986) 37.

the Chinese and the Koreans, had been permitted to maintain trade with Japan throughout the Edo period. The Tokugawa government of the Edo period, the military regime known as the *bakufu*, which controlled Japan from 1600 until 1868, allowed the Dutch to maintain “a small colony at Deshima, an island in the bay of Nagasaki”<sup>4</sup> and Dutch traders brought examples of “Japanese art and illustrated books”<sup>5</sup> back to Europe. Though “Japanese regulations, enacted soon after the expulsion of the Europeans in the seventeenth century, [prohibited] the sale of certain books, pictures, and printed material to foreigners”<sup>6</sup> still Japanese prints found their way back to Europe within travel diaries.

The Dutch would have been naturally very interested in Japanese commercial publishing enterprises since they themselves “published an estimated one-half of all the world’s books over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>7</sup> Given the strength of the Dutch commercial book publishing industry, it is also not surprising that translated Dutch publications were available in France.

During the Edo period, Japanese commercial book publishing flourished. “By 1692, when a guide to shopping and goods around Japan was published, bookshops were evidently an attraction in the largest cities: the guide lists sellers of serious books and Chinese books in Kyoto (3), Edo (2) and Osaka (1)...”<sup>8</sup> Although “isolation is usually associated with cultural stagnation, ...the long peace, stability,

---

<sup>4</sup> Sally Mills, Japanese Influences on American Art 1853-1900 (Williamstown: McClelland Press, 1981) 11.

<sup>5</sup> Phylis Anne Floyd, “Japonisme in Context: Documentation, Criticism, Aesthetic Reactions,” diss., University of Michigan, 1983, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Floyd 22.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Baker, “They Took Manhattan: A Journalist explores the history of the sleepy (though not for long) Dutch town known as New Amsterdam,” rev. of The Island at the Center of the World, by Russell Shorto, New York Times Book Review 4 April 2004: 9.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Kornicki, The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century (Leiden: Brill, 1998) 171.

and economic growth of the Tokugawa period led instead to a veritable cultural explosion.”<sup>9</sup> One manifestation of this “cultural explosion” was the increased literacy of the population and the development of commercial printing and “[in] the course of the seventeenth century books became one of the visible commodities available in shops on the streets...”<sup>10</sup>

Although not all of the European travel journals circulated throughout Europe, there are several, which are known to have reached France prior to 1853. (See figs. 1 and 2 which compare an engraving from Von Siebold’s publication in 1831 and a later landscape print from Hokusai’s Manga) Arnoldus Montanus’ book was “the first book on Japan created under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company. Philippe Burty probably had the French edition published in Amsterdam in 1680. The volume includes essays on the land, plants, cities, temples, laws and customs of Japan. Engravings are included which provide views of the costumes of the natives and views of different cities.”<sup>11</sup> A Swedish naturalist, Thunberg, “is ... reported to have brought back examples of Japanese prints after his stay in the country during the year 1775-1776.”<sup>12</sup> Engelbertus Kaempfer lived in Japan for two years. He “was a physician to the Dutch Embassy in Japan and was attached to the Emperor’s court.”<sup>13</sup> His book, Natural, civil and ecclesiastic history of the Japanese Empire, which described “the character of the countryside, investigated the government, and studied the history of the country,”<sup>14</sup> was published in French in 1729. “Almost all of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Edwin O. Reischauer, The Japanese 21<sup>st</sup> ed. (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle and Co., 1980) 74.

<sup>10</sup> Kornicki 170.

<sup>11</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 21.

<sup>12</sup> J. Hillier, The Japanese Print: A New Approach (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1960) 2.

<sup>13</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 21.

<sup>14</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 21.

Japonistes owned a copy, since it provided a picturesque travel guide to an ‘exotic’ country.”<sup>15</sup> A Dutch official, Isaac Titsingh, had lived in Japan for a period of fourteen years, serving “as chief agent for the Dutch East India Company at Nagasaki.”<sup>16</sup> His small collection of prints, he brought at least nine back to Europe, “was known in Paris as early as 1806 and was sold...in 1812. Some of the prints eventually ended up in the collection of the French artist Bracquemond, who is usually credited with discovering Japanese prints.”<sup>17</sup> A Dutch publication by Von Siebold entitled Voyage au Japon was published in France in 1838. Siebold “was a surgeon with the Dutch East India Company [and lived] in Japan from 1823 to 1829.”<sup>18</sup> His publication was richly illustrated and certain lithographs made reference to works by Hokusai, a well-known Japanese woodblock artist of the nineteenth century. “Images from Von Siebold’s publications were reprinted in popular periodicals...further increasing awareness of Japan.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the availability of Edo prints in France, prior to the 1850’s, “these early arrivals appear to have made little or no impression on those who saw them: they represented an exotic and alien art no more likely to be understood ... than pre-Columbian sculpture would have been understood in Regency England.”<sup>20</sup>

The German art dealer, Siegfried Bing, well known for his shops in Paris which were dedicated to Japanese art, explained that Dutch and Portuguese traders who reached Japan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were aware of the prints, but “since they were

---

<sup>15</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 21.

<sup>16</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 21.

<sup>17</sup> Hugo Munsterberg, The Japanese Print: A Historical Guide (New York: Weatherhill, 1982) 4.

<sup>18</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 21.

<sup>19</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 21.

<sup>20</sup> Hillier 2.

seeking a new domain in order to extend their commercial activities, they were in a mediocre position to evaluate the artistic level of the country.”<sup>21</sup> While his explanation addresses the issue of how Edo prints could be “discovered” in France if they were already “known” at the time of their “discovery,” it also has repercussions with regards to the nineteenth -century American ability to “evaluate the artistic level of the country” as we shall discuss presently.

### **Massive exportation of Japanese art in the 1850’s and 1860’s**

The 1850’s and 1860’s was a period of social upheaval in Japan, brought on concurrently by the arrival of the American Commodore Matthew C. Perry to Japan seeking less restricted trade in 1853, and the abdication of the Tokugawa government, ending the Edo period, in 1868. This political change in government in 1868 restored the imperial court to a more prominent position in the daily affairs of the country. The new government, of the Meiji Restoration, “was the return to effective rule by [a] centralized monarchy and its rationale was the idea of restoring the emperor to his rightful position...[which had been] usurped by ...a succession of shoguns.”<sup>22</sup>

These social changes in Japan resulted in economic upheaval and alienation from native traditions. Both are important factors behind the massive exportation of art and artifacts from Japan during this period. “In the break-up of the feudal system many of the proudest old Lords or ‘Daimyo’ had been reduced to poverty. Their retainers suffered a similar fate. Collections of paintings, porcelains, lacquers, bronzes and prints were scattered, and treasures that are now almost priceless could at that time be bought for a few yen...The abolition of Buddhism as a national religion

---

<sup>21</sup> S. Bing, “La Gravure japonais,” *Le Japon artistique* 25 (May, 1890) 1.

<sup>22</sup> R.H.P. Mason and J. G. Caiger, *A History of Japan* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1997) 258.

came with the downfall of feudalism, and, as a consequence, the treasures of the temples fared only a little less badly than those of private homes and castles.”<sup>23</sup> The art dealer S. Bing observed, during his visit to Japan in the early 1880’s, that the “most perfect things had slipped from control of the richest families, who little by little became impoverished due to the social revolution that had taken place...”<sup>24</sup>

It was not, however, economic need alone, which led to the massive exportation of Edo prints and religious art. Late nineteenth -century Japanese abandoned their artistic and cultural traditions, expressing disenchantment with their native culture, which appeared naïve in the face of modern Western technology. The Meiji government sought to disassociate itself from what it considered to be the legacy of the Tokugawa government policy of isolation: its identity as a charming, technologically unsophisticated, perhaps even backward, nation. Japanese “enlightenment figures... of the 1870’s judged the Edo past against the Meiji future, in terms both of difference and of progress.... They saw the Meiji newness, called ‘civilization’ (*bunmei*), as national and progressing, they depicted the Edo oldness as feudal and a hindrance to the march of time.”<sup>25</sup> “‘New Japan’ was rapidly growing, being rooted in the open ports and Tokyo, the new capital [formerly named Edo, underwent] the thorough Westernisation or *bunmei-kaika*, [which was seen as the ‘enlightened movement’ and which had the effect of destroying] much of the

---

<sup>23</sup> Ernest F. Fenollosa, Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art (New York: ICG Muse, Inc.: 2000) xv.

<sup>24</sup> Weisberg, Art Nouveau Bing 18.

<sup>25</sup> Carol Gluck, “The Invention of Edo,” Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan Stephen Vlastos, ed. (University of California Press, 1998) 263.

indigenous culture of the country”<sup>26</sup> Art of the past, particularly art identified with Edo, such as prints, had little cultural value in this “new” Japan.

During his trip to Japan in the 1870’s, Emile Guimet noted that Edo had disappeared with the change in government in 1868. Not only did the city’s name change from Edo to Tokyo, but it also became “forbidden” to discuss Edo.<sup>27</sup>

### **French “discovery” of Edo prints in the 1850’s**

Edo prints were known in France prior to the 1850’s, but there was a spark of creative recognition in France then which kindled the flame of *japonisme* and distinguishes this phenomenon from earlier European collecting trends, such as *chinoiserie*, or the collecting of objects from China. Japanese prints were discovered as art from which the French could learn. In nineteenth-century France, Edo prints were collected on this basis.

“All modes of Japanese art” were exported to and exhibited in Europe, once Japan was opened to foreign trade. This caused a “multifaceted assault on western artistic assumptions and principles.”<sup>28</sup> Edo prints were at the heart of the European, and particularly French, reaction to Japanese art. “...at no time did any of these [other Japanese art] forms threaten to unseat prints from their ruling position over European taste in Japanese art. *Prints remained throughout this forty-year period [1850-1890] the epitome of Japanese artistic expression.*”<sup>29</sup> [italics mine]

---

<sup>26</sup> Toshio Yokoyama, Japan in the Victorian Mind: A Study of Stereotyped Images of A Nation 1850-80 (London: MacMillan Press Lmted., 1987) 107.

<sup>27</sup> Emile Guimet, Promenades japonais: Tokio Nikko (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1880) 6.

<sup>28</sup> Elisa Evett, The Critical Reception of Japanese Art in Late Nineteenth Century Europe, diss., Cornell University 1980 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press: 1982) xii.

<sup>29</sup> Evett xii.

The account of the French discovery of Edo prints as works of art, which has become a sort of legend, is still remembered today in France. Felix Bracquemond, a well-known print artist and founder of French print collecting societies, is credited with “discovering” Japanese Edo prints in Paris in 1856, as Floyd reports in this version published in 1880:

A few years later, our friend Bracquemond, by chance, entered the shop of a packer at the Place Chateau-d’Eau.

This packer packed, which is nothing extraordinary, but, to protect his merchandise from the shocks of the voyage, he separated them by means of popular Japanese albums that had already arrived edged between I don’t know what products imported from Yokohama.

Bracquemond, with an artistic taste so sure, so proven, stopped dead before these images.

‘That is astonishing! Will you sell them to me?’

These sheets that were used as stuffing were none other than pages detached from albums by Oksai, or to be more exact by Fokusai[sic]. It was simply a treasure that Bracquemond just discovered, a fertile treasure, that he would study and scour.<sup>30</sup>

Other versions of this discovery state more simply that Bracquemond found a copy of Hokusai’s sketchbook Manga in a print shop owned by Delatre.<sup>31</sup> (See figs.3 and 4) “And then in 1856 Bracquemond, ...discovered a little volume of prints by Hokusai, which he carried about everywhere and showed to everyone.”<sup>32</sup>

However, it is the first version, which persists as a sort of charming legend of accidental discovery. A November 2002 edition of the French magazine, *Connaissance des arts*, refers to this legend in an article entitled “Prints: When the West discovered *ukiyo-e*. The subtitle of the article asks “Who had the first idea to unwrap the printed papers which protected, in the Second Empire, the porcelain

---

<sup>30</sup> Floyd 134. Quoting Saint-Juirs, “Chronique,” *La Vie Moderne* 47 (20 Nov.1880): 738-739.

<sup>31</sup> Weisberg, *Japonisme* 3.

<sup>32</sup> George J. Becker and Edith Philips, eds. and trans., Paris and the Arts, 1851-1896: From the Goncourt Journal, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press:1971) 328.

imported from Japan? This was the way, says the legend, that the European public discovered Japanese prints.”<sup>33</sup>

According to this legend, Edo prints seemed abandoned, reduced to the status of packing material, before they were recognized, and retrieved or rescued, by French artists and then bought up by the French public.<sup>34</sup> It was a French artist, not a trader, nor an art dealer, nor a Japanese, who, in this legend, is credited with discovering the artistic merit of the prints. The purchasing frenzy of Edo prints by the French public, which included such artists as Van Gogh, Monet and Manet, was accompanied by the belief that these readily available, inexpensive prints were valuable art objects.

The French credit themselves with “discovering” the prints of Edo, prints, which were already known in Europe. However, the discovery, for very French reasons, was equally the discovery, or recognition, of the concept of the print as an art form, a new concept for the French. “It may be said that appreciation of Japanese prints in the West dates from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century not because they were unknown before, but because it was not until changes had occurred in the western concept of the art of painting that the prints could be accepted as works of art rather than as objects of curiosity.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Voyages to Japan by French intellectuals in the 1870’s and 1880’s**

The Meiji government, which came into power in 1868, welcomed the West, unlike the previous Tokugawa, or Edo government, which had closed Japan off from

---

<sup>33</sup> Françoise Deflassieux, “Estampes: Quand L’Occident découvrait l’*Ukiyo-e*” Connaissance des arts 599 (November 2002) 1.

<sup>34</sup> Notice that the 1880 reference is to print albums, since “it appears that the early collectors sought illustrated books as much as, if not more than, individual prints,” as reported by Evett. The French connected Edo print art to book publication. The Americans never saw this connection. This connection merits further research.

<sup>35</sup> Hillier 3.

the outside. “Just at this moment, the Japanese themselves were turning from all their old traditions and indulging in an orgy of foreignism. Italian sculptors and painters were imported. Foreign teachers, missionaries and adventurers flocked in from all parts of the world.”<sup>36</sup> Among those adventurers were many French intellectuals and collectors seeking both to enlarge their collections, as well as to understand Japanese culture, a culture they found rapidly disappearing with the advent of Western modernization.

Many of these later travelers published articles and books on their findings. “Among the first to travel to Japan were the liberal economist Henri Cernuschi and the critic Theodore Duret who made their voyage in 1871-1872.”<sup>37</sup> As mentioned earlier, both S. Bing and Emile Guimet traveled to Japan. S.Bing spent two years in China and Japan, from 1880 to 1882. William Anderson, the British collector, lived in Japan for a period of years and was a professor of medicine in Edo. “A passionate collector, [Anderson] put together a library of illustrated books and a collection of kakemonos containing examples of all the Chinese and Japanese schools of painting. His treasures were acquired by the British Museum.”<sup>38</sup> Anderson collaborated with Theodore Duret, allowing Duret to study from his collection.

For those who did not travel to Japan, Japanese art came to them in the World Fairs. “In 1862, Japan for the first time after the opening up of the country participated in an international trade fair, the World Exhibition in London. When it closed, the Japanese exhibit was sold at auction.”<sup>39</sup> “There is little doubt, as other art

---

<sup>36</sup> Fenollosa, xiv-xv.

<sup>37</sup> Weisberg, *Japonisme* 143.

<sup>38</sup> Theodore Duret, *Livres & Albums Illustres du Japon* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1900) 121-122.

<sup>39</sup> Becker and Philips 333.

historians have shown, that by 1867, the time of the Exposition Universelle [in Paris,] Japanese prints were everywhere.”<sup>40</sup> “The raging mania for Japanese art was reinforced and disseminated by the Paris world’s fair of 1878, where Japanese art was well represented.”<sup>41</sup>

### **French intellectual inquiry into Edo art**

The European fad or trend of collecting Japanese art, *japonisme*, was accompanied by an intellectual interest or curiosity about Japanese aesthetics. As a result, in addition to collecting Edo prints and experimenting with the perceived Japanese aesthetic, French artists and intellectuals also began serious inquiry into the nature of Japanese art. In fact, the term *japonisme* was first used in 1872 by French art critic Phippe Burty to “designate a new field of study – *artistic, historic and ethnographic*.”<sup>42</sup> [italics mine]

Having established that the Edo prints were art with the legend of their “discovery” by a French artist, the French then enlarged their criteria for this determination with the formation of intellectual circles such as the secret society *Jing-lar*, founded in 1867 to discuss Japanese art. Their discussions led to the publication of articles and journals, which explored and defined Japanese culture and artistic traditions. This intellectual exercise lent further credence to the acceptance of Edo prints as art and not as mere travel souvenirs.

### **Publication of French research about Japan**

The number of articles and books about Japan and Japanese art increased dramatically, between 1870 and 1890, as the travelers returned to France. The

---

<sup>40</sup> Weisberg, *Japonisme* 3.

<sup>41</sup> Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing* 16.

<sup>42</sup> Weisberg, *Japonisme* xi.

authors of articles about Japanese art were primarily art critics, collectors and writers, who found the art appealing and sought to both educate the public and encourage artists to explore this new aesthetic. Japanese art dealers in Paris, such as Tadamas Hayashi, often collaborated on the articles. These French magazine articles and books often included printed reproductions of Japanese art.

The art critic, Zacharie Astruc, wrote several articles for the newspaper L'Etendard about Japanese art. "The articles of 1867 were the first to appear on Japonism in the French press."<sup>43</sup> Both Astruc and the collector Phillippe Burty, who coined the term *japonisme* "in 1872 [using it] as the title of six articles,"<sup>44</sup> "called on French artists to examine this art for their own uses."<sup>45</sup> Ernest Chesneau's "pamphlet *L'Art japonais* (1869)[was] among the first writing to analyse Japanese art according to principles of design and color."<sup>46</sup> Ernest Chesneau and Edmond Duranty published articles on Japan in 1878 in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. Emile Guimet's Promenades japonaises, relating his observations of Japan from his trip there, was published in 1880. The British physician, William Anderson, also published several books and articles about Japanese art.

During this period, the depth of insight and understanding about Japan also grew. "Since 1868, articles by Astruc, Chesneau, Burty and Duranty had served as general introduction to the history of Japanese art, but it was not until the year 1882-1883 that the writings of Duret and Gonse initiated a much needed period of

---

<sup>43</sup> Sharon Flescher, Zacharie Astruc: Critic, Artist and Japoniste, diss., Columbia University 1977 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.: 1978) 348.

<sup>44</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 54.

<sup>45</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 9.

<sup>46</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 9.

intellectual evaluation and scholarly documentation of the recently accumulated knowledge on the art of Japan.”<sup>47</sup>

Louis Gonse, director of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* magazine, published a two-volume book entitled L’Art japonais in 1882. Gonse also organized an important exhibition of Japanese art in Paris in 1883. “Newspapers, journals, and scholarly articles all described how Gonse, by placing Japanese art in a historical and aesthetic context, had changed the Western attitude from fad to serious inspiration.”<sup>48</sup>

The German, S. Bing, an art dealer in Paris, “wrote an essay for the separate exhibition catalogue... [which] secured Bing’s place as a connoisseur and scholar in the field.”<sup>49</sup> Theodore Duret’s article in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* entitled *L’Art japonais* was published in 1882 and his book entitled Books and Illustrated Albums of Japan: Gathered and Catalogued, was published in 1900.

S. Bing, who became a leading dealer of Japanese art in Paris, also sought to disseminate information about Japanese art by publishing a monthly journal entitled, *Le Japon artistique*, from May, 1888 until April, 1891. (See figs. 5 and 6) Bing felt that since French museums were neither collecting nor displaying Edo print art, which was essentially only seen in art markets, his publication, *Le Japon artistique*, provided the intellectual framework for the general public to appreciate Japanese art.<sup>50</sup> The magazine carried several articles each month on different aspects of Japanese culture. It was full of reproductions of Japanese prints and other types of

---

<sup>47</sup> Weisberg, Japonisme 53.

<sup>48</sup> Weisberg, Art Nouveau Bing 20.

<sup>49</sup> Weisberg, Art Nouveau Bing 21.

<sup>50</sup> S. Bing, “Programme,” Le Japon artistique 1 (May, 1888) 2.

Japanese art, accompanied by thoughtful articles. The journal “reached an extremely broad audience since it was printed in French, German, and English.”<sup>51</sup>

Several of the writers, who contributed articles in Bing’s monthly journal, *Le Japon artistique*, also wrote their own books about Japanese prints. The writers were leading intellectuals of their day in Paris and in other European cities, such as London and Hamburg. They were art critics, art historians, art dealers and Edo print collectors and they contributed articles about Japan, its poetic tradition, its theater, its woodblock printing traditions, its ceramic and metalwork and the relationship of Japanese culture to Chinese culture, providing what Bing termed a “historical and social context” or background about Japan for the general reader.

S. Bing not only published the journal and wrote articles, but he also edited it. Other writers included Edmond de Goncourt, Theodore Duret, “who catalogued the collection of Japanese books and volumes of prints in the Bibliotheque Nationale,”<sup>52</sup> and Philippe Burty, art critic, “authority on Far Eastern porcelain,”<sup>53</sup> and “Inspecteur des Beaux-Arts from 1881.”<sup>54</sup> Louis Gonse, the director of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* magazine, and William Anderson, the British physician who had lived in Japan, contributed as well. Justus Brinckmann, “the first director of the Museum fur Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg”<sup>55</sup> and author of *Kunst und Handwerk in Japan*, published in 1889, as well as Ary Renan wrote for the journal, as did Gustave Geffroy, progressive critic, and Roger Marx, art critic.

---

<sup>51</sup> Julia Meech and Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Japonisme Comes to America: The Japanese Impact on the Graphic Arts 1876-1925* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1990) 27.

<sup>52</sup> Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese influence on Western art since 1858* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981) 12.

<sup>53</sup> Wichmann 12.

<sup>54</sup> Wichmann 331.

<sup>55</sup> Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing* 21.

## **French description of Japanese culture in nineteenth- century publications**

French publications of this period sought to broaden the public's understanding of the art of Japan and were aimed at a general readership. Aware that these publications were the beginning of the western description of Japanese art and its history, the information published covered a wide range of topics.

Careful attention was paid to explaining the origin of the art of Japan and its relationship to the art of China in French publications of the nineteenth century. While the Chinese had provided the Japanese with artistic techniques, the French felt that a careful observation of Japanese art revealed that Japanese themes, such as the inherent love of nature and hero worship, were not imported from the continent. French descriptions of early Japanese culture include the relationship of the native Shinto religion to the Japanese appreciation and love of nature. This love of nature is also expressed in the Japanese poetic tradition, which pre-dates the arrival of Buddhism from the continent.

The arrival of Buddhist thought in Japan from China through Korea created the need for literacy for the Japanese. The nineteenth-century French publications explore the, at times, detrimental effects that this import had for the Japanese. Japanese aristocratic classes were consumed by the complicated effort of learning new ideas about a foreign religious system while using the Chinese alphabet to codify their own language. Such study alienated the Japanese aristocracy from their native traditions of Shintoism. It also slowly separated the upper classes as a whole from their native traditions and from the daily life of their society.

As a result of the introduction of Buddhist thought into Japan, according to the French authors, the Japanese military class gained strength, while the aristocratic class weakened, creating the unusual governing system in Japan in which both the imperial court and the military held governing power. “The progress of Buddhism went hand in hand with the decline in imperial authority.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, according to the French, outside influence disrupts and complicates Japanese society. The arrival of Buddhism from China created a “social revolution [which sought to] transform Japan into the image of China.”<sup>57</sup> The Japanese admiration and veneration of Chinese cultural traditions and art appeared to Louis Gonse to have “been raised to the level of a cult,”<sup>58</sup> creating the impression, held even by the Japanese, that “Japanese art was of a purely Chinese origin, rather than a marriage of styles. Gonse also thought that this belief is founded on the presumed barbaric state of the Japanese”<sup>59</sup> when Chinese culture arrived on its shores.

However, Gonse felt that “this explanation [of the origin of Japanese culture] was lacking,” since it didn’t “explain other elements in the oldest Japanese art, ‘certain characteristics’ which were foreign to purely Chinese art.”<sup>60</sup> According to Gonse, these characteristics represented a recognizable Japanese cultural heritage, a heritage, which reappeared in the art of the Edo period and which pre-dated the arrival of Buddhism from the continent.

In evaluating the influence of China on Japanese culture, articles in *Le japon artistique* concluded that Japanese references to China and Chinese culture were

---

<sup>56</sup> Louis Gonse, *L’Art japonais* (Paris: A. Quantin, 1883) 35.

<sup>57</sup> Gonse 35.

<sup>58</sup> Gonse 163.

<sup>59</sup> Gonse 163

<sup>60</sup> Gonse 164.

comparable to Europe's cultural reference to classical Greece and were not evidence of an overpowering influence from China. Rather, Japan learned from China as Europe had learned from Greece.

Theodore Duret observed that Chinese art and wares were available in Japan, prior to its formal opening to other cultures in 1853. He said that for the Japanese, the relationship to China replicated that of Rome to Greece. Chinese art, esteemed as fine art, provided organizational principles, stylistic reference and technical information for the Japanese. Furthermore, Duret felt that the technical advances made by the Japanese in their art after the 1750's were observable signs of a separation from Chinese aesthetics. The Japanese artists after 1750 also used Japanese subjects, either common views of everyday life, or aspects from the history and legends of Japan, another indication of this Japanese separation from Chinese culture. Duret saw this separation as Japanese confidence in their own cultural traditions. He concluded that the art of the Edo period showed the development of an original national art.

Independence from Chinese traditions and interest in their own Japanese traditions produced encyclopedias, such as Hokusai's Manga (or sketchbook) which established Japanese design vocabularies. Portraits of elegant women and actors, which were also exclusively Japanese designs, became popular. The use of actors as subjects also reflects the fact that "theater developed in Japan during the seventeenth century."<sup>61</sup>(See figs. 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11)

French publications provided their readers with historical background for the traditional Japanese schools of painting, and by cataloguing these schools, they began

---

<sup>61</sup> Duret 39.

writing the history of Japanese art. There were three major schools of painting in Japan prior to the Edo period: the Buddhist school of religious painting, the aristocratic *Tosa* school, which was developed in the thirteenth century and which concerned itself with popular and secular themes and the *Kano* School, which was based on Chinese art. As “diverse as these schools were, they were exclusively of the high society. Their artists as well as their public belonged to the noble aristocracy.”<sup>62</sup>

It was not until the Edo period, “under the strong hand of the great shogun, Yeyassu, first of the Tokugawa family... that the artistic tendencies of the whole population were [developed]. The new school of painting, known as “Oukiyo-e (imperfectly translated as ‘vulgar school’) [made] its bed of old classic formulas, [and] has democratized painting.”<sup>63</sup> Louise Norton Brown also credits Tokugawa Ieyasu with the cultural enrichment of the Edo period in her book Block Printing and Book Illustration in Japan from Earliest Period to the Twentieth Century, published in 1924. Brown states that Ieyasu abdicated his position “as Shogun [in 1605] in order that he might devote his entire time to encouraging the renaissance of Japanese art and literature which had suffered so cruelly during the wars of the preceding centuries.”<sup>64</sup>

The French regarded the “Oukiyo-e” school as a popular school of painting, since it “was created for the people to reflect on their own life.”<sup>65</sup> “The need for more realistic painting conventions, than available in either the Tosa or Kano traditions,

---

<sup>62</sup> S. Bing. “La Gravure japonais,” 8.

<sup>63</sup> Bing, “La Gravure japonais” 6.

<sup>64</sup> Louise Norton Brown, Block Printing and Book Illustration in Japan from Earliest Period to the Twentieth Century ( New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1924) 23.

<sup>65</sup> S. Bing. “Les Origines de la peinture dans l’histoire,” Le Japon artistique 14 (June, 1889) 29.

which would reflect the common person's own manner of seeing and feeling combined with a practical consideration of how this art could reach all are the two needs which produced the Vulgar School and its association with the art of woodblock printing, which brought it to the height of impeccable perfection."<sup>66</sup>

The association of the Ukiyo school of painting with woodblock printing was particularly interesting to the French. The high level of literacy and the use of commercial printing to disseminate art throughout the society were important cultural achievements of the Tokugawa era, according to the French. "This last expression of art then leads us to the study of the illustrated book, of the engraving and the print, as an incomparable means of diffusion for a civilization whose pure taste and innate feeling for art unifies all the social classes in a common passion for beauty."<sup>67</sup>

The print art of Edo was particularly compelling for the nineteenth-century French. Impressed by the peacetime renaissance of classical arts achieved during the Tokugawa period, the French appreciated the technical virtuosity of the printers as well as the cultural refinement of the print design artists. The mass-produced aspect of the prints was seen as a superb example of the democratization of fine art, of the inclusion of art in the every day life of the ordinary citizen, and thus of the high level of cultural achievement of this society as a whole. "One of the most glorious periods...[the Edo period] was synonymous with progress of the civilization and tolerance, marking the beginning of the great intellectual expansion of the nation."<sup>68</sup>

Although other art forms and traditions were mentioned in the French publications, the print art of Edo had captured the imagination of the intellectuals of

---

<sup>66</sup>Bing, "La Gravure japonais" 8.

<sup>67</sup> Bing, "Les Origines de la peinture dans l'histoire" 29.

<sup>68</sup> Gonse 70.

the day and was the principal focus of the publications. Information about particular *ukiyo* artists, and examples of the art, usually copies of prints, was included in the French publications.

The French noted admiringly that the print art of the Edo period was the result of collaboration between the artists and the craftsmen, as well as the collaboration of artists and writers. “A Japanese print is due to the collaboration of three men, the designer, engraver and printer, who all work as artists, creating perfection. The fourth person, of importance in making a Japanese print, would be the calligrapher.”<sup>69</sup> As Japanese technology developed in the eighteenth century producing colored prints, Edo prints reached a level of “great beauty and supreme refinement.”<sup>70</sup>

While the designers of the prints were truly artists, trained in established schools, it was the developing technical expertise of the craftsmen involved in the print-making, which brought the prints so close to Japanese painting, that at times it was difficult to tell whether lines had been carved or painted. The French observed the importance of the technical skill of the printer in replicating the artist’s design and the sophisticated technology, which produced this fine art. According to Bing, these craftsmen were “the true initiators of artistic printing in their country.”<sup>71</sup>

Theodore Duret explained that the development of print art, which appeared both suddenly and fully mature, was closely related to the Tosa painting school tradition of manuscript illustration. Luxury manuscripts for the nobles, illustrated by the artists of the Tosa school, with such traditional Japanese tales as *Ise Monogatari*, were well-known. “One day, an unknown designer, used the designs employed in the

---

<sup>69</sup> Duret 27.

<sup>70</sup> Duret 20.

<sup>71</sup> Bing, “La Gravure japonais” 6.

manuscripts, with all its peculiarities and thus printed art appeared mature and developed.”<sup>72</sup> He further argued that a collection of Japanese prints should be composed of a collection of books. “Prints or detached leaves can only partially represent Japanese printing, illustrated books and albums should be the principal series since they show the chronological development in its entirety...since they [artistic prints] develop from book printing.”<sup>73</sup>

The Tosa artist, Matabei, is credited with introducing scenes of contemporary life into his paintings, thereby initiating the Ukiyo-e painting school, which was a mix of classical and everyday themes. Duret credits the artist Moronobu with introducing the representation of popular life into book illustrations. “For Moronobu, the street, places of pleasure, house interiors, shops entered into illustrated books.”<sup>74</sup> “Moronobu used as an artist signature the name Kichibei said to have been taken in token of his admiration for Iwasa Matabei’s work.”<sup>75</sup>

The connection of the Japanese poetic tradition to its painting traditions is noted by the French writers. The French were particularly impressed by the *Ukiyo* School’s efforts to bring classical culture to all social classes. Woodblock prints of classical themes took art out of the exclusive domain of the aristocratic classes. This was what the French called “the democratization of painting.”

Literary references to the cherry blossom, the falling leaves of autumn and the snow of winter in the ancient Japanese poems are the basis for the visual images of Japanese paintings and are also the sources for Edo print compositions. The

---

<sup>72</sup> Duret 14.

<sup>73</sup> Duret 11-12.

<sup>74</sup> Duret 15.

<sup>75</sup> Brown 41.

association of these visual images to the ancient poetry and thus to the national Japanese culture is an important connection. (See figs. 12, and 13) “In abandoning himself to these feelings, the Japanese poet has formed a rich treasure...and after him the painters and then the artisans have formed a taste which appears to us to be absolutely modern in the way of looking at and interpreting nature...the connection between these ancient poems and modern Japanese industry is quite tight, the designs are found on lacquer boxes, swords and ceramics. These ancient poems have become a common patrimony, the first and strongest inspirations for the artist and the public.”<sup>76</sup>

The French celebrated the sensitive combinations of image and poetry, in the privately printed prints known as *surimono*. (See fig. 14) “The *surimono* was the result of the admirable collaboration between poets and popular painters (followers of Ukiyo) and in general all artists busy nourishing the growing passion of the inhabitants of Edo for spiritual and artistic things...and the compositions are nearly always accompanied by verses and the text mixes picturesquely with the illustration.”<sup>77</sup> This observation not only ties Ukiyo art to the classical literary tradition, but also shows a concern to match the growing interest of the general population in loftier ideals, such as “spiritual and artistic things.”

The French observed that within the philosophy of Japanese poems, from the earliest times, lies an understanding of the temporality of life as observed in nature. This understanding then stresses the importance of enjoying the moment, as tomorrow will be too late. “Chisato, a poet of the ninth century wrote ‘One thing,

---

<sup>76</sup> J. Brinckmann. “La Tradition poetique dans l’art au japon” *Le Japon artistique* 19 (November, 1889) 87.

<sup>77</sup> P. Burty. “La Poterie au japon,” *Le Japon artistique* 18 (October, 1889) 80.

alas, is more passing than the leaves of the maple swept by the autumn wind. Comparable to the swirling dust is the short passage of man on the stage of this world.”<sup>78</sup> Thus the particular images from nature, observed in Edo prints, relate to the ephemeral and passing world, the floating world of *ukiyo*.

Unfortunately, Duret concluded, this print art of Edo, with such universally talented, or world- class, artists such as Hokusai, “ was limited to the sphere of the people, the bourgeoisie, and was not at all understood by the aristocratic classes nor the world of the court. It’s only after the judgment of the Europeans, which placed [Hokusai] at the head of his nation’s artists, that the Japanese have recognized him as one of their great men.”<sup>79</sup>

### **French promotion of Japanese art internationally in the 1890’s**

The organization of traveling exhibitions, which promoted Japanese art throughout Europe, and the collaboration with international museums on their Japanese collections are the salient features of this decade for the French.

Bing organized an exhibit of Japanese art in Brussels and he “opened a kiosk at the Nordiske Industri Landbrugs of Kunststudstilling in Copenhagen in 1888 where he displayed Japanese ceramics, metalwork and lacquerware.”<sup>80</sup> Bing worked with the Leiden Mueusm in Holland and the Louvre in Paris, developing their Japanese collections.

Bing also began to sell Japanese art in America. He had met the American, Edward S. Morse, in Paris in 1883. Bing’s “involvement with the American promotion of Japanese art actually began in April 1887, when he was listed as selling

---

<sup>78</sup> Brinckmann 100.

<sup>79</sup> Duret, *Le Japon artistique* 131.

<sup>80</sup> Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing* 29.

Oriental objects through Moore's Art Galleries at 290 Fifth Avenue."<sup>81</sup> Bing organized a second and even larger public auction in New York in November 1888. Bing had salesrooms on Fifth Avenue where he sold Japanese art as well as his publication, *Le Japon artistique*.

"By 1890 Bing decided that the time had come for a comprehensive *ukiyo-e* print exhibition that would firmly anchor the genre as a legitimate artistic tradition.... The retrospective exhibition Bing organized at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts [in Paris] resulted in a lavish display of 725 woodblock prints and 421 illustrated books."<sup>82</sup>

"Shortly after the magnificent print exhibition closed, Bing was nominated for the *Legion d'Honneur* ... an honor rarely bestowed on a naturalized citizen, Bing's receipt of the award indicated that he was recognized as a major tastemaker in France whose exhibitions and publications had really furthered the arts of the Far East."<sup>83</sup> Bing also became a member of *Ryuchikai*, the "Japanese association dedicated to the continuation of the heritage of old Japan."<sup>84</sup>

Though Bing sold his company in 1893, he remained active promoting Japanese art. He worked with the American collector Charles Freer and in April, 1894 "sent several hundred Japanese prints to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston...[and] a large number of his Japanese textile samples were eventually housed in the

---

<sup>81</sup> Meech and Weisberg 23.

<sup>82</sup> Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing* 29.

<sup>83</sup> Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing* 30.

<sup>84</sup> Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing* xx.

Metropolitan Museum of Art.”<sup>85</sup> Bing was “made a Life Fellow [of the Metropolitan Museum of Art] ...for his donations to their Oriental collection.”<sup>86</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The French art critics, writers and collectors who published articles in the 1870's and 1880's respected the high level of cultural achievement of the Tokugawa period of Edo. They were particularly impressed with the print culture of this period. Edo prints originated out of a new school of painting, which dealt with classical Japanese themes from literature and poetry, but which also showed the every-day reality of the average citizen, the “passing world,” according to the French.

Unlike previous art traditions in Japan, this new painting school did not court aristocratic patronage and it achieved the democratization of the national cultural patrimony, once it branched into the use of illustrated books and woodblock prints. The French admired the innovative collaboration of artisans or craftsman and artists in the making of the prints, which they saw as a way of allowing industrial or commercial enterprises to work with artists. The French also admired the compositional subjects of poetry and of nature, which allowed beauty into the every day life of the ordinary people, setting a standard for refinement and original achievement.

---

<sup>85</sup> Meech and Weisberg 31.

<sup>86</sup> Weisberg, Art Nouveau Bing 34.

## CHAPTER TWO: American Version of Japanese Aesthetics

### Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, prior to 1853, the French had already developed an understanding of Japan and Edo culture based on the early travel journals, results essentially of Dutch trade with Japan. By the late 1850's and 1860's, the French had begun actively buying, selling and collecting Edo prints, which had been imported to France. "[As] interest in Japanese products in the nineteenth century grew so did the number of dealers [who] specialized in *chinoseries and japoneries*. Between 1855 and 1863 a number of shops that specialized in Oriental *objets d'art* and *curiosites* were opened."<sup>87</sup>

The American exposure to Japan was much more limited before 1853. Prior to Perry's arrival in Japan, Japan "to most Americans ... was, in Herman Melville's words, 'the impenetrable Japans,' and the sketchy, naïve view they held of her was vulnerable to romanticization and fanciful embellishment."<sup>88</sup> Even after Perry's opening of Japan in 1853, America was slow to pick up an interest in Japan and its art. When "an embassy of Japanese commissioners arrived to ratify the terms of Perry's treaty" in 1860, they caused a "superficial wave of 'Japan fever,' ... [however,] the excitement over things Japanese was quickly eclipsed by tensions between North and South, and was soon effectively extinguished by the Civil War."<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Floyd 40-41.

<sup>88</sup> Mills 11.

<sup>89</sup> Mills 11.

Despite Americans' principal interest in developing Japan as a market for foreign goods, there was some early American interest in Japanese art. The artist, John La Farge, who married a descendent of Commodore Perry in 1860,<sup>90</sup> and was perhaps familiar with Japanese prints from his study of art in Paris in 1856, sought to import prints to America in 1863. However, he observed that his interest was not widespread. He had to "risk [his] purchases entirely and got few things as we should have chosen them, as we had at that time no persons interested in such things."<sup>91</sup>

The craze for Japanese art in America actually started with the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876, after the end of the American Civil War and after the Edo period, which ended with the Tokugawa government's abdication in 1868. The American craze for Japanese art began after the difficult period of tensions between foreign traders, mostly American and British, and the ruling samurai government.

#### **American experience with Japan in the 1850's and 1860's**

For Americans, contact with Japan, from 1853 to 1868, primarily focused on the development of Japan as a trading partner. Traders, or merchants, realizing the financial opportunity offered by this newly-opened market, jumped at their advantages. There was also a unique opportunity for enrichment to be had taking advantage of the inexperience, or lack of economic sophistication of the Japanese with regard to currency exchanges.

---

<sup>90</sup> Sources differ as to whether the woman was a grandniece or a granddaughter of Commodore Perry. Mills states that Margaret Mason Perry was a grandniece of Matthew C. Perry and Weisberg claims that Margaret Perry was a granddaughter of Perry. Mills 14, Meech and Weisberg 57.

<sup>91</sup> Mills 14. Quoting Royal Cortissoz, *John La Farge: A Memoir and a Study* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911) 121.

Japanese reasons for opening their country, however, were not trade related. “The Japanese were appalled by the size and guns of the American ‘black ships’ [of Commodore Perry’s convoy] as they called them, and they were amazed by the steam powered vessels which moved up the bay against the wind. They realized that their own shore batteries were almost useless and that Edo and the coastal shipping which provisioned it, lay defenseless.”<sup>92</sup>

The shogun, Iyemochi, was “a boy of 12 years of age when he was called upon to assume the responsibilities of government... in September 1858.”<sup>93</sup> Concerned by the violent encounters with European traders in China, and aware that nearby English, French and Russian fleets were seeking entry into Japan, the shogun turned to the Americans for support. “The American ambassador offered to us that if we would make a temporary treaty with him, as soon as we should have signed and given him that Treaty he could act as mediator between us and the French and English, and could save us all difficulties.”<sup>94</sup>

“Contrary to common opinion, the treaty Perry negotiated with Japan did not include the establishment of commercial intercourse, as Alcock pointed out following his own diplomatic mission to the country in the late 1850’s:

It will be necessary for the reader to remember that the first infraction of the Japanese system of absolute seclusion from the rest of the world was effected by Commodore Perry in 1854 who found means to induce them to enter into a treaty of humanity, guaranteeing simply succor and good treatment instead of imprisonment and death to any shipwrecked or distressed sailors thrown on their hospitable coasts. It aimed at nothing more, and the only relations

---

<sup>92</sup> Floyd 12. Quoting Edwin O. Reischauer, *Japan, the Story of a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970) 115.

<sup>93</sup> John R. Black, *Young Japan: Yokohama and Yedo 1858-79* (Tokyo: Oxford University Press, 1968) 95. Quoting from a translated letter, which was delivered by the envoy and published in the *Japan Herald*, according to Black, who gives no further reference.

<sup>94</sup> Black 87. Quoting from a circular from the Tycoon dated 6<sup>th</sup> month of the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Ansei (August 1858), sent by order of Yamato-no-Kami by Ometski Kouro Kawa Sadjou.

established consisted in the right to locate a consul at Shimoda, a small and unimportant place south of Cape Idzu....The agreements finally negotiated with Western nations affirm Japan's strong reservations about permitting the foreigners free access to the islands.<sup>95</sup>

The shogun was aware of the Emperor's unwillingness to make treaties with foreigners, however the shogun was consoled by the promise of protection offered by the temporary treaty with the Americans. However, the treaty was not, in effect, temporary and after several years, the Emperor formally expressed his wish to end it. "In June, 1862 the Shogun being only in his 16<sup>th</sup> year, a special Envoy arrives in Yedo, with the Mikado's command that he, the Shogun, 'with all daimios great and small,' should repair to Kioto, and there 'ascertain the opinion of the country, expel the barbarians, and so calm the indignation of the Mikados' divine ancestry.'"<sup>96</sup>

The military ruling class of Japan was caught in an untenable position, wedged between the exigencies of the foreigners and of the Emperor, or Mikado. The samurai were weakened economically by decades of lavish spending and were unable to fulfill their military obligation to both expel the foreigners and protect their country from further invasion. The tensions felt by the samurai government at the foreign intrusion, and the foreigners' demands, combined with the subsequent Imperial demand for the samurai to rid Japan of foreigners was expressed initially in open hostility and then in violent attacks and murders of foreigners by samurai. "During the early 1860's a strong nationalist movement among the samurai class was expressed in violent attacks on foreigners."<sup>97</sup> "Attacks on the foreign residents,

---

<sup>95</sup> Floyd 10. Quoting Rutherford Alcock, *The Capital of the Tycoon: A Narrative of Three Year's Residence in Japan*, 1 (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1863) 190.

<sup>96</sup> Black 97. Quoting from *Kinsé Shiriaku*, but without specific reference.

<sup>97</sup> Toshio Yokoyama, Japan in the Victorian Mind: A study of Stereotyped Images of a Nation 1850-80 (London: MacMillan, 1987) xxi.

including the assassination of government agents in 1859, 1861, 1862 and the destruction of the American consulate in Edo by fire in 1864, clearly reflect the Japanese apprehension of a revival of contact with the West.”<sup>98</sup>

Independent groups of *ronin* began forming to oust the foreigners. “A *ronin* is literally an outcast. Every person in Japan was supposed to belong to some *daimio* [or feudal lord and *ronins* had] permission to slay any person who insulted them, provided they at once performed the *hara-kiru* [suicide] on themselves.”<sup>99</sup> *Daimios* were then not held responsible for their *ronins*’ actions. During this period “...hundreds [of samurai became] *ronins* who had become so for the sole purpose of molesting and attempting to slay foreigners without the *daimios*, the proper masters, being responsible for their acts.”<sup>100</sup>

Signed letters attest to the determination of the *ronin*:

We become ronins now, since the foreigner gains more and more influence in the country, unable tranquilly to see the ancient laws (of Gongen-sama) violated; we become, all four, ronins, with the intention of compelling the foreigner to depart.”

Akigami Tetsondjiro  
Tatemi Tomigoro  
Atsoumi Goro  
Mitsoungi Sadua<sup>101</sup>

### **Foreign reaction to Japanese attacks**

“The disastrous experiences of many foreign residents in Japan had the effect of blackening the image of the entire country.”<sup>102</sup> Criticisms of the earlier reports of

---

<sup>98</sup> Floyd 11-12.

<sup>99</sup> Black 55.

<sup>100</sup> Black 55.

<sup>101</sup> Black 68. Black writes that this information comes from Sir Rutherford’s book, but gives no further information about the source.

<sup>102</sup> Yokoyama 78.

Japan centered on the idea that there was an “old idea of Japan and a new reality”<sup>103</sup> and this “new realism sought to crush the old images created by Kaempfer and the other early travelers.”<sup>104</sup>

Sir Rutherford Alcock, who “during the first half of the 1860’s ... was the leading British authority on Japan,”<sup>105</sup> described Japan as a world of “savage rulers and civilised people.”<sup>106</sup> He called the samurai “swashbucklers and ruffians,”<sup>107</sup> and wrote that “members of the British Legation at Edo often encountered drunken and hostile samurai carrying swords in a menacing way.”<sup>108</sup>

Francis Hall, a well-known American journalist and “America’s leading ‘opinion maker’ on Japan during this crucial age,”<sup>109</sup> kept a diary during his residency in Japan from 1859 to 1866. The diary entries reflect the “changed attitude” towards Japan after the 1860’s attacks on foreigners. Hall did not find Edo culture to be refined and sophisticated, rather he described the loose morality of the Japanese, observing that “half of the Japanese are addicted to sake drinking.”<sup>110</sup> Hall called the urban pleasure districts, such as the *Yoshiwara*, “a successful attempt to render vices alluring and attractive.”<sup>111</sup>

Hall records that “the samurai class who lead an indolent, vicious life frequent the ... inns to an extent that renders them unsafe for foreigners. They come for a

---

<sup>103</sup> Yokoyama 77.

<sup>104</sup> Yokoyama 82.

<sup>105</sup> Yokoyama 69.

<sup>106</sup> Yokoyama 104. Quoting Alcock, ‘Japan and the Japanese,’ *Edin. Rev.*, vol. cxiii (1861) 45.

<sup>107</sup> Yokoyama 91. The author appears to refer to Alcock’s *The Capital of the Tycoon: A Narrative of Three Year’s Residence in Japan*, which is mentioned earlier in the chapter.

<sup>108</sup> Yokoyama 71. Quoting Alcock, *Edin Rev.*, vol. xciii, 50.

<sup>109</sup> F.G. Notehelfer, ed., Japan through American Eyes: The Journal of Francis Hall, 1859-1866 (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001) 12.

<sup>110</sup> Notehelfer 54.

<sup>111</sup> Notehelfer 51.

carouse and bring their mistresses with them or find them ...and would at such times be reckless of what they did.”<sup>112</sup> Hall also noted the economic troubles of the Japanese military elite, which preceded their loss of power with the change in government in 1868. “Many of the Daimios maintain a state beyond their resource and they resort to forced loans from the prosperous merchants of the principalities to sustain their living expenses.”<sup>113</sup>

During this period, foreign residents in Japan blamed its culture for the “‘licentiousness’ and ‘intemperance’ of the nation”<sup>114</sup> and particularly of the “uncivilized military class.”<sup>115</sup> “Plays and literature of Japan were ‘grossly indecent’ ...the Japanese were ‘inveterate liars’ ...and [it was] the common custom of Japanese women to ‘pass their early years in professional prostitution, after which they marry without any loss of character or standing.’”<sup>116</sup> The disparity of these observations from earlier descriptions of Edo by the Dutch and the French reflect the embittered tensions between the ruling military class, the samurai, and the later foreign traders.

Not all foreigners in Japan in the 1860’s, agreed with this depiction of Japan. Algernon Bertram Mitford lived in Japan from 1866 until 1869 serving as Acting Third Secretary of the British government. He sought to understand Edo culture and published a number of articles in which he praised the high level of education of the samurai class and their noble gentlemanly bearing. “[Fixing] his standard for judging

---

<sup>112</sup> Notehelfer 170.

<sup>113</sup> Notehelfer 106.

<sup>114</sup> Yokoyama 78. Quoting J. F. Stephen *Fraser.*, vol. lxix, 103-104.

<sup>115</sup> Yokoyama 78. Quoting Henry Reeve *Edin Rev.*, vol. cxvii, 517.

<sup>116</sup> Yokoyama 78-79. Quoting J.F. Stephen *Fraser.* vol. lxix, 103-104.

Japanese customs firmly on ‘the Japanese point of view,’”<sup>117</sup> Mitford maintained “a close association with the native intellectuals and sympathy with their way of thinking.”<sup>118</sup>

Mitford criticized remarks made by Alcock, particularly “Alcock’s statement that the portraits of the most famous courtesans of Edo were hung each year in the temple. Mitford could see no such pictures there and asked many Japanese about the matter, including the priests of the temple. He concluded that Alcock’s tale was ‘but one of the many strange mistakes into which an imperfect knowledge of the language led the earlier travellers in Japan.’ Mitford further added, “in no country [was] the public harlot more abhorred and looked down upon than in Japan.”<sup>119</sup> Mitford also studied the history of Japanese street theater and “describes this history not as a unique phenomenon, but as one example common to the world: ‘The origin of the drama in Japan, as elsewhere, was religious.’”<sup>120</sup>

John R. Black, the “editor in chief of the *Japan Herald*, a weekly published every Saturday”<sup>121</sup> and later the publisher of the “*Japan Gazette*, Yokohama’s first evening daily, which appeared on 12 October 1867”<sup>122</sup> was also “sympathetic and had respect for the last Shogun, Tokugawa Keiki and his programme for reform.”<sup>123</sup>

However, once the Tokugawa *shogunate* abdicated in 1868, the Japanese government of the Meiji Restoration moved to dissociate itself from the “Old Japan” of Edo and its samurai leaders. “Participants in the Meiji national project asserted

---

<sup>117</sup> Yokoyama 91-92.

<sup>118</sup> Yokoyama 98.

<sup>119</sup> Yokoyama 98. Quoting from Alcock *The Capital of the Tycoon* (London, 1863) vol. II, 311-312.

<sup>120</sup> Yokoyama 98. Quoting Mitford *Fort. Rev.*, vol. vii, new series. 523.

<sup>121</sup> Black vi

<sup>122</sup> Black viii.

<sup>123</sup> Black vii

utter discontinuity between their age and what the Charter Oath of 1868 had called ‘evil customs of the past.’”<sup>124</sup> The old-fashioned world of the feudal warlords of the Edo period, which had “hindered the progress” of the country through its policy of isolation, and was unable, in the end, to protect Japan from foreign intrusion, was now evil in the eyes of the Japanese. “At the restoration of the Mikado, [or emperor, the Japanese] were convinced that an art [in this case that of Noh drama] so closely connected with the Shogunate ought to disappear with it.”<sup>125</sup> For Americans, Edo already signified the crude world of the sexually immoral, drunken samurai, easily provoked to violence. This notion of the world of Edo became the contrast for the notion of “New Japan.”

#### **American experience in Japan in the 1870’s and 1880’s**

For the American merchants, the Meiji government was a welcome relief after their experiences struggling with the rule of the samurai class of Edo. The Meiji government was as vested as the Americans in the development, or westernization, of Japan and invited intellectuals and missionaries to teach Western scholarship and technology in Japanese universities. The favorable experiences with the Meiji government, which saw progress as Westernization, coupled with the recent negative experiences with the failing samurai government, reinforced the negative image of Edo for the Americans as well as for the Japanese. Furthermore, the negative experiences with the weakened and dying Tokugawa *shogunate* became synonymous with the culture of Edo as a whole and served to isolate Edo from its place within the

---

<sup>124</sup> Gluck 265.

<sup>125</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *Fenollosa and his Circle* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1962) 35.

myth of peaceful “Old Japan.” There was “Old Japan,” a peaceful, civilized land and there was modern “New Japan,” and then there was the problem of Edo.

The Philadelphia Centennial of 1876, a world trade fair which celebrated America’s one hundred years of existence, is credited with igniting American interest in Japanese art. The Japanese presence at the Philadelphia Centennial was also “the first large-scale showing of the enlightened Meiji government. The Centennial provided [many Americans] their first glimpse of Japanese workers and workmanship as well as Japanese products.”<sup>126</sup> “The Japanese exhibit at the Centennial exposition in Philadelphia came to us as a new revelation and the charming onslaught of that unrivalled display completed the victory. It was then that the Japanese craze took firm hold of us.”<sup>127</sup> However, “at no site at the fairground was acknowledgement given to the importance of the Japanese print tradition, a heritage that was already igniting the passionate interest of numerous Europeans.”<sup>128</sup>

Like their French counterparts, many American intellectuals traveled to Japan beginning in the 1870’s. The list of Americans who traveled to Japan in the 1870’s and 1880’s includes many well-known figures. Herman Melville, “whose [novel] Pequod is “shadowed by hostile and mysterious Japan,”<sup>129</sup> traveled there as did William Sturgis Bigelow, a wealthy physician, who lived in Japan for seven years and was an admirer of Japanese art. Percival Lowell, a successful businessman, went to Japan in 1883. “[For] the next ten years [Lowell] spent most of his time there,

---

<sup>126</sup> Mills 17.

<sup>127</sup> Christopher Benfey, The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan (New York: Random House, 2003) 57. Quoting Edward Morse, without specific reference, perhaps from Morse’s journal *Japan Day by Day* which is mentioned in the same paragraph.

<sup>128</sup> Meech and Weisberg 19.

<sup>129</sup> Benfey jacket cover.

studying the language and the people.<sup>130</sup> He wrote two books about Asia, *Choson*, (1885) a travel narrative, and *The Soul of the Far East*. (1888) Edward Sylvester Morse, “a trained scientist, . . . was invited to teach zoology at the Imperial university in Tokyo in 1877.”<sup>131</sup> He traveled to Japan three times between 1877 and 1882 and published several books about Japan. Ernest Francisco Fenollosa lived in Japan from 1878 until 1890 and worked closely with the Meiji Government “establishing the government listing of National Treasures, thereby calling attention to the foremost artistic productions of the Island Empire and assuring their permanent retention in Japan.”<sup>132</sup> Fenollosa’s two-volume book entitled *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, was published posthumously in 1912. Former U.S. president Grant visited Japan in 1879. Historian Henry Adams and artist John La Farge traveled together to Japan in 1886. Isabella Stewart Gardner visited Japan. Lafcadio Hearn resided in Japan for fourteen years and was a lecturer at the Imperial University of Tokyo from 1896 to 1903. He published *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* in 1905.

These well-educated intellectuals, who were often both well-traveled and wealthy, were a new breed of American. With the exception of the artist La Farge, these travelers were not as intimately connected to the art world, as were the French visitors to Japan of the same period. Their deeper motivation in visiting Japan also may have differed from the French motivation. According to the cultural historian Christopher Benfey, the United States “had lost its philosophical moorings [after its civil war] and looked eastward to “old Japan” with its seemingly untouched

---

<sup>130</sup> Benfey 180.

<sup>131</sup> Edward S. Morse, *Japanese Homes and their Surroundings* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1961) vii.

<sup>132</sup> Morse viii.

indigenous culture, for balance and perspective.”<sup>133</sup> These intellectuals sought to identify underlying aesthetic and religious patterns or principles in Japanese art, which they used to describe the larger picture of Japanese culture. Their search is reflected in the titles of the books they published: The Soul of the Far East, Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art, Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation.

During their collecting tours in the late 1870’s and 1880’s, American collectors expressed surprise and concern at how quickly the Japanese were abandoning their traditions and art collections now that Japan was open to the West. American collectors, like Edward S. Morse “set out...to collect traditional Japanese pottery, saving it, in his view, from the ravages of modernization.”<sup>134</sup>

Americans envisioned themselves as preservers of the Japanese artistic heritage at a time when the Japanese were abandoning their cultural icons. The French claimed to have discovered Japanese art, particularly the print art, in the 1850’s, and individuals began collecting it in France for personal pleasure. Americans began amassing large Japanese art collections, expressing their desire to save Japanese art from its abandonment by its own people beginning in the 1870’s.

Many Americans amassed large collections with museums in mind. Morse described his hopes for a collecting expedition to Kyoto in his diary. “I shall add a great many specimens to my collection of pottery; Dr. Bigelow will secure many forms of swords, guards and lacquer; and Mr. Fenollosa will increase his remarkable

---

<sup>133</sup> Benfey jacket cover.

<sup>134</sup> Benfey 70.

collection of pictures, so that we shall have in the vicinity of Boston by far the greatest collection of Japanese art in the world.”<sup>135</sup>

Focus on building museum collections should not be underestimated as an American goal in collecting Japanese art in the nineteenth century. America had been criticized for its lack of museums. “One critic despaired over the ‘forlorn absence of public galleries and collections, which confers upon New York a disreputable eminence among cities of either hemisphere.’ ... in New York the recognized capital of artistic endeavor, there were few public galleries, few art publications, and not a single museum (the Metropolitan did not open until 1871).”<sup>136</sup> The Japanese art collections of wealthy Americans became the Japanese section of museums. “In 1911, Bigelow officially presented the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, of which he was a trustee, with the collection he had deposited there in 1889. The gift included nearly 15,000 Japanese and Chinese works of art, (of which 3,600 were paintings), as well as some 40,000 ukiyoe- prints, the fruits of his years of collaboration with Fenollosa in Japan.”<sup>137</sup> Howard Mansfield, a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and “its de facto curator of Asian art until a specialist was appointed in 1915 ... encouraged [his] institution to build public collections [and] ... his collection of more than 300 outstanding Japanese woodblock prints, as well as fine lacquer, painting, pottery, swordguards, and textiles, was acquired by the Metropolitan in 1936.”<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> Benfey 67. Quoting Edward Morse, citing the source as his diary, which may be *Japan Day by Day*, as mentioned earlier.

<sup>136</sup> Mills 13. Quoted in Lloyd Goodrich, *Winslow Homer* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Macmillan, 1944) 23.

<sup>137</sup> Meech and Weisberg 52.

<sup>138</sup> Meech and Weisberg 44.

## **The American intellectualization of Japanese culture, a step beyond appreciation**

American intellectuals, who journeyed to Japan, were fascinated by the art they discovered. However, they were most interested in discovering the cultural ideals implicit in the art, and explored and wrote of the Japanese aesthetic found in the tea ceremonies, the architecture and in the religions, particularly Buddhism. Several of the American visitors, such as Fenollosa and Bigelow, became Buddhists.

Edward S. Morse discovered the Japanese tea ceremony through his interest in pottery and “through the tea ceremony, ... discovered in turn the whole aesthetic world of ‘tea taste’ with its emphasis on rustic simplicity, irregularity, muted colors, and contrasts of rough and smooth. This is the *wabi* aesthetic world associated with the sixteenth-century tea master Sen no Rikyū.”<sup>139</sup>

Morse’s study of Japanese architecture, published in his book Japanese Homes and their Surroundings in 1886, led to his definition that “Japanese houses [showed] an architecture of absence.”<sup>140</sup> Rather than faulting Japanese houses, for “their frail and perishable nature,” Morse “found virtue in impermanence and transience,”<sup>141</sup> both recognizing the appropriateness of the Japanese design in the context of the reality of fire destruction and grasping the sense of the fleeting world, the temporality of life, which is an integral part of the Japanese aesthetic.

Unlike the French intellectual visitors of this period, most of the American intellectuals were not captivated by Edo prints. Although Americans were collecting Edo prints at this time, Edo prints were not the focus of the American passion for Japanese art as it was for the French. In fact, these American intellectuals and

---

<sup>139</sup> Benfey 63.

<sup>140</sup> Benfey 69.

<sup>141</sup> Benfey 69.

collectors made little mention of either the samurai class, or of the Edo period, as a cultural force. Culture of the Edo period, which had been labeled licentious and vulgar by the British and Americans in the 1860's, was not esteemed as aesthetically significant by this wave of foreign intellectuals in the 1870's.

The complexity of this situation is reflected in the comments attributed to La Farge, a trained artist, with respect to Edo prints. "Ignoring Victorian moralists, who associated the prints with erotica...[La Farge's] estimate of the Japanese art he knew stressed design....He described Hokusai as a master print-maker and praised Japanese deftness of line, originality of patterns and sensitivity to moods of nature....[and] La Farge's essay stands at the beginning of an understanding of Japanese art as the product of a distinctive way of seeing."<sup>142</sup> However, La Farge is also credited with saying that Japanese prints "endangered...the reputation of the painter who publicly admired them, [though he himself] had owned prints since 1863."<sup>143</sup>

Although Edo culture had become a sophisticated, increasingly literate, print culture by the nineteenth century, "it proved difficult for the Europeans and Americans who resided in or visited Japan from the 1850s onwards to recognize this [reality.] ... Edward S. Morse, for example, who lived and worked in Japan as a scientist for several years in the 1870s and 1880s and who observed the lending libraries doing their rounds in Tokyo, had no idea of the hinterland of publishers and of the national market for printed books. This American failure of perception"<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> Lawrence W. Chisholm, *Fenollosa: The Far East and American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) 61.

<sup>143</sup> Brooks 41. In the introduction to his book, Brooks gives an overview of his sources. He proceeds to quote different individuals throughout his book, without giving specific references to the source of the quotes, as is the case with this quote by La Farge.

<sup>144</sup> Kornicki 26.

indicates their lack of interest in understanding the world which produced Edo prints. It may also be attributed to the fact that Edo culture did not fit into the nineteenth-century American schematization of Japanese artistic traditions either because of their disregard for Edo or the constraints of their own understanding or definition of culture, which left prints out.

### **Ernest Fenollosa, the “Boddhisattva of Art”**

Morse was responsible for recommending Ernest Fenollosa for a position teaching philosophy at Tokyo University in 1878. Fenollosa left his home in Boston for Japan in 1878, some ten years after the abdication of the Tokugawa government to teach political economy and philosophy at the University of Tokyo. He resided there until 1890. By the time he left Japan, Fenollosa was known as “the world’s foremost expert on Japanese art.”<sup>145</sup>

In the 1880’s, the Emperor appointed Fenollosa to head a special Arts Committee to preserve and catalog Japanese art. This work laid the basis for the “governmental listing of National Treasures.”<sup>146</sup> This committee was the Meiji government’s response to the massive exportation of artistic wares and this listing “[prevented] the outflow of ancient Japanese works which foreign demands were apparently draining from the country.”<sup>147</sup> Fenollosa’s evaluation of Japanese art, used to establish the hierarchy of national treasures, would have been in line with the imperial court’s reasoning. Fenollosa’s training at Harvard, based on his study of Spencer and Hegel prepared him for this task. He was taught to consider art as

---

<sup>145</sup> Benfey 63.

<sup>146</sup> Morse viii.

<sup>147</sup> Floyd 25.

“historical, a developing unity with a common life running through all the works of an individual artist and all the historical moments of composite artistic achievement.”<sup>148</sup>

Fenollosa’s understanding of Chinese and Japanese art was based on what he termed as creative epochs. Fenollosa described different periods of creativity, “tracing styles back to social and spiritual roots.”<sup>149</sup> He outlined waves of influence, art from archaic Greece and Persia, which swept across Asia. According to Fenollosa, each successive civilization in Asia was enlightened by these waves of influence.

Fenollosa’s work articulating this hierarchy, defining and cataloging Japanese art, earned him great respect in Japan and in America. Called the “Bodhisattva of Art,” Fenollosa was decorated for personal service to the Emperor with “The Order of the Sacred Mirror,” the first foreigner to receive this decoration. At the ceremony, in 1890, the Emperor declared “you have taught my people to know their own art; in going back to your great country, I charge you, teach them also.”<sup>150</sup> Fenollosa did just that. He returned to the States where he lectured on Japanese art and worked for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, curating their Japanese collection, which was the collection he had assembled while living in Japan, for five years.

---

<sup>148</sup> Chisholm 27.

<sup>149</sup> Fenollosa xxvii.

<sup>150</sup> Fenollosa xviii. The Emperor’s words are cited in *Sixth Report, Class of 1874 of Harvard College (1894)*, 25, according to Chisholm.

A later tribute to Fenollosa expressed the Japanese gratitude for his role in preserving their heritage.

Since the time of the restoration we had been so enthusiastic concerning western civilization, and blind to our own art as to almost have forgotten it as well as our own literature. At this critical stage of transition his unequalled judgment and his timely warning regarding the revival of our national arts had most fruitful effects, both at home and abroad, and we owe him deep and grateful thanks.<sup>151</sup>

For the Americans who arrived in Japan in the late nineteenth century, Fenollosa was a guide to the culture. However, Henry Adams noted Fenollosa's bias against art of the Tokugawa era. "Fenollosa is a tyrant who says we shall not like any work done under the Tokagawa Shoguns. As these gentlemen lived 250 years, or thereabouts to 1860, and as there is nothing at Tokyo except their work, La Farge and I are at a loss to understand why we came; but it seems we are to be taken to Nikko shortly, and permitted to admire some temples there...[Adams found that] these temples were the work of Tokagawa Shoguns, but about this inconsistency he did not dare to ask."<sup>152</sup>

### **Fenollosa's description of Japanese culture**

Fenollosa's viewpoint differed from the French. The French had determined that there was a solid and respectable cultural foundation in Japan, as evident in its poetry, its folktales and its Shinto religion based on a dependency and appreciation of nature, before its exposure to Chinese culture. Subsequent Japanese art represented a

---

<sup>151</sup> Chisholm 86. Quoting "Fenollosa Memorial Incense Burner Presentation Address" at Miidera Temple. Nov. 28, 1909, by Aiba Komaji, President of Kohukwai, the Association for the Encouragement of National Arts, Preserving and Fostering Their Spirit and Styles. Transcription in Freer Gallery Library, Washington, D.C.

<sup>152</sup> Brooks 41. Brooks does not give specific references for the source of his quotes throughout his chapter on Fenollosa.

marriage of Chinese and Japanese cultures rather than an abandonment of the inherently Japanese elements.

Fenollosa concluded that information about pre-Buddhist Japan, available from gravesites, showed “the arts of a crude people rising upon the circumference of civilization through importations from the center, and not yet sufficient master of itself or of technique to invent indigenous forms.”<sup>153</sup> He described the Japanese as “simple island people, with patriarchal organization, village groups, crude domestic industries, and its primitive Shinto shamanism [upon whom] descended rapidly towards the end of the sixth century the full splendour and force of continental civilization with its imperial institutes, its rich city life, its imaginative literature and especially with its deeper moral questioning, religious theories, and vast views of spiritual hierarchy in the world of Buddhist gods.”<sup>154</sup> Fenollosa considered the Japanese propensity for decoration to be its defining feature.

Thus, for Fenollosa, high art, culturally valuable Japanese art, was connected to Chinese cultural traditions, technology and religious ideals, a conclusion supported by the cultural vision of the Japanese imperial court, whose splendor was based on Chinese ideals and the Meiji government, both of Fenollosa’s employers. “When Fenollosa began his investigations, many cultured Japanese dismissed as vulgar all art but *bunjingwa*, [or literary men’s paintings] saying “nothing but ink rocks and black bamboos are refined enough for a gentleman to paint.”<sup>155</sup>

According to the court, a perfect society is ordered with the aristocracy at the apex, empowered culturally and politically. Fenollosa’s ordering of Japanese art

---

<sup>153</sup> Fenollosa vol. I, 55.

<sup>154</sup> Fenollosa vol. I, 55.

<sup>155</sup> Chisholm 47. Quoting Fenollosa, Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art, II, 165.

reflects this hierarchy, and his work affirmed the new government's status. In an interesting repetition of history, the Japanese imperial court of the Meiji period, aware of its technological underdevelopment, was aligning itself with a powerful civilization from abroad, in this case, America, ready to absorb waves of influence, as argued by Fenollosa.

Fenollosa was personally interested in Buddhism and his criteria for fine art in Japan reflect that interest. According to his argument, Japanese fine art relates to the high moral values of Buddhist teaching, as well as to Chinese artistic traditions. From this vantage point, Fenollosa criticized the old order, the Tokugawa culture and class structuring.

The Tokugawa government of Edo had maintained a social system, which had positioned the imperial court and the aristocracy on the outside for over two hundred years. The system was called “*shinokosho*, after the Chinese ideograms for warrior (shi), farmer (no), artisan (ko) and merchant (sho).”<sup>156</sup> The samurai, or warrior class, had held the highest social rank. Next down were the farmers, “who produce the crops that feed the warriors,”<sup>157</sup> and also produce the wealth as “Japan increasingly shifted from subsistence farming to the growing of cash commercial crops.”<sup>158</sup> Lower down on the social scale were the artisans, who “make the tools that allow the farmers to grow food”<sup>159</sup> and lastly were the merchants, since “they create nothing, living only on the exchange of goods.”<sup>160</sup>

---

<sup>156</sup> Sandy Kita et al., The Floating World of Ukiyo-e: Shadows, Dreams and Substance (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001) 28.

<sup>157</sup> Kita 28.

<sup>158</sup> Reischauer 72.

<sup>159</sup> Kita 28.

<sup>160</sup> Kita 28.

Fenollosa felt that in the Edo period the classes were separated in a way, which “caused each to suffer from the separation...[and] led to the distinctive culture among the Tokugawa populace which was a new feature.”<sup>161</sup> The separate education of the samurai class failed to lift “the people to a higher plane of morality.”<sup>162</sup> In his view, morality would mean a connection to Buddhism and courtly culture, which he felt was not evident in art of the Edo period.

As he catalogued Japanese art and classified different periods of art, Fenollosa had little regard for the art of the Edo period, observing that the separation from courtly life during the Edo period diminished the artistic level of the period. “The art of the people, [*ukiyo-e*] uninfluenced by those who should have been its natural leaders- directing it into lines of high ideal and refined taste-often tended to fall into triviality and sometimes into vulgarity.”<sup>163</sup>

“*Ukiyoe* is particularly a study of contemporary life, and that, too, of the more fashionable or pleasurable side of the popular life. The very name ‘Pictures of, or the Art of, the Floating World,’ means that it deals with transitory and trivial phases, contrasted in Buddhist phrase with the permanent life of moral idealism.”<sup>164</sup> Therefore, “the gorgeous gaiety-namely, the life of the dancing girls, the wrestlers, and the humorous contretemps between the mighty samurai class and the vulgar pleasure givers with whom they mingled ‘on the sly,’”<sup>165</sup> is at the heart of this art.

Fenollosa reasoned that “*ukiyoe* [is] a branch of Japanese art important because so near to us, and so accessible for study. But, if we take it in relation to its

---

<sup>161</sup> Fenollosa vol. II, 160.

<sup>162</sup> Fenollosa vol. II, 160.

<sup>163</sup> Fenollosa vol. II, 160.

<sup>164</sup> Fenollosa vol. II, 181.

<sup>165</sup> Fenollosa vol. II, 181.

historical antecedents, we have to admit that, with all its merit, it is only one of several leading plebeian Tokugawa schools, which, with the aristocratic Tokugawa schools, compose only the fifth, and that probably the aesthetic lowest, of Japanese periods.”<sup>166</sup>

According to Fenollosa, the Tosa School artist Matabei founded the Ukiyo School of painting, which experienced periods of creativity and then decay over the course of the Edo period. This description lends itself to the determination of three stages in Edo art, primitive, golden age and decadence, a classification unique to the Americans.

As Fenollosa discusses individual artists and individual prints of the Edo period, his point of comparison is primarily prints to painting as art forms. Rarely does he mention the connection of Edo prints to either books or book illustration. Nor is he particularly impressed with the sophistication of the print technology of the Edo period. Perhaps, by the time Fenollosa was observing Edo prints, the print albums had been sufficiently cut up for resale, that there was no longer an obvious connection between printed art and book publication, as observed by the French. However, as noted earlier, this inability to connect to the print culture of Edo by the nineteenth-century Americans is now considered a failure of perception.

Although Fenollosa observes stylistic connections of the *Ukiyo* school to traditional Japanese painting schools, he maintains that Edo art was a new and different school with no roots in Japanese tradition. He notes that the artist Harunobu “called himself ‘Yamato artist,’ thus intimating that he was consciously doing what the old Tosa artists had done in 1200- studying native life in all its purer phrases, and

---

<sup>166</sup> Fenollosa vol. II, 205.

yet without retaining a trace of Tosa technique.”<sup>167</sup> For Fenollosa, Harunobu may have wanted to think himself part of the old, venerable Japanese tradition, but he really wasn't. (see figs.7 and 12) Another artist, Okyō, the primary artist of the Shijō School, combined Chinese conventions with Tosa school, or Japanese, strength of feeling. His series of beautiful women constitutes a style, which Fenollosa nicknames the *ukiyo* style of Kyoto, equating the depiction of beautiful women with *ukiyo*.

Fenollosa's disparaging of the *Ukiyo* School of the Edo period is understandable, given his Imperial patronage and the overall disparity of the old world of Edo by the nineteenth-century Japanese from whom Fenollosa learned. The accounts of American experiences with the samurai ruling class in the 1850's and 1860's and Fenollosa's intellectual assessment of the culture of Edo further served to isolate the culture of Edo from the culture of "Old Japan" in the minds of the Americans.

### **American promotion of Japanese art in the 1890's**

Fenollosa and Morse were actively involved with the collections, which they amassed in Japan, once they returned to America. "Fenollosa served as Curator of Oriental Art from 1890 to 1897" at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts,<sup>168</sup> overseeing the Fenollosa-Weld collection. This collection was recognized to be "unsurpassed...by any single collection in Japan" at the time of Fenollosa's death.<sup>169</sup> "Morse was the Director of the Peabody Museum in Salem from 1880 to 1882, [and

---

<sup>167</sup> Fenollosa vol. II, 191.

<sup>168</sup> Meech and Weisberg vii.

<sup>169</sup> Laurence Binyon. "Typewritten copy of article written for the Saturday review at the time of the death of Mr. E.F. Fenollosa. Reprinted in Littell's Living Age for December 5, 1908." Freer Library.

then] joined the staff of the Boston Museum in the post of Curator of Japanese Ceramics.”<sup>170</sup>

After leaving Japan, Fenollosa was exposed to the French vision of *ukiyo-e* through his own travel and through probable contact with Bing.<sup>171</sup> Fenollosa’s description of *ukiyo-e* art shows a remarkable change after this exposure. “Fenollosa went to Europe in 1887 as Imperial Commissioner to investigate the art programs of European nations... He was possibly stimulated by French ukiyo fever to consider a serious study of it.”<sup>172</sup> He may also have observed the value contemporary French artists and critics placed on prints as art. “His articles on the history of ukiyo-e were serialized in the new Western-style art journal *Kokka*, beginning with the first issue in 1890. Ukiyo-e was featured in most exhibitions that he subsequently organized for the Museum of Fine Arts.”<sup>173</sup> He published “his important study, *An Outline of the History of Ukiyo-ye* in 1901.”<sup>174</sup>

Back in Boston, Fenollosa’s staged his “first exhibit at the museum, ‘Hokusai and His School.’”<sup>175</sup> Bing, who was developing exhibitions and Japanese art auctions in America at the time came to visit the collection in Boston.

“Later, discussing his own theories, [Fenollosa] said, ‘I do not like the word ‘decoration.’ It seems to imply too much artificiality, a superficial prettiness. The word we ought to use is ‘structural.’ The lines, the spaces, the proportions lie in the structure of the thing itself...It is a question of spacing, of how the pattern is worked

---

<sup>170</sup> Benfey 67.

<sup>171</sup> This possible connection to Bing and its effect on Fenollosa’s understanding of Edo print art is a direction for further research.

<sup>172</sup> Seiichi Yamaguchi, “Fenollosa on Ukiyo-e,” *Ukiyo-e Art* 65 (1980) i.

<sup>173</sup> Meech and Weisberg 49.

<sup>174</sup> Meech and Weisberg 51.

<sup>175</sup> Chishom 91.

out, that interest us...not the representational element but the structural element.”<sup>176</sup>

Fenollosa appears comfortable with this change from a cultural analysis of art to a stylistic one.

Fenollosa’s description of 440 *ukiyo-e* prints, in his exhibition catalogue for the January 1896 sale at New York Ketcham Gallery, further demonstrates this remarkable change in viewpoint with respect to Edo prints. Entries in this catalogue celebrate the masterful technical achievements of Japanese printing and describe prints with such adjectives as exquisite, sweet, superb. Note Fenollosa’s change of tone: “In the superb specimens by Masanobu, probably attributable to the first year of the new method, we see all these resources handled with incredible mastery. It was the discovery of a new world of beauty by a man almost on the verge of the grave.”<sup>177</sup>

Fenollosa’s treatment of Harunobu in the Ketcham Gallery sale catalogue also demonstrates Fenollosa’s new attitude towards *ukiyo-e* print art:

Harunobu, the fourth great figure in the history of Ukiyo-e, successor of Matahei, Moronobu, and Masanobu, like the latter, did not discover his true power until late in his career... he was led by all this to declare himself *the true successor of the painters, in the department of printing*. ‘Why must I degrade myself to the delineation of actors?’ he proudly asks; ‘I am a Japanese painter,’ (Yamato-yeshi). From this declaration we may deduce his chief characteristics. He will be the painter of life, of youthful life, of youthful love, ...His prints shall be worthy substitutes for paintings, clear and refined in action, strong in presence, figures set in completely rendered surroundings and bathed in real atmosphere, patterns on dresses subordinated to the masses they decorate...It is now a problem of infinite and harmonious refinement in every branch of the art, from design and material to the last loving pressure of the printer.<sup>178</sup>

---

<sup>176</sup> Brooks 49. Again, Brooks does not cite a specific source for this reference.

<sup>177</sup> Ernest F. Fenollosa, The Masters of Ukiyo-e: A complete historical description of Japanese paintings and Color Prints of the Genre School (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1896) 22.

<sup>178</sup> Fenollosa, The Masters of Ukiyo-e 44-45.

Fenollosa was principally interested in defining fine art and he published two articles entitled “The Nature of Fine Art” in a journal *The Lotos* in 1896. This concern reiterates the American search for larger cultural definitions of fine art, noted in the American intellectual experience in Japan. Despite this interest in defining high art for his readership, Fenollosa’s attitude towards *ukiyo-e* prints had softened completely, once he left Japan. One can surmise from this change in appreciation, the intensity of anti-Edo feeling in Japan, to which his Japanese teachers exposed Fenollosa. It is interesting to note the shift in Fenollosa’s focus from broader cultural themes to a detailed, confident stylistic analysis and appreciation of the prints in his later catalogue. These descriptions demonstrate a greater level of comfort with the stylistic analysis of art and a greater appreciation for the technical achievement and artistic mastery of Edo prints.

## **CHAPTER THREE: Reception**

### **Introduction**

The nineteenth-century Western distinctions between fine art and craft were shaken by the discovery of the high quality and highly artistic material culture of the Japanese of the Edo period. The diverse interpretations of Edo art are interesting in what they reveal about French and American culture.

### **Edo prints and the Western definition of fine art**

Nineteenth-century French, resisting the definition of fine art set by the Academy, were enlarging the parameters of this definition when they “discovered” Japanese prints. The French discussion of Japanese prints focuses on its stylistic vocabulary and technical sophistication, recognizing, and even celebrating, the role of Edo art within its culture. Those French intellectuals celebrating this art were, as has been observed previously, actively involved in the art world in one capacity or another.

The concept or definition of original art as applicable to print art was particularly on the minds of French artists of the nineteenth century. The term, *peinture/graveur*, or painter/printer, was coined at this time in France to define the new role of artists producing original artistic prints. The very painters associated with *japonisme*, such as Manet, Monet, Degas, Renoir, Whistler and Bonnard, were actively experimenting with the print medium as *peinture/graveurs*. The vibrantly colored Edo prints on hand-made paper, seemed to confirm the artistic direction that

the French artists, or *peinture/graveurs*, were already pursuing in their own work. “*L’Estampe originale*, a quarterly album of original etchings, woodcuts and lithographs, ... establishes a significant correlation between Japanese prints and innovative printmaking in France”<sup>179</sup> in the mid -nineteenth century. “Japanese art simply confirmed and reinforced trends that were already in existence in Europe before its introduction there.”<sup>180</sup>

Nineteenth-century Americans were seeking to establish themselves as an intellectual force within the international arena when they began to appreciate Edo art. These Americans sought to define Japanese art using a cultural standard for fine art. They were unable to come to terms with the samurai culture and this depreciation is reflected in their interpretation of Edo art.

Nineteenth century Americans were perhaps drawn to a cultural definition of art, in reaction to, or due to, the European view that Americans lacked aesthetic sense. American good business sense appeared to be anti-aesthetic and reminiscent of S. Bing’s evaluation of the earlier merchants’ inability to grasp the artistic quality of Edo prints.

The susceptibility, the tastes, and the genius which enable a people to enjoy the Fine Arts, and to excel in them, have been denied to the Anglo-Americans, not only by European talkers, but by European thinkers. The assertion of our obtuseness and inefficiency in this respect, has been ignorantly and presumptuously set forth by some persons, merely to fill up the measure of our condemnation. Others have arrived at the same conclusion, after examining our political and social character, after investigating our exploits and testing our capacities. They admit that we trade with enterprise and skill, that we build ships cunningly and sail them well, that we have a quick and far-

---

<sup>179</sup> Weisberg, *Japonisme* 62.

<sup>180</sup> Max Put. *Plunder and Pleasure: Japanese Art in the West 1860-1930* (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2000) 14.

sighted apprehension of the value of a territory, that we make wholesome home-spun laws for its government, and that we fight hard when molested in any of these homely exercise of our ability; but they assert that there is a stubborn, antipoetical tendency in all that we do, or say, or think; they attribute our very excellence in the ordinary business of life, to causes which must prevent our development as artists.<sup>181</sup>

Wealthy American intellectuals, visiting Japan in the nineteenth century, looked to the Japanese aristocracy for a definition of art, to ensure that they “made no mistake,” due to, what Europeans defined, as their inferior aesthetic sense. The Japanese aristocrats, in control of Japan, under the Meiji Restoration had their own anti-Edo agenda. One author has suggested that “many art-conscious Japanese [at the turn of the century, were] intensely proud of their nation’s painting, and sculpture, [and would have regarded] *ukiyo-e* as something on the outer fringe of artistic respectability.”<sup>182</sup>

Both the Japanese and the Americans accepted Ernest Fenollosa, as an authority on Japanese art. His appreciation of Japanese art was considered valid “for it was written by one who had not only studied under native teachers, and seen for himself the masterpieces preserved in the temples and private collections of Japan, but who brought to the study an aesthetic perception trained by familiarity with the masterpieces of the art of Europe.”<sup>183</sup> He was acceptable to the Japanese, since he articulated viewpoints in line with the reasoning of the Meiji government, from whom he learned. The validation of the Meiji government made him acceptable to the Americans.

---

<sup>181</sup> Charles Harrison and Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, eds. *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 285. Quoting Horatio Greenough, ‘Remarks on American Art’ *The United States Magazine and Democrat’s Review*, July 1843.

<sup>182</sup> Meech and Weisberg 56. Quoting Oliver Statler, *Modern Japanese Prints: An Art Reborn*, introd. James A. Michener (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1959) 7.

<sup>183</sup> Binyon

Nineteenth-century American attacks on French scholarship of the art of Japan give preeminence to their cultural analysis of art, backed by the Japanese government, over the French stylistic analysis. These attacks may be tied to the effort of Americans to establish themselves intellectually in the world forum. The art dealer S. Bing and the director of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Louis Gonse, were judged as incompetent to evaluate Japanese culture. In his published review of Gonse's two-volume work, L'Art japonais, Fenollosa expressed respect for Gonse's authority as a trained writer, art editor and critic, but disparaged Gonse's "wild speculations on the origins of Japanese art."<sup>184</sup>

Attacks on Bing's scholarship in the major English language publication in Japan, the *Japan Weekly Mail*, in 1889, state that a developed aesthetic sense is not enough to understand Japanese art. "Mr. Bing touches only the hem of the garment, and we doubt if the work of weaving the whole is possible for anyone except a Japanese as deeply versed in the social and political history of this country as he is closely in touch with the spirit of art inspiration."<sup>185</sup>

### **Popular Culture in Edo art and the Western definition of fine art**

While the French were comfortable with the popularization of classical themes and the use of the daily life of ordinary people as sources of inspiration in *ukiyo-e* art, the American rejection of a popular base for fine art, or intellectually viable art, lasted well into the twentieth century. Note this disparagement in the American art critic Clement Greenberg's 1939 article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."

---

<sup>184</sup> Ernest Fenollosa. Review of the Chapter on Painting in Gonse's "L'Art japonais" (Boston: J.R. Osgood and Co., 1885) 8

<sup>185</sup> Weisberg, Art Nouveau Bing 27. Quoting from *The Japan Weekly Mail*, September 7, 1889.

The peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency, but they did not win the leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city's traditional culture. Losing, nevertheless, their taste for the folk culture whose background was the countryside, and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same time, the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demands of the new market a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry, nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.<sup>186</sup>

Greenberg is not writing about Edo. However, he is arguing against the possibility that the democratization of fine art would raise the cultural level of society as a whole and that mass-produced objects geared towards consumer-driven markets could be art.

### **Edo art and the new role of craft, or industrial art, in the West**

Both the French and the Americans of the nineteenth century were interested in those aspects of Japanese art that could be applied to their own industrial art and design. French concern that the industrial revolution would rob society of beauty was also a factor in its passionate embrace of Edo prints. Admiring the technical skill involved in the production of prints, the French felt that the Japanese designs presented a new vocabulary for industrial trade. Edo prints were seen as successful examples of art enhancing industry. Japanese designs began appearing on French fine china and art historians feel that the reception of Japanese art in the nineteenth century was influential in creating the Art Nouveau movement.

S. Bing felt that one of the purposes behind his publication of *Le Japon artistique* was "to reach manufacturers and artisans of the West." He hoped to

---

<sup>186</sup> Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. " Art in Theory 1900-1990 : An Anthology of Changing Ideas. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 534. Quoting Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' *Partisan Review*, VI, no. 5 (New York, Fall, 1939) 34-49.

revitalize the ‘lifeless stiffness’ of Western industrial arts, showing that “mechanical means are no longer irreconcilable enemies of art, but can be docile aides even as the artist’s fingers are.”<sup>187</sup>

The British career diplomat, Sir Rutherford Alcock, had gathered examples of Japanese art for the British World’s Fair in 1862. Although he was most vehement in his criticism of the samurai, he was greatly impressed with the “artistic excellence and merits of Japanese industrial work”<sup>188</sup> He wrote Art and Art Industries in Japan, published in 1878, describing for the English “what Art had done for the Japanese and their industries.”<sup>189</sup> Impressed that Japanese “decorative arts [were] no less serious or important than painting or sculpture,”<sup>190</sup> Alcock hoped to stimulate artistic British industry with his collecting and writing. He extolled the value of Japanese art. “The great works of the Sculptor and the painter, it has been truly remarked, however beautiful, are seen by few, and soon disappear from public view; while the [application of Art to the most common industrial products] are always in sight, and tend to cultivate the taste of the million and give refinement, by bringing constantly before their eyes objects of taste.”<sup>191</sup>

American interest in the design vocabulary discovered in the Japanese Edo prints and *objets des art* may have developed from a sense of lack, as Americans were exposed to finely crafted, artistic objects for personal use produced by other nations and displayed at the World Fairs. This practical application may also have been a factor in the American reevaluation of Edo print art, noticed in Fenollosa’s

---

<sup>187</sup>Bing “Programme” 2.

<sup>188</sup> Sir Rutherford Alcock, Art and Art Industries in Japan (London: Virtue and Co., 1878) 2.

<sup>189</sup> Alcock 10.

<sup>190</sup> Meech and Weisberg 37.

<sup>191</sup> Alcock 11.

publications after his return from Japan. In fact, it was at the Chicago World's fair in 1893 that "Japanese art was classified for the first time not among the industries but among the fine arts."<sup>192</sup> The pressure to produce artistic objects is evident in Edward S. Morse's comment that "it is a significant fact that one looks in vain for any art object worth preserving from our own country. This will not always be so, for within thirty years the arts and craft movement and the numerous kilns throughout the country have been producing artistic pottery and the future bric-a-brac shops will have artistic objects 'made in America.'"<sup>193</sup>

---

<sup>192</sup> Brooks 61.

<sup>193</sup> Edward S. Morse, Japan Day by Day 1877, 1878-79, 1882-83 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1917) 105.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has focused on nineteenth-century Western interpretations of Edo print art, showing the initial disparity between the French and American stances on the cultural and artistic value of this art. It has also shown how the American understanding of Edo print art changed, softened, and became appreciative, once Fenollosa left Japan and came into contact with the French vision.

However, that intellectual reevaluation in the 1890's was not the last word on the subject of Edo print art. In fact, it was due to the many contradictory definitions, or even lack of definition of *ukiyo-e*, in later American scholarship, that I began to search for the beginning, the initial encounter, or encounters, with this art. In researching the early encounters with Edo art, it came as a great surprise to discover the strength of the French approval of the cultural value of *ukiyo-e*, given the American disregard.

This thesis has developed an outline of the Western definitions of Edo art, in an effort to understand why the American view of Edo art is both disparaging and contradictory. The fact that there are over 300,000 Edo prints in America and yet few Edo print scholars is an indication of the problem.

Subsequent American scholars did not develop Fenollosa's later thinking about Edo art, but maintained his earlier anti-samurai agenda, focusing on certain aspects of the art, such as its sensuality, and then characterizing all of Edo art with their generalizations. Langdon Warner acknowledged the importance of Fenollosa's thinking within the American scholarly tradition, 'Though Western knowledge of Oriental art has progressed since [Fenollosa's] death, it has followed the path blazed by him.'<sup>194</sup>

James Michener, the novelist and Edo print art collector, published The Floating World in 1954. According to Michener, Edo prints depict the sexually immoral world, the "evil surroundings"<sup>195</sup> of the brothel district with its luxurious courtesans and theater actors. According to Michener, the "uncouth peasants from the hinterlands" were "the clientele of the *ukiyo-e* artists...[and] it is doubtful if any of the world's other major arts confined itself to so cheap and ephemeral a subject matter as *ukiyo-e*."<sup>196</sup>

Michener concluded that *ukiyo-e* means "pictures of the floating world,"<sup>197</sup> and that "by the time *ukiyo-e* was adopted as the name for an art tradition it had undergone many transformations, had lost its Buddhist connotations and had come to mean just the contrary of grief-stricken or religious evanescence. Ukiyo now referred to something like the modern mode, the passing scene, the floating world of pleasure."<sup>198</sup>

---

<sup>194</sup> Brooks 66. Brooks does not give specifics for this reference.

<sup>195</sup> Michener 134.

<sup>196</sup> James A. Michener, The Floating World 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Random House, 1954) 8.

<sup>197</sup> Michener 31.

<sup>198</sup> Michener 30.

The “illiterate, stupid, murderous brawling” samurai, who drained the daimyo, or aristocrats, would not have required “an intellectual thrust to *ukiyo-e*.”<sup>199</sup> “The financially insolvent, starving artists complied with market demands,<sup>200</sup> while playfully recasting classical events into contemporary form.”<sup>201</sup> This recasting of classical events is “popular art invading the secret places of an older tradition, which is the essence of *ukiyo-e*.”<sup>202</sup> This statement is entirely different from the French thought of the democratization of fine art.

The Edo artist, Harunobu, depicts pretty adolescent girls, and his question “I am a Japanese artist, why should I draw portraits of this vulgar herd?”<sup>203</sup> appears to Michener to be less a statement of Harunobu’s connections to a national aesthetic heritage and more of a moralistic refusal to participate in the low life of Edo.

Towards the end of his book, Michener shifts his anti-samurai stance towards the idea that *ukiyo-e* is valuable as the art of the common people of Japan, a popular art, neither aristocratic nor military. Michener further suggests the role of *ukiyo-e* as an art of social protest, which ridiculed the Tokugawa government similar to the period in China under “Ming rule [which] became so repressive and sterile that all circles, literary, merchant and military in particular patronized the erotic book dealers as a kind of social protest.” “In shunga, [erotic art] the common people triumphed.”<sup>204</sup>

Richard Lane, the art historian, wrote [Images from the Floating World: The Japanese Print](#), which was published in 1974. Lane’s primary focus is on the erotic

---

<sup>199</sup> Michener 114.

<sup>200</sup> Michener 127.

<sup>201</sup> Michener 58.

<sup>202</sup> Michener 198.

<sup>203</sup> Michener 84.

<sup>204</sup> Michener 211.

aspects of Edo prints. His interest in the explicit sexuality of Edo prints comes from his understanding that the milieu of *ukiyo*, the floating world, is the world of the courtesan and actor.<sup>205</sup> Lane's concept of *ukiyo-e* is that it was a unique development, an unparalleled shift in focus from "stereotyped themes of classical tradition to one of the workaday modern world."<sup>206</sup> This idea seems to reflect Fenollosa's early separation, or isolation, of Edo art from the classical heritage and art traditions of Japan.

However, a close reading of Lane's book reveals some ambivalence about the place of Edo prints in Japanese culture. While Lane maintains that "*ukiyo* prints began as bold erotica or handbooks of sex,"<sup>207</sup> he refers to a "gradual process of popularization and popular culture [which] was still a clear reflection of traditional aesthetic standards."<sup>208</sup> Lane also refers, somewhat paradoxically, to "the close relationship between *ukiyo-e* and Japanese history, literature and legend as well as of the basically illustrative function of many of the prints."<sup>209</sup>

While both Michener and Lane uphold Fenollosa's earlier view that the cultural place or role of Edo prints was outside the Japanese artistic heritage, there are contradictions, in both works, in their understanding, or definitions of Edo print art. This ambivalence makes the definition of *ukiyo* prints more elusive than their initial determination would indicate.

---

<sup>205</sup> Richard Lane, Images from the Floating World: The Japanese Print (New York: Dorset Press, 1978) 14.

<sup>206</sup> Lane 11.

<sup>207</sup> Lane 37.

<sup>208</sup> Lane 41.

<sup>209</sup> Lane 49.

The ambivalence, noted in Michener's and Lane's books, about the cultural value or place of Edo prints within Japanese culture has set the stage for the modern revisionist look at Edo art and the latest interpretations of the artistic merit of Edo prints are remarkably similar to the French understanding of the nineteenth century.

“The new view of the Edo period is an attempt to present the culture of Bakufu feudal system from a more rigorously accurate historical perspective, without the distortions of previous simplistic views. And this approach has, at last, provided us with a more accurate picture of Tokugawa culture, giving the eighteenth century its due importance in the cultural history of the nation.”<sup>210</sup>

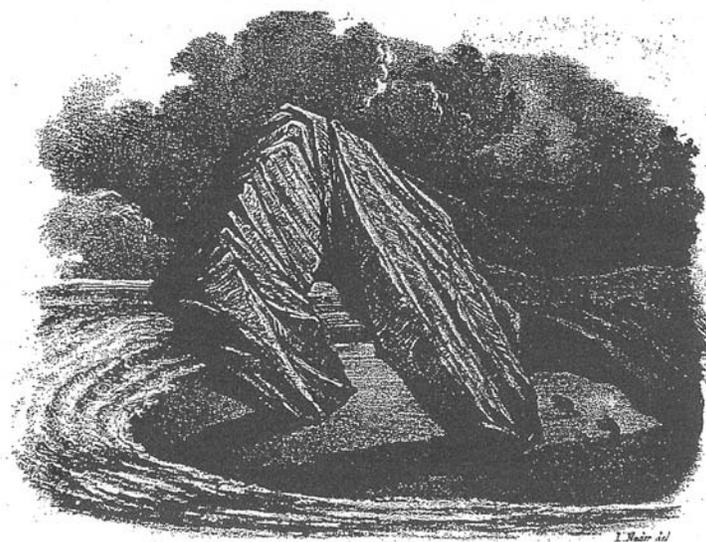
As a result of these changed viewpoints, the Japanese have begun to collect *ukiyo-e* prints. “Prints, which left the country as the worthless products of a school beneath serious consideration have for many years now been returning home in triumph.”<sup>211</sup>

The enormous museum collections of Edo prints in America offer fertile research opportunities to further develop the canon of *ukiyo-e*. Modern western scholars, researching the cultural and artistic significance of these collections, must be able to negotiate the complexities of previous scholarship, without losing their vision of *ukiyo-e*'s cultural and aesthetic value.

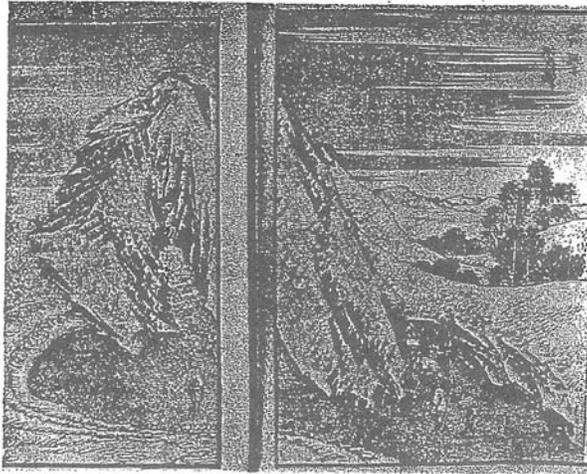
---

<sup>210</sup> Nakano Mitsutoshi, “The role of traditional aesthetics,” *18<sup>th</sup> Century Japan: Culture and Society*, C. Andrew Gerstle, ed. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989) 125.

<sup>211</sup> Hillier 5-6.



1. Engraving from Von Siebold's Nippon Archiv zur Beschreibung von Japon, 1831. 4-5/16 X 5-29/32 inches (11 x 15 cm.). L. Nader, del. Leiden, Courtesy Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde. Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, et al., Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art 1854-1910, (Cleveland, 1975) p.2.

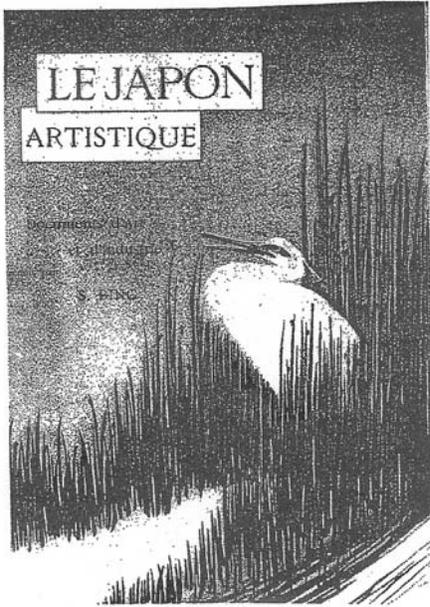


2. Landscape from the Manga, volume 7. Woodcut 9 x 11 ½ inches (22.9 x 29.2 cm.) Katsushika Hokusai. Leiden, Courtesy Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde. Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, et al., Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art 1854-1910, (Cleveland, 1975) p.3.

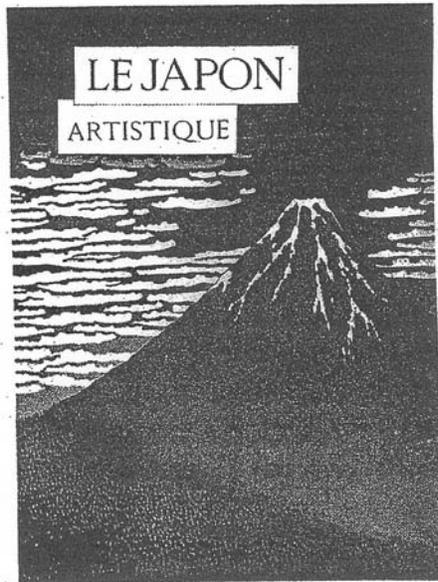




4. Pages from Hokusai's sketchbook Manga, volume 7. Woodcut 9 x 11 ½ (22.9 x 15.9 cm.) Newark Public Library. Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, et al., Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art 1854-1910. (Cleveland, 1975) p. 22.



5. Cover from Le Japon artistique, April 1889. Private Collection 13 ¼ x W 9 ¼.”  
Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900,  
(New York, 1986) p. 14.



6. Cover from Le Japon artistique, August 1889. Private Collection 13 ¼ x W 9 ¼.”  
Reprinted from Gabriel P. Weisberg, Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900,  
(New York, 1986) p. 20.



7. Suzuki Harunobu, "Mitate no Kinko," 1765. Color woodblock, 28.5 x 20.5  
Publisher unknown. Reprinted from Gabriele Fahr-Becker, *Japanese Prints*, (Cologne, 1994) p. 64.



8. Torii Kiyomitsu, "The actor Nakamura Tomijuro I as a female dancer," 1753. Color woodblock, 311 x 142 cm. publisher: Okumura han. Reprinted from Charlotte van Rappard-Boon and Lee Bruschke-Johnson, Surimono: Poetry & Image in Japanese Prints, (Leiden, 2000) p. 14.



9. Utagawa Toyokuni I, "Ichikawa Danjuro VI in a *Shibaraku* role," 1825, Color woodblock, 196 x 179 cm. Reprinted from Charlotte van Rappard-Boon and Lee Brusckhe-Johnson, *Surimono: Poetry & Image in Japanese Prints*, (Leiden, 2000) p. 136.



10. Utagawa Toyokuni I, "Ichikawa Danjuro VII as Sukeroku," 1825, Color woodblock, 198 x 183 cm. Reprinted from Charlotte van Rappard-Boon and Lee Bruscke-Johnson, *Surimono: Poetry & Image in Japanese Prints*, (Leiden, 2000) p. 137.



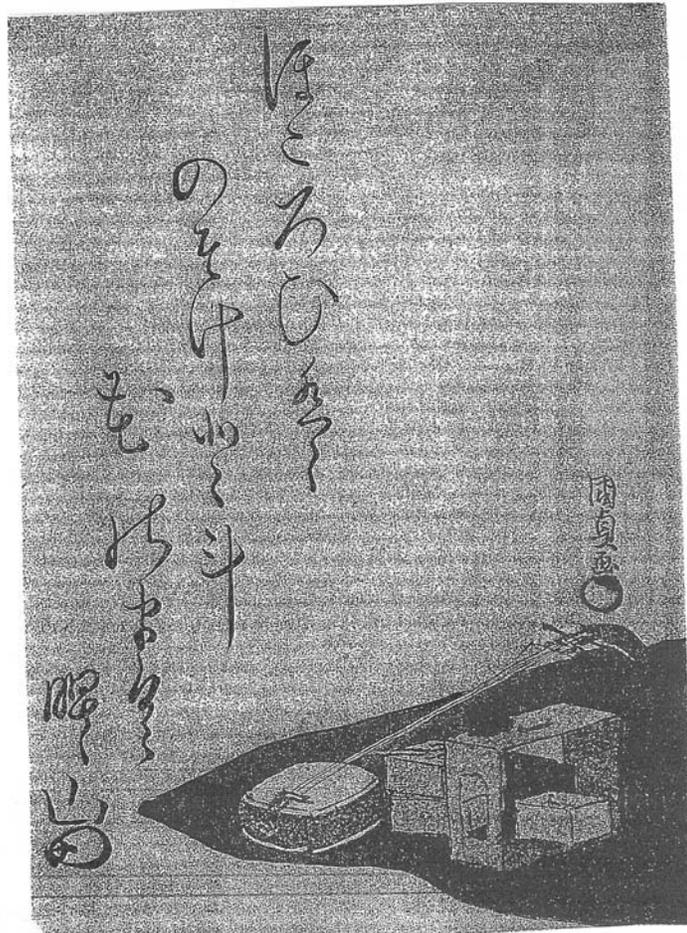
11. Utagawa Toyokuni , "Ichikawa Danjuro V on a kite," 1824, Color woodblock, 198 x 172 cm. Reprinted from Charlotte van Rappard-Boon and Lee Bruschke-Johnson, Surimono: Poetry & Image in Japanese Prints, (Leiden, 2000) p. 135.



12. Suzuki Harunobu, "Sagimusume," 1766. Color woodblock, 28.9 x 21.6." Publisher unknown. Gabriele Fahr-Becker, Japanese Prints, (Cologne, 1994) p. 61.



13. Torii Kiyonaga, "Ten Views of Tea-stalls: Tomigaoka," 1783. Color woodblock, 25.2 x 18.7" Published by Nishimuraya Yohachi. Reprinted from Gabriele Fahr-Becker, *Japanese Prints*, (Cologne, 1994) p. 95.



14. Utagawa Kunisada, "Preparation for a Picnic," 1840, Color woodblock, 193 x 130 cm. Reprinted from Charlotte van Rappard-Boon and Lee Brusckhe-Johnson, Surimono: Poetry & Image in Japanese Prints, (Leiden, 2000) p. 53.

## **Bibliography**

- Becker, George J. and Philips, Edith. Paris and the Arts, 1851-1896: From the Goncourt Journal. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.
- Benfey, Christopher. The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics and The Opening of Old Japan. New York: Random House, 2003.
- Bing, S.ed., Le Japon artistique Paris, 1888-1891.
- Black, John R. Young Japan: Yokohama and Yedo 1858-1879. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Brooks, Van Wyck. Fenollosa and His Circle. New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc, 1963.
- Chisholm, Lawrence W. Fenollosa: The Far East and American Culture. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963.
- Clark, Timothy T., Anne Nishimura Morse, and Louise E. Virgin, with Allen Hockley. The Dawn of the Floating World, 1650-1765: Early Ukiyo-e Treasures from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2001.
- Deflassieux, Françoise. "Estampes: Quand L'Occident devouvrait l'Ukiyo-e" Connaissance des arts 599, November 2002
- Duret, Theodore. Livres & Albums Illustres du Japon. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1900.
- Evett, Elisa. The Critical Reception of Japanese Art in Late Nineteenth Century Europe. diss., Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982.
- Fenollosa, Ernest F. Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art Vol. I-II. Tokyo: ICG Muse, Inc., 2000.
- Fenollosa, Ernest F. The Masters of Ukiyo: A complete historical description of Japanese paintings and color prints of the genre school. New York: Knickerbocker press, 1896.
- Fenollosa, Ernest F. Review of the chapter on painting in Gonse's "L'Art japonais." Boston: Jr. Osgood and Co. 1885.
- Flescher, Sharon. Zacharie Astruc: Critic, Artist and Japoniste., diss., New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978.
- Floyd, Phylis Anne. "'Japonisme' in Context: Documentation, Criticism, Aesthetic Reactions," diss. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983.

- Gerstle, C. Andrew, ed. 18<sup>th</sup> Century Japan: Culture and Society. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989.
- Gonse, Louis. L'Art japonais. Paris: A. Quantin, 1 ed., 1883.
- Gluck, Carol. "The Invention of Edo." Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan. ed. Stephen Vlastos. University of California Press, 1998.
- Guimet, Emile. Promenades japonaises; Tokio-Nikko. Paris: G. Charpentier, 1880.
- Habein, Yaeko Sato. The History of the Japanese Written Language. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1984.
- Harrison, Charles & Wood, Paul. Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Harrison, Charles & Wood, Paul. Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992
- Hearn, Lafcadio. Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation. New York: MacMillan Company, 1905.
- Hillier, J. The Japanese Print: A New Approach. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle, 1960.
- Kawase, Kazuma. An Introduction to the History of Pre-Meiji Publishing: History of Wood-block Printing in Japan. Tokyo: Yushodo Booksellers Ltd., 1973.
- Kita, Sandy, et al. The Floating World of Ukiyo-e: Shadows, Dreams and Substance. New York: Harry N Abrams, 2001.
- Kornicki, Peter. The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century. Leiden: Brill, 1998.
- Ledoux, Louis. A Descriptive Catalogue of an Exhibition of Japanese Figure Prints from Moronobu to Toyokuni. New York: The Grolier Club, 1924.
- Mason, R.H.P. & Caiger, J.G. A History of Japan. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle, Co., 1997.
- McClain, James L., Merriman, John M. and Kaoru, Ugawa, eds. Edo and Paris: Urban Life and the State in the Early Modern Era. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.
- Meech, Julia and Weisberg, Gabriel P. Japonisme Comes to America: The Japanese Impact on the Graphic Arts 1876-1925. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990.

- Michener, James A. The Floating World. London: Secker and Warburg, 1954.
- Mills, Sally. Japanese Influences in American Art: 1853-1900. Williamstown: McClelland Press, 1981.
- Morse, Edward S. Japan Day by Day. Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1917.
- Morse, Edward S. Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1961.
- Munsterberg, Hugo. The Japanese Print: A Historical Guide. New York: Weatherhill, 1982.
- Notehelfer, F.G. ed., Japan Through American Eyes: The Journal of Francis Hall 1859-1866. Boulder: Westview Press, 2001.
- Put, Max. Plunder and Pleasure: Japanese Art in the West 1860-1930. Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2000.
- Reischauer, Edwin O. The Japanese. 21<sup>st</sup> ed. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1980.
- Warner, Langdon. The Enduring Art of Japan. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952.
- Weisberg, Gabriel P. et al. Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art 1854-1910. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum, 1975.
- Weisberg, Gabriel P. Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986.
- Wichmann, Siegfried. Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western Art Since 1858. New York: Thames & Hudson, 1981.
- Yokoyama, Toshio. Japan in the Victorian Mind: A Study of Stereotyped Images of a Nation 1850-80. Hong Kong: MacMillan, 1