Seeking the Floating World: The Japanese Spirit in Turn-of-the-Century French Art

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To the memory of my brother John

In 1795, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris acquired its first Japanese prints from the collection of M. Bertin, Minister and Secretary of State under Louis XV.1 In 1827, 1843, and 1855, the library's Cabinet des Estampes and Département des Manuscrits Orientaux supplemented these holdings with more than thirty-four Japanese illustrated albums.2 Outside France, the British Museum acquired at least one Japanese print in 1851, perhaps from the displays at the International Exhibition, and the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden purchased Japanese printed albums from Philippe F. von Siebold in 1837.3 All of these pictorial works had either been donated by or purchased from merchants and officials who had resided in the Orient. Despite their presence in major public institutions, these Japanese images were known to only a handful of scholars and librarians.

Public auctions during the first half of the nineteenth century consistently featured Far Eastern decorative arts, and an occasional painting, illustrated album, or series of prints came under the gavel at the Hotel Drouot in Paris.4 Before 1858, the year Commodore Matthew Perry secured a treaty establishing commercial exchange between the United States and Japan,5 and also the year trade agreements were signed with England and France, a scant number of scholars, historians, and ethnographers, wrote about Japan and its culture, primarily with an anthropological bias. During the 1860s interest in Japan was transformed: Japanese art and culture became topical in the popular press. Western critics took a hard and serious look at the styles, methods, and subjects of Japan's pictorial arts. Articles were by then in nearly every European journal, and books on Japan and its culture grew ten-fold by the end of the decade. Why did Japanese art suddenly capture the attention of artists and the general public after 1862? What did Western artists and critics find in Japanese art that seized and held their interest? What was it about this art made by an unknown people, living isolated halfway around the world, that struck a resonant chord and became such a rich source of aesthetic inspiration? As André Gide once wrote: "Influence creates nothing, it awakens—the power of an influence lies not in what it makes but in revealing some part of me yet unknown to myself."

In searching for answers to these questions, what soon emerges is that japonisme is not a single entity, nor a consistent phenomenon. The study and inspiration of Japanese art, which began in earnest in Europe about 1862 and continued with varying degrees of emphasis throughout the century and beyond, assumed many different guises varying with the needs of the artist-student. There were in fact several japonisme movements. Some artists gave substance to their Romantic dreams of the Orient by incorporating Japanese costumes and decorative objects into their paintings and prints (cat. nos. 31–43), while others supported their impressions of contemporary city life through study of Japanese illustrated albums (cat. nos. 120–123). Some artisans applied Japanese motifs and patterns to their mass-produced ceramics (cat. nos. 17–19), wallpapers (cat. nos. 22, 24), and screens (cat. nos. 20–21), while French printmakers emulated Japan's color printed albums to revitalize their own printmaking methods (cat. nos. 5, 11, 72, 74, 137–147). Of these diverse groups, many adopted the Japanese practice of simplifying and abstracting from nature, and at the same time described the images produced by these means: "a faultless imitation of nature," revealing a "love of nature... taken to the point of worship."6

The year 1862 marked the onset of the first movement as reopened trade brought a wealth of albums encompassing the spectrum of Japanese artistic schools and a gamut of decorative arts. But equally significant was the receptivity of Western artists and critics at the time, who, as a result of the cultural climate in Europe, were prepared to look at and to see the beauty of Japanese decoration, and to appreciate the different pictorial methods used in its paintings and prints. As Dennis Cate has written, "the discovery of Japanese prints by French artists in mid-century was no accident, but rather occurred primarily because the young artists were readily receptive to Japanese aesthetics."7 And the critic Zacharie Astruc found that: "A bond nevertheless drew us to them."8

The historicist movement flourishing in Europe around the mid-nineteenth century set the first spark of japonisme aflame. Or, perhaps, between the eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century the embers of chinoiserie never completely died out.9 Dutch merchants continued their trade with the Far East, exporting silk fabrics, ceramics, lacquer, and decorative screens from Japan through the island of Dejima. Through their efforts Chinese and Japanese decorative arts continued to trickle into Europe. Nevertheless, imports of original Far Eastern art declined between the late eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century, and Western artisans compensated for the loss by imitating treasured Oriental porcelains and lacquerware and persisting in creating these wares throughout the nineteenth century.

Concurrently, the mass-production of objets d'art grew by leaps and bounds in Europe, as an emerging bourgeois clientele could afford, and insisted on, luxurious yet affordable decorative arts with which to furnish their urban homes. To supply this demand, schools were established in the later nineteenth century to train industrial designers, and to staff the burgeoning number of decorative arts manufactories. Study of the history of ornament much roomed, as artisans ran a test for well-tested patterns with which to decorate their industrial wares. While historicival revivals flourished in painting, decorators applied motifs and patterns from the past to the ceramics, metalwork, fabrics, screens, and fans that flowed out of the decorative arts workshops by the thousands. As the designer Lucien Falaise wrote—under the pseudonym Josse—by 1883 every style had been revived and pressed into service:

Since we no longer had our own particular style, we lived in the past, changing taste and methods every four or five years, we had seen everything; skinned everything; crushed everything; we have covered the ages, we had pressed into service Egypt and Greece, Rome and Byzantium; we had, in fifty years, repeated ad nauseum, all the centuries of our history from the Celtic to the Renaissance, from the Roman to the Rococo; we had stolen from Italian art and Flemish art, and we had come to searching the countries of the North for some Scandinavian rocks, some Saxon manuscripts to decipher a new manner.10

Abetting these revivals were a growing body of encyclopedias of ornament and decoration, which began appearing in the eighteenth century and that continued to proliferate through the 1800s and into the early twentieth century.11 Owen Jones's Grammar of Ornament of 1856 stands as a landmark of this type of publication, with its richly printed pages representing everything from Egyptian ornament to exotic Islamic and Indian
designs, to Chinese and Japanese patterns. (Nearly a third of Jones' designs derived from Oriental sources.) With Japanese decorative imports increasing in number after 1862, their designs and motifs were consistently represented within the pages of these books, (see for example cat. nos. 6, 7, 9, 13). Prominent among French encyclopedias of ornament was Adalbert de Beaumont's Recueil de dessins pour l'art et l'industrie, published in 1859 and engraved by Félix Bracquemond's printer, Auguste Delatre (fig. 5), which reproduced pages from Hokusai's Manga, the Hokkei Manga and other Japanese sketchbooks, many of which were in the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Historicism fueled the japonisme fire through a secondary route. When trade between Japan and France was established in 1858, prominent French critics and writers were in the midst of reviving eighteenth-century Rococo painting and promoting the study of Chinese art. These figures were the first to embrace the art of Japan, although they did so first believing that the works they acquired were Chinese, only later to discover the Japanese origin of some of their most admired treasures. (Japanese and Chinese styles were indistinguishable to most Westerners until the later nineteenth century.) Louis-René Delorme, writing under the pseudonym Saint-Juius in 1880, described Théophile Gautier, an eighteenth century enthusiast and a collector of Chinese art, as the first to discover Japan. (Gautier purchased Chinese screens as early as 1830, and in 1851 and 1855 he reviewed the Chinese displays at the International Expositions for La Presse and Moniteur universal.) Philippe Burty, and Edmond and Jules de Goncourt also acquired Japanese art through their study of French eighteenth century art, chinoiseries and their collecting of Chinese decorative wares. Their appreciation of Japanese art was couched in terms of the parallels they perceived there to the art of the eighteenth century. For example, in 1864, the Goncourts wrote in their journal: "On the whole it is not a paradox to say that a Japanese album and a painting by Watteau are drawn from an intimate study of nature."17

The japonaiseries of Félix Regamey (cat. nos. 32, 33), Henry Somm (cat. nos. 36, 40, 41), Faria (cat. no. 37), and Théophile Steinlen (cat. no. 39) exemplify the links between japonisme and eighteenth-century chinoiseries.

II

To group under a single heading the diverse japonisme movements in nineteenth-century France may ignore the subtleties by which Japanese art inspired Western artists. And yet, the different types of Japanese influence share a common base in French culture: the democratization of art. On that base, various forms of japonisme established their footholds in Western aesthetics.

In this period, the role of the artist in the West was undergoing a radical transformation. Instead of working on commission for aristocratic patrons, artists in all media were more and more left to their own devices, creating works of art alone and then sending them into the market place hoping to attract a buyer and secure a sale. Innovative forms, new subjects and eye-catching styles issued from this changing economic structure, since the clientele artists sought to attract was increasingly comprised of the nouveau riche and the urban bourgeoisie. Recognizing this changing climate, and anticipating the dramatic impact this relationship would engender in the aesthetic realm, Léon de Labord wrote in 1856:

In this great liberal movement, an art reserved for the few, for the elite, for those of superior intelligence, is one of those self-deceptions that can no longer be spread among the public; it is too much like all these pretensions that the suppression of privilege has reversed. Art has been given by God to all, when he placed the finest models of art, this is, all of his creations, within everyone's grasp. Art can no longer be a rare plant artificially cultivated in a greenhouse and that would die outdoors; art should be a vigorous and hardy tree which blossoms in the sun, which drinks the night dew, and according to the seasons, is covered with foliage, fruits and flowers.18

The participation of a broad public in the enjoyment of art haunted the criticism, and the art, of the later nineteenth century. The mass-production—of words, of images, of decorative objects—transformed, and at the same time was the by-product of a transformation both political and industrial, which reached every facet of French society.19 In the mid-nineteenth century the involvement of an anonymous public in artistic matters was an irrevocable fact. It had been secured by mass production, which made decorative art, as well as albums of prints, ornamental designs and photography, reproducible, inexpensive, and thus available to many. In his report on the Fine Arts section of the First International Exhibition in London of 1851, published in 1856, Léon de Labord addressed the role mass production played in this "démocratisation des arts":

What do we say, finally, of these photographs, which are the perfection of art, even to the eyes of the artists themselves, and whose low cost spread them to every hand, whereas their multiplicity places them before everyone's eyes? Already printing has seized upon these productions in order to create less expensive and more uniform prints; at the same time new processes in lithographic printing permit artists to draw on paper without a preparatory study, free to follow their inspiration with an unconstrained hand, and these master drawings are printed in unlimited editions. That is not all: Desjardin reproduces in color the most vigorous watercolors of our best painters, capturing all the qualities of the art. The intervention of the machine has, in this propagation of art, marked our epoch and is the equivalent of a revolution, the reproductive means are a democratic auxiliary, par excellence. To contest this action is to be blind; to disclaim its influence would be absurd; not to foresee the future association of artistic genius with the power of this new, cheap means of reproduction, is to be very narrow-minded.20

Japanese art exerted a powerful influence in the graphic arts of the West, a medium which felt the impact of a "démocratisation des arts" that Labord described more dramatically perhaps than any other in the nineteenth century. André Mellier described this impact in La Lithographie originale et couleur in 1858: "Now it has happened that paintings, statues and all works that have a value as unique objects by their rarity, have become costly collector's items, accessible only to a limited number. What remains? Prints and original prints. Their artistic value is indisputable. The number of prints that can be pulled, and the reasonable price of these, put them within reach of the general public."21

A growing bourgeois and urban audience encouraged the production of original yet inexpensive, multiple images to decorate its homes; they amused themselves reading satirical journals and books illustrated with expressive graphic vignettes; they bought—and promoted the production of—souvenir prints of their travels in the country (cat. nos. 124-128) and to seaside resorts (cat. no. 130); and they were seduced by the decorative posters advertising everything from art exhibitions (cat. nos. 35, 95, 105, 135, 149, 152) and theater productions (cat. no. 39), to the latest fashionable café (cat. nos. 38, 113).

While French culture grappled with the impact of mass-produced prints and illustrated texts, spurred on by new techniques in lithography and wood engraving, Japanese albums
arrived en masse. Their quantity and the quality of their printing prompted Western critics to conclude that “the artistic public in Japan is composed of the entire population, generally well-educated, very interested in reading and imagery.” Another anonymous author found that “Here, in Japan, more than in any other country, the pleasures of artistic taste are spread even to the lower classes,” and he bemoaned that in Europe, “unless being in the service of religion, art is the privilege of the rich and well-to-do. In Japan, it is the property of everyone.” Yet, as Beatrice Farwell writes in *The Cult of Images*, nineteenth-century France saw an increasingly literate public, whose participation in the enjoyment of art was made possible by that “god or monster, industry.”

Among the Japanese imports arriving in Europe during the 1860s, critics discovered illustrated albums, printed sketchbooks filled with caricatures (figs. 16, 26), illustrated novels, craftsmen’s sourcebooks of decorative designs (fig. 1), prints of beautiful women, of actors and of crowds in cafes and theaters, meito (travel books) showcasing the scenic wonders of the Japanese landscape (fig. 12), promenades parading city streets (figs. 20, 34, 36), and tourists traveling country roads (figs. 22, 26, 28). In short, they found a world of graphic imagery, whose subjects differed very little from Europe’s own popular prints: the physiologies, the satirical journals filled with caricatures, or the illustrated travel guides sold in the bookstalls lining the quais of the Seine.

The initial impact of japonisme in the graphic arts occurred during the etching revival well underway in the early 1860s when Japanese prints and illustrated albums began arriving in volume. Artists and critics associated with the French Société des Aquafortistes (Society of Etchers)—Félix Bracquemond (cat. nos. 1, 107), Adolphe Hervier (cat. no. 48), James McNeill Whistler (cat. nos. 44, 91, 92), Johan Jongkind (cat. no. 45), Alphonse Legros (cat. no. 109), Edouard Manet (cat. no. 60), Théophile Gautier, and Charles Baudelaire—pioneered the study of Japanese prints, because they found them afforded for use in their own artistic goals: the creation of multiple images, original in conception, whose expressive success depended on graphic means.

As demand for artistic prints grew in France, so too did the study of Japanese art and its printing methods. Critics like Philippe Burty advocated the study of Japanese albums to strengthen the Western printmaker’s reproductive methods, particularly with regard to color printing, and he criticized Parisian institutions for failing to acquire and to exhibit these exemplary models:

> The Bibliothèque Nationale, the Cabinet des Estampes, evince the same arrogance. There they ignore, or almost, the existence of these impressions imitating Chinese ink wash drawings or watercolors, which in transparency and lightness of tone and in the skill of registration, surpass all our chromolithographic processes; in these books, whose originality and variety of typographic arrangements and whose pictorial instruction is multiplied with a superior taste, the regularity of the printing equals impressions from the best periods of European history, and their simplicity of means is worthy of being offered to our illustrators and printers for study.

Guided by the writings of Burty, and by their own discovery of Japanese sources, Charles Maurin, Eugène Delatre (cat. no. 96), Jean-François Raffaelli (cat. no. 72), Marie Gautier (cat. no. 11), Mary Cassatt, and other artists, experimented with new methods of multi-color etching to achieve the same vivid color effects in their artistic prints that they admired in the polychrome woodcuts of Japan. Other printmakers—Auguste Lepère (cat. no. 142), Henri Rivière (cat. nos. 139–141, 144), and Félix Vallotton (cat. no. 138)—emulated Japanese woodcut techniques and created polychrome impressions printed with translucent water-based inks. Multi-color lithographs called mural prints—in color and size as luxurious as original paintings but whose multiplicity permitted production in large editions—were developed by Henri Rivière (cat. nos. 124–128), Jean-François Raffaelli (cat. no. 72), Eugène Grasset (cat. no. 149), and Jules Chéret. As André Mellerio described them in 1898: “...they are the frescos, if not of the poor man, at least of the crowd.” And here again, the type developed out of the artists’ study of Japanese color prints and represents another facet of the “democratization of art” in France.

While the role of Japanese art played in the formal revolution that culminated in the twentieth-century abstraction has often been recognized, the relationship between this transformation and the democratization of art has been largely overlooked. As French artists explored new subjects in painting and artistic prints, subjects that would appeal to their popular audience, they rendered these themes in the bold simplified style preferred by the masses. Popular illustrations and caricature were forms of mass-communication that this audience consumed along with their morning coffee. Journals of caricature began appearing in France around 1830 and increased in popularity throughout the century. Caricature “had to develop a purgant and rapid communicative vocabulary, exploiting the graphic limitations of its means of reproduction,” to be successful with its public. Since it appealed primarily to the eye, caricature abstracted from reality salient features, and through the most economical drawing, conveyed the meaning of the scene’s narrative. Japanese albums demonstrated a comparable style of generalized yet expressive draftsmanship, as Ernest Chesneau wrote in 1868:

> The dominant tendency in Japanese art is accentuation, the bringing to light of the essential character, of the vital and expressive character of a plant, of an animal, of a man in his diverse offices, of the whole of nature captured in its ensemble and in its particularities. This search for expression is so pronounced in Japanese drawings that frequently one finds them pushed just to the limits of caricature.

Western critics commonly linked the sketchbooks of Hokusai with the caricatures of Goya, Gavarni, and Daumier, for they found in these prints a parallel strength of visual form, that communicated silently the meanings of illustrated texts that they could not otherwise decipher. The birds-eye views, cut-off figures, and dramatic and original compositions of Japanese prints all found parallels in the popular illustrations circulated in France.

The critics who supported Japanese art in the 1860s, and whose writings equated Japanese albums with Western popular prints, were at the same time captivated by the stylistic and expressive possibilities that caricature and popular imagery offered. The first japonistes, Philippe Burty, Champfleury, Zacharie Astruc, and Charles Baudelaire, also advocated study of caricature and popular illustration. There they discovered modern—rather than historical subjects, embodied in a fresh, contemporary form that mirrored the dynamics of Parisian life. And, of the printmakers who supported their original artistic prints from studying those of Japan, many also worked as illustrators and caricaturists for the popular press: Félix Regamey, Auguste Lepère, Henri Somm, Henri Guérard, Hermann Paul, Charles Huard, Henri Ibels, Pierre Jeanniot, Alexandre Lunois, to name only a few.

Thus, influence from Japanese art and Western popular prints intersected, the study of one form sensitized artists to influence from the other, as both revealed a naive simplicity suiting the mass audience for whom they were made. For, as Léon de Labord wrote in 1856, “a lively and intelligent curiosity, which etches in one's memory a lasting image of a striking spectacle, is found in the masses. The populace is fundamentally artistic in their naiveté.” Japanese art exhibited a comparable naiveté in style; a style some Western critics concluded was deliberately cultivated, since this
simplification enabled the artist to communicate with "the common people," as James Jackson Jarves explained in 1871 and 1876:

In fine, whatever the topic, and however complicated the scope, it is executed with a realistic swing of the pencil and naïveté of expression that countermands it to the sight of actual life itself. So simply too, with so few strokes and touches, so much reserved power, and so little artifice.36

Their most familiar art, unlike European, was born of their bone, flesh of their flesh, born of their own feelings and sentiments; truly their artistic vernacular, giving vent to their beliefs, emotions, passions, and actions, and not a special distinction and production of culture and wealth of their country as in Italy, France, and Spain. It is even surmised that some of its technical shortcomings were due not so much to the ignorance of the artist as to his conservative desire to keep on the level of the common people’s standard of viewing its object.17

Impressionist painting, with its caricaturelike drawing, pure bright color, and broadly summarized rendering, demonstrated an equivalent style of democratic naïveté, and as Stéphane Mallarmé concluded in a review supporting the art of Édouard Manet (cat. no. 60) and the Impressionist circle, this simplicity was fostered to appeal to the people:

The participation of a hitherto ignored people in the political life of France is a social fact that will honour the whole of the close of the nineteenth century. A parallel is found in artistic matters, the way being prepared by an evolution which the public with rare prescience dubbed, from its first appearance, Intransigant [the label some critics first applied to Impressionism], which in political language means radical and democratic... today the multitude demands to see with its own eyes; and if our latter-day art is less glorious, intense, and rich, it is not without the compensation of truth, simplicity, and childlike charm. Such, to those who can see in this the representative art of a period which cannot isolate itself from the equally characteristic politics and industry, must seem the meaning of the manner of painting we have discussed here.38

Butressing the Impressionists' simplified style, and their increasingly decorative use of color, were Japanese prints, brightly colored chromolithographs, popular imagery, and caricature, sources that inspired many of the artists in the group.39 As Beatrice Farwell writes in The Cult of Images: "... it must be assumed that any artist whose youth was spent in the 1830's, '40s or '50s grew up in the constant presence of a plethora of images that were bound to appeal to visual sensibility and the urge to draw. It was the first generation of artists so affected. Thus we see in Impressionist painting... essentially the same repertoire [of imagery] as that of the commercial lithographer of a generation earlier.40

The coupling of popular prints with Japanese prints prevailed in criticism of the period. These parallels were established on several levels that were found common to each medium: their democratic role, the modernity of subjects represented, the naïveté and simplicity of the style employed—a simplicity that was found befitting the common people to which each was directed—as well as the essentially visual (as opposed to narrative) basis of their pictorial methods. The keyword here is visual, for the culture that propelled French artists to stop and study Japan's pictorial arts was fundamentally an urban and a visual one. The city of Paris, the center of this emerging aesthetic revolution, was filled with "spectacles." The theater of the boulevard (cat. nos. 55, 66, 120, 121), the omnibus (cat. no. 64), and the café-concert (cat. nos. 62, 63) staged daily performances of silent pantomimes. Edmond Duranty, author of The New Painting (1876), who identifies both the importance of visual language, as well as the influence of Japanese art in Impressionist painting, wrote in that essay:

A lack should reveal temperament, age, and social position, a pair of hands should reveal the magistrate or the merchant, and a gesture should reveal an entire range of feelings. Physiognomy will tell us with certainty that one man is dry, orderly, and meticulous, while another is the epitome of carelessness and disorder. Attitude will reveal to us whether a person is going to a business meeting, or is returning from a tryst. "A man opens a door, he enters, and that is enough: we see that he has lost his daughter!"41

The march toward Modernism, toward the achievement of a purely visual language by means of greater simplification in modeling, a more generalized and expressive drawing, the use of decorative shapes and colors, which the Impressionists first ushered into the high art of painting in France, eventually led the next generation to discover even more primitive and more decorative sources. In the 1880s and 1890s, Paul Sérusier (cat. nos. 56, 65), Emile Bernard (cat. no. 148), Paul Gauguin (cat. no. 28), and Alexandre Charpentier (cat. nos. 146, 147) combined inspiration from Japanese prints with the folk woodcuts of Epinal. In 1889, the critic Roger Portalis again explained the decorative and naive style of imagem d'Epinal as one adapted to its common audience:

The handcolored woodcut became the popular print—the Epinal print—whose coarse execution has only the remotest relationship to Art. And yet the Image d'Epinal is the triumph of handcoloring! Produced from time immemorial, these simple and naive prints that peddlers take into the furthest reaches of the countryside teach history in bold outlines to the unlettered. It would be futile to think of improving them. The crude and gaudy they are, the more they please the public for whom they are intended. What suits this audience are simple ideas and bold colors.42

Certain Japanese prints reflected comparable features, as critics found correspondences between the prints of Kuniyoshi, Kuniyasu and their followers, and the crudely colored woodcuts of Epinal: "It is difficult to put into words the richness and radiance of coloration in these pages that are to their masters' works what our imagier d'Epinal is to the paintings of our most renowned artists.43

And Baudelaire described the prints he discovered early in the 1860s, as "Images d'Epinal from Japan, 2 vols a piece in Edo. I assure you that on vellum, and framed with bamboo or vermilion rods, it is a grand effect."44 Once again, influence from Japanese art illuminated the strengths of non-traditional indigenous sources, prompting French artists to re-examine the abstract means used in the folk woodcuts of Epinal.

III

While industrialization pervaded every facet of French culture in the late nineteenth century, and prompted a counter-movement of antimaterialism, idealism, and a search for spiritual renewal, japonisme emerged in yet another guise. Some artists found an antidote to technological progress in the rural countryside and celebrated the simple rituals of the peasantry: the artists of the Pont-Aven circle, Paul Sérusier (cat. nos. 56, 65), Emile Bernard (cat. no. 148), Paul Gauguin (cat. no. 28), and Maxime Maufra (cat. no. 93), for example, or Auguste Lepère (cat. no. 143), Henri Rivière (cat. nos. 139–141, 144), Henri Guérard (cat. no. 90), and Alexandre Charpentier (cat. nos. 145–148). While other Symbolists turned a nostalgic eye back to the Romantic period of the early nineteenth century, when men and women
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And Baudelaire described the prints he discovered early in the 1860s, as "images d’Épinal from Japan, 2 vols a piece in Edo. I assure you that on vellum, and framed with bamboo or vermilion rods, it is a grand effect."46 Once again, influence from Japanese art illuminated the strengths of non-traditional indigenous sources, prompting French artists to re-examine the abstract means used in the folk woodcuts of Épinal.

III

While industrialization pervaded every facet of French culture in the late nineteenth century, and prompted a counter-movement of antimaterialism, idealism, and a search for spiritual renewal, japonisme emerged in yet another guise. Some artists found an antidote to technological progress in the rural countryside and celebrated the simple rituals of the peasantry: the artists of the Pont-Aven circle, Paul Sérusier (cat. nos. 56, 65), Émile Bernard (cat. no. 148), Paul Gauguin (cat. no. 28), and Maxime Maufra (cat. no. 93), for example, or Auguste Lepère (cat. no. 143), Henri Rivière (cat. nos. 139–141, 144), Henri Guérard (cat. no. 90), and Alexandre Charpentier (cat. nos. 145–148). While other Symbolists turned a nostalgic eye back to the Romantic period of the early nineteenth century, when men and women
lived in harmony with nature (cat. nos. 31, 116, 132, 133) and idealised landscapes mirrored an earthly paradise (as in the work of Charles Daubigny, cat. nos. 70-71, 81). Another group sought inspiration in Medieval art, whose decorative abstractions invoked an age when mankind’s spiritual life dominated his material existence (cat. nos. 149-150). Each of these artists supported their aims through study of indigenous Western styles, and, yet, each also found inspiration in Japanese art. For in Japanese abstraction, spiritual ideas dominated material fact, as critics like James Jackson Jarves observed: “In other words it conceives art to be a supreme spiritual function of man, appealing to his faculties of mind more than those of his body, and best fulfilling its office when it affects the imagination by limitless capacity of suggestion, in preference to pleasing the senses by superior skill of downright realistic imitation.”

IV

The last flowering of japonisme in the nineteenth-century occurred in the Art Nouveau movement, which might be seen as the penultimate merger of Japanese art, the decorative arts, and the “democratization of art” that Léon de Laborde advocated in 1856. From the mid-1880s through the 1890s, critics (Edmond de Goncourt, Siegfried Bing, Camille Maucclair, Roger Marx, and Philippe Burty), art organizations and schools, such as the Union Centrale des Beaux-Arts, and French government officials, campaigned to re-invigorate the applied arts. The Decorative Arts Reform movement strove for a solidarity between the arts (elevating the applied arts to the level of painting and sculpture) and promoted the production of utilitarian works that would be beautifully designed, “universalist and non-historical.”

The government of the Third Republic sponsored these reforms for several reasons: First, it sought to reinstate French dominance on the world market in the production of luxuriously designed manufactured goods, a position being supplanted by English, American, and Belgian craftsmen. Second, the program would have the added benefit of unifying the public by providing them with a supranational modern design, and “welld together all the characteristics of our multitude of constituent peoples into a new and proud unity.” As Rosalind Williams writes “The basic goal of the reform movement was to improve both art and society through improving the design of ordinary items of consumption—dishes, pots and pans, bed and table linens, clothing and jewelry, furnishings.”

In the Decorative Arts Reform movement, Japanese art played a key role: Advising the Director of Fine Arts on the shape the official program would take, were the japonistes Siegfried Bing, a critic and dealer in Japanese art, and Roger Marx, Inspector General of Provincial Museums, a respected critic and close friend to Edmond de Goncourt, who, like Bing, admired Japanese art. Both Bing and Marx were able to illuminate the exemplary decorative achievements of Japanese artists in all media. In an article of 1886, published in Le Japan artistique, Bing described Japanese art as the source for a “new genesis,” in the French applied arts. The Japanese artist’s reverence for nature, above all, accounted for his success, prompting Bing to advocate in 1895 that French artisans return to nature: “The return to Nature is the point of departure of a new aesthetic, framed by local conditions, a particular time, and the spirit of a race.” French officials acted on Bing’s recommendations, even to the extent of working with the Japanese government to promote the study of its art in France. Officials in the Department of Fine Art sponsored the Rijkschikakai exhibitions of modern Japanese painting at the Palais de l’Industrie in 1883 and 1884, and they funded Bing’s exhibition of Japanese prints at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1890 (cat. no. 35). The movement’s goal of unifying all the arts, the decorative and the fine arts of painting and sculpture, was punctuated in 1889 when the annual Salon opened its doors to the exhibit of industrial designs. Artists who figured prominently in the Nouveau and the Decorative Arts Reform movement were Camille Martin (cat. no. 14), Albert Besnard (cat. no. 15), Alphonse Mucha (cat. no. 135), George Auréli (cat. no. 151), Victor Prouvè (cat. no. 8), and Eugène Grasset (cat. no. 149-150) designed books and decorative wares, in addition to painting and producing original artistic prints. The movement’s goal was achieved; the status of the applied arts was indeed elevated, but the impact was felt equally in the higher forms of painting and sculpture, and printmaking, which were increasingly done in color, modeling, and surface pattern. The decorative style of the 1890s lay the foundation for artists such as Henri Matisse to emerge in the twentieth century.

When Japanese art entered Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, the novelty it offered Western artists was coupled with the familiarity. That familiarity propelled and helped to sustain the influence, as the study of Japanese art illuminated the structure of other indigenous art forms, such as popular illustration, cartoon, photography, imagier d’Épinal, Medieval art, and the applied arts. Japanese art showed European artists—already searching for visual language that would engage the people—an art form that could be achieved.

Notes:
2. See Floyd, 1986, for a discussion of the works acquired.
7. Perry’s first treaty of 1854 established a consulate at the American ship in the area to stop and restock supplies for commercial exchange. (See Rutherford Alcock, Tycoon: A Narrative of Three Years’ Residence in Japan, Tokyo, 1881, p. 180.)
10. Asturic, 27 février, 1867: 1.
11. For a discussion of their history, see Durant, 1986, pp. 11–24.
19. The criticism of the period is filled with references to the “irreality.” The Goncourt’s, for example, questioned their role as readers of the novel: “Living in the nineteenth century, in a time of universal suffrage, democracy, and liberalism, we asked ourselves whether what are called the ‘lower classes’ did not have a right to the novel, whether the world beneath a roof, the people, must remain under literary interdict and the disdain of authors.” From the preface to the novel Gemmae Lactantae, translated and included in George J. Becker, ed., Discarnate in Modern Literary Realism, 1963, 117–119.
20. Public participation in the appreciation of art included extending museum and exhibition hours into the evenings. The Union Centrale des Arts Decoratifs, for example, was open from 10–5, and 7–10 daily. (Gazette des Beaux-Arts Artistique, 1870, p. 308). The impressionist exhibition of 1874 held evening hours (from 8–10), “an innovation,” as John Rewald describes it in, History of Impressionism, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973, p. 316.
28. curly, p. 185, p. 222.
30. Melleri writes, for example, that the revolution in color printmaking occurred because of the public’s demand for color: “But, it may be asked, why color prints rather than black and white? From the standpoint of artistic diffusion, it is the general public, which turning to the print, finds in color a more accessible, more direct, and more engaging quality.” Cited in Gute, 1978, p. 96.
31. See for example, Berger, 1983, p. 86. Of the first authors to assess the role Japanese art played in promoting Modern abstraction, is C. J. Holmes, writing in the Burlington Magazine in 1905, p. 5: “Oriental art... is almost wholly symbolic... By a symbolic treatment the artist conveys to the educated spectator a sense of things beyond the mere matter of his picture—something which the most elaborate and complete representation would fail to convey. Symbolism in fact implies abstraction; it suggests more than completeness by means of incompleteness—by means of some omission suggesting space and atmosphere.”
33. Ibid., p. 15.
36. Sharon Fincher (in Zacharia Artcur: Cruik, Arts, and Japonisme, New York: Garland, 1978, p. 368) writes of Atrrea’s admiration for Japanese prints in comparable terms: “Since Japanese art was thought to mirror Japanese life and French artists of the avant-garde were searching for ways to produce a new art reflective of their own life and times, the Japanese artist’s apparent success at doing just that for his own culture was a source of inspiration.”
37. The growing respect for the artistry of popular imagery was punctuated by a series of exhibitions held in the 1880s sponsored by the Société du Noir et Blanc, which in their 1888 exhibition displayed illustrated magazines such as L’Iléminant, La Vie moderne, etc., along with Japanese prints. See Exposition d’oeuvres d’art en Noir et en Blanc, Paris Libraire de l’Art, 1888.
40. Laboed, 1876, p. 20.
45. Peter Brooks, in “The Text of the City,” Oppositions, 8 (Spring 1977): 7–11, discusses the visual text of urban life in Balzac’s writings.
49. Jerves, 1876, p. 45.
50. The question of the “démocratisation des arts,” in relation to Art Nouveau is a problematic one. As Deborah Silverman points out in her thesis on the origins of Art Nouveau, the original conception of the movement was tied to a revival of Rococo and eighteenth-century styles. Some critics, such as Louis de Forcoud, thus found that the style embodied an “aristocratization of the arts” rather than a democratization (Silverman, 1983, p. 517), but as Russell Williams writes, 1982, p. 162: “The decorative arts... are first and foremost the arts of the consumer.” And, “At the same time that Musclet and many of his generation were articulating an artistic and social ideal, they were defining a new style of consumption—democratic rather than elitist, yet not of the masses.”
51. While the Decorative Arts Reform of the 1900s did revive aristocratic styles of the eighteenth-century, and in that sense represented an “aristocratization” of art, it did so in works made for a much broader public.
52. Silverman, 1983, p. 30, explores the role of Edmond de Goncourt, Burt, Bing, and Marx within the decorative arts reform program, while Williams, 1982, pp. 154–209, examines the criticism of Camille Musclet and his part in promoting the decorative arts around the turn of the century. See also, Gabriel Weinberg, Art Nouveau, 1986, in Siegfried Bing as a Propagant of Art Nouveau.
53. Silverman, 1983, p. 430. Williams, 1982, p. 164 also notes that “The principle of appropriateness in design,” a goal of the Decorative Arts Reform movement, “is therefore inherently democratic. It centers dignity upon needs common to all rather than to social status open only to a few. If the democratization of luxury means only the proliferation of social pretensions, the ‘démocratisation of art’—a slogan adopted by Musclet and many others—would bring a genuine revitalization of both art and society. Art would once again be in touch with the life of the people, so that it would again become part of everyday life rather than a luxury for the rich. The dehumanizing hierarchy that places the fine arts, such as painting and sculpture, above applied arts like weaving and pottery, and artists above artisans, would be ended.”
55. Williams, 1984, p. 162.
57. Ibid., p. 258.
58. Siegfried Bing, cited in Ibid., p. 452.
60. Ibid., p. 517.