

Victorians' Perception and Use of Japanese Prints

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In order to understand the complex nature of influence between nations, it is useful to begin by quoting Ian Small. In the Introduction to *The French Revolution and British Culture* (1989), he discusses the nature of the influence of the French Revolution on British culture. He writes:

The first distinction to be made is that influence between national cultures occurs in both manifest and covert ways; the second is that, given this qualification, there are different degrees and different kinds of influence operating in quite unrelated disciplines of thought. Hence the nature of literary or artistic activity ensures that the influence of the ideology of the French Revolution for artists and writers will be quite different from its effects on the disciplines of history, sociology, or politics: such diversity of influence is only the product of the different disciplinary perspectives and preoccupations of those influenced. (ix)

As Small argues, when something foreign is to be accommodated or appropriated by another culture, its significance and meaning may change: cultural “borrowings” involve interpretations and transformations. Moreover cultural influence (or borrowings) take place on various levels at the same time so that there may be simultaneously a number of different interpretations—a number of different kinds of transformation—within the appropriating culture. Small is of course concerned with the influence of the French Revolution on British culture, but his general concept of influence can be applied to the case of Japan.

First of all, though, it is worth noting that the influence of Japan in Victorian society seems to go through a rather different transmission from the case of the French Revolution (as described by Small). According to Small, the influence of the French Revolution on Britain can be categorised roughly in terms of two kinds. The first is what he terms manifest or positive influence, which operates in the areas of politics; that is, “the experience of, and attitude towards, Revolutionary France were instrumental in forming elements of British political thought throughout the nineteenth century” (x). The second he terms covert influence—that is, both the self-conscious and subconscious assimilation of French Revolutionary ideas, such as the general idea of repudiating the past or tradition—into British culture (x-xi). Indeed it is this second notion of influence, at once more subtle and diffuse, which Small sees as particularly relevant to art and to literature—to the possibility in Britain of avant-garde activity, of using the French model of

opposition to the past to contest and subvert British literary and artistic traditions. In the case of Japan, however, unlike France, the country is much more remote from the British people—politically and geographically it is much more “foreign.” As a result, Japanese influence has much less to do with specific political ideologies or traditions. Although it is true that Japan underwent one of the greatest political changes in its history, the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the influence of Japan on Victorian culture for the most part does not involve an appropriation of (or interest in) its political history. The greatest Japanese impact rather came from the artefacts which were imported to and exhibited in Britain: indeed even in travel writings popular at the time, the author’s attention is largely preoccupied by describing those artefacts and not by recounting Japanese politics. Thus, Victorians’ cultural representations should be examined mainly in the arena of art, that is, in terms of what is generally called “Japonisme.”

In this context of argument, it is important to study Victorians’ perception and use of Japanese prints, for a fuller understanding of “Japan” in Victorian Britain. Japanese prints—among other kinds of artefacts—have attracted most attention from critics discussing “Japonisme”, since they were remarkably popular in the late nineteenth century Europe. Their most remarkable influence can be found in French impressionism and post-impressionism, as Munsterberg, among a number of critics, discusses:

The sense of design exhibited by the great Japanese printmakers, their emphasis on two-dimensional space, their strong feeling for decorative forms, and their subtle colors were qualities much admired and frequently imitated. (7)

Although the case of French artists tells how great the Japanese craze was in late nineteenth century Europe, this is not to say, of course, that the whole picture of Western perception of Japanese prints can be explained in terms of those artists’ attitude. The manifestation of the remarkable cultural phenomena differed from country to country. What should be made clear here is how Victorians perceived Japanese prints and what possibly caused the particular situation.

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One significant thing to be noted is that Japanese prints often seem to have been regarded as part of—and a rather minor part of—decorative art. It was typical that in the London International Exhibition of 1862—which in Earl Miner’s words, “laid the basis of an exoticizing of Japan which lives onto this day” (29)—, prints were displayed along with decorative objects, and little serious attention was paid to them as independent art. It is also well-known that E. W. Godwin used Japanese prints as a part of the decoration of his work. Although prints were introduced to Victorian Britain almost at the same time as ceramics, bronzes and lacquer works, their official reputation was not established so easily. As for Japanese decorative art, British museums were quick in acquiring collections. The most important of the early collections was that of the South Kensington Museum (the predecessor of the Victoria and Albert

Museum) which purchased a total of 71.17.6 of goods from Japan in 1854, and among their purchase list were: a porcelain cup and saucer, bamboo baskets, lacquered glove boxes, a pair of large bronze bases, a straw table and a porcelain jar. In 1877 the same museum acquired a collection of 216 Japanese ceramics, which were part of an exhibition at the International Exhibition held in the previous year in Philadelphia. The selection was originally arranged for the Exhibition by Philip Cunliff-Owen (the Director of the Museum), who aimed to “make an historical collection of porcelain and pottery from the earliest period until the present time, to be formed in such a way as to give fully the history of art” (Cunliff-Owen, quoted in Anna Jackson 245). While, thus, British museums were early in collecting Japanese decorative art such as ceramics and bronzes, they were comparatively slow in acquiring substantial collections of Japanese prints (and graphic art in general). According to Laurence Binyon, “it was not until 1902 that the nucleus of a serious collection was formed” (quoted in Philis Floyd 124). Binyon's catalogue listed only nineteen prints. The bias was obvious, as noted by L. R. H. Smith, the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum:

Almost no Japanese prints entered our collections until the 1880s and none in any quantity until the very end of the century. It is a rather strange phenomenon that although Sir A. W. Franks was busy collecting Japanese ceramics and netsuke in the 1860's and 1870's, he apparently took no interest in graphic art.

(Letter, July 19, 1982, quoted in Floyd 125)

The British Museum also purchased Japanese albums: some from the “libraries of Sloane, Cottonian, Harleian, and Bankisian” (Robert K. Douglas v, quoted in Floyd 125) before 1868 and “the first collection of any size or importance was that acquired by purchase from Herr von Siebold in July 1868” (Douglas v, quoted in Floyd 125). It was not until the 1880s, however, that graphic art became a major part of the Museum's acquisitions. As Floyd writes: “These holdings were not substantially augmented until 1882, when a portion of William Anderson's collection was purchased” (125). In 1882, the Museum bought Dr. William Anderson's collection of paintings and prints which he obtained during his six years residence in Japan. It was also in the 1880s that the South Kensington Museum acquired a substantial collection of graphic art: though they bought a number of paintings and albums from the Paris International Exhibition of 1867 and made some other minor purchases, the largest body of early acquisitions of graphic art was made when about 15,000 prints were obtained as late as in 1886 (Floyd, 125).

Considering that in the 1860s Japanese prints were, more or less, recognised as part of decorative art, it seems natural that when Rutherford Alcock praised them, his admiration was for their mechanical process. He was an earnest collector of prints and wrote in *The Capital of the Tycoon* (1863) as follows:

Perhaps in nothing are the Japanese to be more admired, than for the wonderful genius they display in arriving at the greatest possible results with the simplest means, and the smallest possible expenditure of time and labour or material.

(Vol.II, 283)

They meet the popular taste for pictures and bright colours at the cheapest possible rate.

(Vol.II, 284)

It is safe to say that Alcock treated prints along with other mechanical arts of Japan. He wrote in the same book:

In all the mechanical arts the Japanese have unquestionably achieved great excellence. In their porcelain, their bronzes, their silk fabrics, their lacquer and their metallurgy generally, including works of exquisite art in design and execution. I have no hesitation in saying they not only rival the best products of Europe, but can produce in each of these departments works we can imitate, or perhaps equal. (Vol.II, 280)

Such a comment on the cleverness of the Japanese race and society in their technology was repeatedly found in Victorians' admiration for Japanese decorative art in general. Ashdown Audsley, for another example, wrote that "[t]he conditions under which the old artists and artificers cultivated their special talents were those most favourable to the production of perfect works of art" (iii).

Alcock's high admiration for the technological process of Japanese prints presents one question: how was their pictorial side appreciated? The answer was suggested in other pages of *The Capital of the Tycoon*. While admiring the technical arts of Japan, he underestimated Japanese drawings in the same book:

No Japanese can produce any thing to be named in the same day with a work from the pencil of a Landseer, a Roberts, or a Stanfield, a Lewis, or Rosa Bonheur, whether in oil or water-colours; indeed, they do not know the art of painting in oils at all, and are not great in landscape in any material. Their knowledge of perspective is too limited, and aërial effects have scarcely yet entered into their conception. (Vol.II, 281-282)

This passage explains why Alcock emphasised the technological merit of Japanese prints, not their pictorial quality.

This can be considered in Victorian's general concept of pictorial art and decorative art. As Ellen P. Conant discusses, quoting the same part of Alcock's book, "[t]he sharp distinction that Victorian society drew between 'the reforming and ennobling influences of Art, by which was meant pictures and statues' and the decorative arts led Alcock to maintain" (81) the point. In examining Japanese drawings, Alcock stuck to the Western standard of fine art ("knowledge of perspective" and "aërial effects") and did not try to understand the specificity of the Japanese aesthetic. Alcock undoubtedly exerted a far-reaching effect on art criticisms even in much later days, by selecting the objects for exhibition, writing a catalogue about them, *International Exhibition, 1862. Catalogue of Works of Industry and Art, Sent from Japan* (1862) and publishing *Art and Art Industry in Japan* (1878). None the less influential than Alcock was John Ruskin. He clearly stated the morally-debasing effects of the Japanese on British painters, and Japanese fine art

was almost ignored by later specialists. As Watanabe points out, “most of the fine art critics completely ignored it. It is symptomatic that...the prestigious and rather conservative *Art Journal* has only a very few, mostly insignificant, mentions of Japanese art during the 1860s” (159). Fine art critics kept silent about it, except W. M. Rossetti and J. J. Jarves, who agreed on “the lack of moral beauty in Japanese art” (Watanabe, 161). British fine artists would be attracted by Japanese decorative art, as argued by Sato and Watanabe: “The majority of British painters were attracted to the decorative quality of Japanese motifs and objects and included them in their work without regard to their proper context” (19).

Thus, Victorian critics often paid serious attention to only the decorative aspect of Japanese Art, and this may have been why Japanese prints which had a pictorial aspect as well were not properly appreciated.

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It is the very pictorial side of Japanese prints that was made much use of by Victorians: prints—especially those from Japanese illustrated books such as *Hokusai manga* and *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*—were employed in a different way from decorative art. Its main use was as illustrations, often for books and articles on Japan. From immediately after the opening of Japan, many illustrations based on Japanese native drawings began to be published. Britain was the foremost in publishing these graphics, as Watanabe describes as follows:

It is striking that publications in English dominate during the 1850s and 1860s: particularly in chromolithograph facsimiles they are far ahead of any other country. (129)

What was especially interesting was the case of *Recollections of Baron Gros's Embassy to China and Japan in 1857-58*, written by the Marquis de Moges, including “rather westernised details taken from *Hokusai Manga*” (Watanabe, 124). Watanabe points out:

In fact, the French original of this book, published in Paris in the same year, has no illustrations... (124)

It was not only the case of *Recollections*:

Often editions in English are the only ones containing these illustrations and...this is sometimes true even when the original edition appears in French. (129)

The significant point is that in spite of the fact that, generally speaking, Japanese prints were not highly estimated as art among British people, they were remarkably useful as illustrations.

Among the earliest examples of such articles or book illustrations was the *Illustrated London News* of 13 December 1856, containing Hiroshige's *Ōigawa kachi watari* (referred to by Watanabe 125 & Weisbergs xii). Another example was Laurence Oliphant's popular book, *Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan* (1859), using prints by Toyokuni and Hiroshige along with Hokusai's. John Sandberg discusses the illustrations in the work:

Oliphant gives hardly a word to Japanese art as such—but what he neglects in his text is amply compensated for by the number and quality of his illustrations. For among the countless drawings done in a most conventional mid-nineteenth-century manner by European artists attached to the expedition, Oliphant has incorporated a few dozen black-and-white woodcuts by Japanese artists. In addition, the original English edition contains four full-color prints. These have been grossly distorted by the crude process of colour reproduction used in 1860.... (298)

What can be judged from here is that, just like the case of *Recollections*, the prints were more important as illustrations in the British version than the American and the French version published in 1860.

As for the 1860s works, that by Captain Sherrard Osborn should be mentioned. He published a series of essays titled “Japanese Fragments” (*Once a Week* 1860), which were written after he went to Japan as master of Lord Elgin's vessel in 1858. In these essays, he referred to the familiar image of Japan as Marco Polo's *Zipangu* (a land of gold) and then compared it, as many contemporaries did, to the medieval past. He wrote: “the old feudal system of western Europe exists today in a well governed and powerful empire on exactly the opposite side of the globe” (“Japanese Fragments II,” *Once a Week* 27 Jul. 1860, 111). In the essays he used eighteen facsimiles of Japanese woodblock prints including Hokusai's. It may be true that, as John Sandberg points out, “Osborn has selected his illustrations of everyday Japanese life for their vigour, their insight into commonplace situations and above all for their humour” (299), yet it is more likely that the prime aim was to inform readers of Japanese culture which was then still unfamiliar to them. It can be easily inferred that the print with a caption, “How Soldiers are Fed in Nipon” (“Japanese Fragments III,” *Once a Week* 29 Sep. 1860, 387), for example, would be more interesting for what was drawn than in how it was drawn. No reference was made to assess artistic technique and no author's name was informed, even for Hokusai's famous work, “*Travellers viewing Fujiyama*” (“Japanese Fragments III,” *Once a Week* 4 Aug. 1860). The same point can be said about Rutherford Alcock's *The Capital of the Tycoon* (1863). It is true that Alcock, being an earnest collector, could make use of so many prints in his books. Yet again, no reference was made to assess artistic technique and no author's name was given.

Even books of art study utilised Japanese prints as illustrations. In Alcock's *Art and Art Industries in Japan* (1878), prints were inserted at the end of each chapter, which had nothing to do with the context of the chapter. Also, in Dresser's *Japan: Its Architecture, Art, and Art Manufactures* (1882), prints were occasionally used to illustrate the culture (eg. Fig. 202.—Rice Mill Worked by Water Power, 464). These prints were not treated as art even in a book on art.

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Japanese prints were used in Victorian times to know and understand the race and society, that is, they

were treated as if they were almost transparent media to convey “Japan”. It was people's aspiration to “knowledge” (in Saidian sense) of a hitherto “unknown” country that was, thus, reflected in their attitudes towards the prints. They were usually used to satisfy people's curiosity about Japanese race and society, that is, they were part of general understanding of the country. Not every one of specialists treated Japanese prints in this way; nevertheless such interpretation certainly dominated the shared (published) knowledge. The situation can be explained in terms of the historical context of the time: Japan, which had just opened its ports to Western nations, was a new entity to the Victorian public, and their will to “know” was especially intense since Britain recognised itself as the leader in negotiations about the revision of Western commercial treaties with Japan. The pictorial side of prints was taken much advantage of for that purpose because of their comparatively high availability.

One significant consequence was that the identity of individual art works and artists was of little importance, though some of them including Hokusai were known by name. Authenticity was hardly demanded by the public. In the 1870s and 1880s which saw a great circulation of Japanese objects, even specialist shops dealing in Japanese artefacts seem not to have tried to benefit by specific big names. One can see this tendency only by examining Liberty's catalogues. Liberty's issued catalogues where no artists' names were given (although as late as 1899 they enlisted “A few Volumes of Sketches by the celebrated Japanese artist, HOKUSAI, the Hogarth of Japan” [*Liberty Catalogue* 65]).

This way of Victorians' perception and use of Japanese prints made a unique point and should be considered in discussing British “Japonisme”.

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