One Aspect of the Japanese Craze in Victorian Britain : Popularity and Aesthetic Value

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The great craze for Japanese art in Victorian Britain, starting in the International Exhibition in 1862, reached the height around the 1880s when a number of important books on Japanese art were published: they were Rutherford Alcock's Art and Art Industry in Japan (1878); Christopher Dresser's Japan, its architecture, art and art manufactures (1880); and G. Ashdown Audsley's The Ornamental Arts of Japan (1882 & 1884), to name a few. It is obvious that Japanese art techniques were researched well by British specialists in the 1880s, as Audsley and Dresser emphasised their contribution of original knowledge in the 1880s while in 1891 Arthur Lasenby Liberty found the Japanese industrial art was almost fully studied. Audsley wrote as follows:

> ...a comprehensive knowledge of the art works of Japan, and an acquaintance with the manipulatory process by which they were created, are of absorbing interest and full of valuable lessons and suggestions. These lessons in ornamental design and these suggestions in manufacture may be taken to heart by our decorative artists and artizans with unalloyed advantage. I trust that the laborious task I have undertaken, and now happily completed, may prove to be a not unimportant means of spreading this knowledge. (2-3)

Dresser emphasised how significant and contributional his research trip had been for the study of Japanese ornamental art. He wrote in Preface as follows:

> An architect and ornamentist by profession, and having knowledge of many manufacturing processes, I went to Japan to observe what an ordinary visitor would naturally pass unnoticed. (v)

> ...but it is not generally known that just as the Greeks, Moors, and other peoples associated with their architecture certain conventional forms, so the Japanese have a national style of conventional ornament; yet this is the case. To me the fact was almost unknown up to the time that I visited the country, although I had been an earnest student of Oriental art for nearly thirty years. (vi)

Liberty stayed in Japan for three months and wrote in "The Industrial Arts and Manufactures of Japan" (1891):

> During my three months' stay in Japan, observation convinced me that there is little to add to our technical knowledge of the Japanese industrial art which has not already been exhaustively detailed by eminent and well-known authorities long resident in the country. (431)

While, thus, people's serious interest in Japanese art tradition and techniques was remarkable in the 1880s Britain, we can also find a completely different situation for Japanese artefacts: that is, artefacts were used for a popular show. Japanese objects shown and sold at the "Japanese Village" built in Knightsbridge in 1885 attracted enormous number of people. This show organised by a Dutch man from Japan was rather a lowbrow thing, which could be judged from the "Occasional Notes" section of Pall Mall Gazette (5 May 1885), published after the village was burned down:

> The Japanese Village is a very pretty show, and if it could be erected somewhere far away from human habitations, where it was at liberty to burn down once or twice a season without danger to any but its in habitants, in whom practice might be expected to develop a peculiar aptitude for dealing with such accidents, everybody would be delighted. (3)

The point should be discussed in the larger cultural trend notable in Britain at that time: that is, late Victorian times saw the compartmentalisation of culture, that is, "the growing specialization...and the withdrawal of the expert from the broad cultural scene in favor of the civil servant's office, the laboratory, or the academic study" (294) in Richard D. Altick's words. What was interesting and significant about the Japanese craze in the 1880s Britain is, therefore, that it crossed the cultural border. Highbrow taste for art and lowbrow fun existed side by side, and they were, in my view, not separate phenomena but related to each other in the context of the Victorians' aspiration for knowledge.

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It is notable that art critics often analogised Japan with the Middle Ages since the International Exhibition was held in London. As Sato and Watanabe point out, "[t]he Japanese work shown at the 1862 exhibition had an great impact on artists, and above all on the medieval revivalists of the 1860s who saw a direct parallel between the ideal medieval society that they sought to invent and the newly revealed contemporary Japan" (19). Thus, the most well-known early admirers of Japanese Art were architect-designers with a Gothic Revival Background. William Burges was representative in this point, who incorporated what he learned from Japanese objects into his furniture design, and according to Watanabe, [h]is famous Elephant Inkstand...illustrates well Burges's brilliant eclecticism" (169). He was much impressed by the Japanese section of the 1862 Exhibition and wrote in a review article, "[t]ruly the Japanese Court is the real medieval court of the Exhibition" (Gentleman's Magazine July 1862, 11) and also, "hitherto unknown barbarians appear not only to know all that the Middle Ages knew, but in some

respects are beyond them and us as well (Gentleman's Magazine Sept. 1862, 254). In fact, this point was also found in writings by Alcock who had selected those artefacts: for example, in International Exhibition, 1862. Catalogue of Works of Industry and Art Sent from Japan, he compared Japanese art with medieval art (Items 472-424). Burges (and his followers) tended to be interested in not only Japanese Art itself but also Japanese society behind it. As Elizabeth Aslin argues, "[i]t was not primarily the form of Gothic architecture which appealed to Burges but a romanticised view of the conditions which produced it and so it was with Japanese art"(781) and "Burges and his medieval followers admired Japanese ornament for the conditions which they believed produced it"(784). This should be explained in relation to what underlay the medievalism tradition in Victorian culture. The medieval past meant more than just a heritage from romantic ages, as Altick argues:

> Medievalism...was more deeply embedded in the Victorian spirit, doubtless because the need for some such tie with the remote (and supposedly preferable) past had become all the more pressing with the advance of materialism and secularlism. (102)

Burges' admiration for Japanese Art was largely founded on his romantic view of Japanese society and people that he imagined from their artefacts.

It can be easily inferred that by the 1870s such romanticised view of Japan became common among artists. As Watanabe writes, "[f]rom the 1870s onwards it was probably unusual for an artist not to have any Japanese objects in his house or studio" (19). The earliest big sale of Japanese objects was held after the 1862 International Exhibition and some of the objects exhibited were bought and sold by Farmer and Rogers of Regent Street. Shops dealing in things Japanese were increasing in number, among which Arthur Liberty's Department Store, founded in 1875, was the most influential. Liberty's shop dealt in a substantial number of Japanese objects and was frequented by famous artists. Sato and Watanabe quote E. W. Godwin's article, "A Japanese Warehouse" (The Architect 23 Dec. 1876) in order to prove the shop's influence:

> ...it quickly established its reputation as a leading specialist for Japanese goods. Godwin reported the popularity of Liberty's Japanese goods in his article in 1876: 'There was quite a crowd,' which according to him included well-known architects and distinguished painters, all impatiently waiting for the arrival of Japanese fans. (28)

It sounds typical that in Margaret Veley's poetry published in Cornhill Magazine, titled "A Japanese Fan" (1876), a fan made the poet fancy "that wondrous island" (380).

By the 1880s, artists and art critics were looking for more substantial knowledge of Japanese Art than before, and they often tried to understand it in terms of traditional Japanese society. While Burges imagined Japan from the "Japanese court," later critics (those writing after Meiji Restoration) made more practical efforts to try to understand Japan and the Japanese in terms of their art tradition. Though it is true, as Watanabe, as well as Crook, points out, that "Burges appreciated Oriental art not only because it

retained medieval taste in design but also because of its technique"(168), his praise of Japanese technique was not necessarily based on organised study of it.

One of such organised studies was Rutherford Alcock's Art and Art Industries in Japan (1878). He discussed various branches of Japanese art, and concluded:

> ...Japanese as a nation have shown how thousands of the artisan and working classes in succeeding ages, with no higher culture or instruction than Nature affords, can labour in this field with satisfaction to themselves, and the greatest advantage to Art in its many forms, and contribute to the unrivalled excellence of Art Industries, which now gives their country and nation a great and enviable pre-eminence throughout the civilised world.
> (202)

A similar point, Japanese love of Nature, was referred to in George Ashdown Audsley's work. He had devoted himself to eighteen years of study of Japanese art. In The Ornamental Arts of Japan (1882) Audsley celebrated Japanese decorative arts with the highest terms of praise. He wrote: "Of all the countries of the Orient, Japan holds a pre-eminent position in all matters connected with the Ornamental and Decorative Arts; and in several branches of art-manufacture it stands at the head of the civilised world"(Introduction). According to him: "The Japanese have always shown a warm love for the common productions of nature, and have with the greatest ingenuity bent them to their service in the Ornamental Arts" (Introduction, ii). He discussed the point in terms of the social state of Japan. He wrote as follows:

> The conditions under which the old artists and artificers cultivated their special talents were those most favouorable to the production of perfect works of art. Living under the protection and in the establishments of the great Daimios, centrated every thought and expended the most loving care upon each object they essayed to produce. Time was of no account to them; and their masters were well content to watch the gradual development of ideas, and the tedious processes of manipulation, which were to produce masterpieces never before achieved. It was under such circumstances that all the great artists worked for centuries prior to the suppression of the feudal system... (Introduction, iii)

While Audsley, thus, went further than Burges to learn the actual process of Japanese art creation, a number of critics visited Japan and witnessed Japan and its people. In fact, British people increasingly travelled in Japan after 1868, seriously exploring the inner life of the people (See Yokoyama); and it was often the case that they tried to find "real Japan" in the lost world of old Japan. Some successful books were published in the 1880s from these experiences. In Reed's (the Naval Architect) book, Japan: its History, Tradition and Religions, vol.II (1880), the art-workers of old Japan were favourably associated with craftsmen of medieval Europe. Another critic, Christopher Dresser, published a comprehensive study of Japanese decorative art, titled Japan: Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufactures (1882) after visiting the country in 1876-1877. It is notable that half of Japan was devoted to descriptions of Japan and its culture

such as dancing girls and shrines, although his "motives for visiting the country" sounded more professional, as reported, "The purpose for which Dr. Dresser came to the East was to inspect the productions of Japan and China, and to find out their prime cost"(215). His narrative often related Japanese art with its culture. For example, he discussed Japanese art and what he called "honest workmanship" in Chapter 4 in relation to the Japanese traditional mind such as Shintoism. Liberty's essay is another attempt to consider Japanese art in terms of race and society. He clarified his purpose to write the essay as follows: "to deal broadly with my subject, and to consider the race genius of the people in connection with their industrial arts" (431-432). After sketching the feudal times of Japan when Daimios employed art-craftsmen, he wrote:

> To these servant-craftsmen the Daimios looked for diversified and perfect art works, art such as might excel the possessions of rival Daimios, and in the production labour and time were deemed of no moment. It was under such exceptional circumstances that the feudal craftsmen produced the tsubas, kodzukas, menukies, armour-trappings, fine embroideries, brocades, inros, and lacquer boxes which have charmed and astonished the art critics of the Western world. (434-435)

As well as other critics, Liberty was critical of social influence of new Japan (1868 onwards) on art. He argued:

> The latest historical event, the re-opening of Japan consequent on the arrival of Commodore Parry[sic] in the Bay of Yeddo, in 1853 was followed by a rapid absorption of western scientific and mechanical ideas and influences. Perhaps no period could have been more unfortunate for Japanese art, as it coincided with the western climax of art retrogression, and, the Japanese being an emotional people, for a while failed to discriminate between material and art advantages. (436)

Here is the conclusion of his argument:

> I claim that this race-genius has admirably conformed itself to the peculiar physical conditions of land and climate; to historical events which, at one and the same time, fettered in social serfdom, and barred it from all contact with the rest of the world; and that in all varying circumstances, subject only to temporary aberrations natural to an emotional people, it has maintained its essential vitality. (443)

It is true that Japanese art was highly estimated among specialists such as architect designers. The emphasis found in their books and articles was, however, not so much on the art tradition but on its general background—Japanese race and culture. This point is even more obvious when Victorians' attitude towards Japanese woodblock prints is examined. Japanese woodblock prints were introduced to Victorian Britain almost at the same time as ceramics, bronzes and lacquer works, yet they do not seem to have been appreciated as fully as the other artefacts. Although Alcock was an earnest collector of prints and praised

them in The Capital of the Tycoon (1863), his admiration was mainly for their machanical process—and consequently cleverness of Japanese race and society. He wrote:

> 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)

Victorians tried not only to understand the Japanese race through woodblock prints in terms of its technique but also to get information directly from what was drawn. They were often used as illustrations for books and articles on Japan. Captain Sherrard Osborn's essays, "Japanese Fragments" (Once a Week), were accompanied eighteen facsimiles of Japanese woodblock prints including Hokusai's, for instance. Japanese prints were utilised for illustrating Japan even in books on art, such as Alcock's Art and Art Industries in Japan and Dresser's Japan: Its Architecture, Art, and Art Manufactures (1882).

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Japanese art was used in Victorian times to know and understand Japanese race and society. In this situation, identity of individual art works and artists was of little importance and authenticity was hardly demanded in the shared knowledge. This can explain why John Ruskin changed his attitude towards Japan so quickly. Ruskin regarded the Middle Ages as an ideal era for human beings in "On the Nature of Gothic" (1853) in The Stones of Venice, and early in the 1860s he, probably as Arch-Gothic-Revivalist, liked Japan. He sent a letter to William Rosetti, thanking him for a book of Japanese landscapes, writing: "The book is delightful.... I should like to go and live in Japan.... The seas and clouds are delicious, the mountains very good" (Quoted in Watanabe 207). It is obvious that Ruskin's interest here was in what was drawn in the book, not how it was drawn. When he wrote in 1867, "There has long been an increasing interest in Japanese art, which has been very harmful to many of our own painters" (34), he was disillusioned by what he actually witnessed, that is, a company of Japanese jugglers exhibiting in London. He described the jugglers' performance as "the action and power of the monkey" (34) and "demonical" (35). What occupied his mind was racial consciousness when he wrote as follows:

> The impression, therefore, produced upon me by the whole scene, was that of being in the presence of human creatures of a partially inferior race...who were...as a nation, afflicted by an evil spirit, and driven by it to recreate themselves in achieving, or beholding the achievement, through years of patience, of a certain correspondence with the nature of the lower animals. (35-36)

Racial consciousness overwhelmed aesthetic appreciation in Ruskin.

Such context explains why "the great flood of cheap Japanese goods reaching Europe after the revolution of 1868" (in Aslin's words, 784) played a significant role to climax Victorian craze for Japan,

that is, "the prevalence of Japanese objects gives an important aesthetic context for the discussion of Victorian Japonisme"(in Watanabe's words, 19), in spite of their obvious inferiority in quality. After 1868, an enormous amount of cheap and inferior objects were sold in London side by side with Liberty's. The 1868 revolution in Japan brought about a great change in the government's economic policy, and as a result, plenty of cheap objects were imported to Britain. This movement was accelerated not only by the British people's strong curiosity about Japan but also by commercial spirits on the Japanese side: a number of Japanese trading companies were involved in collecting—and often creating—artefacts in order to export them to European countries, especially after the 1873 Vienna exhibition when Japanese collections saw a great success, and the 1870s and 1880s saw a great circulation of mass produced goods. A glance at a record of trading is enough to know the great increase of export: for example, the export of pottery from Japan to Britain increased about eight times between 1873 and 1890 (See Yokohamashi-shi). It sounds natural, therefore, that in June 1885, a Japanese journalist visiting Britain reported on an article from the Standard which claimed that every household had one or two Japanese objects. As for this dominance of cheap Japanese objects, it is most likely that British artists frequenting Liberty's were critical, and significant examples were the Arts and Crafts artists such as William Morris and Walter Crane. Morris's criticism of Japanese design was rather severe in 1893: he wrote, "the Japanese have no architectural, and therefore no decorative, instinct" (Arts and Crafts Essays 35), regarding Japanese works of art as "mere wonderful toys, things quite outside the pale of the evolution of art, which...cannot be carried on without the architectural sense that connects it with the history of mankind" (Arts and Crafts Essays 35) . Walter Crane was influenced by Japanese prints around 1870, as he wrote in his autobiography, "I found no little helpful and suggestive stimulus in the study of certain Japanese colour prints"(107); yet later his appreciation was lost. It is true, as Watanabe argues, that "[t]his, as well as Morris's much later criticism of Japanese art, must be seen in the wider context of the craze for Japanese art in the 1870s and 1880s when cheap and debased Japanese goods flooded the market"(209). The artists' change of attitude described here suggests in turn, however, that their understanding of the artefacts was as a large mass of "Japanese art," as they allowed little distinction between proper objects and cheap ones. Praises or criticisms were addressed to "Japanese art," not to individual art works and artists. They were put into a single category, in spite of the variety in quality and price. In fact, although it is known that William Morris seems to have owned two Japanese paintings (Watanabe 208), no information about who painted the paintings can be found. It could be this common lack of a sense of identification that made Liberty decide to print his own "Japanese" fabrics, a fact Liberty himself admitted in an interview. It is notable that even such a specialist shop as Liberty's did not try to take much advantage of "big"names of Japanese artists. One can see this just by examining the shop's catalogues. Liberty's issued catalogues where no distinction was made about prices of Indian, Chinese and Japanese fans and 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]). For example, "Catalogue of Liberty's Art Fabrics" (1883) advertised "Selection of Indian, Chinese or Japanese Fans on approval by Parcels Post, Prices from 1/- to 21/- and 21/ to 105/-" (23).

The Victorian's appreciation of Japanese art as part of understanding of the country and race can explain the ironical fact that the most inferior objects achieved the greatest success. The "Japanese Village" built in Knightsbridge (1885) attracted 4000-5000 people a day who paid one shilling as admission fee (and probably six pence for a cup of coffee). The "villagers" sold numerous Japanese objects such as bamboos, ivories, drawings, potteries and screens. The price of things was much higher than the usual domestic objects sold in Japan. For example, a screen was sold for about 4 pounds, which was four times as high. Although they were more expensive than those cheap objects then being imported, and even worse in quality, they were extraordinary popular (See Kurata). The key to the commercial success was obvious: the British were excited to see native craftsmen working in front of them and obtain their works completed. The craftsmen were in traditional attire and hair style even though such fashion was getting out of date in Japan. In fact, the traditional fashion was important to the British people's understanding of Japan. Writers in the 1870s and 1880s often deplored its decline. A most severe criticism can be found in Isabella Bird's popular travel book, Unbeaten Tracks in Japan: an Account of Travels in the Interior including Visits to the Aborigines of Yezo and the Shrine of Nikko (1880). Bird blamed those Japanese people who were giving away their original attire:

> The Japanese look most diminutive in European dress. Each garment is a misfit, and exaggerates the miserable physique, and the national defects of concave chests and bow legs. (27)

C. W. Dilke deplored in a similar way. In 1876, he wrote in "English Influence in Japan" (Fortnightly Review) as follows:

> English influence, of course, draws certain evils in its train. Birmingham metal work, art-glass, decanters, gingham umbrellas, and hideous boots and felt hats are spreading in the towns, and it has been my unfortunate to see an ex-Daimio dressed in a ready-made coat, driving a gig, and to behold the detestable suburban villa, near Tokio, in which another lives. (435)

Unlike the Japanese Bird and Dilke witnessed, residents of the "Japanese Village" met the expectations of the Victorian public. The "Japanese Village" sold "Japan" in a most successful way, making most of art and fashion, which were the most dominant and stabilised images of Japan, to create a total image of the country.

An extreme—or caricaturising—example of the Victorians' way to let decorative art and fashion represent Japan can be found in W. S. Gilbert and A. Sullivan's most successful opera, The Mikado (1885). The success of this show owed much to the "Japanese Village", as G. Smith wrote as follows:

> A Japanese Exhibition had just opened in Knightsbridge, including a full-scale native village complete with inhabitants. Londoners flocked to the event, intrigued by the exotic visitors, their novel dress, customs and ceremonies.
>
> Gilbert thus had ready-made publicity for a Japanese show of his own, as well as technical advice on how to amount it, and he took advantage of both. A first-night reviewer correctly linked The Mikado to the wave of Oriental interest.... (30)

Japanese staff from the "village" were employed to teach actresses how to dress, make up and walk in particularly Japanese way. What should be noted about this opera is that it was far from Japanese: the plot of the opera was based on the British theatrical tradition. The well-known comment by G.K. Chesterton is quoted by Smith. Smith writes:

> Since its opening, however, there has been a certain amount of controversy as to how 'Japanese' it really is. G. K. Chesterton stated one position forthrightly when he declared: 'There is not, the whole length of The Mikado, a single joke that is a joke against Japan. They are all...jokes against England, or that Western civilization which an Englishman knows best in England.' And more pithily, 'The Mikado is not a picture of Japan; but it is a Japanese picture.' (141)

Characters in The Mikado were played by British actors and actresses, and the point is that they were claimed to be and recognised as "Japanese" only because of their fashion familiar on Japanese decorative artefacts. Here are the opening lines:

> If you want to know who we are, / We are gentlemen of Japan;
> We are gentlemen of Japan; / On many a vase and jar—
> On many a screen and fan, / We figure in lively paint:
> Our attitude's queer and quaint— / You're wrong if you think it ain't, oh!

* * *

One important characteristic of the late Victorian Japanese craze was that it transcended the ongoing fragmentation of culture. There was common understanding of "Japan" which was available to everyone. This gave British Japonisme great dynamism, but at the expense of aesthetic values.

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