

Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Popular Image of Japan

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Although critics often mention Oscar Wilde's (1854–1900) appreciation of Japanese art, his representations of Japan have been a rarely discussed matter. Eugenio Donato, for instance, notes the novel nature of Wilde's use of Japan, but the novelty he finds is not discussed in the general context of Victorian Japonisme. Donato writes of Wilde's "The Decay of Lying" (1891), "The first systematic treatment I know of which relates the problem of form to nature and uses the example of Japan is the extraordinary dialogue of Oscar Wilde entitled 'The Decay of Lying'" (52). Donato pays attention to Wilde's interest in Japan as "a dream of a representation without an effect" (52), rather than as an exotic entity, and it can still be studied in relation to contemporary "Orientalism" culture. The late-nineteenth century saw numerous examples of representing Japan and one point to be noted is that one should not conflate it Wilde's Japan with the Victorian popular image of it. What should be examined here is Wilde's interaction with the general trend and the unique nature of his representations of Japan.

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Victorian people's perception of Japan can be understood in terms of their racial anxiety. In the late nineteenth century, British colonial ambition was frustrated from time to time, and people were experiencing several crises in Asia. The Indian Mutiny broke out in 1857 and in China, violent struggle had been going on since the first Opium War (1840–1842). The tension was fortified by a prospect of economic decline. Britain's number one position was being lost from the 1870s onwards when Germany and the U.S.A. took over as dominant economic powers. Under such circumstances, people's preoccupation with racial difference was made stronger, and their sense of threat was reflected in representations of the East in various forms of literature.

In such a situation, British people's views of Japan appeared more favourable than those of India and China, and this was because they had much less political struggle with Japan. In fact, a new relationship had just started between the two nations when Japan abandoned its self-imposed seclusion policy in the 1850s. While China—which was often compared with Japan then—was rebellious against Westerners' rule, Japan was, in Elisa Evett's words, "flattered Westerners by embracing Western ways,

embarking on a program of Westernization” (112). William G. Aston, in “Japan” (1872), wrote that “[w]ith the assistance of English skill and English hands, many public works had been accomplished” (495) in Japan, and William Dilke mentioned Britain’s “great influence in Japan” (432). Japan was regarded as a follower of Britain which “aspire[d] to play in the far East” (*Times*, 23 Nov. 1892) the English role. As a result, Japan in the Victorian mind was established as an idyllic country, and Evett argues that, “[h]ad the trade relations with Japan been fraught with the difficulties that accompanied the West’s commercial and religious assaults on China, the idyllic image of Japan would have faded” (112).

One significant reason why Japan was perceived as an admirably romantic country was that people obtained a large amount of knowledge of Japan through artefacts exported from the country. British museums were positive in collecting Japanese art works, and their attitude suggested the Victorian’s general admiration for Japanese decorative art. The great craze for Japanese art in Victorian Britain started at the International Exhibition in 1862 and a number of important books on Japanese art were published: they were Rutherford Alcock’s (1809–1897) *Art and Art Industry in Japan* (1878); Christopher Dresser’s (1834–1904) *Japan, its architecture, art and art manufactures* (1880); G. Ashdown Audsley’s (1838–1925) *The Ornamental Arts of Japan* (1882 & 1884), to name a few. This reflects how much Japanese art attracted the Victorian public. The 1880s saw a climax of the Victorian craze for Japan. After Japan had put an end to its self-imposed seclusion policy in 1854, information about the country flooded into Britain, especially after 1868, the year of the Meiji Restoration and plenty of objects were imported from Japan to Britain. Inside the “Japanese Court” of the Exhibition, 623 items of Japanese art—prints, bronzes, porcelains lacquer works and so on—were displayed (Sato & Watanabe 19). After the Exhibition, some of the exhibited objects were bought and sold by Farmer and Rogers of Regent Street. Another shop, called the Oriental Warehouse, also dealt in Japanese curiosities, and Liberty’s Department Store was founded in 1875 by Arthur Lasenby Liberty, one of the employees of the Oriental Warehouse. By the time Wilde settled in London, those major Oriental shops were frequented by artistic people. Liberty’s shop dealt in a substantial number of Japanese objects and was frequented by famous artists, as testified by Edward William Godwin’s (1833–1886) article, “Afternoon Strolls” (*The Architect* 23 Dec. 1876):

There was quite a crowd when we arrived. A distinguished traveller had button-holed the obliging proprietor in one corner; a well-known baronet, waiting to do the same, was trifling with some feather dusting brushes; two architects of well known names were posing an attendant in another corner with awkward questions; three distinguished painters with their wives blocked up the staircase... (363)

As Elizabeth Aslin informs, in the 1880s, “[e]very mantelpiece in every enlightened household bore at least one Japanese fan, parasols were used as summer firescreens, popular magazines and ball programmes were printed in an asymmetrical semi-Japanese style and asymmetry of form and ornament

spread to pottery, porcelain and furniture” (779).

As a number of critics find, the most notable early admirers of Japanese art were architect–designers with a Gothic Revival Background. It has been often argued that Japan was admired in association with the European medieval past by William Burges (1827–1881) and other Gothic revivalists. Burges, for example, wrote in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1882): “Truly the Japanese Court is the real medieval court of the Exhibition.” In fact, this point was also found in writings by Rutherford Alcock who had selected those artefacts: for example, in *International Exhibition, 1862. Catalogue of Works of Industry and Art Sent from Japan* (1862), 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, they admired “Japanese ornament for the conditions which they believed produced it” (784). Although, as Grace Fox reminds us, “[t]he two island empires [had] little in common” (3), people tended to compare Japan to the British feudal past, and this can be understood in Edward W. Said’s words. Said writes as follows:

One tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things. If the mind must suddenly deal with what it takes to be a radically new form of life—as Islam appeared to Europe in the early Middle Ages—the response on the whole is conservative and defensive. (*Orientalism* 58–59)

While “Islam is judged to be a fraudulent new version of some previous experience, in this case Christianity” (59), as Said continues, Japan reminded people of their pre–industrial past. Furthermore, this romantic and idyllic view of Japan was fortified by the Japanese themselves, through Exhibition catalogues prepared by Japanese authorities, and as Anna Jackson points out, this made Japan different from Said’s “Orient” which “was...not Europe’s interlocutor, but its silent Other” (“*Orientalism Reconsidered*” 17). Jackson takes account of Said’s argument about power and knowledge and emphasises Japan’s active participation in intercultural affairs with the West. Referring to Japanese participation in the Philadelphia International Exhibition of 1876, she comments:

The Japanese produced an English catalogue which spoke directly to Western preconceptions, reinforcing the West’s preferred image of Japan, not the reality.... If knowledge is power, then the rivalry between Britain and America at Philadelphia over ‘ownership’ of Japan was, at least in part, negated by the fact that Japan had the knowledge and knew how to manipulate it.

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One can recognise Wilde's populist desire in his use of Japan. Wilde was a customer of popular Oriental curio shops and was known to possess Japanese prints and accessories, and his interpretation of Japan was based on his appreciation of Japanese art. During his lecture tour in America, he wrote to Frances Richards on the 16th of May, 1882, as follows:

...I will be in Japan, sitting under an almond tree, drinking amber-coloured tea out of a blue and white cup, and contemplating a decorative landscape. *(Letters 119)*

He also wrote to Mrs. George Lewis on the 3rd of June:

I feel an irresistible desire to wander, and to go to Japan, where I will pass my youth, sitting under an almond tree in white blossom, drinking amber tea out of a blue cup, and looking at a landscape without perspective. *(Letters 120)*

In these letters, Wilde represented Japan in a way familiar to Victorian people, referring implicitly to popular Japanese woodblock prints, and then he seems to have been conscious of the contemporary popular literary culture in mentioning his future trip to Japan. He stated his hope to go to Japan when interviewed by *The Atlanta Constitution* (3/7/1882):

In Japan I intend to study the method and the education of their ordinary artisans and to try and understand how it is that every ordinary Japanese workman has got this delicacy of hand, this feeling of beauty and this perfectly masterful power of design which are characteristics of their work. *(Interviews and Recollections 96)*

What Wilde planned and explained in the interview was already done by a number of people in Britain. By the 1880s, people were looking for more substantial knowledge of Japan than before. While Burges, early in the 1860s, imagined Japan from the "Japanese court," later authors made more practical efforts to try to understand Japan and the Japanese often in terms of their art tradition. A number of them visited and witnessed Japan themselves. *Art and Art Industries in Japan* (1878) was published by Rutherford Alcock, who stayed in Japan from 1858 till 1864 as the first British diplomatic representative. He discussed various branches of Japanese art, and admired "the unrivalled excellence of Art Industries" (202). In fact, British people increasingly travelled in Japan after the Meiji Restoration. Some successful books were published in the 1880s from these experiences: Isabella Bird's (1831–1904) *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* and Basil Hall Chamberlain's (1850–1935) *The Classical Poetry of the Japanese*, both published in 1880, for instance. Travel books were so popular then that even books by art specialists were sometimes styled in this way, as in the case of Edward J. Reed's (1830–1906) and Christopher Dresser's books, both titled *Japan*. In Reed's book, *Japan: its History, Tradition and Religions*, vol.II (1880), the art-workers of pre-Restoration Japan were favourably associated with craftsmen of medieval

Europe. Another critic, Christopher Dresser, published a comprehensive study of Japanese decorative art, *Japan: Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufactures* (1882) after visiting the country in 1876–1877. He often related Japanese art with its culture and discussed Japanese art and “honest workmanship” in relation to the Japanese traditional mind such as Shintoism. It was at the time when Japanese travel books enjoyed a large audience that Wilde thought of publishing a book on Japan himself.

Wilde’s aspiration for popularity can be detected also in his representation of a Japanese girl in “*Fantasies Decoratives: Le Panneau*” (1887). This verse began with the following stanza:

With pale green nails of polished jade

Pulling the leaves of pink and pearl.

There stands a little ivory girl

Under a rose–tree’s dancing shade.

(*Poems* 254)

The verse was originally titled “*Impression Japonais: Rose et Ivoire*” (Mason 102), and in a letter to Bernard Partridge, Wilde wrote that “the girl under the rose tree is Japanese” (*Letters* 206). Wilde’s “little ivory girl” may have reminded people of the popular “three little maids from school” appearing in Gilbert and Sullivan’s most successful opera, *The Mikado* (1885). As Geoffrey Smith writes, “[a]waiting their entrance, the three little maids trembled in the wings like real–life schoolgirls, but their trio was stunning success, encored three times” (134). The three girls were the most popular image of Japanese women at that time, and Wilde probably tried to take advantage of their popularity.

Wilde’s “little ivory girl”, as well as “three little maids from school”, can be understood in terms of a Victorian stereotyped image of Japanese women. Lord Elgin’s mission to Japan brought about a fantasy of the male traveller in Japan, as found in a verse titled “*The Joys of Japan*” (*Punch* 13 Nov. 1858). Its opening stanza was:

How bright are the dreams of poetical fancies,

About ‘bowers of roses’ and ‘gardens of bliss!’

But we feel while we listen they are but romances

Of a world which exceedingly differs from this;

But whilst we here sigh for such pleasures ideal,

Lord Elgin is surely a fortunate man,

To have found out a land all substantial and real,

And fraught with such joys as the joys of Japan.

In the same issue of *Punch* was a cartoon of a man surrounded by six young women taking care of him, with a caption: “And by all means let us have Japanese Manners and Customs here”, and a passage from a *Times* article (2 Nov. 1858) was quoted:

The traveller, wearied with the noonday heat, need never be at a loss to find rest and refreshment; stretched upon the softest and cleanest of matting, imbibing the most delicately

flavoured tea, inhaling through a short pipe and fragrant tobacco of Japan, he resigns himself to the ministrations of a bevy of fair damsels, who glide rapidly and noiselessly about, the most zealous and skilful of attendants.

When Rudyard Kipling wrote in “From Sea to Sea” (1889), “I blew smoke through my nose, and at the ring of *Mikado* maidens over against the golden-brown bearskin rug” (44), he seems to have echoed the passage above and his representation of Japanese women was totally different from the case of Indian women. In his stories such as “Beyond the Pale” (1888) and “Without Benefit of Clergy” (1890), it was suggested that a love affair between an Englishman and an Indian woman was a taboo because the Indian women’s sexuality was harmful. As John McBratney argues, “[i]t is no accident that none of Kipling’s tales of interracial love results in the birth of a child who survives” (53), because they are “both Indian and female” and “doubly ‘Other’”(53). In contrast, stereotyped Japanese women were described to be devoid of such dangerous sexuality. A part of the reason why Japanese women were described as such seems to have concerned the emergence of the “New Woman” in Victorian Britain.

The late nineteenth century saw significant movements and changes about Women’s Rights. John Stuart Mill’s (1806–1873) *The Subjection of Women*, a classic work on the emancipation of women, was published in 1869. The Married Woman’s Property Act was enforced in 1882 and women’s suffrage was campaigned for. The “New Women”, who were familiar figures in the press and novels in the late eighties and the nineties, refused to conform to the Victorian conventional idea of womanliness and sought for independence of and equality with the male sex. The “semi-angelic sweetness” —mentioned in Edwin Arnold’s (1832–1904) *Japonica* (1891, 103)—of Japanese women is likely to have reflected people’s nostalgia for the Angel in the House, the popular Victorian image of the ideal woman, who is devoted to her husband.

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Wilde aspired for popularity in his use of Japan, but it is not to say that he intended to be a follower of the Victorian tradition. One point is that it was James McNeill Whistler (1834–1900) that he tried to persuade to illustrate his book on Japan. When he saw a possible commercial opportunity in Japan, he wrote to Whistler (June 1882):

...when will you come to Japan? Fancy the book, I to write it, you to illustrate it. We will be rich. (Letters 121)

Although Whistler’s “Oriental” paintings, such as *The Leizen of the Six Marks* (1864) and *La Princesse du Pay de la Porcelaine* (1863–1864), had made him a well-known Japonist painter in Britain, he had become a controversial figure in the British art society by the 1880s. His lawsuit against John Ruskin (1819–1900) was a well-known fact among Victorians. Ruskin was critical of Whistler’s *Nocturne in*

Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket (1875) which was influenced by *Hiroshige* prints, and wrote in *Fors Clavigera* (July 1877), “I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face”(160). In fact, Wilde himself gave an ironic comment on the painting in “The Grosvenor Gallery” (1877):

These pictures [*Nocturne in Black and Gold* and *Nocturne and Blue and Silver*] are certainly worth looking at for about as long as one looks at a real rocket, that is, for somewhat less than a quarter of a minute. (*Miscellanies* 18)

It seems that Wilde intended to publish a book on Japan which would be unique, not traditional, with Whistler’s illustrations.

Also a subversive element can be found in Wilde’s representations of Japanese people. Influence of French decadence can be detected in descriptions of Japanese painters in “*Fantasies Décoratives: Le Panneau*” as well as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, revised in 1891). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* echoed J. K. Huysmans’ (1848–1907) *A Rebours* (1884), which was suggested as the protagonist’s favourite book: “For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray/For Love of the King* 204). In *A Rebours*, Japanese art was used to give a great impact in the following scene:

Il [Des Esseintes] choisit dans une collection japonaise un dessin représentant un essaim de fleurs partant en fusées d’une mince tige, l’emporta chez un joaillier, esquissa un bordur qui enfermerait ce bouquet dans un cadre ovale, et il fit savoir, au lapidaire stupéfié que les feuilles, que les pétales de chacune de ces fleurs, seraient exécutés en pierreries et montés dans l’écaille même de la bête. (64–65)

In the opening passage of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the narrator referred to “those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray/For Love of the King* 1). The colour jade was associated with decadence here. As Karl Beckson explains, “[i]n the 1890s, the image of the green carnation emerged as a symbol of Decadence” (122). Wilde gave a subtitle, “A Study in Green”, to “Pen, Pencil and Poison” (1889), a critical memoir of a poet, painter and poisoner, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (1894–1847), who “had that curious love of green, which in individuals is always the sign of a subtle artistic temperament, and in nations is said to denote a laxity, if not a decadence of morals” (*Intentions and the Soul of Man* 68). The imagery of decadent Japan was also suggested in the description of the “little ivory girl” in “*Fantasies Décoratives: Le Panneau*”. The phrase “With pale green nails of polished jade” was repeated in the poem, and here the innocent girl was tinted with decadent connotation. Wilde’s “little ivory girl” was diverted from the Victorian tradition of Japanese women, who were innocent and devoted.

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While Wilde tried to appropriate the general trend of Victorians' "Japan", he added a subversive nature to it in his writings. Wilde's avant-garde elitism was set side by side with his populist desire.

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