

Japanism in America

by Gail Leggio

The 1854 Treaty of Kanagawa, negotiated by U. S. Navy Commander Matthew Perry, opened Japan to the West after more than two centuries of isolation. Japanese artifacts became available just at the moment when the international exposition was becoming a craze. Mixing trade goods and high art, these displays often exacerbated the dissatisfaction of many observers with what they saw as the shoddy soullessness of mainstream design. (The furniture and fabrics at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851 so appalled William Morris that he began making his own.) Japanese art and design objects figured prominently in expositions throughout Europe and the United States over the next decades, notably in the Paris Exposition of 1867 and the Centennial Exhibition (1876) in Philadelphia. The juxtaposition of Japanese objects—handcrafted, based on an aesthetic of sophisticated simplicity—with the machine-made clutter of the products of Western industry was a thunderbolt. The design-reform movement found a crucial idea resource, and painters found inspiration in the Japanese printmakers' radical reconception of pictorial space. Paradoxically, a traditionalist, conservative culture provided a major impetus toward modernism.

The Impressionists became avid collectors, and Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) purchased several hundred woodblock prints, which were cheap at the time; reproductions were being made specifically for the Western market. Van Gogh started buying in Antwerp in 1885 and continued collecting when he moved to Paris the following year. He copied two prints by Ando Hiroshige (1797–1858), *Plum Tree in Bloom* and *Bridge in the Rain* (both 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam). The copies are faithful yet idiosyncratic. Van Gogh responded to and exaggerated the originals' keyed-up palette, adding bright “frames” with freely drawn Japanese characters and using tactile brushwork to mimic the texture of the prints.

Two American expatriates, Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) and James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), were in the forefront of what the French called *japonisme*, a term coined by the art critic Philippe Burty in 1876. Cassatt and Whistler were featured, along with an intelligent selection of other artists, in “Japanism in America,” an early summer show at Debra Force Fine Art in New York City. The works on view were small in scale and destined for a domestic setting, but this modesty belies the revolutionary impact of the movement on the course of Western art. Japanese art helped liberate artists from the epic size and grandiose schemes demanded by the Salon. Cassatt accompanied Edgar Degas to an exhibition of Japanese ukiyo-e prints at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1889. She responded with a set of ten aquatints—two of which, *The Bath* and



Mary Cassatt, *The Lamp*, 1890–91 COURTESY DEBRA FORCE FINE ART, NEW YORK

The Lamp, were featured in the exhibition—that trace a woman’s daily routine. In *The Lamp* (1890–91) the prominent fan and the erotic attention to the nape of the neck subtly allude to the Japanese taste for kimono-clad beauties. More importantly, Cassatt has thoroughly assimilated the lessons of the great print-maker Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806) and thereby taken a confident stride toward modernism. A bourgeois Western interior has been flattened out into an asymmetrical arrangement of overlapping shapes, and the picture plane is no longer a window into illusionistic space but a deft balance of pattern and void.

Another image of a woman in an interior takes a different tack, less radical

but equally cogent. The model for John White Alexander's (1856–1915)¹ *The Butterfly* (c. 1904) is probably Evelyn Nesbit, the centerpiece of a scandal that climaxed when railroad tycoon Harry K. Thaw shot architect Stanford White in 1906. But this dynamically painted composition is less a portrait than a celebration of the Aesthetic Movement. The flushed model wears a loose-fitting, Asian-inspired robe; the poppy-strewn green drapery elicits bravura brushwork from the artist. The strong diagonal of her extended arm is a Japanese compositional device, and the flitting butterfly is a staple of Eastern iconography, but the final result is an example of all-American dash. Such images of upscale bohemianism were a staple of fin-de-siècle American art. Robert Frederick Blum's pastel *A Scheme in Reds and Greys* (c. 1883–84), with its fashionably Whistlerian title, evokes the studio milieu by concentrating on an attractive young American woman in a kimono, expertly flirting with a fan. Kimonos, fans, screens, textiles and porcelain were de rigueur furnishings in the studios of artists such as William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), who exploited the artist's space as showroom and showplace, rather than as humble workshop.

The most spectacular Japanese-inspired interior ever conceived by an American was undoubtedly Whistler's *Peacock Room* (1876–77). Created for the Liverpool ship owner Frederick Leyland and installed in the dining room of his London home, the room was purchased in 1904 by Charles Lang Freer, whose collection of Japanese ceramics and prints forms the nucleus of the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where the *Peacock Room* remains on permanent display. The creation of this lavish design scheme is a saga in itself.² The first chapter belongs to an underrated figure in the design-reform movement, the British architect and metalworker Thomas Jeckyll (1827–81), whose career is being showcased this year at the Bard Center in New York City.³ While he started off as a Gothic Revival architect, Jeckyll developed into a master of the Anglo-Japanese idiom, especially in metalwork, and was instrumental in popularizing the sunflower as one of the Aesthetic Movement's signature motifs. At Leyland's request Jeckyll took on the project of redecorating the dining room at 49 Prince's Gate, turning the room into a setting for a superb collection of blue-and-white porcelain, with walls covered in antique Dutch leather and spindled walnut shelves. Whistler's *Rose and Silver: La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine* hung above the mantelpiece. But Whistler went further and transformed the project into what he called *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, painting peacocks and peacock-feather patterns on every surface. The result is theatrical Orientalism, as inauthentic and completely exhilarating as Leon Bakst's decor for Diaghilev.

Whistler wasn't usually so over-the-top. He fully assimilated the formal lessons of the Japanese aesthetic, as witnessed by the reticence and economy of his Thames paintings, notably the evocative *Nocturne in Blue and Gold, Old Battersea Bridge* (c. 1872–75). Artists responded to Hiroshige's woodblock prints

in highly personal ways. While van Gogh intensified the palette, using color expressionistically, Whistler bled most of the color out, moving the image toward abstraction. The Whistler works at “Japanism in America” were limited to a pen-and-ink-and-wash study of an Asian object, *Large Cylindrical Vase with Hollow Neck* (1876–78), and several masterful etchings. Harbor scenes—allowing for lively interaction between nature and commerce—had been popularized by the Dutch in the seventeenth century. Whistler brings to the genre, as seen in the fine example here, a new subjective note, at one lyrical and modern.

This intelligent show uncovered some relatively obscure artists and made a strong case for unexpected Japanese leanings in better-known Americans. Like Whistler, Adele McGinnis Herter (1869–1946) often employed a signature emblem derived from the Japanese printmaker’s seal. Unlike Whistler, she actually traveled to Japan, after studying with William Adolphe Bouguereau at the Académie Julian in Paris. Her husband, Albert Herter, son of the celebrated New York cabinetmaker and himself an artist, would also be influenced by Japan, which they visited on their honeymoon. Adele Herter’s small vertical canvas *Allium* revealed her flair for combining the Western tradition of botanical illustration with the Japanese-screen aesthetic, specifically the eighteenth-century Rimpa School. *Allium* presents the feathery spikes of an American plant against a luminous silver-leaf ground. When Adele Herter painted the murals at the family estate, El Mirasol, in Santa Barbara, California, she depicted local plants on aluminum leaf glazed with dull gold. Frank Lloyd Wright considered it “one of the most beautiful wall coverings in the world.”⁴

Wright, one of the twentieth century’s most innovative architects, integrated Japanese elements into his all-American Prairie School style. He was a close friend of Ernest Fennelosa, foremost American expert on Japanese culture, and knew the lectures of Edward S. Morse, author of the highly influential *Japanese Homes and Their Gardens* (1886). Shingle Style architects and Arts and Crafts furniture makers had already embraced the Japanese house aesthetic—harmonious asymmetry, respect for the texture of natural materials, fluid interior spaces—when Wright started treating walls as screens. American builders adopted low-ceilinged elegance and intuitively grasped the common denominator between the Japanese house and the vernacular American cottage, finding a way out of the grandiloquent cul-de-sac of the pseudo-European marble piles littering Newport, Rhode Island.

The international cross-currents among the United States, Japan and Europe are often complex. The American Renaissance artist John La Farge (1835–1910), Tiffany’s only real rival in stained-glass design, traveled to Japan in the company of Henry Adams and lectured frequently on Japanese culture. La Farge’s study of Japanese art, published in 1868, was the first written in English. Visiting Tokyo, Yokohama and Nikko in 1886, La Farge used photographs and on-site watercolor sketches to preserve his memories. When



Theodore Robinson, *In the Orchard*, c. 1891 COURTESY DEBRA FORCE FINE ART, NEW YORK

he returned to New York, he executed some remarkable paintings, including a watercolor-and-gouache, *The Great Statue of Amida Buddha at Kamakura, Known as the Dalibutsu, from the Priest's Garden*, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. La Farge, a devout Catholic open to many kinds of spirituality, captures both the monumentality and the serenity of the fifty-foot-high bronze, cast in 1252. *Nocturne* (c. 1885), another watercolor at the Metropolitan, is a poetic close-up flower still life that suggests an unexpected link between Asian floral art and Georgia O'Keeffe.

La Farge worked on a decorative arts project for Cornelius Vanderbilt in New York in 1881 with the American Impressionist painter Theodore

Robinson (1852–96); both were Japanese-print enthusiasts. Robinson had first been introduced to Japanese prints by Whistler on an 1879 trip to Italy, but his most significant conduit was Claude Monet. Spending summers in an artists' colony in Giverny between 1887 and 1892, Robinson had access to Monet's collection of ukiyo-e prints and eventually acquired thirty-two examples for himself. The Robinson painting in the Debra Force exhibition, *In the Orchard* (c. 1891), seems at first glance a sun-dappled Impressionist cliché, the young woman in white in a garden. But the composition is given punch not only by the freedom of the brushwork but also by the Japanese-print-inspired daring of a boldly abstracted serpentine tree trunk.

American landscapists seeking to move beyond the florid sublime of the Hudson River School responded to the Japanese way of approaching nature in a variety of ways. Arthur Wesley Dow (1857–1922), who worked at the Pont-Aven artist colony alongside Paul Gauguin and other Symbolists, is best known as a teacher; Georgia O'Keeffe was one of his students. At the "Japanism" exhibit his color woodcut *Marsh Creek* (c. 1914) depicts natural elements in such a radically stylized way that it could pass for a work by a Japanese master. The Rookwood pottery tiles displayed nearby made an illuminating comparison. Dow was once keeper of Japanese art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Japanese influence on landscapists was not always so blatant. Julian Alden Weir's (1852–1919) *Loading Ice* (1894) has a roughhewn grace, uncovering the painterly possibilities of an outdoor working environment. Weir was a resident of the fashionable Tenth Street Studio building in New York City, alongside William Merritt Chase, Theodore Robinson and John Henry Twachtman (1853–1902). Two terrific pictures by Twachtman at Debra Force demonstrated how Japanese principles could be applied to Western subjects and mediums. Twachtman simplifies forms and exploits negative space, allowing the texture of the working ground to assert itself. In the spare yet atmospheric composition *The Harbor* (c. 1881) oil paint is thinly applied, especially at the horizon, where the canvas shows through. In the pastel-on-board *The Hillside* (c. 1889–91) the brownish ground reads convincingly both as ochre earth and sunlit cloud. Sketchy blue pastel roughly indicates sky above the high horizon line, while strokes of white and green selectively pick out grasses and wildflowers. Twachtman uses a similar device, isolating brushstroke reeds in the foreground, in his most Japanese—or Whistlerian—canvas, *Argues-la-Bataille* (1885, Metropolitan Museum of Art).

While most of the images in the exhibition dated from around the turn of the century, two later works documented the persistence of the Japanese aesthetic. Charles Burchfield's (1893–1967) *View Southwest of Emporium (Village by a Mountainside)* (1941) infuses a spot about forty miles from Buffalo, New York, with a rapturous pantheism. This watercolor fuses the quintessentially American reverence for wilderness with an elegant abstraction derived from Eastern models. There were also two striking watercolors by John Marin

(1870–1953), *Black River Valley* and *Wave and Rock* (1934). Best known for his loosely exuberant seascapes and urban skylines, Marin is not usually associated with Japanese art, but his characteristic balancing act between mimesis and abstraction makes perfect sense in this context.⁵

The fad for all things Japanese expressed itself in a variety of ways. For a look at the cultural impact of this milestone in the history of taste, consider W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's operetta *The Mikado* (1885), with its mix of admiration and parody, and Mike Leigh's movie on the creation of the work, *Topsy-Turvy* (2000). Exotic costumes and paraphernalia could be mere decor, descended from the Rococo mania for Chinoiserie, or a sure indication of avant-garde taste. But the flattening and foreshortening of Japanese prints would have enormous impact on the rethinking of the picture plane in the twentieth century, architecture and designs would find fresh models for reform, and the Romantic landscapist's pantheism would be translated into a new, modernist key.

DEBRA FORCE FINE ART is located at 14 East 73rd Street, New York, NY 10021. Telephone (212) 734–3636. On the Web at www.debraforce.com. The Bard Graduate Center is located at 18 West 86th Street, New York, NY. Telephone (212) 501–3023. On the Web at www.bgc.bard.edu.

NOTES

1. Sarah J. Moore, "John White Alexander (1856–1915): In Search of the Decorative," Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate School of the City University of New York, 1982.
2. See Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
3. "Thomas Jeckyll: Architect and Designer" continues through October 19, 2003, at the Bard Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture. The catalogue, by Susan Weber Soros and Catherine Arbuthnott, is published in collaboration with Yale University Press.
4. Patricia Trenton, ed., *Independent Spirits: Women Painters of the American West, 1890–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
5. It is important to remember that the Japanese printmakers—Utamaro, Hiroshige and Hokusai (1760–1849)—were avant-garde artists. For all their rapturous chronicling of the seasons, they were equally fascinated by the goings-on in contemporary Edo (now Tokyo), the "floating world" of everyday existence.