

Japan and the Cross-Pollination of Art

Cultures change depending on the era and politics. Sometimes they influence and even fuse with each other. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Western world started incorporating parts of Japanese culture, creating an artistic movement known as “Japonism” in Europe. We asked Akiko Mabuchi, director general of the National Museum of Western Art, about this phenomenon.

YUKIKO ISHIKAWA

Would you please give us an overview of “Japonism”?

At international expositions around the world, including the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris, Japan introduced various traditional arts, crafts, and goods made of silk, with the aim of increasing exports. The exhibits also included *ukiyo-e* and other pieces that caught the attention of Westerners, and European artists began incorporating what they felt was the singular essence of these pieces in their creations. For instance, *ukiyo-e* were not seen as particularly significant back in their

country of origin, but were perceived in the West as unprecedented modes of expression and a glimpse into a new world. This gave birth to the art movement known as Japonism.

Europe had maintained its traditions since the Renaissance, and until that time European nations had never really seriously adopted foreign influences into their local cultures. However, the progress of industrialism and subsequent changes in society at the beginning of the nineteenth century made it clear that it was no longer possible to go on by simply holding on to tradition. There was a spreading

Akiko Mabuchi, director general of the National Museum of Western Art





Elegant patterned paper designs

sense of hopelessness and an understanding that something had to change.

It was at this moment that Japanese arts and crafts came on the scene. Japanese visitors who saw the heavily Japonism-influenced Art Nouveau* designs at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris were reportedly surprised at how Japanese art was used in this new context.

It is well known that *ukiyo-e* art by Hokusai Katsushika (1760–1849) was very influential then. Were there any other strong influences?

In fact there were many pieces of art, including objects like folding screens and fans, picture books and patterned paper.

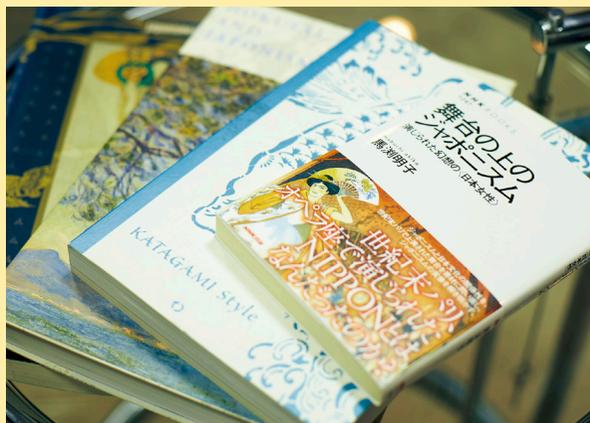
Patterned paper, made by binding layers of Japanese *washi* paper using persimmon juice and carving it with a small knife, was traditionally used to dye various patterns onto cloth. The resulting designs are intricate and exquisite. As Western clothing replaced Japanese clothing, however, many of these patterns were destroyed. The Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna has over ten thousand such artifacts, and even more were exported to other countries and used as design samples for wallpaper, textiles and crafts. The artist Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) even used them to inspire his work.

Such a phenomenon was closely linked to economic strength and political power. As such, the Louvre, Berlin and Metropolitan art museums, which had a lot of wealth at the time, feature large

collections of Japanese arts and crafts. It seems inevitable that culture flows in this way to those who have power. Art pieces from Japan of that era, which at the time were not thought of highly within Japan, still exist because Westerners saw them as having value and collected them. I think it was an amazing act of preservation and care on their part.

Do you have any more examples of art that have influenced other countries?

Of course. The three-dimensional effect and techniques of Western art were considered astonishing in Japan, and by incorporating them *yoga*—Japanese Western-style art—was born. In the Edo era (1603–1867), Chinese culture and Dutch culture entered via the island of Dejima in Nagasaki Prefecture, and as such Edo art became more cosmopolitan.



Books about Japonism

Now that crossing international borders has become much less of a hurdle—compared to the nineteenth century—the flow of people and things has grown much more intense, and that of course strengthens the influence of art from other countries. It is completely possible that Japanese art will cross over to other countries and lead to new art being created. It's hard to tell how much Japanese art will evolve, but I hope to keep an eye on these changes. 📖

* An art style that spread through various European countries from the late nineteenth century until the early twentieth century. Taking inspiration from plants and forms found in nature, it is distinguished by its use of organic curves and decorative surfaces.