

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Linda Gertner Zatlin

book review of

Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and nineteenth-century Japan by Ayako Ono

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 4, no. 3 (Autumn 2005)

Citation: Linda Gertner Zatlin, book review of *Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and nineteenth-century Japan* by Ayako Ono, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 2005), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn05/japonisme-in-britain-whistler-menpes-henry-hornel-and-nineteenth-century-japan-by-ayako-ono>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



Ayako Ono

Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and Nineteenth-century Japan

London and New York: Routledge, Curzon, 2003.

Pages: xxi, 250; illustrations, bibliography and index.

ISBN: 0-415-29686-2

Hard cover: \$115.00

European *japonisme* has commanded attention during the past thirty-five years. Beginning in the 1970s, Dr. Gabriel Weisberg opened the field with his wide-ranging analyses, capping them in 1990 with a thorough annotated bibliography of scholarly work on *japonisme* that continues to be the point of embarkation for young scholars. His exhibitions and accompanying catalogues, from the 1975 *Japonisme: the Japanese Influence on French Art, 1854-1910*, for the Cleveland Museum of Art, to the recently opened (2004) *The Origins of L'Art Nouveau: The Bing Empire* for the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, continue to add to our knowledge. In contrast, outside of James McNeill Whistler, studied by American and French as well as British writers, there has been a paucity of scholarly studies of the influence of Japanese art in Britain during the last half of the nineteenth century. This relatively new subject for scholars boasts studies of E. W. Godwin, Arthur Lazenby Liberty, Christopher Dresser, and Aubrey Beardsley. Toshio Yokoyama's ground breaking publication, *Japan in the Victorian Mind* (London, 1987), explores the social effects of Japanese art and artifacts on English culture. There is wide room for studies of textiles, tableware, furniture, and interior design, fashion design, children's book illustration, graphic art, painting, and decorative art. British collectors of Japanese applied arts and those who purchased Japanese-influenced art and objects merit their own monographs.

Artists have been the prime object of scholarship, and Ayako Ono has studied four artists who worked in England: Whistler, Mortimer Menpes, an Australian, George Henry and Edward Atkinson Hornel, the latter two part of the artistic group known as the Glasgow Boys. Her purpose is "to consider how western artists understood and accepted Japanese art as a source of inspiration," a task she accomplishes primarily by examining their paintings (xvi). Ono's first chapter uses the lens of exhibitions of Japanese art and objects in Britain to focus on the manner in which a taste for this radically different art was built, and her brief survey of English artists and craftsmen who adopted facets of Japanese style and technique includes enough names and brief descriptions of English and Scottish artists, craftsmen, and merchants to whet the palate for more studies. Chapter Two belongs to a study of Whistler's *japonisme*, ground well trodden. But Ono brings a fresh—because it is a Japanese

—perspective to this material, and her deft analysis considers what Japanese techniques Whistler tried to adapt in his paintings and the degree to which he succeeded. Her most valuable contribution in this chapter, however, is her examination of Whistler's inclusion of Japanese objects in his work, and her relation of these objects to his "attempt to produce subjectless paintings" (66).

Among the artists Whistler influenced was Mortimer Menpes, and Chapter Three explores the combined influence of Whistler and European artists on one hand, and on the other, Menpes' encounter with Japanese art during his trips to that country. Like Whistler, Menpes did not understand Japanese painting techniques. Consequently, he merely imported trappings of Japanese art into his realistic paintings and graphics. But back in London after his second trip to Japan, he adventurously built a studio and home according to what he perceived as Japanese style, and decorated it with Japanese fittings. In this fascinating chapter, Ono discusses Menpes' studio-house; his acquaintance with the prominent Japanese painter Kawanabe Kyosai; as well as Menpes' photographs of Japanese subjects, and their relation to his subsequent work. Chapter Four takes up George Henry and Edward Atkinson Hornel. Like Menpes, they were interested enough in Japanese art to take a joint trip to Japan where they collected over 400 souvenir photographs (for export) of the type called *Yokohama Shashin*. In varying degrees these scenes of daily life influenced their art, Henry gaining a "genuine awareness of Japanese colour," while Hornel effectively used a "European manner to create his own original style when treating Japanese subject matter" (124, 129).

There are, in addition to these chapters, ten appendices that document the furnishings of Whistler's home on Tite Street; his collections of oriental porcelain, and blue and white china; Raphael Collin's (flavorlessly translated) recollections of the great Japanese art dealer, Tademasa Hayashi; a transcription of a supposed Japanese citizen's view of Commodore Perry's arrival in Japan; the 1888 London exhibition of 177 pieces of Menpes's work; the 1903 show of his collection of 265 works by Whistler; and the Yokohama Museum's forty-nine etchings by Menpes. Rounding out this group are Hornel's 9 February 1895 lecture on Japanese life and art, the 20 June 1894 interview of Henry on the same subject, a letter to Hornel, and a glossary of terms.

There are interesting sections of this book although the group of artists examined is somewhat eccentric. As mentioned above, Whistler has been much studied and his relation to Japanese art has been far from ignored; articles and books detailing his relation to Japanese prints continue to be published. This book would have been the place for Ono's particular contribution— the Japanese reaction to Whistler. Why is that subject omitted? Even the mention of a lack of contemporary Japanese sources would not merely have been helpful, it would chart the way for further studies. Furthermore, Whistler and Menpes worked in London, while Henry and Hornel were in Glasgow, but Ono presents no rationale for her selection of these four artists. Were there links among the four? Any correspondence? Were there other artists in the United Kingdom who came under the Japanese influence? Was it some other compelling, but unmentioned, reason? Or was it merely her residency at the Whistler Center that led to her choice? Moreover, while Ono presents much information, she is not guided by some of the larger questions. For example, was there a difference between Whistler and Menpes and the Scottish artists in their

acceptance of Japanese influence—in other words, regional differences? How did the shifts in the English attitude to things Japanese during the last half of the century affect their views? What do sales of these four artists' work tell us about *japonisme* in Britain? What part did Japanese artists working in Britain play in the phenomenon of *japonisme*? Most important is the lack of discussion of Japanese sources. With the exception of Whistler, these westerners met Japanese artists and photographers on their trips to Japan, as Ono documents. But a reader who threads through her mention of these meetings and therefore yearns to know what the Japanese art world thought of the three western artists, is greatly disappointed; that material is lacking—whether through lacunae in the records or the author's omission is not clear. At times, avenues of research are dead ends, and this book fails to document if those paths were even considered. Finally, abundant and inexcusable typographical errors stud the pages. Nonetheless, if the book is slight, the material is interesting—perhaps even more so in Japan where this study recently won Ayako Ono a prize.

Linda Gertner Zatlin
Professor of English
Morehouse College
lzatlin[at]morehouse.edu