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Elizabeth Fowler

book review of

*The Influence of Japanese Art on Design* by Hannah Sigur

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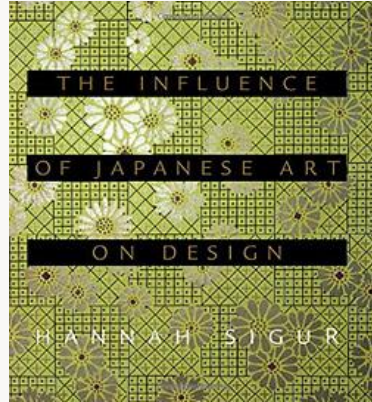
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Hannah Sigur,  
*The Influence of Japanese Art on Design*.  
Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2008.  
222 pp., 238 color ills.; bibliography; index.  
\$40.00 (hardcover)  
ISBN-13: 978-1-58685-749-3

In *Influence of Japanese Art on Design*, Hannah Sigur, a Western historian of Japanese art, examines not only *how* Japanese art influenced the West but also *why* it was so influential. Her book moves beyond the study of formal comparisons to examine the events, individuals, documents, and artifacts--both Western *and* Japanese--that were significant players in this historical narrative. As she explains in her prologue " [t]he story of Japanese influence ... is also one of a newly technological and newly international world in which disparate societies mingled in awkward tandem, each pursuing ambitions and seeking to remake itself in the face of rapid radical change" (9). In earlier studies, the Japanese, if they are even acknowledged as participants, are assigned them a fairly passive role.[1] The contribution of the Japanese was the work itself. As Sigur points out, however, the Japanese were far from passive. They actively participated in the dissemination of their goods, often tailoring them to western tastes, and sought to carefully control the image of Japan in the west. She also recognizes that westerners saw in Japan what they wanted to see, which often had little connection to reality. "[Japonisme] is ... a tale of Japanese and American talent, ambition, and vision; ... it is a romance of charming fantasy – an American daydream that the Japanese actively fomented, fueled on both sides by the lighter and darker aspects of human nature" (9).

Early scholarship on Japonisme--what Sigur consistently refers to as the "Japan Craze"--focused on how Japan influenced France, which in the nineteenth century, was the undisputed capital of the western art world.[2] Scholars, such as Siegfried Wichmann, were mainly interested in the influence of *ukiyo-e* on western painters such as Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Mary Cassatt, J. A. M. Whistler, and Vincent van Gogh. The decorative arts were not completely ignored, but given the hegemony of fine arts in art history, it is not surprising that scholars focused on two-dimensional formats and how the art of Japan helped western artists fully break from classicism, paving the way for modern innovations.[3] Eventually, scholars

took an interest in the influence of Japan in other areas of Europe as well as the United States. Many important works on Japonisme in the United States focused on architecture, especially the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>[4]</sup> With the recently renewed interest in design and the decorative arts, scholars, such as Sigur, have broadened the scope of Japonisme to include American applied and decorative arts as subjects worthy of independent inquiry.<sup>[5]</sup>

The most problematic aspect of the book is its title. Despite the absence of the word "American," for example, Sigur's study primarily traces developments in the United States. Also problematic is her use of the phrase "Japanese art." As Sigur herself points out, the term "fine art" was only introduced to the Japanese in 1873; the Japanese had no parallel terminology. "Over the course of two millennia," she explains, "[Japan's] visual culture had emerged a multifaceted and nuanced thing. Lacquers were lacquers; tea bowls were tea bowls; sword fittings were sword fittings; temple carvings were temple carvings" (52). In order to adapt to western standards that clearly distinguished between "fine" and "applied" arts, the Japanese would ultimately claim that everything they created was understood as art (53). The clear definition of for "art" is difficult as it historically meant different things to the Japanese than it did to westerners. It is curious that Sigur then includes this ambiguous term in the title of her book. The examples that she uses suggest that she does not mean "art" in the western sense, but without understanding the two different meanings, one could assume that her book is only examining the impact of Japanese "fine art" (*i.e.*, paintings) on American design, which is also problematic. "Design" is also a multi-faceted term which can mean everything from industrially produced goods to decorative arts, applied arts, and graphic arts, to crafts, interior design and architecture. Upon reading the book, however, it is obvious that Sigur does indeed mean "design" in its broadest sense, but perhaps it would have been more judicious to use a term such as "visual culture" instead.

Aside from the semantic issues with the title, Sigur's work is a notable contribution to scholarship on Japonisme as well as American decorative arts, Asian and Asian-American studies. It is meticulously researched, thorough, and, as mentioned above, demonstrates an important methodological advancement in this type of scholarship. It is organized into eight chapters: the first four are organized along a specific theme or topic; the latter four around specific media, such as glass, textiles, metals, and ceramics.

In Chapter 1, "Strange Dreams and Strange Awakenings: *The Great Face to Face*," Sigur begins by providing an historical overview, detailing the early contacts between the Japanese and the Dutch, the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853, and how the 1854 treaty with the Americans contributed to the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the establishment of Meiji authority. In 1871, the Japanese began sending missions, the most famous of which was the Iwakura Mission, to Europe and the United States to gather information on modern governments, education, and production models. Ironically, the Japanese looked to the west as a model for their own industrialization while Americans sought out Japanese goods that bespoke an idyllic, pre-industrial society. The Japanese government needed money and it realized that in selling the material remnants of the past, they could fund their own modernization and industrialization. To this end, the Japanese government established Kiritsu Koshu Kaisha, an export company (1873–1891) that had offices in Japan and the United States, which sold high-quality wares. There were also private endeavors, such as Yamanaka & Co., which sold not only antiques to Americans, but also designed and marketed a line of western-

style furniture with Japanese motifs. The Japanese, due to the industrialization of textile production, were also able to create high-quality, mass-produced, affordable materials for the western market. Sigur argues that the Japanese "colluded" in creating this "mixed image of Japan" that was mutually exclusive: a traditional culture which produced high-quality, hand-made wares versus an industrializing nation which could provide exotic or "foreign" goods in high quantities at affordable prices (21).

Chapter 2, "Arts and Agendas on the Public Stage: *The World's Fairs*" details how the Japanese cultivated and controlled their international image. In 1862, Sir Rutherford Alcock, Britain's first consul to Japan, organized a "Japanese Court" for the London Exhibition of Industry and Art. In 1867 the Japanese also exhibited at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, where they achieved international acclaim for their decorative arts. Unsettled by Alcock's representation of Japanese culture and encouraged by the commercial success in Paris, Sigur explains why the Japanese government was motivated to participate so enthusiastically at subsequent fairs. In 1871, the same year they sent envoys to the west, Japan established an Exhibition Bureau, which was well funded and given broad authority. Drawing from historical accounts, Sigur details Japan's participation and evaluates the overall impact their displays at the international exhibitions had in the west. She also illustrates via historical photographs and contemporary images the monumental tour-de-force buildings and objects exhibited by the Japanese to great acclaim, such as the Hōōden in Chicago (1893), Japanese Village and Cottage in St. Louis (1904), or the cast-bronze vase (1874–76) commissioned by Kiritsu Kosho Kaisha and executed by Sugiura Seitaro that was shown at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Also included are images of the inexpensive objects that were available for purchase: photographs of souvenir tables filled with fans and vases, and an example of popular Japanese bric-a-brac, here an 11" long moveable "Iron Crawfish" from 1876.

Chapter #3, "International Comings and Goings: The Crafting of An Artful Market," examines the individuals and organizations that helped develop a taste for Japanese art in the west. Her method, as in previous chapters, is to consider not only western players, but to also take into account Japanese actions and motivations. Although the Japanese government actively promoted Japanese art through international exhibitions, and many Japanese nationals owned shops in western cities, Sigur argues that it was westerners, instead of the Japanese themselves, who came to define "Japanese art" to European and American audiences. Shops, such as Yamanaka & Company and the First Japan Manufacturing and Trading Company, directed by Oxford-educated Shugio Hiromachi, and dealers such as Bunkio Matsuki and Hayashi Tadamasu, were not, ultimately, the most influential; instead, it was individuals such as William Sturgis Bigelow, Edward S. Morse, Ernst Fenollosa, Christopher Dresser and Siegfried Bing. As Sigur summarizes, "not only did their foreignness create a barrier, but also, in entangling their art with their political and economic agendas, the Japanese had set themselves an impossible task requiring they create public image that was simultaneously traditionally naïve and progressively cosmopolitan" (89).

By 1882, Japonisme was waning in Europe. In the United States, it would continue until the turn of the twentieth century. In Chapter 4, "Hither and Thither: *The Japan Craze Comes to America*," Sigur discusses how Japan exerted a strong influence on commercial art in the United States, initially through exoticism, but later through employing Japanese aesthetic principles. She discusses how Americans saw Japanese art as a model of "economy, simplicity, and

functionality" and employed these principles in their advertising materials to make them more effective. Japanese elements were also used to bring an exotic flavor to American goods such as in enameled tin advertising "Acker Quality Crystallized Ginger" (1920) with a photo transfer of a Japanese rickshaw and a chromolithograph of a blond woman in a kimono advertising--what else?--American Eagle Tobacco (1884). What is peculiar about this chapter is that although the title indicates that it will examine the Japan craze in the United States (American Japonism), aside from these examples from American popular culture, the majority of the material focuses on Britain. She begins with Oscar Wilde's arrival in the United States in 1882 for a whirlwind tour consisting of 140 engagements in 260 days. While Wilde was certainly an important individual--both for his sardonically witty cultural observations as well as his aesthetic inclinations--Sigur focuses less on his reception in the United States and more on documenting his travels and his statements on Japan that he made not on this tour, but in 1905. This information is significant, but it is an awkward fit in a chapter purportedly about the influence of Japanese art in the United States, even after she explains that "Wilde's visit could be described as a kind of exclamation point in a running Japan-inflected dialogue between Britain and North America" (97). She concludes the chapter with a discussion of *The Mikado*, Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, which opened in London in 1885. Although she discusses its New York premier, she focuses more on Gilbert and Sullivan's vision of "Japan" instead of clarifying how this was important to American Japonism.

The last four chapters, "Ins and Outs of a Room: The Tasteful Speak 'Japanese'" (Chapter 5), "Glass and Textiles: The Creative Assimilation" (Chapter 6), "Silver and Bronze: The Gladiators of the Tabletop" (Chapter 7), and "Clay and Glaze: The Journey to Modern," examines the two types of Japoniste wares: the Japanese wares that were exported to the west, and the work of western designers who were influenced by the art of Japan. Sigur is able to draw upon her knowledge of Japanese art history to contextualize the Meiji wares as well as making sophisticated connections between Japanese and western designs, subtle qualities that many historians have missed. The illustrated examples combine iconic examples of Japonisme, such as Whistler's *Peacock Room* (1876) and Lewis Comfort Tiffany's "Pond Lily" Lamp (1902) with less known ones, such as a cotton textile (ca. 1883–1900) by Candace Wheeler and a set of bronze plates (1906–1929) by Otto Heintz. Most of the information included in these chapters is not new, but the juxtaposition of the two kinds of Japoniste wares across a variety of media creates a more accurate visual account of the movement and underscores its complexity and diversity. She also moves beyond the approach of Siegfried Wichmann and Lionel Lambourne--to focus almost exclusively on the superficial similarities--and into one that addresses the variety of ways that westerners came to understand Japanese design principles, and how their understanding came to bear upon their work. As she aptly concludes: "... for all the discussion of what was 'Japanese' in design, it rarely accorded in any way to the practices of Japan, about which most knew or cared little. All felt free to apply the principles they gleaned according to how they understood them, anywhere and any way they liked, for the world they knew" (102).

In her Epilogue, Sigur articulates the issues at the heart of Japonisme: "economic advancement, international respect, and cultural uniqueness in the modern industrial age." Japonisme was an international phenomenon that was not simply about the consumption of Japan by the west, but also the active marketing of Japan to the west by the Japanese. Early scholarship focused on the aesthetic discourse between the two nations, but failed to recognize the political and economic considerations that motivated this complicated exchange. Sigur's book makes a valuable contribution to furthering not only an historical understanding of

developments in the decorative and applied arts, but also encapsulates a new approach that recognizes both the role of the Japanese and the broader historical concerns of the movement as well.

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## Notes

[1] See, for example, Gabriel Weisberg et al., *Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art 1854-1910* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 1975); Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western Art Since 1858* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981); and Lionel Lambourne's *Japonisme: Cultural Crossings between Japan and the West* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2005); and Karin Breuer's *Japanesque: The Japanese Print in the Era of Impressionism* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and DelMonico Books, 2010), a current exhibition catalogue that employs this traditional approach. A notable exception is *Japonisme in Art: An International Symposium*, which published the papers given at a symposium held in Japan in 1979, titled "The Mutual Influences between Japanese and Occidental Arts." Co-sponsored by the Committee for the Year 2001 and the Society for the Study of Japonisme, this book includes twenty-two essays that examine various aspects of the subject through a wide variety of methodological approaches. Given the location and sponsors of the symposium, it is not surprising that Japonisme was addressed from both a western and a Japanese perspective.

[2] The term *Japonisme* was coined in 1872 by the French critic Phillippe Burty; it roughly means "the love of all things Japanese." It is the term that is most commonly employed when discussing the movement internationally. Other terms, such as Japonism, the Anglicized Japonism, and Sigur's "Japan Craze" are synonymous. Japonism, however, is the term that is most often utilized when describing the movement in the United States. The term Japanesque, however, has a different connotation and suggests merely a "in the style of."

[3] Gabriel Weisberg was one of the first scholars to provide in-depth studies of Japonisme in the decorative arts, especially in regard to Félix Bracquemond and Siegfried Bing. Weisberg's most recent publication on Japonisme in the decorative arts is *The Origins of L'Art Nouveau, the Bing Empire* (Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam), the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (Paris), Mercatorfonds (Antwerp), distributed in the United States by Cornell University Press, 2004.)

[4] Clay Lancaster's *The Japanese Influence in America* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983) was the first major study in this area; more recent books include Kevin Nute's *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan: The Role of Traditional Art and Architecture in the Work of Frank Lloyd Wright* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1993) and Julia Meech's *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Art of Japan: The Architect's Other Passion* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001).

[5] Another noteworthy example of scholarship in this area is the exhibition catalogue *The Orient Expressed: Japan's Influence on Western Art: 1854-1918*, edited by Gabriel P. Weisberg (Seattle and London: Mississippi Museum of Art in association with the University of Washington Press, 2011).