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Japonisme and Japanese works on paper: Cross-cultural influences and hybrid materials

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Rebecca Capua

Japonisme and Japanese works on paper: Cross-cultural and hybrid materials

The rise of *Japonisme* as an artistic movement came at a time when Western artists' materials and practices were experiencing the impact of industrialization; as artists' supplies were becoming more commodified and mass-produced, art was disseminated through commercial reproductions and schools were emphasizing the potential for art's use in the service of industry. In many ways, the aim of the *Japonisme* enthusiasts in both Europe and the United States was to counteract this industrial influence, a reactionary stance that at times still colours our modern narrative of the cross-cultural interaction between Japan and the West. While some histories of *Japonisme* engage in a somewhat limited, content-based enquiry of the works of this period, it is more useful for the conservator or technical art historian to focus on the ways in which artists used both new and familiar materials, in order to arrive at a broader understanding of artists' choices and of the works they produced. Fundamental to this understanding is the association of Japan, beginning in the nineteenth century, with commerce and the relatively new world of advertising—although artists' interpretations of Japanese art varied somewhat, based on region.

Japonisme is sometimes described as originating out of a backward-looking impulse, a desire for a simpler, more direct mode of expression, akin to the interest in medieval art among the Pre-Raphaelites and Arts and Crafts' circle of artists. However, in the case of *Japonisme*, what resulted was, rather, a unique aesthetic that was highly dependent on new printing and papermaking technology, and a creative hybridization of a number of techniques. For the conservator, especially when strategizing a course of treatment to be carried out on some of the more avant-garde works from this milieu, no assumptions should be made about factors such as the original tone, texture, fibre make-up and origin of the support, the type of ink or pigments used, and even whether or not the artist successfully carried out his or her intention, as there was so much experimentation occurring and an assimilation of myriad influences by artists in a very short period of time. Furthermore, as we shall see, the hybridization of Japanese and Western techniques also applied to Meiji works of this period and conservators should be equally cautious in their treatment approaches toward these objects.

Western Europe and Japanese art: inspiration and experimentation

Prior to Commodore Perry's arrival in 1854, the only Western country allowed to trade with Japan was Holland. The Dutch East India Company's trading post in Dejima existed for 200 years and gave the Dutch limited access to Japanese goods such as papers, including those used by Rembrandt, and art objects, which could be brought back to Europe. It was also an important point of exchange for the Japanese, who were able to catch glimpses of scientific, technological and artistic developments in the West. The most famous early European collection of Japanese prints was that of Dutch physician Phillip Franz von Siebold, who was stationed on Dejima in the 1820s. Although Siebold's collection opened to the public in Leiden in 1837, this early exposure to Japanese art seemed to make little impact on Western artists, perhaps because it lacked the reinforcement of a massive commercial enterprise.

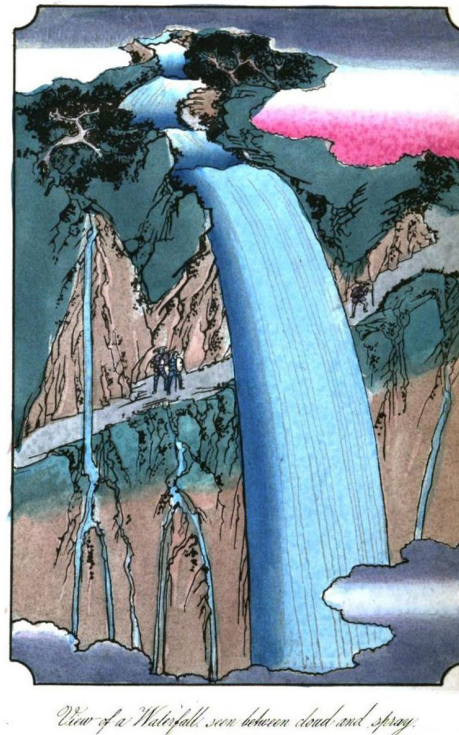


Fig. 1 One of the 'Illustrations by artists of Yedo' (etching), in Captain Sherard Osborn, *Japanese Fragments*, 1861. Image: Internet Archive/ public domain.

Wildly popular international exhibitions in the second half of the nineteenth century tend to be cast as watershed moments for the dissemination of Japanese art into Western mass culture. The 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris was the first exhibition in which Japan represented itself as a nation, curating its own section. A flood of Japanese and Japanese-inspired goods for decoration of the home, including art of different kinds, entered the markets of Paris in the late 1860s and the U.S. by 1885. The promotion of such trade was certainly a major motivation behind this and other international exhibitions.

Western audiences were also introduced to Japanese art through facsimiles and Westernized copies of Japanese prints during the 1850s and 1860s, such as the lithographs that appeared in the report of Commodore Perry's Japan expedition and in Captain Sherard Osborn's travelogue, *Japanese Fragments* (Fig. 1). Facsimiles of the landscapes of Hiroshige featured heavily in these and other early books on Japan. These reproductions, and later ones such as the etchings by Henri Guérard in French art critic Louis Gonse's groundbreaking work of connoisseurship, *L'Art Japonais*, had a wide audience but varied greatly in fidelity to the original.

Another extremely important source for reproductions was Siegfried Bing's magazine *Le Japon Artistique*, published in French, German and English. Bing was a dealer and promoter of Japanese art through his galleries in Paris and New York. *Le Japon Artistique* was generally regarded as a momentous, but rather superficial, presentation of Japanese art, with essays and reproductions of a variety of objects, including ceramics, paintings, *ukiyo-e* prints (always called 'engravings') and metalwork. All of the colour illustrations in *Le Japon Artistique* were printed by Charles Gillot, inventor of the photomechanical relief process of *gillotage*, also sometimes called zincography, a highly advanced process for its time that was lauded for its fidelity to the original image (Figs. 2, 3). In *gillotage*, an image is transferred



Fig. 2 Katsushika Hokusai, *Old View of the Boat-bridge at Sano in Kōzuke Province*, from the series *Remarkable Views of Bridges in Various Provinces*, c. 1830. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Howard Mansfield Collection, purchase with Rogers Fund, 1936). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 3 Gillotage copy of Hokusai, in *Le Japon Artistique*, ed. Sigfried Bing, 1888–91. Image: Rebecca Capua/public domain.

to the plate using a photographic negative, and the plate is then etched in several stages to achieve the depth necessary for relief printing. The disadvantage of this process is its inability to produce gradated tone; rather than display the painterly effects of *ukiyo-e* printers, Gillot's reproductions deploy areas of aquatint in rough approximation to the colour blocks of the original and otherwise rely on a variety of familiar black line-based shortcuts. In addition, none of the textural contrasts are can be reproduced in the calendered lithographic paper of the magazine. While readers of the magazine may have enjoyed a general sense of the aesthetic of Japanese works on paper, these reproductions were actually quite misleading in terms of materials and techniques, and certainly spoke to artists who wished to work in an intaglio style, which the Gillot reproductions most closely resemble, despite being made with a relief process.

Most artists did have some access to first-hand viewing (or collecting) of authentic examples of Japanese paintings and prints. However, the popularity of reproductions played an important role in determining what many Continental European artists chose to incorporate into their own work and what they chose to ignore. The reproductions emphasize

flatness, simplicity of line and brightly coloured shapes, and they play into the general European adoption of an aesthetic of *Japonisme* mainly without regard for technical matters but reflecting an attitude of experimentation, hybridization and co-option towards Japanese art. This approach may also reflect a lack of personal experience in Japan on the part of most French artists and a dearth of nineteenth-century French sources on Japanese materials and techniques. In any case, it surely is no coincidence that the medium of etching, as well as lithography, which was popular with so many artists in the circle of *Japonisme*, was also the main medium of reproduction and dissemination of Japanese art.

An example of the inventiveness of the French approach toward technique is found in the novel coloured etchings of Mary Cassatt. Cassatt was introduced to Japanese prints through Edgar Degas and the two attended the exhibition of Japanese art in April 1890, held at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts, which displayed hundreds of prints and books lent by French collectors. Inspired by the exhibition, she created her celebrated series of 10 aquatint and drypoints in colour in 1890–91.

In a letter, she explained that ‘the set of ten plates was done with the intention of attempting an imitation of Japanese methods; of course I abandoned that somewhat after the first plate, and tried more for atmosphere’.¹ Describing her method of printing, she wrote:

I drew an outline in drypoint and transferred this to two other plates, making in all three plates, never more, for each proof. Then I put an aquatint wherever the colour was to be printed; the colour was painted on the plate as it was to appear in the proof.²

Although she worked with a printer, her mother describes her as participating throughout the printing processes, which ‘if left to a printer, would not be at all what she wants’.³ Using oil-based printers’ inks, the impressions are far from the layered transparencies of Japanese woodblock prints. However, the use of colour in itself was arresting at the time, and certainly the connection with Japanese prints was evident to viewers. Cassatt was not disposed toward using Japanese paper for these prints and used an ivory laid paper.

¹ Letter from Mary Cassatt to Frank Weitenkampf, 18 May 1906, quoted in Frederick A. Sweet, *Miss Mary Cassatt: Impressionist from Pennsylvania* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 122.

² Letter from Mary Cassatt to Samuel P. Avery, 9 January 1903, quoted in Sweet, *Miss Mary Cassatt*, 120.

³ Letter from Mrs Cassatt to Alexander Cassatt, 23 January 1891, quoted in Sweet, *Miss Mary Cassatt*, 118.



Fig. 4 Detail showing paper surface, Félix Bracquemond, *Aspens on the Bank of the Seine*, c. 1884, etching and drypoint, second state of three, on cotton tissue. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (gift of Theodore De Witt, 1923). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 5 Henri Rivière, *The Wave* from *L'Estampe Originale*, Album IV, 1893, lithograph in eight colours, on heavy wove calendared paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (purchase with Rogers Fund, 1922). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Etcher Félix Bracquemond is generally credited with ‘discovering’ Japanese prints at a very early stage and circulating them among his artist friends. He claimed some years later that he had first seen a copy of Hokusai’s *Manga* in 1856, although that date, while possible, has been debated.⁴ He is also one of the first artists of this milieu, along with Whistler, to use Japanese paper for prints. Both artists worked with Parisian printer Auguste Delâtre, who was printing their etchings and drypoints on Japanese paper as early as 1858 or 1859. Bracquemond used a variety of Japanese papers for his etchings.

Interestingly, a print dated *c.* 1884 of *Aspens along the Seine* appears to be on a thin, very white, Japanese tissue, but on closer inspection is clearly a machine-made paper (Fig. 4). The fibre make-up is entirely cotton, and the ‘MB’ watermark indicates that the paper was made by Arches before 1879, when another owner joined the company.⁵ It is unclear whether the paper was manufactured to emulate Japanese tissue, but it seems clear that Bracquemond was interested in that look, as this is not a common Western printing paper.

The artists Henri Rivière and Auguste-Louis Lepère began printing multicolour woodcuts in 1889, somewhat following Japanese technique but performing all of the labour themselves, as opposed to the Japanese division of labour between designer, engraver and printer. In the 1890s, Rivière printed two albums of 40 elaborate colour woodcuts each, writing in his memoirs that he was initially completely ignorant of the techniques of the Japanese masters and, upon reflection, ‘it was a little ridiculous to invent a process that already existed’ (Fig. 5).⁶ Until the influence of *ukiyo-e* prints, colour was used in Western printmaking almost exclusively for commercial purposes, and was not considered to be an aesthetic appropriate for artists’ original work. Rivière was very innovative in producing colour lithography, which he pursued roughly concurrently with his series of colour woodcuts. For a number of reasons, including the time and energy involved in creating large colour woodcut prints by himself and a lessening of enthusiasm for the idea of prints as unique art objects, Rivière ultimately stuck with lithography as his main mode of expression. Lithography was very popular among French artists working in a *Japonisme* style, especially those related to the emergent milieu of poster art, such as those published by Cherét in the 1870s and 1880s.

⁴ For the possibility of Bracquemond viewing Japanese prints as early as 1856, see Phylis Floyd, ‘Documentary Evidence for the Availability of Japanese Imagery in Europe in Nineteenth Century Public Collections’, *The Art Bulletin* 19, no. 1 (1986): 126, as well as Gabriel P. Weisberg, ‘Japonisme: Early Sources and the French Printmaker 1854–1882’, in *Japonisme: Japanese Influence in French Art 1854–1910* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1975), 3.

⁵ Jean-Marie Janot, *Les Moulins à Papier de la Région Vosgienne* (Nancy: Berger-Levrault, 1952), 22.

⁶ Quoted in Jocelyn Bouquillard, ‘Henri Rivière, un graveur à l’âme japonisante’, in *Henri Rivière: entre impressionnisme et japonisme* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2009), 22.

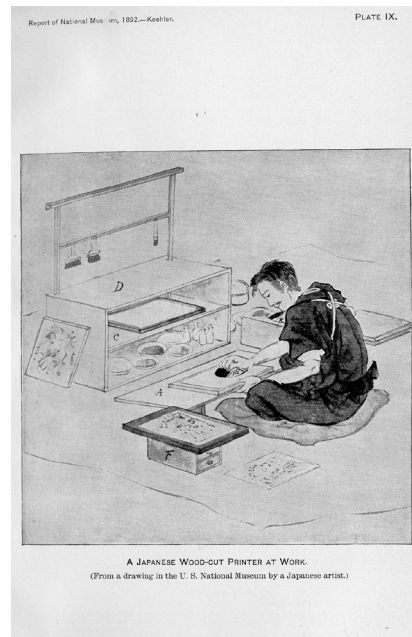


Fig. 6 Illustration from T. Tokuno, *Japanese Wood-cutting and Wood-cut Printing*, 1892. Image: Rebecca Capua/public domain.

Great Britain and Japanese art: a return to traditional techniques

Turning towards the UK, the artists who represented the first wave of British *Japonisme* were introduced to Japanese art around 1863 and included Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Frederick Sandys and James McNeill Whistler—who inhabited both the French and British circles, while, of course, actually being American. This earlier group showed great enthusiasm for the collecting and appreciation of Japanese art but, like the French circle of the same period, were not very interested in the techniques of Japanese artists in painting or printing.

A later wave of British Japonism around the turn of the century was re-energized by the Arts and Crafts movement, where the emphasis on the hand of the craftsman meshed naturally with the possibilities for hand production, creativity and autonomy that woodblock printing offered. One of the central figures of this circle was Frank Morley Fletcher, who greatly advanced the technique of multi-block colour printing. Fletcher influenced a number of other British artists who worked with traditional Japanese technique, including John Edgar Platt and Allan Seaby. In his treatise on colour printing, Seaby noted that an International Exhibition of School Drawing in 1908 featured student multi-block printing using oil-based lithography inks and a printer's press rather than water-based colours and a hand-pressing method,⁷ and we can presume that there were other artists mixing Japanese and Western techniques and materials in a similar way at the time. Platt and Seaby followed the example of Fletcher, who published his own guide to the art of woodblock printing in 1916, a process he learned from a pamphlet by T. Tokuno, the Chief of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing of the Ministry of Finance in Tokyo (Fig. 6).

Tokuno's report was published by the U.S. National Museum (now the Smithsonian) and it was edited and annotated by Sylvester Koehler, the first curator of prints at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Although the U.S. National Museum was more natural history museum than art gallery, the report was an essential document for those artists truly interested in the materials and techniques of Japanese woodblock printmaking on both sides of the Atlantic.

⁷ Paul Seaby, *Colour Printing with Linoleum and Wood Blocks* (Leicester: Dryad Handicrafts, 1925), 4.

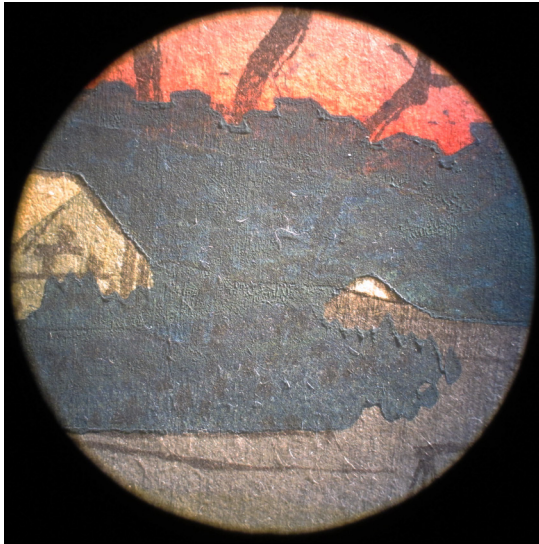


Fig. 7 Photomicrograph showing ink texture, Utagawa Hiroshige, *Minowa, Kanasugi at Mikawashima*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, 1857. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The techniques of traditional Japanese printing are illustrated throughout the document, and the commentary of Tokuno and Koehler helped define the values of this art form for the West. The pamphlet describes how the artist's drawing is pasted on the wooden block and then the reserve areas from the block are removed by the engraver. Koehler emphasizes the ability of the engravers over the tools used, noting that, according to Tokuno:

Our engraving on wood depends wholly on the skill of the engravers. With only one knife, such as that sent you, they can execute all grades of work, from the roughest to the finest. We therefore have no other kind of knife.⁸

When the block is ready for inking, dry pigment is mixed with a small amount of water by the printer and applied directly to the block along with a bit of rice paste. Other artists' descriptions of this aspect of the inking differ (even when they claim to be quoting the Tokuno manual) and it may well be a reflection of personal choice of the printer—some describe the paste as being applied to the block before the pigment, some describe the paste as being sprinkled on the block after inking, and some describe the printer dipping his brush first in the moistened pigment, then the paste, then applying that to the block. In any case, Koehler notes the high degree of artistic sensibility involved in this step:

We have seen this of late years in the renewed development of the monotype, and it may, indeed, be said of Japanese printing that it involves, at least in its best productions, the principle of the monotype . . . [The printer] must have the skill to produce 'the various hues and shades with printing brushes, in precisely the same way as the water-colour painters do'.⁹

Photomicrographs show the ability of Japanese printers to obtain a range of textural effects with different thicknesses of inks (Fig. 7). Transparent water-based colours also allow for colour mixing through layering with different blocks.

Once the block is inked, the printing paper is dampened, placed on the block and burnished with a great amount of hand pressure using the bamboo-wrapped *baren*. Tokuno's document does not mention the subtlety

⁸ T. Tokuno as quoted in Sylvester Koehler, 'Notes by the Editor', in Tokuno, *Japanese Wood-Cutting and Wood-Cut Printing*, ed. Sylvester Koehler (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1892), 242.

⁹ Koehler, 'Notes', 232.



Fig. 8 Detail with raking light, Katsushika Hokusai, *Fuji from Gotenyama on the Tōkaidō at Shinagawa* from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, c. 1830–32. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

of embossed textures in woodblock prints, but they are an integral part of the surface, often used for depicting patterned garments as well as for actually mimicking the real texture of the object being pictured (Fig. 8). In comparing Western *Japonisme*-style woodblock printing with their Japanese counterparts, this variety of texture is one of the main elements missing from the Western prints. The interest of many Western artists seemed to lie in the perceived flatness of Japanese prints and, as we have seen, the reproductions of Japanese prints certainly would have furthered this perception, as they had no ability to convey the nuances of the printer's hand.

Japanese papers and the Western preference for the *torinoko*-like surface

Traditional Japanese woodblock print paper is rather thin and absorbent enough that the ink generally soaks through to the verso. The paper used for printing *ukiyo-e* in Japan is generally a *kōzo*-fibred refined handmade paper called *hoshō*. Its surface can be described as matte, smooth in terms of evenness of furnish, but having a loft that allows it to be compressed by the block and the textures described earlier imparted on to it to great effect.

In contrast, the Japanese papers chosen for printing or drawing by nineteenth-century Western artists tend to have more of a satiny sheen to them, the prime example being the use of *torinoko* or *kyokushi* by artists such as Degas (Fig. 9) and *gampi* tissue as used by Gauguin, Whistler and others. Papers chosen by Western artists were often of the thick *torinoko gampi* or *mitsumata*-fibred type, but even a bamboo-fibred paper used by American artist John La Farge has a similar surface. By the early twentieth century,

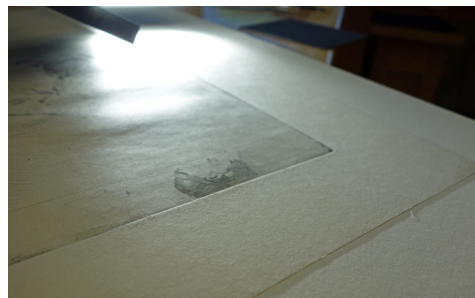


Fig. 9 Detail with raking light showing texture of paper, identified by the author as *mitsumata*-fibred *torinoko*. Edgar Degas, *Portrait of Joseph-Gabriel Tourny*, etching, 1857. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 10 Detail with raking light showing texture of printed area from Utagawa Hiroshige, *Revelers Returned from the Tori no Machi Festival at Asakusa*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, 1857. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (purchase with Rogers Fund, 1914). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

silky *mitsumata* was the most common fibre in exported Japanese papers.¹⁰ *Torinoko* is generally too thick and non-absorbent for woodblock printing, although it is much more suitable for etching, which, as we have seen, was the preferred technique for artists working in a *Japonisme* style in Europe. It is also more suitable for artists working with oil-based printing inks, which are much heavier and denser than watercolours.

The kind of surface texture pursued by Western artists extends to the use of ersatz Japanese and Chinese papers. In the early twentieth century, simulated 'Japanese' papers began to be made in Europe. In addition, and around the same time, the compositions of Japanese *torinoko* and *kyokushi* were altered as the papers began to be made specifically for export to the West.¹¹ Whether made in Japan by Westernized factory processes or made in Europe, around the turn of the century we begin to see papers containing hardwood, softwood, bamboo, straw and cotton fibres, often in a mix with *kōzo* or *mitsumata*, as well as extremely macerated fibres and increased amounts of fillers such as clay and chalk.

Interestingly, when looking at Japanese prints, the areas of colour where the paper has been compressed by the block, which often covers much of the printed surface, does more closely resemble the sheen of smooth *torinoko*-type paper (Fig. 10), and it is possible that seeing Japanese paper in the form of woodblock prints gave a misleading impression of proper Japanese printing paper. In any case, it is clear that import-export firms catered to the demand for this smoother type of paper, as did Western-style papermaking factories in both Japan and China, and paper mills in Europe that began manufacturing imitation Japanese paper.

With respect to terminology, the thick *torinoko*-type paper is sometimes called 'Japanese vellum' or 'Japan vellum' due to its similarity to true vellum (derived from animal skin) used for printing. More often when referring to these older papers related to the period of Dutch trade, the term used is 'Japan', and sometimes 'Japan paper', as in 'some of Rembrandt's finest proofs were on Japan'.¹² The term 'Japanese paper' is virtually never used to describe papers from the seventeenth century as a matter of convention in art-historical sources, although of course it is correct. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term 'Japanese paper' was much more commonly used by artists discussing technical matters and, for example, was used repeatedly by Whistler and by people he was corresponding with

¹⁰ 'Sources of Paper in Japan', *Paper: Everything Regarding the Manufacture, Sale, and Use of Pulp and Paper* 10, no. 9 (1913): 19.

¹¹ Antoinette Dwan, 'A Method for Examining and Classifying Japanese Papers Used by Artists in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Prints of James Abbott McNeill Whistler', *Studies in the History of Art* 41 (1993): 111.

¹² Carl Zigrosser and Christa M.A. Gaehde, *A Guide to the Collecting and Care of Original Prints* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965), 67.

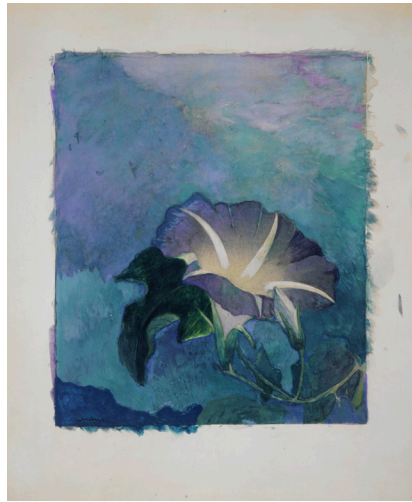


Fig. 11 John La Farge, *Nocturne*, watercolour on Japanese paper (mounted to Western paper), c. 1885. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (bequest of Miss Louise Veltin, 1937). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹³ University of Glasgow, 'The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler', <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/>. Whistler refers to 'Japanese' or 'Japanese paper' in letters dated 3 August 1863, 10 September 1879, 15 June 1891, 30 August 1894 and 27 October [1895], among others.

¹⁴ The Duret letter dates to 30 October 1891, and one of the drawings he may be referring to is *Rose and Pink, The Mother's Sleep*, currently in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. The dealer, Edmund Gosselin, refers to Whistler's print on 'Japon' in a letter dated 22 October 1887.

¹⁵ Maxime Lalanne, *Traité de la Gravure a l'Eau Forte* (Paris: Cadart et Luquet, 1866), 90.

in English.¹³ The reason for this change in terminology is probably largely due to the vast increase in the types of Japanese paper available through the opening of trade with Japan. In English, the use of the term 'Japan' or 'Japan paper' generally was used more specifically by printers and publishers than by artists, especially to denote limited deluxe editions of reproductions, illustrations in literary works and so forth. It is important to recognize that, beginning in the twentieth century, the term 'Japan paper' can include those ersatz papers not made with Japanese fibres. In general, it is more proper to apply the term 'Japanese paper' than 'Japan paper' to impressions by the artists like those discussed here.

It is less clear how this paradigm applies to writing in French. For example, in Whistler's correspondences in French, critic Theodore Duret mentions Whistler's drawing on 'velum', which probably refers to two rather unique watercolours he did on Japanese paper, and a dealer refers to Whistler's etchings on 'Japon'.¹⁴ On the other hand, in the original French, Maxime Lalanne's important 1880 book, *Traité de la Gravure*, refers to *papier Japonais* as the preferred printing paper for artists and amateurs.¹⁵

The United States and Japanese art: adventurers and connoisseurs

Turning now to the United States, the phenomenon of 'The Japan Craze', as it was sometimes called, was delayed by the American Civil War and spurred in large part by the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. For artists, the reaction to Japanese art was more individualistic and less of a movement of cohesive circles of aficionados, as it was in Europe. American artists working within a Japanese aesthetic tended to have some kind of experience in Japan at some point in their careers, as well as ties with the major collections of Japanese art in America, mainly (although not exclusively) in New York and Boston. Americans were also less enamoured of *ukiyo-e* than Europeans, as the most prominent scholars and influencers in America, in agreement with the cultural elite of Japan, believed the Japanese traditional painting schools were superior to printmaking.

Painter, draughtsman and stained-glass designer John La Farge was an early and avid collector of Japanese prints, and he incorporated Japanese materials into his work in a comprehensive and unique way (Fig. 11). La Farge told his biographer about an incident during his travels in Japan, when he met a Japanese court painter who noted that the washy and tonal

quality of one of his illustrations had been achieved with a Japanese brush, the recognition of which 'had given him immense pleasure'. La Farge greatly valued his Japanese paints, as the artist wrote to a friend during a bout of illness:

I have had a great consolation. I have found the Japanese and Chinese paints chosen for me by [Kakuzo] Okakura some years ago—all, of course, of great purity and of long tradition. Such a 'Kano' blue! The exact Chinese vermilion of the extremest best!¹⁶

La Farge also often drew on Japanese paper with graphite or charcoal, as his son recalled in 1915:

His studies used to be made largely in sketch books, and I recall that at a very early date he liked to draw on Japanese paper and had sketch books made up of such paper.¹⁷

La Farge's early interest in Japanese art and his travels to Japan predated the development of two prominent circles of Japonism in New York and Boston. The New York circle was influenced by art dealer and connoisseur Shugio Hiromichi, who arrived in New York in 1880 as the proprietor of the First Japan Manufacturing and Trading Company. Shugio organized the first exhibition of Japanese prints and illustrated books in New York in 1889 at the Grolier Club, and was associated with several New York artists and collectors, including Robert Blum, who lived in Japan as an illustrator for *Scribner's Monthly*, as well as Theodore Robinson, J. Alden Weir, John H. Twachtman and Childe Hassam. Shugio also gave a lecture on Japanese books and printing at the Club in 1887, and displayed tools and materials of the printer for the attendees.

An important figure in the other centre of Japanese art appreciation in Boston was Arthur Wesley Dow, a printmaker, educator and advocate not only for the value of the Japanese aesthetic for artists but also for the use of Japanese materials in art-making. Dow first learned the technique of Japanese woodblock printing through the same publication of T. Tokuno discussed earlier, with a few modifications. His prints were generally done on a very small scale, largely because of the difficulties inherent in his

16 Royal Cortissoz, *John La Farge: A Memoir and a Study* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 103.

17 Frank Weitenkampf, 'John La Farge, Illustrator', *Print Collector's Quarterly* 5 (1915): 488.



Fig. 12 Page from Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition*, 9th ed., 1914. Image: Rebecca Capua/public domain.

completing all phases of the process himself. They show an inventiveness in colour and shape relationships, generally leaving out the key block and emphasizing planes of colour. He used a limited amount of pressure in his hand-printing, especially in his early prints in which he used blocks of softer pine wood. Even in his later prints using maple blocks, his impressions have none of the three-dimensional quality of more traditional Japanese prints. He also continued to use the oil-based inks he was accustomed to; water-based inks were generally not used by printers because, as they were prepared for watercolour painting, they lacked the body needed for printing. In 1905, after Dow had been making his own small woodblock prints for at least a decade, he made a trip to Japan and met American printmaker Helen Hyde, who introduced him to the use of water-based inks, which he used after this period. In his teaching and in his landmark 1899 manual, *Composition*, Dow recommended that students use a Japanese brush and ink, and well-sized Japanese paper for drawing (Fig. 12). He references *toshi* as the best Japanese paper for drawing, which is a traditional Chinese paper made with bamboo fibres.¹⁸ At this time, *toshi* was used for painting by Japanese artists. Dow's own printing papers are closer to traditional *hosho* made with *kōzo* fibres, although hardwood fibres were found in one sample (analysed by the author), and in another sample the fibres seem to be more macerated than is usually found in papers used for printing in Japan. This is consistent with the change in Japanese papers we find around the turn of the century.

18 Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*, 9th ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1914), 95.

Changes in Meiji Japan: the impact of modernization on industry and artists

In the period following the restoration of Meiji Imperial rule in 1868, the effects of Westernization and industrialization were felt quickly, with a marked influence on Japanese artists and materials. The establishment of Western-style papermaking factories in Japan began around 1872. By 1877 there were multiple mills in Japan supplied with both cylinder and Fourdrinier papermaking machines, although cylinder machines were better able to mimic the appearance of handmade papers¹⁹ and were used more in the nineteenth century in Japan. The annual output of the Western-style papermaking factories in Japan was 35,000 pounds of paper in 1872; by 1884 that number had increased to over five million pounds of paper produced, and by 1904, to over 126 million.²⁰

This quote from an early twentieth-century paper trade publication explains some of the complexity of exported Japanese papers and their range of quality:

Machine made *mitsumata* paper is chiefly manufactured for export to America and Europe. The machines are rotary, steam heated drums for macerating the pulp with caustic soda, and the regular pulping tanks for separating the fibres and in which the bleaching process is conducted. In the majority of paper mills, however, the same hand moulds are employed by the operators in making the sheets from the vats of pulp, so that most of the papers using the bamboo mould process may still be classed as handmade.²¹

In considering treatment of works on Japanese or Japanese-appearing paper from this period, especially treatments such as bathing or light-bleaching, testing is required as no assumptions can be made regarding a paper's strength or integrity, wetting properties or lignin content. Papers that initially appear to be Japanese in origin can be composed entirely of wood pulp and straw, be very hard-sized or packed with clay fillers, or be made with Japanese fibres so macerated as to obviate the benefits of *kōzo* or *mitsumata* as a papermaking fibre. This caveat should apply equally to works on Japanese paper by Western artists and by Japanese artists.

19 Cathleen A. Baker, *From the Hand to the Machine: Nineteenth-Century American Paper and Mediums: Technologies, Materials, and Conservation* (Ann Arbor, MI: Legacy Press, 2010), 53.

20 P.D. Perkins, *The Paper Industry and Printing in Japan* (New York: Japan Reference Library, 1940).

21 'The Cultivation of Mitsumata for Paper Pulp', *Paper: Devoted to the Manufacture, Sale and Use of Pulp and Paper* 12, no. 7 (1913): 20.



Fig. 13 Shiba Kōkan, *Enjoying the Evening Cool at Nakazu*, copperplate etching; ink on paper, with hand-applied colour, c. 1784. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (William Sturgis Bigelow Collection). Photograph ©w Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Changes in the paper industry were a result of the development of an export market, as well as increased Japanese demand for printed materials, such as government banknotes, using Western printing techniques. Printing processes other than the traditional woodblock printers' studios were not unknown to the Japanese, as the Jesuits brought presses for copperplate engraving with them to Japan in the early seventeenth century for use in proselytizing. In the late eighteenth century, the artist Shiba Kōkan rediscovered this process himself and made copperplate etchings of scenes similar to a French *vue d'optique*, probably inspired by Chinese copies of European prints (Fig. 13).

In 1875, the printer Matsuda Rokuzan established a studio for lithography and etching called Gengendō, and between 1875 and 1887 the studio published high-quality lithographs and lithograph collections by several artists, as well as maps and scenic views. Photography and photo-process prints also had wide adoption in Japan. 'Yokohama prints' of the 1860s, the hand-coloured photographs of Yokohama life by British photographer Felice Beato and others, were an immensely popular form of souvenir for export to the West; Beato's assistant Kusakabe Kinbei started his own photographic studio in 1881 and produced tourist art such as collotype-printed paper and silk fans.



Fig. 14 Kobayashi Kiyochika, *Heian Period Courtier on a Moonlit Beach*, nineteenth century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 15 Salesman's Christmas card sample, chromolithograph, 1885. Image courtesy of www.graphicatlas.org.

Woodblock print artists were also affected by the influence of trade with the West; many were excited about the prospect of selling their prints within the new market of dealers in Europe and the U.S. The artist Kobayashi Kiyochika was not trained in a traditional woodblock printer's studio; rather, he learned the technique informally from colleagues, including Charles Wirgman, artist and correspondent for *The Illustrated London News* who gained a circle of disciples in Yokohama. Kiyochika's prints, and those of contemporaries such as Uehara Konen, seem to echo the atmospheric quality and use of colour of Arthur Wesley Dow and his contemporaries, and prints may have been conceived with a Western audience in mind (Fig. 14). The New York-based dealer and importer E.T. Shima sold many prints by Kiyochika and Konen through the Shima Art Company; many of the advertisements for Shima prints were placed in education-oriented periodicals such as the *School Arts Journal*.

From the moment that Japanese goods began to be accessible to the Western public, many in Europe and the U.S. associated bright colours with Japan. Perhaps encouraged by Western interest in woodblock prints, export objects such as umbrellas, fans, lanterns and kimonos were supplied in a riot of bright hues. The newly invented aniline dyes imported from Germany and China were soon introduced into prints, textiles and other consumables, resulting in colours ever more vivid. The development of new colour printing processes such as chromolithography and the collotype helped reinforce this appreciation for colour, especially in mass advertising, many examples of which contained Japanese motifs even if unrelated to the sale of Japanese items (Fig. 15).

Almost immediately, a sort of backlash developed among Western collectors of the later nineteenth century, who viewed the prints of the Meiji era with bright aniline reds and purples as too gaudy and garish, evidence of a fall from the purity of older ideals, a position perhaps embodying a kind of critical self-reflection on the period of voracious consumption of all things Japanese and the West's influence on Japan in general. Today, the conservator should be cognizant in his or her assessment of the condition of both Edo and Meiji prints that the resulting preference for a more subdued palette by Western connoisseurs had a lasting impact on the evaluation and acquisition of Japanese prints, even during the Meiji period. In some senses,

the biases formed during the introductory decades of exposure to Japanese art have continued to influence how these works are viewed today.

For the artists of the West, the reproductions of Japanese art and the association of the Japanese aesthetic with the world of commerce and advertising, especially around the turn of the century, was as influential as the authentic Japanese works themselves, even as many wanted to view the Japanese as a pre-commercialized society. Like a repeating image between two mirrors, the art of both Japan and the West responded back and forth to new influences, as similar impulses for experimentation and innovation manifested in artists' practices and artists adapted to the new global market of audiences and materials.

Abstract

In the decades following the opening of Japan to foreign trade in 1854, artists living in Europe were inspired by a growing influx of Japanese art and everyday objects and began to incorporate those influences into a style which is often called *Japonisme*, a term coined in the 1870s by French critic Philippe Burty. The European *Japonistes* were soon joined by American artists working within a slightly less cohesive circle, and although the style reached its pinnacle around the 1890s it remained influential through the first two decades of the twentieth century. The access that Western artists had to specific Japanese works has been documented, and ranges from the viewing of reproductions of Japanese prints in Siegfried Bing's journal *Le Japon Artistique* to examining Japanese prints in the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale or the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, to actually traveling to Japan and visiting artists' workshops. The expression of this style varied greatly: while some artists attempted to mimic the actual Japanese process of woodblock printing or ink drawing, some used Japanese papers for Western-style etchings and drawings, and others were simply drawn to the aesthetic of Japanese works on paper, disregarding material aspects of the works.

As Western artists and the public at large became enamored with works on paper and other objects from Japan, simultaneous markets grew for authentic Japanese objects in the West, and for Western methods of industrialization in Japan to meet demand. As a result, Meiji period works on paper produced in Japan during this time show significant influence of the West, and have often been considered to be adulterated and undesirable compared to the Edo works that were admired by Western artists. Through

the examination of this cross-cultural exchange with a focus on materials, this paper seeks to provide more insight into the choices of artists such as Whistler, Cassatt, Braquemond, and Dow as well as others, and a deeper picture of how the aesthetic developed through the influence of newly-available artists' materials. In addition, the Japanese-inspired works on paper will be viewed alongside the Japanese source material, including authentic Edo works and reproductions, to shed further light on the materials and techniques of works that have been linked through scholarship focused on aesthetics rather than on material technology. Special attention will be paid to the papers used by Western and Japanese artists, which show a great variation in appearance and fiber composition, often beyond what is expected when one is confronted by a 'Japanese' paper.

Biography

Rebecca Capua graduated with a BA from Barnard College and then studied at the Conservation Center, NYU-Institute of Fine Arts where she earned a Certificate in Conservation of Works of Art as well as an MA in Art History. She went on to receive two Andrew W. Mellon Fellowships in the paper conservation department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art before joining the staff in 2009 as a full-time conservator, where she is responsible for treating diverse objects from the Museum's 17 curatorial departments. Her primary research interests generally relate to materials and techniques of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century artists, with a focus primarily on artists working in America.

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