Forgotten Japonisme
The Taste for Japanese Art in Britain and the USA, 1920s-1950s
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“Question of Oriental Aesthetics: antithesis to Design?”

Ernest F. Fenollosa

Yakushi Triad, bronze 薬師三尊
Suryaprabha (right) 日光菩薩
Yakushi Nyorai Bhaisajya-guru (center) 薬師如来
Candraprabha (left) 月光菩薩
cia 644-710
Yakushiji Temple, Nara Prefecture
Exposition universelle de Paris 1900
Exposition universelle à Paris

Ernest F. Fenollosa, The Place in History of Mr. Whistler's Art, 1882-1890

First official edition of Japanese art history published in French in 1900 at the occasion of the Exposition Universelles à Paris

Claude Monet, La Japonaise, 1875-1876

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, VA.
Virginia Spate, The Colour of Time Claude Monet, Thames and Hudson, p.114, Fig. 130

Keynote Lecture: Question of Oriental Aesthetics: antithesis to Design?
The room is absolutely empty, except for what may be placed there temporarily to satisfy some aesthetic mood. (...) To a Japanese, accustomed to simplicity of ornamentation and frequent change of decorative method, a Western interior permanently filled with a vast array of pictures, statues and knick-knack gives the impression of a vulgar display of riches. It calls for a mighty wealth of appreciation to enjoy the constant sight of even a masterpiece, and limitless indeed must be the capacity for artistic feeling in those who can exist day after day in the midst of such confusion of colour and form as is often seen in the homes of Europe and America.

In Western houses we are often confronted with what appears to us absurd and inai ronisation. Not a few living rooms are crowded with full-length portraits and trumpery. This leads us to wonder which is real, the picture or the person who talks, and feel a curious conviction that one of them must be a fraud. (...) (Kakuzô Okakura, The Book of Tea, 1906; Dover Edition, 1964, p.39.)
The Question of Oriental Aesthetics: antithesis to Design?


Sono Raizō (1891-1973) translator of Feng Zekai

Consideration of the Japanese Ukiyo-e painting


Japanese consideration of the Asarazán Ukiyo-e painting

Studie in Oriental Arts, 1925. Tokyo: Keiseisha Shoten, 1922

Psychology of Artistic Creation

Sono Raizo

Studies in Ancient Chinese Treaties on Painting

Nakamura Fusetsu

Kyoto: Naigai Shuppan, 1922

'yûgen' is designated as "meaning that which lies under the surface, vague and opposite of the obvious, suggestion rather than a manifestation." Arthur Waley, The Nô Plays of Japan, 1922; Tokyo: Gen'o sha, 1913


"sabi" or archaic imperfection, apparent simplicity or effortlessness in execution, and richness in historical association." Suzuki Daisetzu, Essays in Zen Buddhism (1932) Tokyo: Keiseisha Shoten, 1922

"Art can be regarded as a "state of mind where the distinction between the self and the object disappears." (pp.16-17) Theodor Lipps (1851-1914), Psychology of Artistic Creation (Theodor Lipps) Tokyo: Kinbara Shôgo, 1922

"The most revealing and clear-cut articulation of the idea that Feng Zikai could present throughout the essay on the "Triumph of Chinese Fine Arts in modern World Art."

"Yellow" is designated as "meaning that which lies under the surface, vague and opposite of the obvious, suggestion rather than a manifestation." Arthur Waley, The Nô Plays of Japan, 1922; New York: Columbia Press, Inc, pp.21, 23.

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Oriental Aesthetics: antithesis to Design?

Establishment of Nô Plays aesthetics as a ‘Yûgen’ in Japan (1912-1925)

Kakuzô Okakura, The Ideals of the East (1904), published during the Russo-Japanese War vs. ‘Yellow Peril’ (1919-29)

The Empire of Japan wished to be legitimized as an independent Asian state in the midst of the Western nation-states.

Against the hegemony of the Western idea of Fine-Arts and Design, Jun’ichirô Tanizaki (1886-1965) and Ernest F. Fenollosa (1853-1908) developed the concept of Nô-aesthetics.

Three Phases of Japonisme (Western Reception of Things Japanese and Japanese Reactions)

First phase: 1862-1905

Awakening of Western interest toward the Far East

Kakuzô Okakura, The Ideals of the East (1904)

Second phase: 1905-1919-29

The Empire fights back: Out of the yoke the unequal treaties

Kakuzô Okakura, The Awakening of Japan (1905) published during the Russo-Japanese War vs. ‘Yellow Peril’

Feng Zikai, “The Triumph of Chinese Fine Arts in Modern Art” (1930)

The Empire of Japan wished to be legitimized as an independent nation state in the midst of the Western countries.

Third phase: 1920-1945

Pursuit of Oriental alternative aesthetics

As “Yûgen” in Japan (1912-1925) and its Irish-American connections

The Book of Tea, Kakuzô Okakura, 1906, translated into Japanese in 1929

Kôno Harunobu, “In Praise of Shadows” (1933) in search of Oriental alternative aesthetics

In opposition to the Western idea of Fine-Arts and Design, Jun’ichirô Tanizaki (1886-1965) developed the concept of Nô-aesthetics.

Yûgen and Aware

Yoshinori Ônishi, Yûgen and Aware (1939) ; On Fûga; A Study of Sabi (1940)

The Book of Tea, translated into Japanese in 1929

Kakuzô Okakura, The Book of Tea, 1906, translated into Japanese in 1929

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南方熊楠「ロンドン抜書」より拇印の図

1999 (明治32年)

Minakata Kumagusu (1867-1941).


Mind is nourished and cultivated by the forms which the hand manufactures, and mind in turn fosters and elaborates forms through the hand which works on the material.

KAWAI Hayao (1928-2007)

Soul is the name of something which is lost when we try to separate the mind from the body.

Hayao Kawai, Nihonjin no Kokoro no yukue (Where is the Japanese Mind going?), Iwanami Shoten, 1998.

NAKAI Hisao (1934-)

Another distinguished psychiatrist, observes that in the case of acute mental crisis (persecution delusion for example) it is a wise treatment just to give the patient a portion of clay.


Clay is attached to Stigma in the West; in Japan clay is Limited by its history.


Ernest F. Fenollosa, «The Place in History of Mr. Whistler’s Art».

Ernest F. Fenollosa (1853-1908)


Stigma attached to Clay in the West; in Japan clay is Limited by its history.


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Question of Oriental Aesthetics: antithesis to Design?
The necessity of getting rid of the insularity of a parochial "Japanism" so as to conserve and advance Oriental Art.


"The Rehabilitation of the Southern Literary Painting and Chinese Modernity
南畫復権と近代中國
「我們把氣韻生動解釈到了這地步、自然要想起了現代俄羅斯的康定斯奇的
新晝論」

"expressionism" 「表現主義」
"pure painting" 「純粋絵晝」
"Innere Klang" 「内面的響」
"formal language" 「形的言語」
"color language" 「色的言語」
"spiritual side" 「精神的方面」
"internal necessity" 「內的必然」

On the formal level, Kandinsky aspires to an extreme revolution in the Komposition, or improvisation.

Kandinsky's "Innere Klang" with Qi-yun-sheng-dong 氣韻生動.

Kinoshita Mokutarô 木下杢太郎
"Anti-naturalistic Tendencies in Western Painting in Japan," in Bijutsu Shinpô “美術新報” 1913.

Sono Raizô 园頼三
professor at Doshisha University,同志社大学 translation in 1915.

The Psychology of Artistic Creation 『藝術創造的心理』 1922