



# FROM JAPONISME TO ART NOUVEAU

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Japanese art is important as a teacher. From it, we once again learn to feel clearly how far we have strayed from nature's true designs through the persistent imitation of fixed models; we learn how necessary it is to draw from the source; how the human spirit is able to absorb a wealth of magnificent, naive beauty from the organic forms of nature in place of pedantic, decrepit rigidity of form.

Julius Lessing, *Report from the Paris Exposition Universelle*, 1878

In the nineteenth century, an age where art from many different cultures was available for consumption, no other art had such a deep, transformational and permanent impact on the West as that of Japan. A five decade-long fascination began in exoticism, with widespread, literal copying of Japanese motifs and techniques, and ended in the absorption of Japanese aesthetic principles to the point that we no longer see anything overtly Japanese in European art and design of the turn of the twentieth century – the brief, brilliant moment of Art Nouveau, now widely recognised as the beginning of modern design.

As the term 'Japonisme' suggests, Japanese art had an enormous impact on the arts in France from the 1860s onwards.<sup>1</sup> The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of soul searching for intellectuals and artists across Europe. Many believed that the rise of industrial production in the nineteenth century had destroyed taste. Concomitant with this was the belief that quality of taste reflected the health – or lack thereof – of a society. This perceived aesthetic malaise came to be deemed indicative of deeper social problems.<sup>2</sup> In Britain, figures like John Ruskin and the socialist William Morris promoted a return to the social and artistic ideals of the Middle Ages to produce art that would serve as a corrective to these apparent problems. In France, by contrast, under the influence of art critics like Philippe Burty and the Goncourt brothers, and the innovative work of the Impressionist artists, Japanese art was seen to hold the hope of aesthetic renewal. Not that Japanese art was without influence in Britain. The proto-



LOUIS MAJORELLE *Display cabinet* c. 1900

(p. 30)  
GALLÉ, NANCY (manufacturer) *Clematis, vase* c. 1890–1900



PAUL SÉRUSIER *Boys on a river bank* c. 1888–96

industrial designer Christopher Dresser had travelled to Japan in 1876 and returned with large quantities of artworks, one of the very few Western commentators on the arts of Japan to do so.<sup>3</sup> Although William Morris disparaged Japanese art as a worthy model for European artists, not all British art and design reformers shared Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement's reverence for the Medieval Christian world.<sup>4</sup> Followers of the Aesthetic Movement rejected the moralising content of Arts and Crafts production, advocating instead for a purely aesthetic engagement with art. The purpose of art, for the Aesthetes, was to uplift the viewer through beauty, not scold them for a lack of moral rectitude.<sup>5</sup>

For both French Japonistes and British Aesthetes, the study of Japanese art encouraged new ways to think about pictorial composition, colour, subject matter and the traditional hierarchies of artistic materials and techniques. The vision of Japan upheld by these artists was admittedly romantic.<sup>6</sup> The Japanese

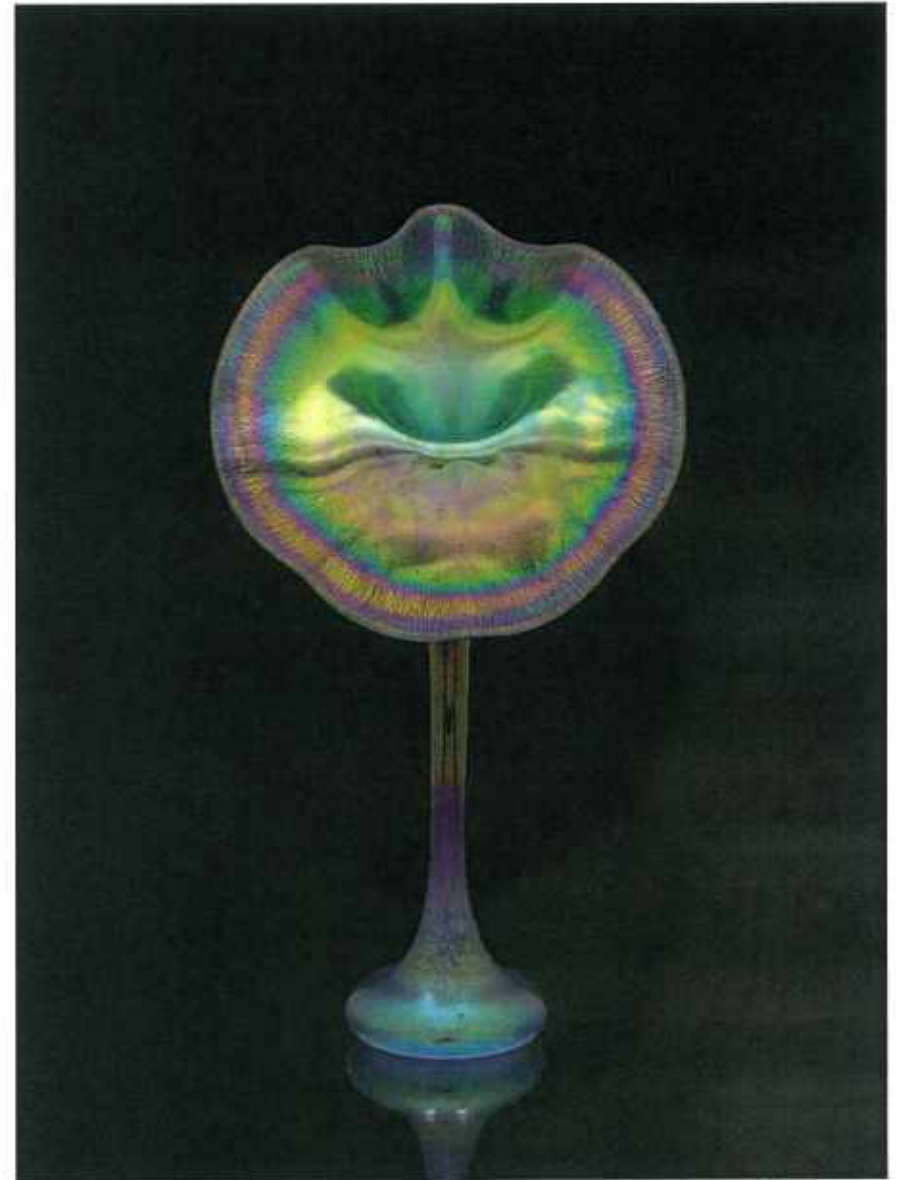
artworks available in the West were not necessarily representative of what the Japanese themselves valued in their own artistic traditions, and indeed by the 1880s Japan was producing export art specifically created to appeal to Western tastes.<sup>7</sup> Nor were the innovations suggested by Japanese art necessarily always completely new to Western artists, but growing awareness of Japanese art certainly encouraged their wider acceptance and application.<sup>8</sup> Since Western viewers understood (and often were interested in) little or none of the symbolic content of Japanese art, it effectively provided artists with a new formal language devoid of historical European cultural associations, a language that was therefore open to having new meaning inscribed upon it. In this way Japanese aesthetics functioned as a dynamic force informing various innovative art movements of the late nineteenth century – Aestheticism, Impressionism, Symbolism – that sought to address the need for artistic and social reform. These assorted movements, united by their shared, self-conscious break with the academic and historicist traditions of nineteenth-century art and design, collectively served to constitute nascent modernism.

One of the most significant among these movements was Art Nouveau – the new art. Art Nouveau flourished briefly during the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, coming to a decisive end with the First World War. Although short-lived, it changed European and American art and design forever. The movement took its name from the Paris gallery, La Maison de l'Art Nouveau, opened in December 1895 on the rue de Provence by Siegfried Bing. It is no coincidence that the entrepreneur Bing, the great importer and promoter of Japanese art and a key figure in Japonisme, should become the leading commercial patron of the new art. In the first issue of his journal *Le Japon artistique*, released in 1888, Bing had described Japanese art as an 'art nouveau' that would have a profound and lasting impact on Western creativity.<sup>9</sup> Bing's new gallery promoted modern artists in whose work he apprehended the fruits of the profound lessons of Japanese aesthetics. The names he commissioned work from are a rollcall of the avant-garde: Belgian architect Henry van de Velde worked on the interiors of the gallery, and Louis Comfort Tiffany supplied stained glass to designs by Nabi artists like Ker-Xavier Roussel, Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard and Maurice Denis, as well as art glass from his own studios.<sup>10</sup> Bing's gallery did not just display individual works of art and objects that balanced functionality, respect for materials and beauty of form, it also featured entire room settings designed in the new manner. For the opening of the gallery in 1895, rooms by van de Velde, Vuillard, Denis, Paul-Albert Besnard and Charles Conder were presented where furniture, textiles, wall coverings, murals, glassware and ceramics were conceived as part of a single coordinated aesthetic vision.<sup>11</sup>

The new art refused to differentiate between minor, applied art and higher, fine art. Instead, the Japanese artist-craftsman provided a paradigm for the unity of the arts. Art Nouveau embraced the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the total work of art. ‘What we are trying to do is what the Japanese have always done’, proclaimed Viennese Art Nouveau architect and designer Josef Hoffmann, in the work program of the *Wiener Werkstätte* (the Vienna Workshops), the influential craft and design studio he helped found in 1903.<sup>12</sup> For disciples of Art Nouveau, every aspect of the man-made environment was deemed worthy of the attention of the artist, creating a unified aesthetic whole where the idea of life itself as a work of art became a reality. In this way, the new art strove to transform society. The natural world, itself the ultimate *Gesamtkunstwerk* and an obvious corrective to the aesthetic malaise attributed to industrialisation, provided potent inspiration, as too did the evolutionary writings of Charles Darwin, which repositioned humanity within the natural world, rather than standing apart from it as its master.<sup>13</sup> Japanese art had shown Western artists how to look at the natural world with new eyes: fluid, organic forms, soft, coruscating colours and sensual textures derived from nature characterised the works of the new art.

*Wisteria, table lamp*, c. 1903–05 (cover, p. 9), designed by Clara Driscoll for the American doyen of Art Nouveau glass, Louis Comfort Tiffany, exemplifies these ideals. Tiffany was intimately familiar with Japanese art – he possessed a large group of objects collected for him in Japan by Christopher Dresser, and was later a client of Bing’s – and the products of his studio reflect this deep knowledge.<sup>14</sup> The cast bronze base of the lamp assumes the shape of a twisting wisteria vine. The shade, crafted from over 2000 pieces of hand-worked coloured and leaded glass, forms a canopy of lush, cascading wisteria blossom in a naturalistic palette of rich cobalt, ultramarine, soft lavender and pearly white. The essence of the natural world informs every aspect of the lamp’s design and its execution demonstrates a perfect understanding and mastery of materials and their potentials, a characteristic typical of traditional Japanese artisans. Similarly, the use of an inexpensive medium like glass echoes the Japanese respect for humble materials.

Tiffany’s engagement with Japanese aesthetics evidences an ever-increasing sophistication. *Jack-in-the-pulpit, vase*, c. 1913, illustrates the gradual abandonment of literal references in favour of a more profound appreciation of Japanese design philosophy. The vase’s elegant proportions, its unerring balance of elongated and swelling forms and its gentle asymmetry clearly echo the morphology of the botanical world without ever falling into literal imitation. The scintillating colours and iridescent surface of the glass are like dragonfly wings or hummingbird feathers; the vase is perfectly functional but also stands as an object of beauty



LOUIS COMFORT TIFFANY (designer); TIFFANY FURNANCES, CORONA, NEW YORK (manufacturer) *Jack-in-the-pulpit, vase* c. 1913

in its own right. There are no geishas or chrysanthemums. Instead, we find Japanese aesthetics fully internalised, the artist giving expression to something bold and modern, completely of its own place and time. The mirror of Japanese art had cast the gaze of Western artists back on to their own traditions, encouraging them to seek innovation and renewal, thus leading them to the brink of modernity.

#### NOTES

1. Gabriel P. Weisberg et al., *Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art 1854–1910*, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, 1975, p. 15.
2. See, for example, John Ruskin, 'The deteriorative power of conventional art over nations', in *The Two Paths*, Blackfriars Publishing Co., London, n.d., pp. 1–44; William Morris, 'Useful work versus useless toil', in A. Briggs (ed.), *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*, London, Penguin, 1986, pp. 117–36.
3. Widar Halén, 'Dresser and Japan', in Michael Whiteway (ed.), *Christopher Dresser: A Design Revolution*, V&A Publications, London, 2004, pp. 127–39.
4. William Morris, 'Textiles', in *Arts and Crafts Essays*, Scribner, New York, 1893, p. 35.
5. Lynn Federle Orr, 'The cult of beauty: the Victorian avant-garde in context', in Stephen Calloway & Lynn Federle Orr (eds), *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860–1900*, V&A Publications, London, 2011, pp. 24–37.
6. For example, see Walter Crane, *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books, Old and New* (1896), G. Bell, London, 1972, p. 132.
7. Hannah Sigur, *The Influence of Japanese Art on Design*, Gibbs Smith, Layton, UT, 2008.
8. Jean-Paul Bouillon, 'Remarques sur le Japonisme de Bracquemond', in Chisaburoh Yamada & Tatsuji Omori (eds), *Japonisme in Art: An International Symposium*, Kodansha International, Tokyo, 1980, pp. 85–107.
9. Siegfried Bing (ed.), *Le Japon artistique: documents d'art et d'industrie*, vol. 1, Paris, 1888, p. 5.
10. Gabriel Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900*, Abrams, New York, 1986, pp. 49–51.
11. Gabriel Weisberg, 'Redesigning the home. Bing's Art Nouveau workshops', in Gabriel Weisberg, Edwin Becker & Évelyne Possémé (eds), *The Origins of l'Art nouveau: The Bing Empire*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2004, pp. 164–5.
12. Quoted in W. H. Schweiger, *Wiener Werkstätte: Design in Vienna, 1903–1932*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1984, p. 43.
13. Paul Greenhalgh, 'Le style de l'amour et de la colère: l'Art nouveau hier et aujourd'hui', in *L'Art nouveau – la révolution décorative*, Pinacothèque de Paris, Paris, 2013, pp. 16–17.
14. Whiteway, p. 132.

#### SELECTED WORKS

