

Press Release
New Exhibition
June 11 to September 27, 2015

Looking East

Western Artists and the Allure of Japan



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Québec City, Wednesday June 10, 2015 ✕ The Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec sets sail for Japan, fascinating land of the rising sun, with its exclusive Canadian exhibition *Looking East: Western Artists and the Allure of Japan* being held from June 11 to September 27, 2015. This exhibition, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, explores the fruitful encounter between East and West from the late nineteenth century to the end of the Belle Époque through a presentation of *ukiyo-e* prints, or “images of the floating world,” and pieces of Japanese decorative art, in dialogue with paintings, prints and refined objects produced by renowned artists in Europe and the United States. The approximately 130 works in the exhibition, by a hundred different Japanese, American and European artists including Vincent Van Gogh, Claude Monet, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri Matisse, Edgard Degas, Édouard Vuillard, Edvard Munch, Paul Gauguin, Mary Stevenson

Cassatt, Louis C. Tiffany, William H. Bradley and others, come from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, which has one of the largest and most renowned collections of Japanese, American and European art of the period.

The Birth of a Major Artistic Current

From the mid-nineteenth century to the early part of the twentieth century – beginning with the opening up of Japan to Western trade in 1858 – Western infatuation with all things Japanese brought about a radical renewal of the arts. In 1872, a French art critic and collector, Philippe Burty, even coined the term “Japonisme” to describe this fascination of the day. Some of the greatest American and European artists of the time were inspired by Japanese art and culture to create work of singular beauty. The collective Western imagination was particularly spurred on by Japanese prints known as *ukiyo-e*, graphic works which shine light on the ephemeral nature of life. The themes found in these images include annual flower blossoming celebrations, alluring geishas dancing in elegant kimonos, Kabuki theatre actors performing and the majestic Mount Fuji. Employing unusual viewpoints and asymmetrical compositions combined with decorative motifs and delicate colouring, *ukiyo-e* were a revelation for Western artists trained to depict the world around them from a single perspective.



Masterpieces with a Japanese Influence

Following an introduction highlighting Japan’s appeal for the West, the exhibition is built around four themes: *Women, Urban Life, Nature and the Decorative Arts* and *Landscapes*. It shows the various paths taken by American and European artists discovering Japanese art and culture, as seen in four major works by Claude Monet (1840–1926), including the wonderful *Water Lily Pond, Green Harmony*, 1900. Monet made this the topic of a series of paintings, like Zen meditations on nature and humanity of which nothing like it had been seen in the history of Western art. Another remarkable work is a scene of Breton peasants which attests to Paul Gauguin’s (1848–1903) interest in Japanese prints: *Landscape with Two Breton Women*, 1889. In the wonderful work by Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *Postman Joseph Roulin*, 1888, the bright colours and stylized forms of Japanese prints are immediately recognizable; van Gogh collected and copied *ukiyo-e* prints and even organized an exhibition on the topic. *Summer Night’s Dream (The Voice)*, 1893, by Edvard Munch (1863–1944), a Norwegian artist whose work is being shown in Québec for

the very first time, lets us observe the motif of long aligned shafts, which his painting certainly picked up from Japanese works exhibited in Paris, or borrowed from avant-garde artists who had already incorporated these lessons into their work.



Le The Musée is also proud to be presenting rare prints by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), in particular *Senju in Mushashi Province* from the famous series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (around 1830–31, Edo period), a skilful composition in the very first large series of landscapes.

Among the work of the many decorative artists who appropriated Japanese forms and flora and fauna motifs such as chrysanthemums and butterflies, including Louis Comfort Tiffany and the potters of Newcomb College in the United States, *Still Life with Azaleas and Apple Blossoms* by the American artist Charles Caryl Coleman (1840–1928) and inspired by his vast and eclectic collection of decorative art, is an eloquent example. This work, made for a private home, was in harmony with the frame and with the motifs of the art objects around it. The aesthetic movement of the 1870s and 80s embraced the philosophy of art for art's sake and promoted the integration of the fine arts and the decorative arts in skilfully designed interiors which were believed to be typical of Japanese homes.

The Themes of the Exhibition

Japan: An Irresistible Attraction

Following the opening of trade with Japan, many Westerners discovered the island nation through its art and artifacts. By the 1870s, plenty of opportunities for introduction to Japan existed in Europe and the United States, at specialty shops, World's Fairs, and exhibitions, including an impressive and highly influential display at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Artists and collectors were among the first to appreciate the exotic wares arriving in large quantities on Western shores, but the general public soon caught on to the wonders offered by woodblock prints, bronzes, lacquerware, and other unfamiliar objects produced by a culture that had once seemed impossibly remote. These goods soon appeared in Western works of art, reproduced literally as documents of taste and collecting habits, or creatively reimagined as elements of a new style. Views of Japan also became part of the repertoire of artists who were among the early travelers to visit the country on long voyages of

discovery and learning. Their works in turn spread images of Japan to an appreciative audience. The paintings, prints, and decorative arts on display in this gallery demonstrate the type of Japanese art available to Western audiences in the late nineteenth century, as well as a rich sampling of the initial ways that artists engaged with Japan as collectors, travelers, and enthusiasts.

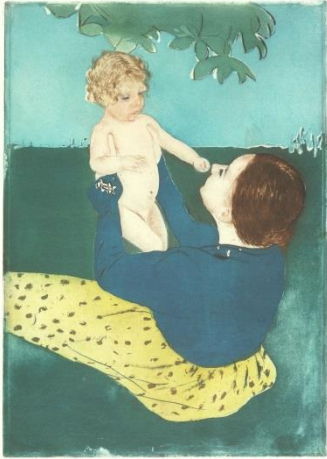
Japonisme

In 1872, French intellectual Philippe Burty became one of the first writers to use the term japonisme to describe the cultural phenomenon explored in this exhibition: the West’s growing interest in Japan, the collecting of Japanese objects, and the exploration of Japanese subject matter and styles in Western art. In 1887, writing for an American audience in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, Burty called it “Japonism.” Other terms you’ll sometimes see include “japonaiserie,” adopting Japanese scenes or details in traditionally Western styles, as opposed to the more complete integration of Japanese techniques and design into new forms of Western art. “Japonesque” is often used to indicate “Japan-like” or “inspired by Japan,” and is most frequently seen in the description of Japanese-influenced decorative arts.

Ukiyo-e

With no foreign invasions or major internal struggles, Japan during the Edo period was relatively peaceful and prosperous. The social changes that began to occur during this time were very similar to those that were then occurring in Europe: growing urbanization, the establishment of a cash economy, and, above all, the rise of a middle class. For the first time in Japan, urban merchants and artisans who were not members of the ruling elite but nevertheless had significant disposable income became numerous enough to influence social and cultural developments. A world of popular culture grew up to accommodate the newly affluent urban commoners. The term Floating World (ukiyo) originally referred to specific entertainment areas in major cities such as Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka; its meaning then expanded to include the world of fashionable pleasures in general, including red-light districts, Kabuki theater, restaurants and teashops, sumo wrestling matches, visits to scenic parks and temple grounds, imported curiosities and horticulture. Woodblock printing, which had been known in Japan since at last the eighth century, became a popular medium in this period. A new style of art known as ukiyo-e developed for these prints and book illustrations, as well as paintings of the fashionable pleasures of the Floating World.





Women

As women assumed more active roles in public life at the turn of the century, they became important participants in a number of fin-de-siècle artistic movements, especially japonisme. They were by turns collectors in the market for exotic goods, artists inspired by the art and culture of the foreign land, and themselves subjects of numerous works of art. The taste for Japan was associated early on with female consumers who wore imported silks and decorated their homes with curiosities. Paintings of European beauties in such gowns were among the first Japan-inspired works of art in the West, starting in the 1860s and 1870s. Many Westerners imagined the country to be replete with geishas and courtesans, symbolized by *Madames Chrysanthème* and *Butterfly*, the tragic and fictitious heroines of popular novels, plays, and operas. The frequency with which attractive women, or male actors dressed as female beauties, appear in *Ukiyo-e* art reinforced this stereotype for some Western observers. Others were challenged by the Japanese artists' frank portrayal of the most intimate or everyday activities of their subjects as well as the glamorous aspects of their existence. Elements borrowed from the Japanese seemed well-suited to a variety of ways of depicting woman, ranging from traditional portraiture to avant-garde experiments with unusual subjects and styles.

City Life

Great changes in cities across Europe and the United States set the stage for the cult status Japanese goods achieved in the late nineteenth century. A distinct urban culture emerged during this period, a result of architectural transformation, the Industrial Revolution, and the merging of public and private spheres. The excitement of this electrifying time captivated a generation of artists who were compelled to move away from tradition toward new subjects and styles that matched the character of modern life. They were fascinated by the major category of *ukiyo-e* prints devoted to depictions of city life and its diversions. Many welcomed the discovery that the Japanese had engaged seriously with subject matter that critics had dismissed as frivolous or superficial. "These Japanese artists confirm my belief in our vision," wrote the Impressionist Camille Pissarro, after seeing an exhibition of *ukiyo-e* in 1893. The newness of Japanese art seemed well matched to the novelty of popular activities like horse-racing and cabarets, as well as to the sensations of immediacy, speed, and theatricality they produced. It also offered a range of formal possibilities to artists experimenting with abstraction and symbolism. City life not only encouraged interest in

Japanese art, it fostered the development of artistic movements that incorporated Japanese elements so thoroughly that they became part and parcel of Modernism.



Posters

Following the French tradition, posters in the United States also gained popularity in the 1890s. Like their European counterparts, American posters were usually commissioned as advertisements that were designed, and sometimes produced by, artists themselves. As such, they were a kind of hybrid art-advertisement and served as a precursor for modern advertising. Japanese prints were a major influence on Western commercial arts toward the end of the nineteenth century, as their calligraphic patterning, bold shapes, and flattened forms lent themselves to the attention-grabbing needs of advertising. The poster craze of the 1890s also benefited from a growing belief in the merits of the so-called minor arts, which had parallels in Japanese culture.



Nature and Decorative Arts

Natural motifs and styles inspired by Japanese art are hallmarks of several major Western artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is especially true for the decorative arts as well as printmaking, poster design, and photography, all of which previously had been considered minor or commercial in comparison with painting and sculpture, but which drew increasingly serious attention in the fin de siècle. Critics imagined Japanese artists and designers to be universally dedicated to the appreciation of flora and fauna and urged their contemporaries to similarly devote their efforts. “The art of Japan leads us to return to nature” was a sentiment shared by numerous writers. A wide variety of organic forms appeared in the Japanese prints, lacquers, silks, bronzes and ceramics that saturated the Western market in the late nineteenth century. These were especially welcomed by the artists and collectors who valued the revitalization of the domestic interior and incorporated natural references into skillfully designed rooms. Their commitment to the highest level of creativity in all media, whether fine or decorative, found parallels in Japanese culture. Siegfried Bing, one the great promoters of Japanese art, commented that “Nature” is the Japanese artist’s “sole, his revered teacher, and her precepts form the inexhaustible source of his inspiration.”

Art Nouveau

The style called Art Nouveau (literally “New Art”) emerged in France the 1890s and spread rapidly throughout Europe and the United States. The style cut a wide swath, leaving its mark on architecture and the decorative and graphic arts up to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Sinuous, asymmetrical lines and abstracted organic forms define the style, though there were national variations. Designers found inspiration in natural forms, but also drew on Japanese art and the rococo style of the mid-eighteenth century. Siegfried Bing, whose Parisian gallery the Maison de l’Art Nouveau gave the movement its name, was a dealer in Japanese art and the publisher of the illustrated journal Le Japon Artistique. His gallery featured the latest in interior design by artists of the movement, and Bing sponsored exhibitions of their work as well as Japanese prints and objects. The rapid urbanization of the second half of the nineteenth century fueled the spread of the new style, as a generation of patrons born in cities longed for nature, now a foreign environment rather than an everyday experience. Nature, in its reinvented Art Nouveau form, came to embody the very idea of modernity, standing in stark contrast to the historical revivals popular in architecture and decorative arts at the time.



Landscape

Japanese approaches to color, perspective, and light in the depiction of landscapes offered compelling possibilities to Western artists already enamored of the country’s sensitivity to nature and its ever-changing beauty. Many painters discovered Japanese art around the same time that they became aware of the new science of color, especially the theories of nineteenth-century chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul, and increasingly questioned the Western landscape tradition. Some observers remarked that the bright colors of *ukiyo-e* prints made them feel as though veils had been lifted from their eyes. Instead of using shadows to create convincing three-dimensional forms, the Japanese employed contrasts in color, the repetition of shapes, and a focus on essential features to animate views of such iconic sites as Mount Fuji. A number of these pictorial devices became part of the Western repertoire. Western artists were drawn, for example, to the atmospheric effects featured in *ukiyo-e* prints, concentrating on the ephemeral nature of the seasons and times of day. Other Japanese motifs that became essential elements of the new Western styles were the repeated trees, trellises, and gridlike structures that offered a way of organizing landscape, which was legible while also decorative or symbolic. The overhead perspective known as a “birds’ eye”

view also came into favor, and was especially useful in translating a personal reaction to a place, be it as majestic as the Grand Canyon or as quietly sublime as a water lily pond in Giverny.



The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue in English and by a French translation of the essays in the catalogue, totalling 48 pages. The catalogue was produced by MFA Publications.

Looking East: Western Artists and the Allure of Japan has been presented at the Frist Center for the Arts in Nashville, the Setagaya Art Museum in Tokyo, the Kyoto Art Museum and the Nagoya/Boston Art Museum. Following its presentation in Québec City, the exhibition will complete its tour at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

June 11 to September 27, 2015

INFORMATIONS: 418 643-2150 ou 1 866 220-2150 / www.mnbaq.org

Credits

The exhibition *Looking East: Western Artists and the Allure of Japan* has been organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in collaboration with the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

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New Technology at the MNBAQ!

The Mediaguide™

In this digital age, the MNBAQ is offering a new adventure to its visitors, young and old alike: the mediaguide™. Visitors can view the exhibition *Looking East: Western Artists and the Allure of Japan* differently, using a tablet which makes learning about art a fun experience. The mediaguide™ offers two different tours to meet the needs of families: a digital guided tour for adults and, something entirely new, a fun educational visit for children aged five to twelve. Available in English and French, the two tours have been designed to complement one another so that parents and children can visit the exhibition together and learn about it in ways adapted to each.

For Children

The children's tour is divided into two levels: for children aged 5-8 and children aged 9-12. These two levels have twenty-two stations, seventeen of which offer stimulating activities (brain teasers, questionnaires, observation games, creative games, etc.). Margot, a little girl inspired by the works in the exhibition, accompanies the child during his or her visit. Audio commentary with additional content is adapted to two age groups; complementary images are synchronized with the narrative; a transcription is also available, with clickable words giving access to definitions along with a glossary that can be consulted at any time during the visit. Finally, a souvenir image can be sent by e-mail at the end of the child's visit, summarizing all the activities engaged in during their tour. The entire digital adventure has been designed to be intuitive, dynamic and interactive

For Adults

Adults can also enjoy the twenty-two stations of the visit, including: audio commentary and additional content; a variety of complementary images synchronized with the narrative, which can be viewed again at will; a transcription available with clickable words to see their definition; and a glossary that can be consulted at any time during the visit. This digital experience is an added value, one that is personalized to the interests of each visitor. Content for the exhibitions *Four Figures of Modern Art in Québec – Jean Paul Lemieux: Silence and Space, Alfred Pellán: Wide-awake Dreamer, Fernand Leduc: Painter of Light, and Jean-Paul Riopelle: Metamorphoses* – has also been transferred to this guide. The addition of a written transcription to the audio is a considerable plus for the deaf and hard of hearing.



Page 1 - Kikukawa Eizan; Publisher: Mikawaya Den'emon. *Otome*, from the series *Eastern Figures Matched with the Tale of Genji (Azuma sugata Genji awase)*, Edo period, about 1818–23 (Bunsei 1–6), Woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, 11.17766. Photograph © 2015 MFA, Boston

Page 2 - Claude Monet, *The Water Lily Pond*, 1900, oil on canvas, Given in Memory of Governor Alvan T. Fuller by the Fuller Foundation, 61.959. Photograph © 2015 MFA, Boston

Page 3 - Vincent van Gogh, *Postman Joseph Roulin*, 1888, oil on canvas, Gift of Robert Treat Paine, 2nd, 35.1982. Photograph © 2015 MFA, Boston

Page 4 - Utagawa Hiroshige I; Publisher: Uoya Eikichi, *Bamboo Yards, Kyôbashi Bridge (Kyôbashi Takegashi)*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo (Meisho Edo hyakkei)*, Edo period, 1857 (Ansei 4), 12th month, woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, 11.26350. Photograph © 2015 MFA, Boston // Utagawa Hiroshige I; Éditeur: Uoya Eikichi, *Suidô Bridge and Surugadai (Suidôbashi Surugadai)*, from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo (Meisho Edo hyakkei)*, Edo period, 1857 (Ansei 4), intercalary 5th month, Woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, 11.36876.34. Photograph © 2015 MFA, Boston

Page 5 - Mary Stevenson Cassatt, *Under the Horse-Chestnut Tree*, about 1895, drypoint and color aquatint, Bequest of W.G. Russell Allen, 63.313. Photograph © 2015 MFA, Boston

Page 6 - William H. Bradley, *Bradley: His Book*, 1896, woodcut and lithograph, printed in color, Lee M. Friedman Fund, 69.1152. Photograph © 2015 MFA, Boston // Retailed by: Frédéric Boucheron: After a design by: Paul Legrand; Possibly made by: Crossville and Glachant, *Inkstand*, 1876, Silver, partial gilt, champlévé, basse-taille, cloisonné enamels, Museum purchase with funds bequeathed by Genevieve Gray Young in memory of Patience Young and Patience Gray Young, Frederick Brown Fund, William E. Nickerson Fund, Otis Norcross Fund, Arthur Tracy Cabot Fund, H.E. Bolles Fund, Russell B. and Andrée Beauchamp Stearns Fund, Ernest Kahn Fund, Helen B. Sweeney Fund, and European Decorative Arts Insurance, Deaccession and Deaccession Income Funds, 2000.977.1-7. Photograph © 2015 MFA, Boston

Page 7 - Paul Gauguin, *Landscape with Two Breton Women*, 1889, oil on canvas Gift of Harry and Mildred Remis and Robert and Ruth Remis, 1976.42. Photograph © 2015 MFA, Boston

Page 8 - Louis Dumoulin, *Carp Banners in Kyoto - Fête des Garçons*, 1888, oil on canvas, Fanny P. Mason Fund in memory of Alice Thevin, 1986.582. Photograph © 2015 MFA, Boston

Page 10 - Richard Béliveau pour la conférence *Samourais: La voie du sabre et la voie de la santé* // Création réalisée par Alain Côté pour l'atelier *Poupée japonaise*. Photo : MNBAQ, Idra Labrie

General Information

OPENING HOURS OF THE MUSÉE

June 1 to September 7, 2015
Daily from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
Wednesdays until 9:00 p.m.

**September 8, 2015 to May 31,
2016**
Tuesday to Sunday, from 10:00
to 5:00 p.m.

Wednesday until 9:00 p.m.
Closed Mondays (except 12
October and 28 December)

ADMISSION

Adults : **18 \$**
Seniors (65 and Over) : **16 \$**
Ages 18 to 30 ans : **10 \$**
Ages 13 to 17 ans : **5 \$**
Children 12 and under: **Free**
Families : **40 \$** (2 adults and 3
children 13 to 17)
Members : **Free**
Wednesdays from,
5:00 to 9:00 p.m.: **Half-price**
Reduced rates for groups

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