

The Stereotype of Collections: *japonisme* and Pierre Loti's "Japan"

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Japonisme and japonaiseries

The nineteenth-century Western view of Japan had a unique quality of its own when compared to that of other "Oriental" countries. This was due to the long isolationist policy of "sakoku", which lasted from 1640 to 1854. With no historical context within which to frame it, Japan, as Akane Kawakami says in *Traveller's Visions: French Literary Encounters with Japan, 1881-2004*, "reentered the Western consciousness as a primarily visual entity through the phenomenon of *japonisme*, and through the French Impressionists' appreciation of Japanese art" (Kawakami, p.1). This led to "an aesthetic way of seeing Japan", with little or no understanding of its cultural or historical background.

To further differentiate "Japan's unique status in the Western imagination" was the fact "that it was never colonised, and therefore never imagined [...] in the context of the coloniser-colonised relationship" (Kawakami, p.1). This difference from other Asian countries was actually a source of frustration, as reflected in the musings of Rudyard Kipling in his *Letters from Japan* (1889). Kipling bases his assessment of the Chinese and Japanese on his own Indian experience, differentiating 'natives' from the European 'Sahib-log', and experiencing confusion when faced with a Meiji Westernisation which defies his fixed model: 'The Chinaman's a native [...]. That's the look on a native's face, but the Jap isn't a native, and he isn't a sahib either. What

is it?’ (Kipling, p.16). He expresses a certain admiration but then confirms them as natives after all: ‘Well, I’m very fond of the Jap; but I suppose he *is* a native any way you look at him’ (Kipling, p.75). Kipling’s unease and final semi-contemptuous dismissal reflect the lack of comprehension and consequent ambiguity of the initial nineteenth-century view Kawakami refers to.

A lack of understanding led to a need to somehow classify Japan. This is most noticeably observable through the phenomenon of “*japonisme*, a fashion for all things Japanese and Japanese-like” (Kawakami, p.1). This was largely just “a fad for collecting Japanese objects, known as *japonaiseries*” (Kawakami, p.15). The Japan which people imagined “through the medium of these *japoniste* objects was an imaginary place which they saw as an aesthetic utopia.” *Japonisme* became “the lens through which they saw a domesticated, aestheticised image of Japan”. This deliberate reductionism was recognized at the time, as can be seen in the words of Oscar Wilde. In the imaginary discussion of art that is ‘The Decay of Lying’, the main character Vivian comments directly on the illusory nature of “Japan”, and shows that it is nothing but artistic creation:

Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If you set a picture by Hokusai, or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them. The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. (Wilde, p.82)

Wilde, through Vivian, is arguing that anyone trying to find the "Japan" of "*japonisme*" will inevitably be disappointed. What *japonisme* did was to define Japan, with the "*japonaiserie* [becoming] a signifier for 'Japan' that overshadows its signified so completely that it eventually *becomes* the signified: a self-reflexive sign that signifies only itself" (Kawakami, p.52).

Kawakami goes further in describing the effects and underlying 'motivation' of "the craze for *japonaiseries*" in France (Kawakami, p.20). By becoming "the stereotypical and predominant symbol of Japan", the *japonaiserie* offered "a 'bite-sized' image of Japanese otherness": "In possessing these small objects, exotic enough to titillate but not substantial enough to threaten the authority of the French aesthetic, Parisians were able to experience the strangeness of Japan as a harmless frisson of exoticism." She refers to Roland Barthes' view of "the exotic", and extends it with regard to *japonaiseries*:

The stranger, when labelled and stowed away mentally in a category labelled 'the exotic', immediately becomes unthreatening, a spectacle to be gazed at rather than an 'other' requiring interaction. The *japonaiserie* goes one crucial step further in its domestication of the otherness of Japan in that it is *literally* an object, a small knick-knack that can be put away in a box: it is physically assimilable into the cabinets of Parisian salons as a curio. The *japoniste* 'Japan' was thus an imaginary space peopled by a collection of small porcelain figures, paper lanterns and other pretty *bibelots*.

A further significant point she makes is that "these objects were *commodities*, available to all for money. The "popular view of Japan" (Kawakami, p.21) was therefore "primarily art-related and commodified", rather than being based in any scholarly, cultural, or historical context.

Edmond de Goncourt and his collection

To illustrate her view Kawakami looks at one of the most well-known French collectors of *japonaiseries*, Edmond de Goncourt. One of his best-known works is *La Maison d'un artiste* (1881), an exhaustive catalogue of the many collections in his house. His circular attitude is a perfect representation of the reductive nature of seeing Japan through a collector's eyes: "Goncourt's 'Japan' is deduced from the *japonaiserie*, and that 'Japan' is then used to qualify the *japonaiserie*: the process is a self-fulfilling hermeneutical arc which never fails to satisfy, the voyage to 'Japan' starting and ending at the object" (Kawakami, p.25). An example she gives is from a passage where he describes his netsuke collection: "Un jongleur japonais, tout en dansant, fait tomber à terre, [...] les grands dés triangulaires d'un jeu de chô-ghi" (*A dancing Japanese juggler drops the triangular dice of a game of shogi*) (Goncourt, p.176). Goncourt's mistake here is in assuming that falling objects in a game must be dice, although they must in reality be chessmen: "his mistake reveals that he arrived at this conclusion through examination of the object rather than reliance on external sources" (Kawakami, p.26). Such an attitude is seen throughout his descriptions:

He is determined to dwell only briefly, if at all, on any knowledge that does not relate directly to the objects: their function, for instance, is usually considered to be extraneous. There is no mention of tea in the section of Satsuma bowls, no discussion of food or drink in the section on lacquerware. [...] In other words, the *japonaiseries* are given meaning purely in the context of their existence in Goncourt's collection, as objects-on-display, not in their previous existence as objects-in-use: the object is not allowed to take us out of the glass cabinet and into its country of origin. (Kawakami, p.29)

To deliberately ignore cultural context is actually an essential part of a collector's

outlook. The context that he desires for his objects is of "the home country, because potential specimens – especially if they are to be sold – need to be assigned a recognisable value within the traveler's own culture" (Kawakami, p.29). Goncourt's collection "becomes a self-reflecting sign, referring back – ultimately – to *japonisme* rather than Japan" (Kawakami, p.30).

Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* as *japonaiserie*

Of course, one of the best-known, and indeed notorious descriptions of late nineteenth-century Japan is contained in the works of Pierre Loti, most notably in *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887). Loti's motive for writing *Madame Chrysanthème* was a strictly financial one. In a letter to a friend he expresses his annoyance at having to finish it: "Travaillez énormément, écrivez roman japonais que dois livrer en août; grosse affaire d'argent. Roman sera stupide. Le deviens moi aussi" (*Working very hard, writing a Japanese novel that I have to deliver in August; big money affair. The novel will be stupid. I'm becoming stupid myself*) (Lefèvre, p.158). He is writing a book for money, and knows that pandering to the public's desire for *japonisme*, is what will make it sell. For Kawakami this is the fundamental irony of the novel: "Loti the colonialist, the dominant Westerner who buys a young Japanese woman for his pleasure, has in turn sold himself to a Parisian publisher; like *Chrysanthème*, he has prostituted his talents to become a *japonaiserie*" (Kawakami, p.48).

Loti's descriptions of Japan and the Japanese are firmly based in stereotype. The novel is based on the premise of choosing a wife and living with her for a while as a 'married' Japanese couple. He describes this 'wife' before even meeting her. She will be "une petite femme à peau jaune, à cheveux noirs, à yeux de chat. – Je la choiserais jolie. – Elle ne sera plus haute qu'une poupée" (*a small woman with yellow skin, black hair, and eyes like a cat. – She will be pretty. – She will be no*

taller than a doll) (*Romans*, p.651). For Kawakami this description reduces her to being a *japonaiserie*, part of an aesthetic fantasy. Loti is quite clear himself about this stereotyping, which is crystallised in his description of her in his *Journal intime* (*Private Diary*) in an entry on 24th July 1885. She fulfills all of his preconceptions: “j’avais déjà vu son portrait partout, sur des paravents, au fond des tasses à thé; cette figure mignarde de poupée, ces beaux cheveux d’ébène, lisses et comme noués” (*I had already seen her picture everywhere, on fans, on the bottom of tea cups; this pretty-pretty doll’s face, the beautiful ebony hair, smooth and knotted*) (*Cette éternelle Nostalgie*, p.168). This stereotyping also extends to descriptions of the scenery. From a distance as his ship approaches the Nagasaki coastline he is ecstatic: “Quel pays de verdure et d’ombre, ce Japon, quel Eden inattendu!...” (*What a country of greenery and shadow, Japan, what an unexpected Eden!...*) (*Romans*, p.653). However, as with Chrysanthème later on, the gap between the aesthetic fantasy and the banality of the mundane reality he finds inevitably causes disillusion: “Quand Nagasaki parut ce fut une déception pour nos yeux: aux pieds des vertes montagnes surplombantes, c’était une ville tout à fait quelconque.” (*When Nagasaki appeared it was a big let-down: at the foot of the towering mountains, it was a completely ordinary city.*) When the harbour traders swarm aboard his ship, the tone of the novel is set. A *japoniste* fantasy cannot survive outside of its fictional display-case world: “Mais, mon Dieu, que tout ce monde était laid, mesquin, grotesque!” (*But, my God, how ugly, shabby and grotesque they all were!*) (*Romans*, p.654).

Loti’s treatment of Chrysanthème as a *japonaiserie* obviously leads to a problematic relationship with her. She cannot live up to his preconceived expectations. This tension is crystallised in a scene where he warns Madame Prune not to wake her: “Gardez-vous-en-bien, bonne madame Prune! si vous saviez comme elle me plaît mieux ainsi” (*Don’t you do it Madame Prune! If only you knew how much she pleases me better like that*) (*Romans*, p.684). He prefers her asleep, as only then can she be made to fit the fantasy. In this silent pose she becomes an object to

be looked at, literally being described as a dead specimen pinned in a display case:

Ses bras était étendus en croix, ses manches déployées comme des ailes – et sa longue guitare gisait à son côté.

Elle avait un air de fée morte. Ou bien encore elle ressemblait à quelque grande libellule bleue qui se serrait abattue là et qu'on y aurait clouée. [...]

Quel dommage que cette petite Chrysanthème ne puisse pas toujours dormir: elle est très décorative, présentée de cette manière, – et puis, au moins, elle ne m'ennuie pas. – Peut-être, qui sait? si j'avais le moyen de mieux comprendre ce qui se passe dans sa tête et dans son cœur...

(Her arms were stretched out in a cross, her sleeves spread like wings – and her long guitar lay at her side.

She looked like a dead fairy. Or more like some big blue dragonfly which had been killed and pinned there. [...]

What a shame that this little Chrysanthème can't always sleep: she is very decorative, presented in that way, – and then, at least she doesn't worry me. – Perhaps, who knows? If I were able to better understand what goes on in her head and in her heart...) (*Romans*, pp.684-5)

Loti is basically admitting the hollowness of his *japoniste* fantasy in expressing his frustration at being unable to understand her. He prefers his static image of her as a lifeless specimen. His initial claim to having realised his fantasy is now revealed to be obviously a sham: “je me sens entré en plein dans ce petit monde imaginé, artificiel, que je connaissais déjà par les peintures des laques et des porcelaines. [...] Je l'avais deviné, ce Japon-là, bien longtemps avant d'y venir” (*I feel myself fully entered into this little imagined world, artificial, that I already knew from pictures, lacquerware and porcelain. [...] I had already guessed that Japan, a long time before coming*) (*Romans*, p.662). He can only enter this “petit monde imaginé”

(*little imagined world*) by seeing it as just that, an imagined lifeless collection of *japonaiseries*, right down to the stereotype of the Japanese “guitar” lying at Chrysanthème’s side.

Loti’s passion for collecting began in his childhood, when he created his own museum in his house. This is described by Irma D’Auria in her essay “Les Contradictions du Japon dans l’expérience de Loti” in *Loti en son temps: Colloque de Paimpol.*:

Dès son enfance Loti [...] passe en effet des heures dans son ‘Musée’ en regardant les ‘papillons’ et les ‘nids d’oiseaux’ qu’il trouve dans les bois de la Limoise, en contemplant ‘des nacres exotiques’, ‘des coquilles’ qui viennent de l’île d’Oléron et des ‘Colonies’. L’observation de ces objets donne libre cours à l’imagination de Loti, qui rêve déjà à ces ‘étranges rivages’.

(*From his childhood, Loti [...] spends hours in his ‘Museum’ looking at the ‘butterflies’ and ‘birds’ nests’ that he finds in the Limoise woods, gazing at ‘exotic mother of pearl’, at ‘sea shells’ which come from Oléron island and the ‘Colonies’. The observation of these objects gives free reign to Loti’s imagination, as he is already dreaming of ‘strange shores’.*) (Chappé, p. 112)

His childhood images mold his expectations, leading him to make the following description of Japanese women as “mystérieux [bibelots] d’ étagère” (*mysterious display-case trinkets*) (*Femmes japonaise*, p. 223). Wanting to preserve this image while interacting with real people is, of course, next to impossible, so Loti did the next best thing. On leaving Japan at the end of *Madame Chrysanthème* he takes eighteen cases of souvenirs. The description of packing is one of intense aesthetic pleasure:

Messieurs les emballeurs sur ma prière, ont envoyé dans la soirée plusieurs

petites caisses ravissantes, à compartiments, à doubles fonds, et plusieurs sacs en papier (en indéchirable papier japonais) qui se ferment d'eux-mêmes et s'attachent au moyen de liens, également en papier, [...].

(The packers, at my request, sent in the evening several beautiful little cases, with double-depth compartments, and several paper bags (in untearable Japanese paper) which close by themselves and are tied by cords, also of paper, [...].) (Romans, p.744)

The satisfaction of being able to put his keepsakes in such boxes is palpable, and what he has accumulated corresponds exactly to his image of Japan as he thinks he *should* have found it: "Dix-huit caisses de paquets, de bouddhas, de chimères, de vases" (*Eighteen cases of packages, buddhas, daydreams, vases*). This he transported back to his home in France, which he had converted into a kind of exoic museum, with differently themed rooms. He was therefore able to construct what he called his "pagoda japonaise" (*Japanese pagoda*) (Quella-Villéger, p.351), a satisfying recreation of his fantasy. Here, the "ennuyeuse" (*worrying*) Chrysanthème, would, of course be absent, and would no longer disturb his *japoniste* fantasy with her awkward presence.

Conclusion

For Kawakami, Loti's "use of the distorting lens of *japonisme*" was ultimately subversive of it (Kawakami, p.53). His "use of the objects that 'symbolised' Japan to describe the real Japan creates a surfeit of signification that ultimately points to the artificial nature of the sign". The *japonaiseries* that form the basis of the novel, and indeed of the "Japanese pagoda" he created in his house, are shown to be a hollow construct that refer, as with those in Goncourt's collection, only to themselves. To return to Oscar Wilde, what we are seeing in *japonisme* is "the deliberate self-

conscious creation of certain individual artists [...] the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people.”

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When Japan ended its isolationist policy of "sakoku" in 1854, the West had very little idea of what sort of country it was. An image was formed based on hazy ideas of ancient samurai culture, revolving around a fascination with Japanese art and artefacts. That this in no way corresponded to the reality of Meiji modernization had little effect in undermining the stereotype. This paper looks at Western preconceived ideas, focusing on the artificiality of *japonisme* and the collection of *japonaiseries*.

