

19

A European Eye on Japanese Arts and a Japanese Response to 'Japonisme' (1860-1920)¹

A Transcultural Interaction between Visual Arts and Critical Discourse

INAGA SHIGEMI

I

One of the first champions of the Impressionists, Théodore Duret (1838-1927) is also known as one of the first 'japonisants' or amateurs of Japanese arts. His authority was based on his experience. As a matter of fact, he was one of the first French civilians to visit Japan.² This privileged position is worth noting principally because it was Duret himself who affirmed as an eye-witness the Japanese influence on French Impressionists. In one of his essays entitled 'Critique d'avant-garde' (1885), we see Duret advance an analogy between Japanese Ukiyo-e prints and Impressionist paintings.

Il a fallu l'arrivée parmi nous des albums japonais pour que quelqu'un osât s'asseoir sur le bord d'une rivière, pour juxtaposer sur une toile un toit qui fût hardiment rouge (...) et de l'eau bleu. (...) Ces images japonaises (...) sont d'une fidélité frappante. (...) Je regarde un album japonais et je dis: oui c'est bien anisi, sous son atmosphère lumineuse et transparente, que la mer s'étend bleue et colorée (...) aussi a-t-il fortement influencé les Impressionistes. / L'oeil japonais, doué d'une acuité particulière, exercée au sein d'une admirable lumière (...) a su voir dans le plein air une gamme de tons aigus que l'oeil européen n'y avait jamais vue et (...) n'y eût probablement jamais découverte (...). Claude Monet, parmi nos paysagistes, a eu le premier la hardiesse d'aller aussi loin qu'eux [les Japonais] dans ses coloration.³

In the years that followed Duret continued to make this comparison. Interesting as it may be, the assertion is rather problematic, for it is beyond verification. Nevertheless, Richard Muther's *Geschichte der Malerei in neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (1893-94, in three volumes) does suggest the authority Duret enjoyed in his day. Respecting Duret's conception of an evolution in European modern painting, the author of this monumental book was obliged to insert a chapter on Japanese art between 'Realismus' and 'Impressionismus' in order to explain the gap that would otherwise

remain open between the two. A curious and heteroclitic mixture from our point of view, for Impressionism would be a bastard or a mutant, rather than the legitimate son of European painting tradition if we would not admit, with Duret and Muther, the legitimacy of Japanese insemination!

II

We should recall a passage of the Goncourt brothers' *Manette Salomon* (Ch. XLVII), to make the point that this vision of Japan as a world without shadow and filled with bright and transparent sunshine was a sort of 'constant' for that generation of French 'Japonisants,' and that they believed this 'pays féerique, un jour sans ombre et qui n'était que lumière' to be transmitted with complete fidelity by Japanese ukiyo-e prints.⁴

This French optic clearly appears when we examine how Duret perceived the historical evolution of Japanese colour prints:

En ce qui concerne le coloris proprement dit, au commencement du XIX^e siècle, il consistait en tons pâles et comme atténués, mais à mesure que l'art se développe, il s'accroît de plus en plus. C'est dans l'oeuvre de Kouniyoshi et Toyokouni II qu'il atteint enfin son maximum d'intensité et arrive à un degré d'éclat qu'il serait impossible de dépasser.⁵

Duret, therefore, dates the apogée of the ukiyo-e polychrome prints in the middle of the nineteenth century. We can readily understand why Duret came to this view; and while we can no longer share his view, the fact is it was widely accepted as authentic by French 'Japonisants' circles at the time. In the same way he considered Impressionist painting to be the result of a liberation from the conventional academic chiaroscuro and a step towards open air aesthetics; he also believed that the vivid colour of the Japanese ukiyo-e prints had reached the peak of perfection in its own evolution.

This exaggerated preoccupation with crude colours in late ukiyo-e prints was to be replaced in the 1890s by a more sophisticated preference for the attenuated colours of the eighteenth century prints. A native art dealer, one Tadamasa Hayashi (1856-1906) seems to be largely responsible for this fundamental change. During this same period French amateur painters no longer recognized any kind of climacteric in the use of primary colours of the nineteenth century Japanese print but rather began to see in it a sign of decadence.⁶

Interestingly enough, this aesthetic shift coincided with the so-called Impressionist crisis. A curious coincidence, indeed, because it was precisely when the French amateurs began to regard the late ukiyo-e prints with their crude colours as decadent work, that French aesthetics was also dominated by 'Decadentisme.' Significantly, Stephan Mallarmé's collection contains only a shoddy 'pacotilles' of the so-called 'bariolage' of late Japanese prints. Rather than to ascribe this to a 'mauvais goût' of our great poet, it would be more appropriate to say that this decadent poet justified himself by his own 'decadent' Japanese prints collection.⁷

The apogee or the decadence, that is the question; which of these incompatible interpretations of the late Japanese prints is the right one? Rather than make a choice between the two, we should try and understand

how and why such a divergence took place in the aesthetic judgements of the second half of the nineteenth century European appreciation of Japanese prints.

Divergent as they are, both of these hypotheses are based on the then prevailing organic theory of social evolution. The 'phase difference' between the two stems only from a psychological complex inherent in any cultural exchange. As a matter of fact, did not the Japanese disdain the occidental amateurs for their one-sided appreciation of the so-called 'decadent' Japanese prints? By so doing the Japanese could declare, if not ostensibly, a superiority of ukiyo-e prints over Impressionist painting. It would indeed have been quite infamous for the Europeans to learn that the new world vision achieved by Impressionism reflected nothing but a decadent tendency in Japanese ukiyo-e prints. Moreover, we should not forget, here, that the famous 'bariolage' of late ukiyo-e prints was largely due to the chemical pigments imported from Europe. Before the Impressionists, it was therefore the Japanese that suffered from the so-called 'indigomania,' to use the expression of J. K. Huysmans.⁸ Did the decadence of ukiyo-e, then, come from the decline of Occident?

In short, it is one thing that cultural exchanges amplify artistic experience; it is another thing if this exchange serves as a criterion for any quality judgement.

III

Now let us return to the Japonisme thesis which regards Japanese prints as the origin of Impressionism and let us examine if the hypothesis was relevant in Japan or not. For, if Impressionist aesthetics had been unconditionally accepted in Japan, it would have justified Théodore Duret's claim, but the historical fact was much more complicated.

As we know, during the Meiji period, when Japan 'imported' European oil painting techniques, there was a conflict between the option of the 'Bitumen' School ('*yani-ha*') and the 'Violet' School ('*murasaki-ha*'). In other words, there were incompatible positions in Japan as to how the European oil painting technique should be applied. The 'Bitumen' School represented a tendency of the Barbizon School transmitted by Antonio Fontanesi (1818-1882) to Asai Chū (1856-1907); whereas the 'Violet' School reflected a moderated impressionist tendency imported to Japan by Kuroda Seiki (1866-1924), a disciple of Raphael Collin (1850-1916).⁹ It would be useless to try to judge which of them was better suited to represent Japanese nature or 'local colour.' Much more important for us is to recognize that such a conflict between the Bitumen School and the Violet School did exist in spite of the impressionistic world view for which Japan was par excellence an ideal model of the Violet School. We can deduce here that such an impressionistic interpretation of Japan, advanced by Duret and other Japonisants like Louis Gonse had no realistic cognitive base at all.¹⁰

IV

This fundamental ambiguity of Japanese nature in face of the Impressionist aesthetics gave birth to a more complicated situation in the next generation.

It is no longer an empirical question but rather an ideological and theoretical conflict. In 1909, Yamazaki Nobuyoshi presented a clearly impressionistic painting to the official Salon Buntan, which provoked a vivid discussion. The Shirakaba School members enthusiastically applauded this painting, saying this canvas was equal to Claude Monet's 'La Gare St Lazare' in its achievement. On the contrary, Oda Kazuma (1882-1955), painter and engraver, harshly criticized this work. Oda could not admit the painter's irresponsible imitation of Claude Monet because, by such an imitation, the painter violated the local colour typical to Japan. In other words, Oda did not accuse the painter of plagiarism but of infidelity to the spirit of Impressionism which, according to him, consisted of respecting the sensation the painter feels in front of Nature. Oda maintained: 'If Impressionism was born in the French climate, a painter respecting the Japanese climate would naturally get a different effect of nature from that of French Impressionists. So the painters in question were not at all faithful to Japanese nature which is much more sombre, calmer and more sober than French nature. It was therefore quite natural that Impressionism should not develop in Japan.'¹¹

In this way, Oda vigorously argued the inadaptability of Impressionistic coloration to the Japanese landscape. A declaration which completely contradicts the naive hypothesis of Théodore Duret. This refutation is all the more symbolic as it was developed by a painter-engraver who, during that period, reestablished the tradition of Japanese prints not by returning to the past but rather by renovating it according to the modernist demands of the epoch. In short, what was 'avant-garde' to Théodore Duret in Japanese prints was nothing but a fossil of past feudalism for a Japanese contemporary artist.

Opposing Oda's view was Takamura Kōtarō (1883-1955) a famous poet and sculptor who defended Yamazaki's impressionistic painting. Paradoxically, however, this plea contradicts the Impressionist aesthetics he should have defended.

In our present artistic world in Japan, most people believe that it is important to respect local colour. It is as if to say that the destiny of oil painting in Japan depends on its capability of finding a compromise with the local colour proper to Japan. As for us, we want to ignore such local colour; even if somebody wants to paint the sun with green pigment, I would not condemn him.¹²

Kōtarō speaks as if he were repeating the Impressionist principle of negation of local colour, but as a matter of fact, he rejects at the same time all that represents Japan. In this way, Kōtarō refuses to admit that the painting transmits any impression proper to its environment. He thus transgresses the limits of Impressionism. Moreover, with his incantation of the green sun, he opens up to Impressionism. Just as in Germany with Kandinsky or in England with Roger Fry, the delayed reception of Impressionism in Japan was inextricably mixed up with the artistic reaction that Impressionism itself had occasioned at the end of the nineteenth century.

We can now see that the affinity Duret pretended to have found between Japanese art and Impressionism was nothing but pure fantasy. But far from being negative, this fantasy was rather productive. Thanks to this 'idée-reçue,' a Japanese critic in the Taishō era could discover a forgotten old Japan; Duret tried to regenerate this Japanese tradition in the heart of the modernity Japan was experiencing. Kinoshita Mokutarō (1885-1945) was initiated to the forgotten world of ukiyo-e prints in about 1913 by European critics like R. Muther and Théodore Duret, and later he looked back upon this experience: 'Without any comparison with Impressionism we could hardly truly appreciate either the Japanese ukiyo-e prints of the Edo period nor the atmosphere they emanated.'¹³

Here we can see one case of reverse movement in Japonisme. This return of Japonisme to Japan makes it evident how complex cultural exchange is; for it reveals to us a kind of 'inverted synthesis' of the European misinterpretation of Japanese art, on the one hand, and the refusal of Impressionist aesthetics in Japan, on the other.

Guided by the Impressionist aesthetics, Mokutarō turned his gaze to ancient Japan and discovered about 1913 a forgotten 'artisan' - one Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847-1916). A disciple of Kawanabe Gyōsai (1831-1889), considered then by Europeans as the last personification of the disappearing Hokusai School, Kiyochika was at the same time one of the students of Charles Wirgman (1832-1891), special correspondent and painter for the *Illustrated London News* in Japan, who served as the first instructor of European painting techniques in Japan. Kiyochika was also interested in the photography being applied for the first time in Japan by Shimooka Renjō.¹⁴

In a series of Kiyochika's woodcuts 'Tokyo Meisho Zue,' executed between 1878 and 1881, Mokutarō found an unknown beauty, really impressionistic features 'avant la lettre.' What is significant here is the fact that this series was called 'kōsenga' or luminous images.¹⁵ But contrary to what would be expected by a Théodore Duret, these 'plein-airist' images did not come so much from the tradition of Japanese ukiyo-e prints. Paradoxically, this singular expression of light effect came rather from the strict application of European academism's chiaroscuro technique. Moreover, this imitation of a European technique was undoubtedly exploited for its European export prospects. Of course these commercial tactics failed, because at the time the Europeans were earnestly looking for old Japanese prints and were no longer interested in contemporary art.

If Duret discovered in the ancient Japanese ukiyo-e prints a world filled with sunshine and transparent limpidity which he pretended he had really seen during his stay in Japan, the originators of these ukiyo-e prints, generally speaking, continued to ignore what was light and consequently what was shadow. It was not before they learned light and shadow from the Europeans that they recognized the existence of these factors in Nature. Thus, can we really suppose that the crude coloration of ukiyo-e prints truly reflects the 'limpid light' of Japan, as was declared by Duret?

If the Impressionists recognized the unknown light effects in the

Japanese traditional prints in which the Japanese noticed nothing of the sort, Kiyochika, in his turn, acquired in the rudimentary European academic technique of *chiaroscuro*, the ability to render the 'plein-airist' effects in his own 'modernist' woodcuts. It would certainly be a paralogism to call his discovery impressionist, as these unknown effects would not have been obtained without European Academism. Nevertheless, the result was quite 'impressive,' if not 'impressionistic.' Was not this double-misunderstanding the origin of a better mutual understanding and further communication between Eastern and Western aesthetics?

VI

It must be noted, finally, that just as the fantastic critical discourse of a Théodore Duret was necessary in order to retain and consolidate the Impressionists' interest in Japanese art, so the introduction to Japan of Impressionist aesthetics as theory was indispensable in order that the forgotten Kiyochika woodcuts should be exhumed from oblivion and rehabilitated. Indeed, thanks to Mokutarō the work of this Japanese 'Impressioniste avant la lettre' who had abandoned his 'kōsenga' thirty-five years earlier and was about to die, was saved. Sadly, he died without fully appreciating that a next generation had begun to reappraise his forgotten prints.

Here closes a complex link of aesthetic exchange. It was only at the end of this double negation between Europe and Japan that the Impressionist's view of Japanese art formulated by Duret was ratified in Japan. This vision had been grasped by a Japanese artist who did not know anything about Impressionism, but only the academic technique Impressionism disdained; and then this same vision was recaptured, only retrospectively, by a young critic who was indoctrinated, indeed for the first time in Japan, by Impressionist aesthetics, yet his appreciation of the new aesthetics was only through black and white reproductions!

Ultimately, nobody can say if it is legitimate, or not, to call Kiyochika an Impressionist. For it is no longer a question of an a-historical legitimation but of a historical recognition of legitimacy. It was exactly in this dynamism of paradoxical encounter between cultures, in this mutual determination between visual art and its discourse, or in this dialectical movement between words and images that Mokutarō recognized the real adventure of critical aesthetic discovery.

From that moment, the Impressionism imported to Japan was no more an artificial amalgam of Eastern Tradition and Western Modernity. Instead of imposing itself under the name of Europe, as was feared by several Japanese like Oda, Impressionism, from now on, was to contribute to further research in the Japanese aesthetics from which it had been inspired. At the end of this 'transcultural' voyage, we can recognize that the 'Impression: *Soleil levant*' of Claude Monet is finally justified in the 'Empire du soleil levant.'

11. See *The Karma of Words*, pp. 52-54.
12. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* Tokyo, 1924-1932, Vol. 17: 92ab.
13. As translated by A. K. Reischauer, 'Genshin's Ojo Yoshu: Collected Essays on Birth into Paradise,' *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, second series, No. 7, 1930, p. 48. (Tokusa may refer to a kind of reed or to the colour characteristic of such worms).
14. Miyeko Murase, *Emaki: Narrative Scrolls from Japan*, New York: The Asia Society, 1983, p. 62. See also selections from other scrolls mentioned above.
15. For more on this see 'Hungry Ghosts and Hungry People.'
16. On this see Aladair MacIntyre, 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science,' *The Monist* 60, 4:453-472, and *The Karma of Words*, p. 46.

Chapter 19 INAGA SHIGEMI

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1. A more complete French version is to be published in a special issue of *Word and Image*, for The First International Conference held in Amsterdam in April 1987.
2. Théodore Duret, *Voyage en Asie*, first published as 'feuilleton' in the *Journal Le Siecle* Sept.-Oct. 1873; Paris, Michel Lévy, 1874.
3. The first part is published as 'Les Peintres impressionistes' in May 1878 and the second as preface to Claude Monet's personal exhibition at the Gallery La Vie moderne in June 1880. Here quoted from Théodore Duret, *Critique d'avant-garde*, Paris, Charpentier, 1885, pp. 65-67; pp. 98-100.
4. Cf. William Leonard Schwartz, *The Imaginative interpretation of The Far East in Modern French Literature, 1800-1925*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1927.
5. Théodore Duret, 'L'Art japonais, les livres illustrés, les albums imprimés, Hokusai,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1882, pp. 211-212.
6. Cf. Siegfried Bing (1838-1905) remarks in 1891 this rediscovery of older prints among the later prints (*Exposition de la gravure japonaise*, Paris 1891, p. 40). Hayashi criticizes Duret's dubious authority on Hokusai books in one of his letters sent to Edmond de Goncourt on 8 January 1892 (*Correspondance des Goncourts*, Guerlin-Houbron, Vol. XLI, Nr. 107-108). As for Duret, Camille Pissarro writes to his son that 'terrible Duret' seems to have decided to sell all the prints he has collected until then, in order to attack 'ancient' ones (*Lettres à son fils Lucien*, 3 March 1893, ed. by J. Rewald, 1950, p. 299).
7. Mallarmé's collection of Japanese prints was partly exhibited in an exhibition; *Ukiyo-e prints and The Impressionist Painters. Meeting of The East and The West*, Tokyo, The Sunshine Museum, 1979-80.
8. Joris Karl Huysmans, 'L'Exposition des indépendants en 1880' reprinted in *L'Art moderne*, Paris, 1883, pp. 89-90. Here Huysmans also criticizes the baselessness of Duret's apparently epistemological and scientific justification of Impressionist aesthetics.
9. Mori Ogai echoes Th. Duret in qualifying Kuroda's Violet School as Impressionism. *Mezamashigusa*, Vol. IV, April 1896. On Fontanesi see Iseki Masaaki, *Gaka Fontanesi*, Tokyo, Chūōkōron Bijutsu Shuppan, 1981. On the relationship between Raphael Collin and Kuroda Seiki, see an exhibition catalogue: *L'Académie du Japon moderne et les peintres français*, Tokyo, The Bridgestone Museum, 1983-84. For the quarrel between the Violet School and the Bitumen School, see Nakamura Giichi *Nippon Kindai Bijutsu Ronsoshi*, Tokyo, Kyūryū-dō, 1981, pp. 95-120.
10. Cf. Amano Shirō, 'Louis Gonse to Japonisme,' in Yoshida Mitsukuni (ed.) *Jūkyū-seiki Nihon no Jōhō to Shakai-hendō*, Kyoto, Jinbunkagaku kenkyūsho, 1985, pp. 333-356.
11. Oda Kazuma, 'Nihon no shizen to Hikari no kaiga honi,' *The Journal Asahi*, 23 February 1911. On this quarrel, see Nakamura Giichi, *op. cit.* (note 9) pp. 147-174.
12. Takamura Kōtarō, 'Midorihiro no Taiyō,' *Subaru*, April 1910.
13. Kinoshita Mokutarō, 'Futasu no tsugeoto' (obituary to R. M. Rilke and to Th. Duret), *Chūō bijutsu*, May 1927, pp. 81-86.
14. Cf. Tsuji Nobuo, 'Kobayashi Kiyochika' in *Kindai Nihon Bijutsu-shi I* (ed. by Sasaki Seiichi and Sakai Tadayasu), Tokyo, Yūhikaku, 1978, pp. 152-156.
15. Kinoshita Mokutarō, 'Kobayashi Kiyochika ga Tokyo Meisho Zue,' *Geijutsu*, Nr. 2, May 1913. Reprinted in *Kinoshita Mokutarō Zenshū*, Tokyo, Iwanami shoten, 1981, Vol. 8, pp. 144-46. 'Ko Kobayashi Kiyochika ō ga koto,' *Chūō bijutsu*, Feb. 1916, *Zenshū*, Vol. 9, pp. 70-82.

Ch.19 *A European Eye on Japanese Arts and a Japanese Response to 'Japonisme' (1860-1920)*

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2



1. Théodore Duret about 1920, courtesy of the Kuroda family. 2. Kinoshita Mokutaro, 1917; courtesy, Iwanami shoten. 3. Kobayashi Kiyochika's 'Ryogoku Yakeato', Nishiki-e Oban, 1881.



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