Bokanmeldelse

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Gabriel P. Weisberg, Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, and Hanne Selkokari, eds.
Japanomania in the Nordic Countries, 1875-1918
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Japanomania in the Nordic Countries, 1875-1918, in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name (Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki; National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo; National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen), fills a void in existing research on the relationship between Nordic countries and larger European interests in Japanese art and design in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. After the 1850s, in a period when Japan agreed to trade with the West, an influx of Japanese visual and material culture into markets led to widespread infatuation with Japan for American and European consumers. In tandem with the growing obsession with Japan in the West, collections of Japanese art and design flourished in Europe, influencing artists and designers as formal qualities from Japanese art and design began to appear in their own work, a trend coined as Japonisme by Phillippe Burty. As one of the largest studies over the influence of Japonisme in the Nordic region, this catalogue provides an important resource on a topic where little research has been done. The catalogue traces two large themes: the collection of Japanese art and design in public and private collections in Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, and analyzes the effects of Japanese visual and material culture on Nordic art and design. A major strength of this catalogue is its broad scope. Divided into seven sections, topics discussed range from popular culture fascination with Japan (as evidenced in postcards and fashion), to ceramics, textiles, paintings, and prints.

The first section of seven introduces readers to Japonisme within a larger European context through tracing the dissemination and collection of Japanese visual and material culture in France and England. Gabriel Weisberg notes the importance of persons such as Phillippe Burty and Louise Gonse, both of whom published widely on Japanese aesthetics and in turn influenced art and design in France and abroad. In England, art and design reform movements were particularly important in the circulation and collection of Japanese art and artifacts. Widar Halén places these reformist movements in
dialogue with Christopher Dresser’s private collection of Japanese objects and his role in importing European interests in Japanese art and design socio-culturally and establishes the pivotal role of specific figures in its diffusion. Nordic interests in Japan are placed in dialogue with larger European trends as artists and collectors in the region often orbited within an international milieu. Understanding Nordic interest in Japanese art and design within an international network is important because, as noted by many contributors, Nordic artists were both directly and indirectly influenced by Japanese art. Artists who did not have the opportunity or interest to view Japanese art and design first-hand were nonetheless impacted by the aesthetics through appreciation of other artists incorporating formal qualities of Japanese art into their work.

Additionally important in spreading Japanese aesthetics to the Nordic region were growing Nordic collections of Japanese art, providing spaces where the public could view objects in person. The second and third sections of the catalogue focus on the beginnings of major Japanese art collections in the region and the dissemination of Japanese aesthetics through publications and societies invested in the trade of Japanese goods. Contributors in both sections shed light on objects particularly prominent in Western collections, including lacquer, porcelain, and prints. Of note is Susanna Pettersson’s article on Herman Frithiof Antell’s Japanese art collection and its far-reaching influences for the National Museum of Finland upon his bequeathal to the Museum after his death. Antell’s importance cannot be underestimated as through his collection artists, such as Albert Edelfelt and Akseli Gallen-Kallela, viewed Japanese art and design. Also of importance is Malene Wagner’s study on Karl Madsen’s publication, Japansk Malerkunst (1885), the first publication on Japanese art in a Scandinavian language. As noted by Wagner, Madsen, like many Europeans writing on Japanese art and design, portrayed Japanese artists as having a certain fondness and ability in depicting nature. This portrayal was partly fed by perceptions of Japan as being more “exotic” and “pure” compared to the industrialized West.

Perceptions of Japanese art and design as providing a more “pure” aesthetic had far-reaching effects in Scandinavian art and design as artists viewed Japanese art as a vehicle to develop their own national imagery. Section four investigates how Nordic artists were influenced by Japanese art and what artists and designers presumed could be gained through incorporating “pure” and “natural” Japanese aesthetics into their own work. As noted by Widar Halén, Japanese depictions of national myths and nature were particularly influential for artists in Russian-ruled Finland and Swedish-ruled Norway as artists working in these countries strove to create their own national imagery. Since Japanese art was perceived as untainted by modernity, it served as influential for Finnish and Norwegian artists looking back into their own national past to create a particularly Finnish or Norwegian visual rhetoric. Misperceptions and mythologizations of Japan are central for Nils Ohlsen’s article discussing Nordic understanding of Japan as maintaining qualities perceived to have been lost in the West through industrialization: a tight bond between humankind and nature, strong social solidarity, and an interest in arts and crafts. For Nordic artists, Japanese aesthetics provided a space of return, a conduit for looking back into the past as a means for reformulating art and design into a new national aesthetic.
In the search for alternative aesthetics, new, rare, and older artistic mediums saw a rise in popularity. Section five analyzes three different mediums where Nordic artists incorporated formal elements from Japanese art and design into their own work: textiles, printmaking, and photography. When integrating Japanese aesthetics into their own work, the aim was not to copy directly but rather to assimilate certain elements within an existing Western tradition. Nordic translations of Japanese aesthetics are expanded upon in section six, where scholars hone in on the profound influence of Japanese depictions of the natural world on Nordic landscape imagery. “Rediscovering” nature through Japanese aesthetics provided fodder for Nordic artists striving to evoke an emotive state in landscape imagery. Although employing formal elements adapted from Japanese art or drawing from European artists influenced by it, Nordic artists often depicted local flora and fauna, flavoring the art with a particularly local aesthetic. Nordic artists may have viewed a kinship with Japanese depictions of the natural world, as landscape imagery had long been popular in Nordic art. As noted by Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, some Nordic artists viewed themselves as primitive or “exotic” compared to other Europeans and did not see a problem with enhancing their own aesthetic aims through the “more exotic” East.

The final section shifts focus away from Nordic art and design and instead turns towards Western appropriation of Japanese culture into European visual and material culture. As noted by scholars throughout the catalogue, European fascination with Japan was not limited to art and design, but manifests in fashion trends, entertainment, advertising imagery, and communication. Much like the first section, fascination with Japanese aesthetics is part of a larger dialogue between European fascination with Japan and Nordic consumer culture. Widar Halén traces Nordic importation of Japanese fashion and entertainment, pointing to the popularity of European operettas with Japanese themes. Meanwhile, Harri Kalha points towards Japonisme as a form of mass media without an original, embodied in the new medium of the postcard. Japanese inspired design and costumes often adorned postcards, yet it is quite unclear where European imagination of Japanese culture begins and the “real” Japanese imagery ends.

In closing, this catalogue is a fruitful resource that covers a broad range of topics for those interested in Nordic manifestations of Japonisme. Additionally, the catalogue provides important resources for further research, including a bibliography and a list over exhibitions of Japanese art and design held in Nordic countries between 1873 and 1917. Although many contributors to this catalogue mention the mythologization of Japan and Japanese aesthetics in Europe, lacking is a more critical dialogue with Japonisme. European interest in Japan is presented as a one-way dialogue rather than as a complex discourse between East and West with Japan retaining some agency in marketing its own self-image. To be further considered are questions regarding the role of Japan in fashioning its own self-image for Europeans through the exportation of art and design. It might also prove fruitful to further flesh-out some of the difficulty in Nordic perceptions of Japan as a space unaffected by modernity and how this notion influenced artistic appropriations of Japanese aesthetics.