

Book Review



Sophie Basch, *Le Japonisme, un art français* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2023), soft-cover, 560 pages, 246 illustrations, €32. ISBN 978-2-37896-309-5

Winner of the 2023 Prix Paul Marmottan, this densely written tome presents an in-depth examination of the dynamics of French Japonisme, enhanced by a rich collection of 246 illustrations, many in color, as well as a substantial bibliography of primary and secondary sources. These elements support a thoughtful analysis of an undeniably important and unique cultural phenomenon characteristic of the French nineteenth century. In fact, the very title of the study insists on Japonisme as it manifested in France, even as the author acknowledges the universal nature of the movement. “Ce livre ne parle pas du Japon mais de la France,” she explains in the introduction (“This book does not speak of Japan, but of France”) (6). The Japonisme of other countries is therefore not the book’s subject, nor is the evolution of Japanese art from 1800 to the present day. This emphasis on a specifically French artistic perspective also comes through forcefully in an assessment of critical studies and exhibition catalogues dedicated to Japonisme. Sophie Basch presents a robust critique of many analyses written in English in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, particularly with regard to what the author sees as ambiguous readings of notions such as influence, prefiguration, and communication between cultures – notions that, she argues, need to be rethought in a more inclusive context.

The author emphasizes the visual arts, exploring the ways in which Japanese masters of *ukiyo-e*, such as Hokusai and Utamaro, interact with the work of a host of French artists (especially those born between 1820 and 1850). Accordingly, she traces an eccentric tradition perceptible as early as the work of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) and moving through other, more canonical figures for Japonisme, such as Edgar Degas (1834–1917) and James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903). Yet Basch also reminds readers of the crucial relationship between visual arts and literary forms of expression, as

well as the fundamental role of *les petites revues*, the often innovative, anti-conventional, (and frequently quirky) small journals founded especially in Paris, in bringing together creative minds from a multitude of disciplines, from the arts to critical analyses. The study's scope is remarkably vast, addressing writers and art critics as varied as J.-K. Huysmans (1848–1907), Jules Laforgue (1860–1887), and Ernest Chesneau (1833–1890), among many other nineteenth-century figures, and, perhaps surprisingly, a handful of figures from the mid- to late-twentieth century, such as André Malraux (1901–1976).

Early chapters engage with definitions and theory: “Japanese Effects” (“L’Effet japonais”), ranging from Japonisme as experienced in Paris to how it develops in Bloomsbury and in Athens, and “Japonisme, a French Debate” (“Le Japonisme, un discours français”), which traces the trajectory of Japonisme through political and literary movements. Other chapters explore the importance of specific individuals or groups, such as Hokusai (“L’Invention d’Hokusai”), the Barbizon School (“D’Ingres à Degas par Barbizon”), and Philippe Burty (“Philippe Burty: Définir le Japonisme”). The final chapters focus on different types of nineteenth-century artistic production, from architecture and dolls, to posters and poetry (“Moussmés et Tanagras: La ‘Ninfa Japonica,’ “De l’Exposition des maîtres japonais à ‘L’Âge du papier,” “Le Marteau des enchères et la fleur au fusil”).

The author masterfully manages to avoid the potential traps of equating Japonisme with Orientalism, and renders crystal clear the differences between Japonisme and the faddish trends of “*japoniaiseries*” mocked by Jules Champfleury (1821–1889) and others. She posits the notion of Japonisme in terms of methodology and style rather than theme and motif. In so doing, she underscores the ways in which the movement breathed new life into the stagnating traditions of a conventional interpretation of academic painting in Europe. Basch also asserts the originality of her approach by moving past earlier studies of Japonisme, mostly those produced in Anglo-American academic circles, works that she suggests may place too much emphasis on the influence of Far Eastern culture on the Western visual arts. She prefers to highlight the prominent role of the movement in the general modernization of European cultural expression in the second half of the 1800s and beyond. For Basch, Japonisme says a great deal about the past, as well as about future expressions of art.

In an innovative approach, Basch turns to parallels between developments in ancient Greek art and the French reformulation of Japanese artistic elements in the nineteenth century. Further, in an especially well-developed section of her study, Basch points to the work of Hokusai as indicative of Charles Baudelaire’s essential notion of modernity, describing how the aesthetics of

both creators prominently influenced fin-de siècle artistic dynamics. Also engaging is Basch's discussion of the relationship between Japonisme and Art Nouveau, as she suggests that the rise of the latter signals the demise of the former. We find reference as well to the more social and political aspects of Japonisme, often associated with a kind of French Republican ideology, as other scholars have noted.

In the end, Basch invites us to take a more careful look at the artistic creations and critical evaluations that appeared in the nineteenth century, with the aim of understanding the often deeply perceptive readings of the contemporaries who first engaged with what came to be known as 'Japonisme'. Indeed, Basch's contribution represents an instrumental reference in our ongoing understanding of the significance of French and (more broadly), global Japonisme for both French and Anglo-American cultures up to the current day.

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