Critical Reactions to the 1890 Japanese Print Exhibition in Paris

Tatsuya Saito
Université Paris-Sorbonne
saito.portola@gmail.com

Abstract

The great Japanese pictorial arts retrospective held in Paris in 1890 drew considerable attention from critics. By examining press reviews, this article aims to clarify how the critics responded to the exhibition and Japanese prints. Many reviewers expressed favorable opinions of the exhibition, describing the characteristics of Japanese art and notable painters such as Hokusai, Hiroshige, and Utamaro as well as the so-called “primitive artists.” However, there was also harsh criticism of Japonisme and Japanese art, which is discussed here as well. Writers such as Teodor de Wyzewa, Edmond Pottier, and Jacques Tasset published original studies on the Japanese pictorial arts. Their writings will likewise be analyzed in order to present the wide variety of reactions in the critical sphere.

Keywords

art criticism – ukiyo-e prints – exhibition – Hokusai – anti-Japonisme

The major exhibition of Japanese woodblock prints held at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1890 drew considerable press attention. More than sixty reviews consequently appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines, ranging from brief announcements or notices of the exhibition to serious studies on Japanese art. Some reviewers were anonymous or pseudonymous, but there were also reviews from many emerging art critics, such as Gustave Geffroy...
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(1855–1926), Teodor de Wyzewa (1862–1917), Arsène Alexandre (1859–1937), and Georges Lecomte (1867–1958), and from scholars such as the archaeologist Edmond Pottier (1855–1934) and the Orientalist Jacques Tasset. Artists including Jules Adeline (1845–1909) and George Auriol (1863–1938) also commented on the show. These reviews garnered a wide public audience because they appeared in a host of newspapers, including *Le Temps*, *Le Rappel*, *Le Moniteur universel*, *La Justice*, and *L’Événement*, and magazines, such as the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, *L’Artiste*, *Revue des deux-mondes*, *Art et critique*, and *Entretiens politiques et littéraires*.

The focus of the articles was diverse. While most reviewers dealt with the exhibition itself or the ukiyo-e prints, some addressed specific subjects. For example, Paul de Boissy, one of the lenders to the show, devoted his entire article to the Japanese illustrated books,2 and Gabriel de Roton (1865–1964), the draftsman known as Notor, published a study on *kakemono* （掛物）(scroll painting).3 A member of the organizing committee, Roger Marx (1859–1913), wrote a column in *Le Voltaire* two days after the exhibition opened, giving it the widest possible publicity. However, there were several articles that harshly criticized Japanese art and Japonisme, and although these were relatively small in number, they threw a particular light on the nature of Japanese art, mainly, of course, on the way in which Japanese aesthetics did not meet Western ideals of art.

What could be assessed on the basis of these writings published in 1890? Several scholars have studied the critical responses to Japanese art in nineteenth-century France. In their dissertations, David John Bromfield, Elisa Evett, and Phylis Anne Floyd interpreted the observations made by the Western critics and analyzed a vast corpus of literature on Japanese art.4 Gabriel P. Weisberg and Yvonne M. L. Weisberg, in their extensive bibliography of Japonisme, developed an annotated list of writings on Japanese art and culture, summarizing in their preface the main points discussed by nineteenth-century crit-

ics. All these works confirmed the characteristics of Japanese art – the vivid colors, decorativeness, simple lines, subject variety, comical expressions, love of nature, qualities of naïveté and sincerity, and lack of perspective – that had been reiterated by critics throughout the rest of century. The responses to the 1890 exhibition were no different. However, revisiting these reviews and writings on the Beaux-Arts exhibition could reveal a synchronic perspective on the reception of Japanese art at this time. This is particularly significant because, with very few exceptions, few of the 1890 exhibition reviewers were renowned Japonistes. In other words, examining the accounts of many reviewers, including obscure writers, could provide a precise and balanced panorama of the critical responses to Japanese art at the end of the nineteenth century. Another important point is that since the exhibition was devoted exclusively to woodcuts and original paintings, the critics naturally focused their discussion on this pictorial art. As displays of the decorative arts were absent, unlike at previous major exhibitions of Japanese art in Paris, it is possible to more accurately perceive how critics viewed the prints and paintings from the Far East.

**Exhibition Reviews**

Because the Japanese woodblock print exhibition was held at the highly prestigious École des Beaux-Arts, it aroused the interest of some notable writers and critics. Marcel Fouquier (1866–1961), who saw “M. Bouguereau walking around with a slightly doleful air” at the show, wrote, “This conquest and invasion did not take place without causing some surprise to the guardians of the temple and the strict pontiffs of the Italian tradition.” On the other hand, the pseudonymous critic Gérome noted that “the old École des Beaux-Arts itself acknowledged the victory of the yellow artists of Nippon and Kyoto.” The paper *La Justice* reported there were no protests from the École des Beaux-Arts: “The building did not crack, and the ghost of Cabanel did not show any hostility. After Courbet and Manet entered the sanctuary, now Moronobu, Utamaro, Hokusai, and Hiroshige have come to settle in as victors over in academic positions.”

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Since previous Japanese art exhibitions in Paris had focused primarily on the decorative arts, it seems that only fervent art collectors or *Japonistes* fully appreciated ukiyo-e prints before 1890. Therefore, the critics could not help but be surprised at seeing some 1,100 woodblock prints and illustrated books at the École des Beaux-Arts. For the journalist from *Le Temps*, the exhibition was “intended to reveal to the public an art that they were entirely unaware of: the Japanese print.”9 *La Justice* noted that only “a few, rare connoisseurs” could hitherto appreciate “the marvels of delicacy and coloring” of Japanese woodcuts10 and the art critic Émile Cardon (1834–1899) believed that such a large collection “shows us the final secrets of Japanese artists, which were still unknown to us until very recently.”11 One said the Beaux-Arts exhibition “is going to reveal to the public one of the most curious and least known branches of this diverse art in its many and varied forms: the Japanese print.”12 “The exhibition at the École des Beaux-Arts reveals a hitherto almost unknown aspect of Japanese art,” wrote the journalist Champimont.13

Under such circumstances, use of the term “revelation” was common. Even the exhibition organizer, Siegfried Bing (1838–1905), wrote in the exhibition catalogue that the Japanese prints were the last of “successive revelations” about art in Japan.14 Writing for *Le Soir*, Paul Lafage stated, “For many Parisians, this print exhibition will be a revelation.”15 The art critic Léon Roger-Milès (1859–1928) related the term to features of Japanese woodcuts: “Powerful or attenuated, according to the subject being dealt with and the site being represented, with dizzying perspectives, a simple process, and harmony, which is the formal revelation of great art.”16

This feeling of surprise and revelation reflected in the words of the critics was quite natural, given that the ukiyo-e exhibition was unprecedented in scale. While, previously, Japanese prints had been presented at various occasions, at successive Paris World’s Fairs in 1867, 1878, and 1889 for example, and Bing had been organizing ukiyo-e-centered shows since 1888, none of these had ever come close to the 1890 exhibition in terms of the quality and quantity

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9 “Une exposition de la gravure japonaise,” in *Le Temps*, April 25, 1890, p. 3.
of exhibits. The critic Roger Marx, a member of the organizing committee, stressed that unlike previous shows, the Beaux-Arts exhibition aimed to show the general history of Japanese woodcuts: “The exhibition at the École des Beaux-Arts fulfills a special role in response to a clearly defined program; the idea was to borrow from Parisian collections elements of the history of the print, and to set out the developments and successive phases of xylography in Japan by using methodically categorized model examples and masterworks.”

Francis Nautet (1854–1896), the critic for the Belgian journal *La Société nouvelle*, noted that in comparison to the Japanese painting and print exhibition held in Brussels in 1889 by Bing, the Paris show “represents ten times [the number of prints]; the number of artistic riches gathered together in these rooms is incomparable.” This comprehensive presentation of Japanese woodblock history must have enabled visitors to distinguish each Japanese artist. Georges Lecomte thus commented that after the Beaux-Arts exhibition, “it is henceforth no longer acceptable to confuse centuries of artistic fertility and to heap the same kind of praise on the superb work of Kiyomitsu, Kiyonaga, Utamaro, Hokusai, Hiroshige as on that of Masanobu, Harunobu, Shuncho, Eishi, etc.”

The reviews agreed that the exhibition was a success. Paul de Boissy, a lender to the show, stated clearly that the exhibition was “a resounding success.” Edmond Pottier wrote in the *Gazette des beaux-arts* that the exhibition “will signify a milestone in the history of Japonism in France.” “The era of imported knick-knacks and commercial curiosity is over; the age of artistic influence is beginning,” he added.

The exhibition’s accompanying catalogue was highly praised. It included a preface and a chronological table of Japanese print history by Bing, color illustrations (Fig. 1), and a list of the exhibits and their lenders. In the preface, Bing succinctly traced the history of ukiyo-e prints and the polychrome printing technique, which helped visitors understand the exhibition. Bing’s text was consequently quoted by a number of reviewers in their articles and its documentary value was highly appreciated. Gustave Geffroy noted that even after the exhibition had closed, “a precious document from it will remain in libraries ...: that is the extremely extensive and very scholarly catalogue created by M. S. Bing.” His colleague Roger-Milès regretted that the catalogue did

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19 Georges Lecomte, “Japon,” in *Entretiens politiques et littéraires*, no. 3 (June 1890), p. 90.
not contain a detailed analysis of the subject matter, but felt it was still “a true library book, not only because of the chronologies and reproductions that it contains, but also because of M. Bing’s excellent preface.”

Japanese Woodblock Print Characteristics

Many critics commented on the wide range of subjects represented in the ukiyo-e prints. Le Petit parisien wrote that “the subjects of the engravings are very varied,” citing lords, battle scenes, animals and plants, masses of people

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24 Most of characteristics of Japanese art discussed here are examined in a broader context in Floyd, “Japonisme in Context.”
on the streets, and private family life.²⁵ Paul Lafage, in commenting on this variety of motifs, explained that “like the Dutch, they do not consider anything to be unworthy of their pencil, as art knows how to lift up even the smallest of subjects.”²⁶ For those critics with a good knowledge of Japanese art, these diverse subjects had always been part of Katsushika Hokusai’s 葛飾北斎 (1760–1849) works. Gustave Geffroy noted that Hokusai “was interested in everything” and enjoyed “looking at everything and reproducing everything.”²⁷ He went on to say that Hokusai is “an anatomist, a botanist, a geologist.”²⁸ Indeed, as can be seen in Hokusai’s Irises 菖蒲 (Fig. 2) for example, one of the exhibits in 1890, reviewers considered flora and fauna to be a favorite theme of Japanese artists. Kitagawa Utamaro’s 喜多川歌麿 (?–1806) illustrated books, too, were commented upon in this context by Boissy, who wrote that the painter could be regarded as a “devoted lover of animals” and a “scrupulous botanist,” and that

²⁵ “L’Exposition de la gravure japonaise,” in Le Petit parisien, April 27, 1890, p. 3.
his books could compare with the best Western botanical and zoological publications.29

Many critics recognized the fancier aspect in the Japanese woodcuts in relation to the variety of subject matter. The critic Nautet wrote that Japanese art was “so intellectual, so true and so fancier,”30 while Gabriel de Roton, writing an article on kakemono, found that Japanese artists “preferred abandoning themselves to their imagination, like poets and dreamers.”31 Edmond Pottier claimed that Japanese artists combined “the most refined taste with the most fancier imagination, brought to life as poets’ dreams in a tangible form.”32 What was meant by the terms “fantasy” or “imagination” varied but generally referred to fancier and imaginary subjects such as monsters, apparitions, or personified animals; further, on a more conceptual level, these comments implied an improvisational, suggestive, or spiritual quality of the Japanese prints. The art critic Maurice Hamel (1856–1949), for instance, associated this latter view with the paintings by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) and when discussing Nocturne in Blue and Gold (Fig. 3) and Nocturne: Black and Gold, two pictures exhibited at the Salon in 1890, he drew a parallel between the imaginative scenes in the Japanese paintings and Whistler’s dream-like, mysterious landscapes.33

The comical aspect of ukiyo-e was frequently highlighted. Georges Price (1853–1922) saw in the Japanese artists “a powerful instinct for caricature that drove them to add grimacing heads and comical manners to even their most serious pieces of work.”34 This taste for caricature was found to be particularly present in Hokusai’s Manga, and some critics compared him to French caricaturists. The critic Arsène Alexandre paralleled Hokusai with Honoré Daumier (1808–1879), Jean-Louis Forain (1852–1931), and Adolphe Willette (1857–1926).35 Marcel Fouquier came up with the illustrator Paul Gavarni (1804–1866) and thought that some of Hokusai’s works resembled “a fantasy from M. Willette.”36

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33 Maurice Hamel, Salon de 1890 (Paris: Librairie d’art, 1890), pp. 52–56.
34 Georges Price [Ferdinand-Gustave Petitpierre], “Paris qui passe,” in Le Parti national, June 1, 1890, p. 2.
Jules Buisson summed up: “the Japanese have excelled in their fantastical imaginings and caricatures.”

For many reviewers, the vividness and the harmony of the colors was one of the most attractive qualities of the multicolored Japanese prints. Francis Nautet found that in Japanese art the “color is so soft and so alive.” The writer


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for *Le Livre moderne*, in encouraging his readers to visit the exhibition to see “the magic” of ukiyo-e prints, appreciated “the harmony of these ravishing colorings.” Bing’s friend the etcher Jules Adeline observed the harmonious juxtapositions of pure color:

However, what is curious in this system of polychrome woodcutting is that the range of tones is very restrained, and these tones are almost always juxtaposed; they are never superimposed. The effects obtained in this way are stronger and more shaded, and furthermore the coloring, being conventional and never aiming for a trompe-l’oeil effect, is always based on the strictest principles of harmony between colors.

Some writers compared the Japanese color prints with those of the West. Georges Price, who found in the multicolored woodcuts “the simple brilliance and the extraordinarily happy union of hues,” noted that Japanese prints were far superior to Western ones. “In terms of color woodcutting, we can be sure that these people are still our masters,” he added. Roger-Milès also wrote, “It is indeed surprising that the printing and the precision of tones on these prints has achieved a perfection that our European printers can still not reach, even today.”

Reviewers also commented on the Japanese painters’ calligraphic printed lines, although less frequently than colors. Many found that the simple but expressive lines quickly grasped and depicted the forms. Geffroy, discussing the work of Hokusai, noted that he was “always simplifying further and further and really managed, by bending a line or placing a dot, to capture the visible shape of beings and objects and their intimate structures.”

These simple contours and flat colored tones prompted reviewers to comment on the decorativeness in the multicolored prints. Jacques Tasset observed

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that “everyone considers the Japanese superior decorators.” Georges Price recognized that this decorativeness was what the Japanese artists intended in their works: “Ornamentation also inspires their rich and wandering imagination. Everything becomes a decorative subject in their ingenious painting and their inventive engravings.”

The multicolor printing technique used for the Japanese woodcuts was of great interest to reviewers. They understood the technique from the explanations Bing had written for the exhibition’s catalogue, which offered a brief but concrete description of the polychrome process used in ukiyo-e. Bing’s technical presentation in the preface was quoted and/or paraphrased in many reviews. Some reviewers pointed out the simplicity of the process. One journalist found in the execution “simplicity,” while the critic Champimont wrote that Japanese artists “have produced technical masterpieces using only simple means.” Some critics highlighted the uninked embossing technique called karazuri 空摺 in Japanese. One of them was Georges Price, who was particularly interested in this technique and wrote that “one of the most curious characteristics of Japanese woodcuts is the goffering of paper that is achieved by applying pressure,” which gave “the most unexpected and most gracious effects.” The printmaker Jules Adeline was probably the most insightful author when writing about the technical aspects of the Japanese woodblock. In his book Les Arts de reproduction vulgarisés, published in 1894, Adeline explained the Japanese printing procedure in detail and stressed the remarkable skills of the carvers and the printers: “Many European artists have been stupefied by this skill at carving wood; but it is also worth noting that the prints made with this wood are produced in a unique manner.” Tasset, Adeline, and many other reviewers also noted that the ukiyo-e prints required a close collaboration between the artists, carvers, and printers, a fact Bing had underlined in his preface.

49 Adeline, Les Arts de reproduction vulgarisés, p. 334.
The Fame of Hokusai, the Reappraisal of Late Eighteenth-Century Painters, and the Finding of Primitives

Several writers discussed the originality of Japanese art in relation to the “race” and the “people.” Le Télégraphe noted that the exhibition demonstrated that the Japanese were “a people and an art that are essentially original.”50 The Belgian critic Francis Nautet wrote that the characteristics of Japanese art resided in “the entire race” rather than in the individual artists. “This ideal and this vision, which is delicate and charming in its dramatic effects, are those of a people that is fading away in a prism of wonderful colors as though in a natural element,” he continued.51 Edmond Pottier claimed, “These people deserve our respect and our admiration; they have entered the cycle of races that thinking humanity must honor, since the art of drawing has not reached a higher state of perfection in any other part of the world.”52 In Teodor de Wyzewa’s opinion, in order to fully understand Japanese art, one had to know “the dominant characteristics of the Japanese soul,” or, in other words, “the character and the morals of Japan” and then consider “the ethnographic origin of the Japanese.”53

The national character of the Japanese people was also important for Gustave Geffroy, who was convinced that “the race is embodied in this art.”54 For Geffroy, if the style of each Japanese painter shared similarities, it was because “the character of a race” was reflected in their art. He wrote that it is nevertheless possible to distinguish each artist and even named some who he felt were “essentially Japanese”: Hishikawa Moronobu 菱川師宣 (?–1694), Torii Kiyonaga 鳥居清長 (1752–1815), Utamaro, Hokusai, and Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重 (1797–1858).55 The artists he mentioned are indeed those who were most frequently discussed in the press.

As is well known, Hokusai was seen in the West as the incarnation of Japanese art. His works were greatly appreciated and “Hokusai” remained almost the only Japanese artist that French amateurs, beyond a limited number of Japonistes, could identify by name.56 In 1890, Hokusai was therefore widely recognized in the reviews and treated as an individual for the most part. Roger

Marx, for example, compared Hokusai to Michelangelo and stated that the artist had “created, unbeknownst to him, the synthesis of a great art.”57 Paul de Boissy offered a similar observation when he wrote that Hokusai’s works were “a summary of the entirety of all Japanese art.”58 Among the reviewers, George Auriol was probably the most enthusiastic in his praise for Hokusai. Japonisme may turn out to be just a fad, noted Auriol, but this should not prevent us from recognizing Hokusai as “one of the most significant and consummate geniuses that the world has ever produced.”59 Jacques Tasset summarized the high status accorded to Hokusai as follows:

In Europe, Hokusai enjoys an unrivaled reputation. The prodigious truth of his works, his original and powerful artistic genius, and the expression with which he rendered the life, customs, sites, soul, body and setting of the Japanese people have made him a unique personality in the eyes of Europeans, for whom he dominates all of the country’s art, which he personally has come to represent almost entirely.60

After Hokusai, Hiroshige was probably the second best-known Japanese artist at the time. Indeed, his polychrome prints from the late Edo period were widely admired. Paul de Boissy, for example, describes Hiroshige as “the great landscapist of Japan.” He writes that “[in his] polychrome prints [Hiroshige] uses the widest number of resources,” and that “engravings in six different tones are not rare [in his work], and the entertaining imaginativeness of the print makes it a feast for the eyes.”61

More frequently mentioned than Hiroshige were the late eighteenth-century artists and Utamaro in particular. Artists such as Utamaro, Kiyonaga, and Suzuki Harunobu, 鈴木春信 (1725?–1770), to name just a few, were shown extensively for the first time in Europe at the exhibition. In general, Western amateurs saw the nineteenth century as a culmination of the ukiyo-e printing history; however, Bing wrote in the exhibition catalogue that the “Third Period (1760–1800)” of history would be the “peak of the chromo-xylography.” Bing’s


60 Jacques Tasset, “Études sur la gravure japonaise (suite et fin),” in Mémoires de la Société sinico-japonaise 10 (1891), pp. 75–76.
insightful comments and explanations contributed to the changed perceptions of the visitors. Tasset’s comments illustrate this clearly:

Printing from this century – I am referring to the period before 1868 – is perhaps inferior to that which flourished in all its splendor at the end of the last century with Harunobu, Kiyonaga, Shunshō, and Eishi. The color imagery from this period, when it remained faithful to the style of its masters, can be classed among the most harmonious and seductive work that Japanese art has produced.62

Of the twenty-two “Third Period” artists listed by Bing, Utamaro received the most comments in the press. For the critic Georges Lecomte, Utamaro was “the most impeccable artist in the field of drawing of the whole eighteenth century.”63 Tasset wrote that Utamaro’s works “have a remarkable refinement,” and he pointed out, “A beautiful print of an Utamaro drawing is always highly prized by connoisseurs.”64 In a series of three articles on the exhibition, Gustave Geffroy dedicated the second to Utamaro, and described the beauty of the women in prints such as Chiyozuru 千代鶴 (Fig. 4).

The so-called “Primitive artists,” who roughly corresponded to the “First Period (1675–1720)” and to the “Second Period (1720–1760)” in Bing’s chronological table, were also noteworthy for the reviewers. Roger Marx wrote that one can find with “Moronobu and his pupils, touching works of primitive art, which are emotional and sincere” in the manner of Western “Gothics and Italian primitives.”65 George Auriol compared the “Japanese primitives” with the “admirable primitive works that the museums of Europe boast so proudly of.”66 When writers mentioned Moronobu and the early ukiyo-e artists, they usually quoted Bing’s text as this was the first time works by Japanese “Primitives” had been exhibited in France on such a scale. Lacking a valid reference from which to discuss these early ukiyo-e painters, writers tended to rely on the preface, in which Bing attributed the leading role in ukiyo-e history to Moronobu.

Many critics recognized that Japanese art came to an end as Japanese contacts with the West had been growing. Gabriel de Roton explained: “They are

64 Tasset, “Études sur la gravure japonaise (suite et fin),” p. 75.
hardly alive anymore, these Japanese painted works, and have not been for thirty years. This is now the time of irreparable decline.”67

**Anti-Japonisme Reviews**

However, not all exhibition reviews were favorable, with several criticizing Japonisme and the *Japonistes*, and some even attacking Japanese art. The journalist from *Journal des débats* wrote that Japanese art appeared to be “a little narrow, contorted and childish,” but was “nonetheless often exquisite.” He

further claimed that Japonisme was merely “a fashion, a craze or a business.” He was more critical about the japonistes, writing that they “compromise Japanese art with the abuse that they have attempted to do it,” and even “scornfully disregard Western art.”

Some critics deplored the influence of Japanese art on Western art. Henry Céard (1851–1924), a member of Émile Zola’s (1840–1902) circle “groupe de Médan,” briefly traced the history of French literature and pointed to the harmful consequences of passively accepting foreign cultures. “What can French art find practical or useful in this Far Eastern art?” he asked himself, referring to the Japanese prints he saw at the exhibition. Céard found there was nothing original to learn from the Japanese art: “I cannot, for my part, see what is so original in their inventions, and, apart from the workmanship, these works do not appear to be much superior to what we usually see in fourteenth-century French art.” The art critic Arsène Alexandre commented on the quality of Japanese art and the fact that it had inspired French artists to use bright colors, paint with natural light, and observe nature but believed that French artists had nothing more to learn from it: “But in all honesty, our artists no longer need to take inspiration from this naïve, delightful art. Now all we have is too many penchants for subtlety. We can be excellent French artists; we do not need to become questionable Japanese artists.” Interestingly, however, in 1902 Alexandre would write a prologue for Henri Rivière’s (1864–1951) Thirty-Six Views of the Eiffel Tower, a series of lithographs clearly inspired by Hokusai. On the other hand, Alexandre condemned japonistes for their narrow enthusiasm, writing that he found “a great deal of snobbery in their swooning praises” of Japanese prints.

This kind of harsh criticism of the craze for all things Japanese was not new. Edmond Duranty (1833–1880), for instance, was known to have been scathing about Japonisme, commenting that the 1878 World’s Fair had brought the “illness of Japonisme,” which he saw as “artistic jaundice.” He was also critical of the influence of Japanese art on many French decorative arts. Other writers expressed negative views about Japanese art itself. Georges Bousquet (1845–

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69 Henry Céard, “Chronique. Les orientales du naturalisme,” in Le Siècle, May 6, 1890, p. 3.
1937) was very critical of Japanese art and attacked its lack of ideal beauty or some elevated artistic concept.\textsuperscript{74} In 1890, the two writers Jules Buisson and Georges Lecomte expressed support for this view.

In a long article published in \textit{L’Artiste}, the politician and caricaturist Jules Buisson (1822–1909) harshly criticized Japanese art. He was clearly opposed to the notion propagated by the \textit{Japonistes} that Japanese art could equal the art of the West:

\begin{quote}
The monuments of great art, from Egypt to Assyria, to ancient Greece, to Italy and modern Europe, their artistic inventions, the great heights that they reach, the piercing aesthetic sensibility which omits nothing in its perception of nature, their methods, their teaching, their philosophical ideas – all bear no comparison with Japanese art.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Buisson admitted that “the Japanese have excelled in their fantastical imaginings and caricatures,” but in his view, those imaginative or comical scenes in ukiyo-e prints never showed “the logical rigor of construction, nor the aspiration to beauty found in Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek, or modern European compositions.”\textsuperscript{76} In stressing that Japanese art had no “ideal” or elevated artistic concept, he even expressed the belief that Japan lacked monumental architecture, which, he stated, was “the primary art in which man’s power of imagination and artistic invention reaches its highest expression.”\textsuperscript{77} Instead of finding a proper artistic “ideal” in the Japanese prints, Buisson mentioned the decorative aspect of Japanese art, which was, however, of little importance to him. He stated that since the Japanese prints were essentially “decoration,” the exhibition should have been held at museums for decorative arts, and not at the École des Beaux-Arts. He wrote, “I acknowledge that in terms of the artist’s intention to create something decorative it is sufficient, but it is also the mark of an art that does not surpass this point.”\textsuperscript{78} Buisson considered Japanese prints to be no more than bibelots, which did not deserve the status of “high art.”

Another critic, Georges Lecomte, who was a close associate of Félix Fénéon (1861–1944) and a friend of Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), was among those who

\textsuperscript{75} Buisson, “Souvenirs de l’exposition,” p. 163.
\textsuperscript{76} Buisson, “Souvenirs de l’exposition,” p. 171.
gave the most severe criticisms of Japanese art in 1890. He published two articles on the occasion of the Japanese woodcut exhibition: one in *Art et Critique* and the other in *Entretiens politiques et littéraires*. The former was a review of the exhibition, in which he discussed a number of ukiyo-e artists, from “Primitives” such as Moronobu, Torii Kiyomitsu 鳥居清満 (1735–1785), and Okumura Masanobu 奥村政信 (1686–1764) to late Edo period artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige. Unlike most of his colleagues, however, Lecomte carefully distinguished each artist and characterized each of their styles. He attempted to explain works by Masanobu, Isoda Koryūsai 礆田湖龍斎 (1735–1790?), or Ippitsusai Bunchō 一筆斎文調, artists that had rarely been mentioned by others. At times, he had some negative opinions, as with Harunobu, for instance. He saw in Harunobu’s women “the same schematic, androgynous prototype, of rare folly.”79 These criticisms were, however, exceptions in this article. In general, his tone was favorable to ukiyo-e artists.

Given that Lecomte was very perceptive in his characterizations of the various artists, it was all the more surprising that his second article for the magazine *Entretiens politiques et littéraires* is full of caustic comments toward Japanese art. For Lecomte, the whole problem with Japanese art was that it lacked idealization, as Japanese artists’ main concern was to study and use nature. In his opinion, all of this was due to what he perceived as the Japanese people’s indifference to or disinterest in higher spiritual or philosophical subjects:

They were unaware of the symbolic eloquence of religious or philosophical painting, and this lack of skill in great Art shows their intellectual narrowness. To tell the truth, this people had no native philosophy or religion; their infertile imagination did not offer them even the most rudimentary suggestion of divinity. The doctrines of Confucius and the religion of Buddha came to Japan from China. Having neither devout understanding of the Divine Being nor prescience of the superhuman and the world beyond, the Japanese always treated the majesty of a philosophical concept of God with nonchalant carelessness.80

The absence of the notion of God, he continued, affected Japanese architecture as well. He shared with Jules Buisson the idea that there was no monumental architecture in Japan and even believed that no paintings symbolizing the divine existed in that country. As for sculpture, Lecomte only mentioned

the Great Buddhas of Nara and Kamakura as statues that may suggest some philosophical or religious ideals. In any case, pursuing a higher purpose in painting was crucial to Lecomte, and he reiterated:

Intellect and thought are absent from Japanese art. The ideal is something that has dried up at the source. Such mental destitution among sensitive artists who are so talented moves one to real pity. The Japanese did not even develop any of the artistic methods that enabled their artistic abilities to be expressed.81

This was not a passing criticism. However hostile these accounts may appear, Lecomte’s attitude was firmly based on his deep conviction that art, in the West and elsewhere, should express a high ideal, a doctrine he called “idéalisme.” In Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898) he saw a French representative of this concept: “How narrow and petty Japanese art appears compared to M. Puvis de Chavannes’ moving painting ‘Inter Naturam et Artes [sic]’ that is currently on display at the Palais du Champ-de-Mars!”82 He found in Puvis’ Inter Artes et Naturam (Fig. 5) an expression of “the absolute tranquility of Art and Nature.”83 From around 1892, Lecomte went on to apply this principle when discussing the Impressionist movement by suggesting a symbolist interpretation.84 He believed that the Impressionist painters were not merely reproducing visual reality but were elevating their paintings to an “eternal Beauty” that “are suggestive of dreams.”85 For Lecomte, the criticism of Japanese art was inseparable from his deep-rooted “idéalisme” aesthetics.

Three Notable Authors: Wyzewa, Pottier, and Tasset

Teodor de Wyzewa: Pure Vision of Japanese Artists

The art and literary critic Teodor de Wyzewa wrote two articles. In the shorter one, while he was generally favorable toward the show, he regretted the fact

FIGURE 5  Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Inter Artes et Naturam. 1888–1890. Oil and wax on canvas. 295 cm × 830 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen. © RÉUNION DES MUSÉES MÉTROPOLITAINS ROUEN NORMANDIE.
that only ukiyo-e prints had been presented to the public and claimed that there were some ten schools of art in Japan that were yet to be introduced.86 Wyzewa's more serious study on the Japanese pictorial arts was published in the magazine Revue des deux-mondes. This article indicated that he had been reading a large number of books on the Japanese, as he wrote about having read Louis Gonse's (1846–1921) L'Art japonais, William Anderson's (1842–1900) The Pictorial Art of Japan, Edward Morse's (1838–1925) books on Japanese pottery, Bing's magazine Le Japon artistique, Justus Brinckmann's (1843–1915) Kunst und Handwerk in Japan, and even the Japanese art magazine Kokka, which had just been launched in October 1889 by Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三 (1863–1913) and Takahashi Kenzō 高橋健三 (1855–1898). Wyzewa was thus, without doubt, one of the few reviewers who had a good knowledge of Japanese art.

Wyzewa was not completely satisfied with these previous studies on Japanese art, since they did not address the problem of “race.” To consider this problem, he referred to several books that had been translated into Western languages and concluded that it is the childlike mentality of the Japanese that makes their art original because with this childishness, the Japanese artists have a purer vision of nature. Examining literary and philosophical works by Japanese had brought him to the conviction that “abstract ideas are entirely absent” in Japanese people and found “a total absence of logical coherence in the deductions made.”87 Unlike Jules Buisson and Georges Lecomte, however, he never considered the lack of rational thinking a grave fault. On the contrary, he felt that this lack of higher thought was what allowed Japanese art to express its pure vision: “Maybe the absence of higher intellect, while narrowing the scope of their painting, has contributed to creating its special character of sweet and naïve serenity. … Their soul has always remained peaceful, like that of a child, and their works are the reflection of the innocent simplicity of their lives.”88 This unreflecting soul enabled the Japanese to perceive the world without being confused by thoughts.89

Wyzewa identified Kichizan Minchō 吉山明兆 (1352–1431), Kanō Motonobu 狩野元信 (1476?–1559), Hanabusa Itchō 英一蝶 (1652–1724), and Hokusai as the

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86 Teodor de Wyzewa, “Exposition de la gravure japonaise à l’École des beaux-arts,” in La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité (May 11, 1890), pp. 147–149.
88 Wyzewa, “La peinture japonaise,” p. 120.
representative Japanese painters and wrote that the genius of these four was “the supreme fulfillment of the distinctive spirit of their race” and that “the soul of Japan” was expressed in their works in the most complete manner. In explaining the history of Japanese painting, he specifically recalled the Buddhist paintings, the Tosa school, the school of Sesshū (1420–1506), the Shijō school, as well as the ukiyo-e school and said that the Kanō school had, in fact, been the greatest of all. He observed that the Kanō school was, “in the history of Japanese painting, the equivalent of what the classical art of the sixteenth century was to the history of Italian painting” and that “it is in the works of the Kanō school that the distinctive Japanese spirit has best achieved the measure of formal perfection that it was capable of.” Among the Kanō school painters, Wyzewa highlighted “the vigorous draftsman” Motonobu, “the impressionist” Kanō Tanyū (1602–1674), and Kanō Naonobu, who was “one of Japan’s most personal and delicate painters.” Examination of Louis Gonse’s L’Art japonais published in 1883, which features numerous illustrations of Kanō school paintings, may have contributed to Wyzewa’s perspective on this traditional school. The magazine Kokka, where he could also find some fine reproductions of kakemono by the Kanō school that had remained in Japan, was probably another source for his ideas. In its choice of illustrations, the Kokka had, in fact, been focusing on traditional paintings rather than on ukiyo-e prints; for example, in the February 1890 issue, four of the five illustrations were paintings by Kanō Masanobu (1434–1530) and Motonobu. His appreciation of the Kanō school is perhaps what made Wyzewa’s article more original compared to others. Despite his praise for Hokusai, Wyzewa thought that the ukiyo-e paintings and prints school were, in comparison to the traditional schools, merely improvisation. On seeing a thousand ukiyo-e prints gathered in one room at the exhibition, he claimed that “one cannot help but find this art tiresome.”

After discussing the Japanese painters, Wyzewa returned to his concept of childlike mentality and purity of perception:

Our Impressionism may well claim to build on the work of Japanese artists, but really it owes them nothing or almost nothing: above all, it is a learned impressionism that strives to show an excess of truth by means of an excess of artifice and thought. The impressionism of Tanyū, Shōkadō,

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90 Wyzewa, “La peinture japonaise,” p. 120.
Itchō and Hokusai is something else entirely; these are naïve souls that worry only about expressing their simple visions as easily as possible.\(^93\)

To Wyzewa, even French Impressionism had an intellectual framework; the Impressionist paintings were not seen as a pure representation of nature.

observed directly through the painter’s eyes. The Japanese artists were, on the other hand, capable of translating their naïve and sincere observations into a painting, which made their art original. Departing from the view that the Japanese lack an elevated concept of art, Wyzewa thus reached a conclusion that was the complete opposite of that of Buisson and Lecomte. His discussion was unique in 1890, given his great preference for paintings from the traditional art schools.

**Edmond Pottier: The Singular Affinity between Japanese and Ancient Greek Art**

Edmond Pottier, an archaeologist specializing in ancient Greek pottery and assistant at the Louvre from 1886 (he would become curator in due course), published an article titled “Grèce et Japon” in the magazine *Gazette des beaux-arts*. As the title indicates, this study aimed to compare Greek and Japanese art to reveal similarities in their pictorial style and motifs. This article was widely read and some writers later referred to it. S. Bing recalled this article in 1902 when he wrote about Pottier who “was so very interested in certain analogies between Japanese drawing and that of our Greek ancestors.” Louis Gonse wrote in 1900 that Pottier’s article “received some noise at the time,” but that the archaeologist revealed “the singular analogies that were there to see for any attentive observer.”

Pottier stated that since his first visit to the Japanese prints exhibition at the École des Beaux-Arts, “a comparison formed irresistibly in my mind.” He continued, “I found at every step, in the curve of an arm, in the fold of a cloth, in the silhouette of a naked man, a comparison to be made with Greek works, and in particular with Athenian style drawings.” He found major similarities in the drawings. Giving many examples to support his argument, he compared the drawings for the ukiyo-e prints and those from ancient Greek vases and pointed out that in both cases, the shadings and tonal effects were omitted and a simple contour pursued. Two drawings of horses (Fig. 7) were presented to show the similarities in their simple lines, the precise depiction of movement, and the handling of the brush. Pottier even felt that both Japanese and Greek

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artists used similar instruments and techniques in making their drawing. He wrote: “The drawing technique is strikingly similar in Greece and Japan: perfection is found in the total purity of the line, the tools are identical, and the handling of instruments functions according to the same rules.”

It is interesting that Pottier referred to Impressionism in his discussion of the contour in Japanese prints and Greek pottery: “Japanese art and Greek art are impressionist in the same way: going against the grain of many modern painters who endeavor to render the entirety of an object by using a colored tone, with a stroke, they give the impression of the whole with a contour, with a line.” It is not that clear what he meant by “impressionist,” given that he defined it through contour and line, which are not generally seen as features of the Impressionist style; therefore, this definition seems closer to Cloisonnism or Synthetism than to Impressionism. Indeed, Pottier could have had the Pont-Aven School in mind. In June 1889, an exhibition of works by Synthetist painters such as Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Émile Bernard (1868–1941), Émile

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Schuffenecker (1851–1934), and Louis Anquetin (1861–1932) opened at the Café des Arts, situated near the official pavilion of the Paris World's Fair. Significantly, the show was entitled “Exhibition of Paintings by the Impressionist and Synthetist Group.” Pottier might have seen this so-called “Exposition Volpini” in 1889 and considered the painters to be Impressionists, as the poster and the catalogue indicated. Those painters had indeed been inspired by Japanese woodblock prints and were using strong black contours, as can be seen in the exhibits by Bernard and Anquetin (Fig. 8) in particular. This means that, paradoxically, Pottier made use of the Japanese-inspired artists to characterize the Japanese prints and, to subsequently present an affinity between Japanese and Greek drawings.

In addition to the lines in Japanese and Greek art, Pottier compared other features such as the colors, the lack of modeling, the costumes and their pattern, the attitudes of the figures, and the instruments that people used in everyday life. Drawing parallels between Japanese prints and Greek vases on the basis of these elements, Pottier became more and more convinced that there were affinities between the arts of the two countries. He wrote, “It is therefore unsurprising to notice methods, a style, and subjects in Japanese engravings that evoke natural comparisons with Greek works.” He believed that the resemblance was not the result of chance. When comparing the textual patterns and in reference to an account by Christopher Dresser (1834–1904), Pottier concluded that Persia or Central Asia could have been a contact point between the two civilizations in the past. At the end of the article, he wrote that the Japanese and the Greeks “both start with the direct observation of the humblest and most ordinary things and then raise them to the most sublime summits of creativity.”

This kind of comparison between Japanese art and ancient Greek art was not an original invention of Pottier. Such comparisons can be found from 1860s onwards, in the writings of Zacharie Astruc (1833–1907) and Ernest Chesneau (1833–1890), for instance. As Pottier wrote, Louis Gonse also discovered parallels between Japan and ancient Greece. It was, however Pottier, who for the

100 For a detailed discussion of the Japanese inspiration in Cloisonnism and Synthetism, and its relationship to the Exposition Volpini, see in particular Inaga Shigemi, Kaiga no tôhó (The Orient of the Painting) (Nagoya: The University of Nagoya Press, 1999), pp. 292–313.
101 For the poster, the catalogue, and the identified exhibits at the Exposition Volpini, see Heather Lemonedes, Belinda Thomson, and Agnieszka Juszczak (eds), Paul Gauguin: vers la modernité (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2010), pp. 215–225.
first time devoted an entire article to the subject. His prestige as a specialist of archaic Greek art at the Louvre, and the fact that his study appeared in the highly regarded academic art journal of the time, the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, must have given his argument a scholarly dimension, thereby distinguishing Pottier from any previous authors. For the most part, what Pottier presented is mere superficial resemblance, but it does reflect his hope, and, perhaps more generally, that of his contemporaries, to define Japanese art in relation to the Western canon.104

Jacques Tasset: Defining the Subjectivity

Along with Teodor de Wyzewa, the Orientalist Jacques Tasset was one of the most knowledgeable reviewers of the exhibition. Reviewing the ukiyo-e exhibition in 1890, he published two articles in Mémoires de la Société sinico-japonaise, an annual bulletin of an Orientalist society founded by the Japanologist Léon de Rosny (1837–1914) in 1873. The Japonistes Philippe Burty (1830–1890) and Émile Guimet (1836–1918) were among its members, and S. Bing was appointed president of the society in 1895.105 When the society’s bulletin had articles on Japanese or Chinese subjects, kanji (Chinese characters) was used together with the Latin alphabet, thanks to the typesetting abilities of the publisher E. J. Brill in Leiden. This was the case for Tasset’s two articles, in which all the Japanese artists’ names were given in kanji. In fact, Tasset must have had some knowledge of the Japanese language, because he was a graduate of the École des langues orientales and a student of Léon de Rosny. He was, on the other hand, a good friend of Émile Bernard, since they had been classmates at the Collège Sainte-Barbe.106 He may have become interested in modern art through his relationship with Bernard; it is known that Tasset owned the painting by Bernard (exhibited at the Exposition Volpini), and a still life painting by Paul Gauguin.107 From 1894 to 1897, Tasset was in Korea on behalf of the French government, and, according to Bernard’s letters to his mother, in June 1895, Tasset had stayed in Nagasaki and was still in Japan in June 1896.108

In his first article Tasset traced the history of Japonisme in France and explained how the ukiyo-e print exhibitions, including the one organized by Bing in 1890, had contributed to a general understanding of Japanese art. He then gave an overview of the general history of Japanese pictorial arts from their origin to the Tosa and Kanō schools.109 In his subsequent article, he discussed numerous ukiyo-e artists. Beginning with Iwasa Matabē 岩佐又兵衛 (1578–1650) and Moronobu and ending with Kawanabe Kyōsai 河鍋暁斎 (1831–1889), Tasset explored more than seventy ukiyo-e painters and, in particular, showed appreciation for the eighteenth-century painters, such as Harunobu, Kiyonaga,

105 On the appointment of Bing as the president, see the member list of the bulletin published in 1895.
109 Tasset, “Études sur la gravure japonaise (premier article),” pp. 51–64.
Katsukawa Shunshō 勝川春章 (1726–1793), and Chōbunsai Eishi 鳥文斎栄之 (1756–1829).

Although Tasset recognized the superiority of the eighteenth-century painters over those of the nineteenth century, he identified Hokusai as a significant exception. He appreciated the energetic movement and vivid colors in Hokusai’s paintings, which he admitted were drawn with extreme precision. Tasset argued that Hokusai’s absolute genius resided in his original way of seeing and representing objects and the world around him. Using a Zolaesque definition of art in his introduction, Tasset attempted to reveal the subjective side of Hokusai’s expressive paintings: “The famous definition, ‘art is nature as seen through a temperament,’ is perfectly applicable when we are talking about the work of the great Japanese draftsman [Hokusai]: he shows us his country the way he perceives it in his artist’s soul.” Even though Émile Zola never employed this exact phrase, this expression and its variations were widely used in art writings at the time. Possibly because of his friendship with Émile Bernard, Tasset was somehow acquainted with contemporary art theory and even attempted to shape it to fit Japanese art in an attempt to explain its subjective dimensions.

Interestingly, Tasset’s focus on art theory in relation to Japanese art was more explicitly reflected in his discussion on color. In order to understand the color system employed by the Japanese artists, Tasset wrote that he had asked a friend who had knowledge in this area for an explanation (whether the friend was Bernard or not is unclear). Considering the vividness and the harmony of the colors in the prints, the friend was convinced that Japanese artists knew of the color circle through intuition: “The artists proceeded through reduced or graded shades from a darker to a lighter point, in this way completing the entire color wheel.” He continued: “Hokusai handles the three primary colors, red, blue and yellow, with aplomb.” Immediately after this, in a footnote he introduced Ogden Nicholas Rood’s (1831–1902) book on color theory, which had been translated and published in France in 1881. Therefore, Tasset must have had in mind some of Rood’s color wheels, which were reproduced in a color frontispiece at the very beginning of the book (Fig. 9). Tasset’s friend also pointed out that the Japanese artists must have learned the complementary color system through experience. After quoting these lines by his friend, Tasset himself wrote:

110 Tasset, “Études sur la gravure japonaise (suite et fin),” p. 79.
Before Chevreul set down the theory of complementary colors in a definitive essay, before eminent artists started to concern themselves with the grading and composition of colors, and before scholars gave impressive opinions, the artists of Japan, by analyzing themselves and their palettes, had identified the harmonic paths for our modern arts that descend from them and which pay legitimate tribute to their masters from another con-
tinent, who are no less knowledgeable than our own most revered artists.\textsuperscript{113}

The chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul’s (1786–1889) works on color relationships were known to have influenced the Neo-Impressionist painters and critics like Félix Fénéon. Chevreul maintained that when one perceives a simultaneous color contrast, each color could be heightened or altered, depending on the color composition; colors can therefore be essentially understood through a perceptive subjective process. In citing Chevreul, Tasset implied that Hokusai’s use of colors reflected his subjective view of the world.\textsuperscript{114} If Pottier needed classical Western art to understand Japanese drawings, Tasset made reference to the Western theory of art and color to characterize Japanese polychrome prints, and, furthermore, the subjectivity he found in the use of the colors.\textsuperscript{115}

**Conclusion**

The comprehensive exhibition of Japanese pictorial arts of 1890 was so novel that it attracted significant attention from critics and, as described in some reviews, was a “revelation” to the French public. Many critics were favorably disposed toward the exhibition and the ukiyo-e woodcuts, and the distinctive features of Japanese art were widely discussed. There was, however, some harsh criticism, which could be seen to be a personal reaction to this new art. It is noteworthy that the most perceptive reviews were usually written by authors who were in their twenties or thirties. Wyzewa, Pottier, Tasset, Geffroy, Lecomte, Alexandre, Roger-Milès, Hamel, Price, and Roton, for example, were all very young compared to the renowned Japonistes who organized the show. The exhibition afforded an emerging generation of art critics and scholars a unique opportunity to examine a vast range of Japanese print art. The exhibition was a great success and paved the way for these original studies, which

\textsuperscript{113} Tasset, “Études sur la gravure japonaise (suite et fin),” p. 82.
\textsuperscript{114} The subjective dimension in Japanese art had been frequently highlighted by critics. See Floyd, “Japonisme in Context,” pp. 211–219.
\textsuperscript{115} Some critics had discerned the intuitive application of color theory in Japanese prints without mentioning the names of Chevreul or Rood. See Floyd, “Japonisme in Context,” pp. 251–252.
served to enhance Western artistic understanding of Japanese woodblock prints.

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