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ARTISTS, AESTHETICS, AND ARTWORKS
FROM, AND IN CONVERSATION WITH, JAPAN
PART 1 (OF 2)

MUTUAL IMAGES
ISSUE 8 – SPRING 2020

MUTUAL IMAGES

A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

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EDITED BY
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The influence of Japanese *kimono* on European bustles and their representation in the paintings of the late nineteenth century

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the relationship between Europe and Japan at the end of the nineteenth century through the influence of the clothing from both countries. Paintings and portraits from that era are analysed. A typical European clothing piece of that period, the bustle, is proof that little by little the traditional Japanese kimono began to enter the fashion of England and France. In addition, the article also investigates how the Japanese kimono became a luxury item in Europe; however, it was used as a gown-style clothing for the home, losing its original function. At the same time, some kimono and furisode were trimmed and re-sewn as decorative parts of European bustles. The dresses that have survived to this day, most of them preserved in museums, are compared with the European paintings of that period to show how painters portrayed these changes in fashion and modified the use of Japanese garments through their interpretations in Europe.

KEYWORDS

Europe; Fashion; History of Art; Japan; Japonisme; Paintings.

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After the Great London Exposition in 1862, European art was overwhelmed by what would later be labelled *Japonisme*, affecting all of its facets, including painting, design, illustration, and fashion. London and Paris were the main centres of dissemination of *Japonisme*: artists from all over Europe illustrated what they believed was Japanese art, creating a new vision of it that affected European clothing design. The illustrations and designs of James McNeill Whistler, Vincent Van Gogh, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Aubrey Beardsley—among others less known but even more influential at the time—idealised the image of traditional Japanese costumes, such as the *kimono* (this and any other Japanese word will be always used, in this article, with this orthography, without the addition of the English “s” for the plural). In these illustrations, the cut of the dresses idealised the figure of the woman, and created sinuous forms covered by endless *kimono*, generating a mixture between fantasy and reality regarding the

possibility of clothing in Europe. The rising fascination with Japanese culture in Europe became a social and cultural indicator. Clothing was one of the most affected traits: women from the upper classes started to incorporate traditional Japanese motifs and fabrics into their daily clothing styles. But how many of the paintings of that era were true to the actual way women used to dress at that time? According to Ohno Ken'ichi (2006: 55), thanks to the Meiji Restoration and its opening to imports from Europe and North America, the economic development in Japan changed and expanded exponentially. Due to the opening of commerce between Europe and Japan, the fabrics as a matter of fact arrived in Europe and began to be used in the fashion of that time. The bustles began to be sewn with these fabrics, and although the Japanese addition did not change their structure, it altered the combination of fabrics, colours, and designs. In some cases, even real *kimono* were used to create bustles. The representations circulated in the plastic arts are somewhat removed from the real dresses that could be seen in the streets. This article attempts to show these differences with a reconstruction of European clothing inspired by Japan, and its counterpart in the painting of the late nineteenth century.

From the perspective of art history, a conventional way to study the difference between the pictures presented by the artists and the dresses used on the streets would be to study the evolution of the pictorial image on the one hand, and on the other hand, the patterns and sewing of the dresses. This article aims to discuss the relationship between the “imaginary” and the “real” elements of female clothing in Europe as well as in Japan. And how, at the end of the nineteenth century, European painters developed a fascination, even an obsession, with all those arts that came from Japan after the Great London Exposition. Specifically, how this was transferred into their paintings and to the fashion trends of the moment, since the image they presented of fashion was not the same as the one that was actually worn on the streets. Thus, the intention is to show these differences with a reconstruction of European clothing inspired by Japan, and its counterpart in the paintings of the late nineteenth century, as well as the relationship between the bustle and the *kimono* at the end of the nineteenth century. To achieve this, I will make some comparisons between the portrayals by the European painters most influenced by Japan and *Japonisme* in their time, and the dresses from that same period that have been preserved until today.

Taking into account that this article is written from the art history prism, the analysis of the pictorial section will be based on works by European or American authors who developed a large part of their work in Europe, specifically France and England. From these, a comparison will be made between photographs of dresses from the same era and locations that have lasted until today in museums and private collections. With these data, the aim is to elucidate whether the idea that these European artists had when painting their works was the result of knowledge or an idealisation of both the *kimono* and the women who supposedly wore them. And if they wore them, or not, on the street on a daily basis.

In the present study, when speaking of idealisation of the female figure, I refer to the way the artists represented women, as well as women's ways of dressing, or presenting themselves, in portraits.

Embroidered figures and images

One of the first publications to include a text about the concept of *Japonisme* in Europe was "La Renaissance littéraire et artistique", in which Philippe Burty (1872: 25) described and defined for the first time that concept as the influence that Japanese art was exerting on the arts and crafts in Europe. We must take into account that Burty wrote "La Renaissance littéraire et artistique" after the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris, which was of great importance in the development of *Japonisme* fever and the work of the artists mentioned later in this article.

The strong appearance of the Japanese arts in Europe was truly visible in the Great London Exposition in 1862, held in South Kensington, where we can now find the Museum of Natural History. The previous exhibition had been held in Paris in 1851. Shortly after, London and Paris would become the cities most influenced by *Japonisme*, and all the artists related to this trend would live in one of them—sometimes in both—by the end of the century.

The London edition was a showcase of the advances made in the Industrial revolution, and it was sponsored by the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. What really matters to us is that Japanese art and artefacts were among the main attractions of this International Exposition. It is important to highlight that Japan accepted the invitation to be the guest country that year, but delegated the selection of the material for the Exposition to the British Minister in Japan, Rutherford Alcock, (Alagón Laste, 2016:

628). The European artists were shocked by what they understood as the asymmetry of Japanese art, the difference in the vanishing points in their illustrations, and the designs of their paintings. In particular, the Japanese woodcut prints (*ukiyo-e*) produced a great sensation among avant-garde artists of the late nineteenth century, who became obsessed with the society and culture from which those prints came, going on to create great collections of Japanese art and artefacts.

This exchange between Europe and Japan was possible after the end of the long period of isolationism following the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Although during the Kaiei period (1848-1854) merchant ships from other nations arrived in Japan, it was not until the Meiji Restoration that trade really took place and reached a position to influence European fashion. Thus, until that moment, European artists had accumulated prints with images of clothes that they did not really understand, and that, therefore, they idealised in their representations. It is necessary to also take into account that the portraits these authors painted were usually highly paid-for commissions. Therefore, the vision of the clients in the paintings also comes into play. In the portraits of women, we do not only find representations of dresses and *kimono*, but also other luxuries such as ceramic pots, jewellery (which the women portrayed usually do not wear), Japanese folding screens and decorations, and other items that, however interesting, will not be analysed here because this investigation focuses on the dresses and clothing items represented, and whether they are based on real fashion of that time.

The novelty of Japanese products held an extraordinary power of attraction for European audiences. Especially for women of upper social stations, who were delighted with the artistry of Japanese women's products, such as *kimono*, belts (*obi*), hairpieces (*kōgai*), combs (*kushi*), fans, boxes and cases for calligraphy (*suzuribako*), or medicines (*inrō*). All of these had intricate and beautiful ornamentations that European women found fascinating. These products were used originally in Japan by those who could afford them, such as *geisha* and courtesans who became simultaneously subject to and the creators of fashion (Sosnowski, 2017: 16) not just in Japan, but in Europe as well.

Just as Schmiegel presents in her thesis, wealthy women would have their costumes sewn for them by prominent dressmakers, who would design the garments, acquire the materials, fit the dresses, and sell their product directly to them. While high- to middle-class women created the garments themselves or with the help of skilled in-house servants (Schmiegel, 2019: 16), every haute couture fashion house designed dresses that

were made from imported *kimono* from Japan. A stylised practice began in the late 1870s: these companies acquired the garments simply for repurposing for western dress. Japanese silk manufactures simply could not keep up with British demands for new silk designs (2019: 22).

Some of the most recognised images in European art from that time are those of James McNeill Whistler, Alfred Stevens, James Tissot—among others—who in their works used the image of traditional Japanese costumes, such as the *kimono*. There are many more European authors whose works dealt with Japanese themes and landscapes, such as Monet, or Klimt, whose illustrations were influenced by Japanese prints. However, the works exposed here are related to the idealisation of the female body and the clothing and garments that women used on a day-to-day basis, against the images that the artists presented in their paintings.

The Belgian artist Alfred Stevens worked in Paris for a couple of years at the end of the century, particularly on portraits of society. These paintings display similarities with the work of some friends of his, such as the aforementioned Edouard Manet, James Tissot, or James McNeill Whistler. Stevens painted three canvases related to the fashion of the moment, all of them because of the society portraits he was working on. All of them were representations of women of high society: *Japanese-Parisian* (1872), *Mélancholie* (1876), and *In the studio* (1888) are perfect representations of the three types of dresses and wardrobe of the moment.



Figure 1. Alfred Stevens, *Japanese-Parisian*, 1872; oil on canvas.

In *Japanese-Parisian* (Fig. 1), Stevens paints a Parisian lady wearing a *kimono* at home. This is an important detail, because at the beginning of the imports from Japan *kimono* were used only at home, as a robe for being comfortable, fashionable, and presentable to receive guests. It is because of this idea (that the *kimono* was a luxury at home in Europe) that in the picture the woman is in full make-up with her hair well-dressed. In addition, in the reflection of the mirror we can see her underwear, reinforcing the idea of the robe or gown. On the contrary, *Mélancholie* (Fig. 2) represents a complete bustle, the full dress that was fashionable and considered the standard in Europe (especially in France and England) in the Victorian Era. This image shows the difference in volume and form between both styles. In the last picture, *In the studio* (Fig. 3), it is possible to observe how the two women on the right are dressed in a bustle, while the model in front of them covers her body with what we might consider a *kimono* fabric, which however, looking at the detail of the sleeve, has a European cut.

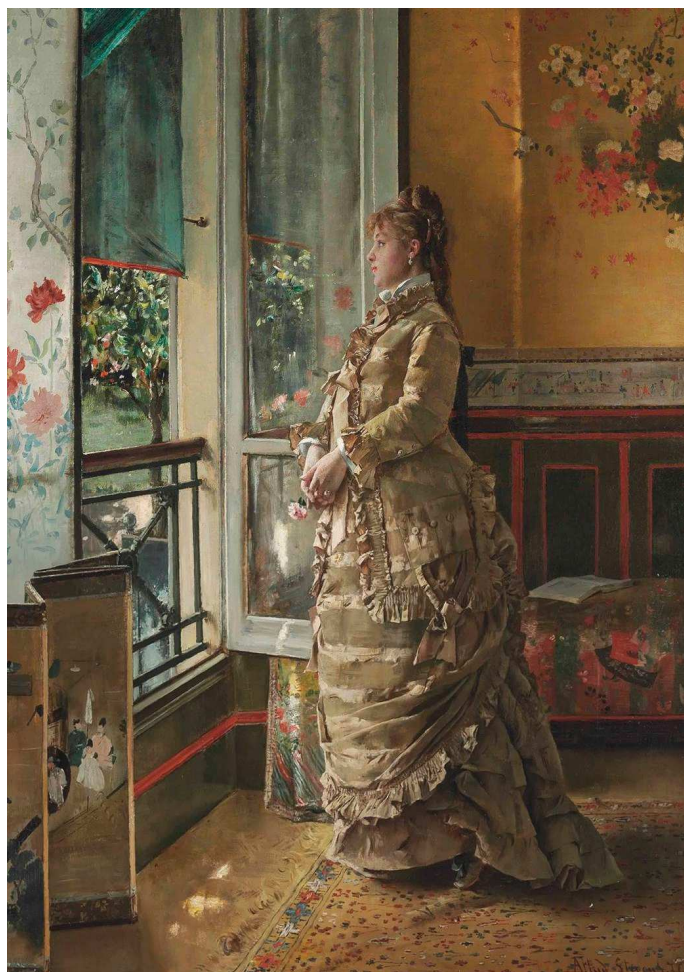


Figure 2. Alfred Stevens, *Mélancholie*, 1876; oil on canvas.

It is important to notice the difference in volume between both styles because of the layers and types of fabric. The type of *kimono* that arrived in Europe at the time had just a couple of layers: underwear, *juban* (a white one-piece cotton top and skirt, also considered underwear), *kimono*, and *obi* (traditional sash). Whereas the bustles had traditional snickers, a chemise (similar to the *juban*, this was also considered underwear), a corset, a cage, a petticoat, an underskirt, a skirt with an apron, a shirt, and a jacket. Neither of these paintings portray any of these items which could be presented as embellishments. This will be further explained in the next part of this article.



Figure 3. Alfred Stevens, *In the studio*, 1888; oil on canvas.

In addition to the last European representations, the famous Peacock Room was originally designed as a dining room for a townhouse located in Kensington, London, by Thomas Jeckyll between 1873 and 1876. James McNeill Whistler, an American who made almost all of his career between France and England, repainted the room and added murals that are the true focus of this study. The painting *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (Fig. 4) was done in 1864, two years after the London Exposition, and it presents a European woman wearing a *kimono* as a dressing gown. As in the previous cases, we know that this is so because despite her make-up being done, she does not wear her hair tied up. Although the waist is slightly wrapped around by the red fabric, the core of the

kimono is not properly placed. If she were really wearing the *kimono* as it should be worn, in the traditional Japanese sense, the lines would be much straighter.



Figure 4. James McNeill Whistler, *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, 1864; oil on canvas.

James Tissot, who was a French painter and illustrator, is the creator of two of the most famous works that are typically used to represent *Japonisme* in the academic texts written about this era. *Young women looking at Japanese objects* (Fig. 5) are two paintings created in 1869, from private collections, whose title is the same for both of them. The title of the paintings refers to the importance of the origin of the objects. They show Japanese objects and curiosities in different collection rooms, including the decorations of the rooms, e.g. the folding screen as well as small brush strokes in their dresses that remind the viewer of the Japanese garments in the bustles, such as the red lacing placed

in the position where the *obi* would be placed in a typical *kimono*. In that case, the bustle would not have gone over the jacket, but under the tail of it, to give more volume to the back of the dress. Again, the pictures show the fascination of the artist with the lines of *kimono*. Even when Tissot was working on a commission like this, the background was as important as the women represented.



Figure 5. James Tissot, *Young women looking at Japanese objects*, 1869; oil on canvas.

As we can see in these selected paintings, the fascination of many authors, and their high-class clients, for traditional Japanese clothing became a movement in Europe. Art critics and artists such as James McNeill Whistler also had their own collections of objects brought from Japan. These objects can be seen in his paintings, as decorations around the portrayed woman/women. Schmiegel explains that during the International Exposition at Kensington in 1862, the Aesthetics Movement painters, such as McNeill Whistler, heightened the stereotypes about Japanese women, particularly the *geisha*, exposing contrasts with the standard embodied by European women (2019: 11). The Aesthetic Movement was a cultural revolution that pointedly argued against the overbearing ideals of the Victorian age, and all the artists who appear in this article were part, at one time or another, of this movement. Luckily for them, many of the upper classes of European society agreed with their fascination with Japan. In this way, the artists modelled new aesthetic designs in their portraits, as well as a type of new European woman based on their own idea of the Japanese *geisha*.

Although the works chosen for this study represent different European women in different types of clothing, the artists created not only these works, but many others as well, in which they used the excuse of representing *geisha* to create sexualised images of women who, otherwise, would not have been accepted in Europe. Many European artists eroticised Japanese women in their paintings, including Whistler and James Tissot. These artists aimed to expose private scenes in the delicate hours prior to these women assuming their roles as *geisha*. These paintings almost always showed these women in *kimono* that, in reality, constituted the veil that masked the underlying eroticism hidden within these paintings. Eventually, in Europe, *kimono* themselves came to represent the exoticism of Japan. Japanese women in general came to represent a new understanding of female identity. Even so, popular magazines would eventually warn European women against dressing in *kimono*, fearful that the act would incite unwanted sexual attraction. However, it would not be seen as unacceptable to dress in a European interpretation of Japan (Schmiegel, 2019: 12), because of the imagined, unreal idea that European artists depicted in their paintings.

How did that fascination for Japanese fabrics actually transfer to everyday garments in Europe?

The real fabric

The influence and the use of Japanese fabrics in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century is clearly visible in almost any historical fashion museum. Many pieces of this era are now on exhibition or in collections in the US but are accessible in their online catalogues. One of these examples is the *Tea gown* (1870) from the Fashion Institute Technology in New York, a pink silk taffeta and embroidered crepe made from real *kimono* fabric (Fig. 6). The front and part of the back layer have been made with panels of *kimono* fabric. It is necessary to have on account that Japanese cloth panels do not have the same measurements as European ones. Even in countries within Europe the same measurements are not used to buy clothings, but in the case of the *kimono* cloth the panels are narrower, so in many designs the unions between them are visible, as seen in this tea gown. In the detailed image the joints are visible between the fabric panels in the apron that covers the skirt, as well as in the pieces that make up the back of the jacket and the sleeves. That all the designs of the panels go in the same direction shows that the fabric has been cut and assembled from scratch, and that no *kimono* was reused.



Figure 6. Artist Unknown, *Tea gown*, 1870; pink silk taffeta and embroidered crepe (photograph). Fashion Technology Institute, New York.

The second example shows what usually happened when Europeans—and, sometimes, Americans—wanted to have a bustle made with *kimono* fabric. It was cheaper and easier to buy a *kimono* than *kimono* fabric, so sometimes they would buy a *kimono* and dismember it to make modifications and sew it again like a jacket or part of a bustle. When assembling the new body, the direction of the original fabric was maintained, unlike in the previous example where the whole design followed the same direction; when a *kimono* becomes a dress the direction of its design changes. A perfect example is the *Tea gown* (1870) from the Kyoto Costume Institute (Fig. 7), where we can see the change in the direction of the design, and some traces of the original *kimono* seams remain in the textile.



Figure 7. Misses Turner Court Dress Makers, *Tea Gown*, 1870; bodice and overskirt: silk satin damask (*rinzu*) with silk and metallic-thread embroidery (photograph). The Kyoto Costume Institute.

In the photographs of *Robe* (1885) from the FIDM Museum & Galleries (Fig. 8), it is visible how, by making small modifications to a Japanese piece such as a *kimono*, it was possible to make dressing gowns for walking around the house. In this case, the openings of the sleeves have been maintained, increasing them slightly for greater mobility, and an addition has been made in the rear part to completely cover the cage of the bustle. The *obi* disappears and becomes a cord that holds the robe in place. The design varies its position, which demonstrates the reuse of an existent *kimono*. The most striking thing about this reuse is that this amazing fabric had already appeared in one of the previous paintings. In *Young women looking at Japanese objects* a fabric appears under the ship miniature which the young girls are looking at (Fig. 5, left). This fabric is depicted in this picture sixteen years before the robe was made. This indicates that after the Great Exposition in London Europeans started to buy *kimono*, and in a time when it was easier to access they started to make new pieces out of them.

Obviously, at the end of the nineteenth century the number of designs was more limited than today. So, the presence of the same fabric or *kimono* sixteen years later is not so strange. In the end, the ideas that Europeans had about Japan at that time, as Yokoyama Toshio exposes in his book, were full of stereotypes, even after European tourists started to visit Japan (1987: 150). The idealisation and mysticism that surrounded the nation were widespread not just among artists but also within high society, among those who could pay to travel and afford the clothing.



Figure 8. Unknown, *Furisode Kimono-style dressing gown*, 1885, silk (photogr.). FIDM Museum & Galleries.

As can be seen in these photographs, and as remarked upon at the end of the previous section, wearing *kimono* in Europe was not frowned upon as long as it was within a Victorian aesthetic. Thus, we find bustles like those in the pictures, where *kimono* have been dismantled and reused as part of dresses that would be worn outdoors, while those that were worn as a complement indoors suffered fewer modifications.

Japan and the bustles

Europe's fashion was not the only one affected by these exchanges of fabrics and culture. In Japan there was a growing interest about Europe after all those years when the borders were closed. Travellers who arrived from Europe were a novelty and became a very exotic topic for the Japanese people. Many of the customs that the visitors brought along with them were initially incomprehensible to the Japanese. The excitement that came with the arrival of these travellers was embodied in the prints of the time, as happened in Europe after the Great Expositions of London and Paris. The commercial activity of the port of Yokohama was a topic depicted in many *ukiyo-e* (Utagawa, 1861: 56).



Figure 9. Utagawa Yoshitoyo, *Foreigners*, 1861; wood engraving.

The image above shows a couple of alleged foreigners walking (Fig. 9). We could argue that they are foreigners because of their clothing; although the representation of their faces seems somewhat anchored to the standard representational codes by which Japanese artists used to portray their fellow countrymen, we can see ethnic markers especially in the shapes and sizes of the noses. More differentiating than the clothing are the actions and behaviours that were represented in Japanese paintings, as we see in Fig. 10: “At that time, in Japan was customary to go to bed early, so it was strange that foreigners used lamps to read at night” (Yoshikazu, 1848-71: 60). There are objects in this picture and in the previous one that were introduced in Japan during that era. The sofa and the mirror presented in Fig. 10 indicate a clear interest in foreign customs. In both images there are two different dresses, one of them a complete bustle (Fig. 10). More detailed is Toyohara (Yōshū) Chikanobu’s triptych called *Women and girls in western dresses with various hairstyles* (1887), which represents four adult women and two young ladies, all of them in very detailed bustles.



Figure 10. Yoshikazu Issen, *Foreigners studying at night*, 1848-71; wood engraving.

But this interest was not only at an artistic level. The European travellers were part of high society: when they arrived in Japan, they started to make contact with families from the cities where they were going to stay for at least a couple of months. The influence that these visits created is palpable in the photographs, like the one of a woman from the Maeda family dressed in a bustle (Fig. 11) and photographed at the time by Suzuki Shin'ichi (1892).



Figure 11. Suzuki Shin'ichi, *Bustle-style dress*, 1892; photograph.

In the information attached to the picture, it is commented that one of the family friends was from the United Kingdom. In Europe, *kimono* were kept as a luxury and were originally used at home; in Japan, initially, the same happened with bustles. Although there are many photographs of Japanese girls and women from wealthy families dressed in European clothes, initially this was only done for the photo shootings, as something exotic and eccentric in Japan. However, as it has already been shown, in Europe both the fabrics and the *kimono* were introduced as the fashion of the

moment. As Kramer points out in her article “‘Not So Japan-Easy’: The British Reception of Japanese Dress in the Late Nineteenth Century”, “the adoption of Western clothing was limited in the Meiji period to urban areas, particularly port towns, and was mostly worn by uniformed professionals or the *élite*, particularly men. Adopting European dress marked Japanese men as equal participants on the global stage and allied them with the associated characteristics of rationality and seriousness” (2013: 10). At the same time, favouring European clothing not only disrupted Victorian ideas about the alleged cultural identity of Japan, but was also implicated in the perceived deterioration in the quality of Japanese decorative arts (Kramer, 2013: 20). European observers and travellers wanted to enjoy Japan according to their “pure” and “traditional” idea of it, without realising the influence of the exchange of art on their vision of Japan. The opposite happened too: Japan agreed to the opening of ports, and through those ports came dresses that represented European culture. Although they were used and valued by wealthy young women, the idea of these dresses in Japan was, ultimately, quite pejorative, something that can be seen in the publications that Kramer lists, which illustrate that even the morality of those who wore those dresses in Japan were criticised by the Europeans there at the time (Kramer, 2013).

Conclusions

In informative and educational texts, *Japonisme* is considered an artistic movement in Europe that covers the years between 1854 and 1900. However, these texts do not usually take into account the cultural exchanges reflected in clothing. This article shows the artistic-cultural dialogue between Japan and Europe, especially France and England in terms of fashion. But also the roots of patterns and fashion that attracted those European observers. *Japonisme* did not end at the beginning of the twentieth century; it continued and evolved.

The paintings related to *Japonisme* idealise the figure of the woman in a *kimono* and they are not realistic in their conception. However, the paintings are not far from reality when they represent bustles, so it is obvious that the artists had direct contact with them. It was women’s typical garment for everyday wear, and the incursion of the *kimono* in Europe was initially slow. The relationship between France, the United Kingdom, and Japan—and *Japonisme*—is evident in the painters’ lives and works that have been described here. But even the words used in the fashion of that historical period have been

accepted by other languages. “Chemise” or “petticoat” are both French words that have been accepted into English to refer to pieces, or parts, of the bustle. Just like *Japonisme* never disappeared from Europe, the *kimono* influenced the patterns and shapes of the fashion in Europe not only during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but even more recently (a diramation that we do not explore here). Furthermore, the relationship between Europe and Japan in the late nineteenth century was not only reflected in exchanges such as clothing. Rather, each developed ideas about the other that would be maintained during the beginning of the twentieth century, and which little by little would open up towards a much more realistic ideas on both sides.

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