

Mutual  
Images

ISSUE 9

AUTUMN 2020



ARTISTS, AESTHETICS, AND ARTWORKS  
FROM, AND IN CONVERSATION WITH, JAPAN  
PART 2

MUTUAL IMAGES  
ISSUE 9 – AUTUMN 2020

# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

AURORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA, MAXIME DANESIN & MARCO PELLITTERI

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ARTISTS, AESTHETICS, AND ARTWORKS  
FROM, AND IN CONVERSATION WITH, JAPAN  
PART 2

EDITED BY  
MARCO PELLITTERI & JOSÉ ANDRÉS SANTIAGO IGLESIAS

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# MUTUAL IMAGES

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# ***Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities***

## **– Christopher REED**

New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 422 p.

Review by Tyrus MILLER | University of California, Irvine, USA

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*Bachelor Japanists* offers readers an engaging and richly narrated look at Western “Japanism” of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century—scholarly, collectionist, and creative engagements with Japanese culture, religion, art, and aesthetics—which, Christopher Reed argues, Western individuals and coteries used to construct queer “bachelor” identities, both male and female, eschewing marriage and evading the domestic norms of their day. The term bachelor, Reed underscores, is not reducible to gay or homosexual, since “deviance from bourgeois family norms” (4) that he considers takes a variety of forms, ranging from highly sublimated spirituality or aesthetic tastes to preferences for all-male associations to outright sexual relations. As he notes, the bachelor Japanists’ “range of experience and expression was neither enabled by the solidarity attached to affirmations of sexual identity nor limited by its definitional boundaries” (5). Accordingly, Reed treats discerningly a wide range of behaviours, relationships, activities, and aesthetic and life choices, some of which movingly express bachelor alienation and a search for congenial spaces for difference—and at the same time, appear notably odd, eccentric, “queer” against the heteronormative context of their times and places.

Reed adopts a perspective on his bachelor Japanists that neither uncritically accepts their self-regarding and often self-serving fantasies nor dismisses them wholesale as merely discreditable instruments of Orientalist oppression and exploitation. Through mosaic-like arrays of references to letters, diaries, journalistic articles and interviews, catalogues, and artistic works, he discloses the personal and social motivations that lie behind these fantasies and reveals their creative force in the fashioning and presentation of otherwise unacceptable queer identities and life-modes. Setting out

from a brief discussion of Oscar Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying” and Roland Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* and progressing through three multifaceted case studies—19<sup>th</sup>-century French *japonisme*, turn of the century Bostonian elite collectionism and scholarly Japanism, and the West Coast avant-garde Japanism of Mark Tobey and figures including ceramicist Bernard Leach, painter Morris Graves, composer John Cage, and novelist Nancy Wilson Ross—Reed explores the variegated ways in which bachelors used Japan “as a point of departure in an act of self-invention” (4).

A tributary theme running through the book is also the ways in which this tradition of bachelor Japanists parallels and intersects with, but is also excluded by, the critical canonisation of a modernist avant-garde during these two decades, with its valuation of individualism, activity, virility, creativity, and independence. Thus, Reed samples scholarship on the experimental domesticity of the brothers Goncourt, who created an eclectic, subjective juxtaposition of 18<sup>th</sup>-century French furnishings and Japanese *objets d’art*, noting that their role in promoting *japonisme* in France has been something of an embarrassment to later critics and scholars. He argues, in fact, that despite its subjectivism, “[Edmond de] Goncourt’s eclectic, inverted style was at odds with the look of individualism that characterised modernism” (93); Goncourt’s *Maison* has been “written out of art history” (93) on account of its intimations of what would later be characterised famously by Susan Sontag as the aesthetics of Camp (1966, 277-293). In chapter 2 on turn-of-the-century Boston this tension with modernism drops a bit underground, though the presence of such figures as Ernest Fenollosa and Amy Lowell in the narrative suggests that one of key combatants and canonisers of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernism, Ezra Pound, might have formed a coda to this chapter, even if he was outside the circles of Brahmin Boston on which Reed focuses. The theme comes to its culmination in Reed’s final case, however, which discusses Mark Tobey and his artistic and personal circles. Tobey briefly enjoyed the cautious interest and critical support of the modernist kingmaker of post-World War II painting, Clement Greenberg; but for the New York art establishment, he evidently did not measure up to the large-scale, extroverted masculinity of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still and other abstract expressionists whom Greenberg elevated into *the* representatives of American art. Tobey’s work appeared too diminutive, too impersonal, and perhaps too feely “Oriental” to stand shoulder to shoulder with such muscular New York company.

The book is anchored by better-known figures such as Oscar Wilde, the brothers Goncourt, Ernest Fenolosa, Isabella Stewart Gardner, George Santayana, Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, John Cage, and Roland Barthes, although Reed often focuses on marginalised or even suppressed aspects of their work in light of bachelor Japanist aesthetics. In the case, for instance, of John Cage, he ventures a revisionist hypothesis about the composer's notorious misdating of his first engagements with Zen Buddhist thought (Cage suggested he was introduced to Zen by D.T. Suzuki's lectures in New York, but at a date earlier than the scholar's arrival in the United States). Reed argues for greater appreciation of the role Tobey as an artist and artistic thinker in Cage's adoption of Zen ideas, but also for Cage's experiences of Tobey and his circle personally, as a Seattle "subculture in which philosophies drawn from Japan redeemed bonds among bachelors—and between bachelors and women who offered nonromantic companionship and collaboration" (253). Beyond these major figures, however, Reed also thickens the contextual pictures with a rich pantheon of "minor" figures, texts, collections, and sites that together constitute the weave and weft of the bachelor Japanist networks of Paris, Boston, and Seattle. Sometimes he may focus on actual biographical figures and sites, such as Henri Cernuschi and his house-museum outside the Parc Monceau; or Hugues Krafft's Midori-no-sato, his Japanese home and garden near Versailles; or Okakura Kakuzō and the Japanese spaces designed and installed in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to display highlights of the burgeoning collection. At other times, and with equal weight, Reed takes up fictional characterisations that illuminate the bachelor Japanist culture, from now little-known novels such as the Goncourt brothers' novel *Manette Salomon* and its painter-character Coriolis de Naz, Mary McNeil Scott Fenolosa's *Truth Dexter*, and George Santayana's *The Last Puritan*.

The book concludes with some understated observations about the eventual "exhaustion" of bachelor Japanism. Throughout the book, Reed offers instance after instance of a fantasy-structure by which his bachelor-subjects mediated a relation to their self and their own socio-cultural context through an imagined, aesthetically felt, and artificially constructed version of Japan as an otherplace of art. By the end of a century of bachelor Japanism, in the 1960s, its function had begun to erode and go into abeyance. In part, Reed suggests, this was due to the intensifying dissonance between modern Japanese and Japanese-American identities and the sorts of fantasy projections that animated bachelor Japanism. He discusses, for example, the emergence into middle-

class prominence in Seattle of the art dealer Tamotsu Takizaki and the artists George Tsutakawa and Paul Horiuchi, who had been close to Tobey in the 1950s. As Reed concludes, “the normalization of aesthetics and identities labeled ‘Japanese-American’ brought an end to Japonism’s usefulness as an alternative to normative modes of masculinity in the West” (285). But there was also an erosive dynamic in the rise of distinctive gay minority cultures modelled, as Reed notes, explicitly on ethnicity and organised in urban neighbourhoods with “their own distinctive aesthetics and institutions” (294). Bachelor Japonism, he suggests, went into eclipse when the cultural, sexual, and social desires amalgamated into its aesthetic fantasies could ultimately be addressed by name.

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**Tyrus MILLER** is Dean of the School of Humanities and Professor of Art History and English at the University of California, Irvine. His publications include *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (University of California Press), *Singular Examples: Artistic Politics and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Northwestern University Press); and *Modernism and the Frankfurt School* (Edinburgh University Press).