

# An Ireland of the East: W. B. Yeats's Japan

東洋のアイランド：W. B. イェイツのジャパン

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W. B. Yeats had a life-long interest in Japanese culture. Yet his image of Japan was an artistic construct that had little to do with Japanese reality, and was in fact determined by imperialist and orientalist stereotypes from which he could not escape. He devoted considerable energy to the project of Irish nation building and saw many aspects of traditional Japanese culture as ideals for Ireland, but the same possibility or promise of change was denied to Asia, as it remained fixed in his mind in its original state.

W. B. イェイツは生涯にわたって日本文化へ関心を寄せていた。とはいえ、彼がもつ日本のイメージは、芸術として作りだされたものであり、日本の現実とはほとんど無縁のものであった。さらに、そのイメージは大英帝国主義者やオリエンタリストが持っていたステレオタイプによって、実際は規定されていたのである。イェイツはそのステレオタイプから逃れることができなかったのだ。また、アイランド建国の事業に相当な精力を傾け、伝統的な日本文化の多くの点をその理想としてみていたが、同様の変化の可能性や期待をアジアに対してもつことはなかった。イェイツの心の中で、アジアはその当初の状態に留められていたからである。

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It is well known that the great twentieth century Irish poet William Butler Yeats had an interest in Japanese culture. The story of his introduction to the Japanese *no* theatre in 1916 through Ezra Pound and the translations of Ernest Fenolosa has been often told. Passing mention is occasionally made of Yeats's much earlier introduction to Japanese culture through other sources (e.g. Foster 2003, 34-35), but little attempt has been made by scholars to identify these sources, explore any of this material, or discuss what influence it may have had on Yeats's ideas of Japan. That is the first purpose of this essay.

The second purpose is to examine those ideas in the light of recent postcolonial criticism. For in the past few years Yeats has been gradually removed from the canon of *English* modernist literature and repositioned as the great postcolonial Irish poet, whose life and work were devoted to the project of Irish independence and nation creation (e.g. Said 1993). This

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repositioning of Yeats as one of the twentieth century's most important poets of anti-imperialism or decolonization makes Yeats's orientalist attitudes all the more interesting, and worthy of fresh investigation. For careful analysis of Yeats's thoughts about Japan, and Ireland for that matter, reveals that he had curious and complicated attitudes toward the non-Western world. Briefly stated, Yeats idealized cultures and societies that he believed were beyond the pale of Western science and industrialism — and he included the west of Ireland as one of them — but at the same time he held typically orientalist assumptions that were Eurocentric, and ultimately rather condescending. Let me begin with a short discussion of Yeats's earliest introduction to Japanese art.

Of all the influences on Yeats's development as an artist, perhaps the greatest was that of his father, the painter John Butler Yeats, and it is highly likely that the poet-son was first introduced to Japanese color prints through the influence of the painter-father. The elder Yeats personally oversaw the education of his son, and through John Yeats's friends and connections, W. B. was exposed to an uncommon degree to the world of art and artists. One of John Yeats's many friends, for instance, was Frederick York Powell, Regius Professor of History at Oxford. The elder Yeats received many letters from Powell in which Powell discussed his passion for Japanese art. Powell was an avid collector of Japanese color prints, and W. B. Yeats recorded that he spent a "pleasant week" in 1888 in Powell's rooms amongst Powell's "cherished gathering of Japanese pictures, many hundreds" (Elton 1906, 1: 414).

Junzo Sato, the Japanese who famously presented Yeats with an authentic samurai sword in 1920, remarked to Shotaro Oshima that Yeats had inherited his interest in Japanese culture from his father, who also had "a strong longing for Japanese art and literature" (Oshima 1965, 128). There does not seem to be evidence elsewhere of J. B. Yeats's "strong longing" for Japanese culture, and so perhaps Sato had heard this from Yeats himself. But Yeats in his *Autobiography* or *Memoirs* does not credit anyone — least of all, his father — with having introduced him to Japanese art. Instead, he recorded in 1922 in *The Trembling of the Veil* that he

found when a boy in Dublin on a table in the Royal Irish Academy a pamphlet on Japanese art and read there of an animal painter so remarkable that horses he had painted upon a temple wall had slipped down after dark and trampled the neighbours' fields of rice. Somebody had come into the temple in the early morning, had been startled by a shower of water drops, had looked up and seen painted horses still wet from the dew-covered fields, but now 'trembling into stillness.' (1965, 126)

It was only characteristic of Yeats to thus distance himself from the pervasive influence of his father. After all, the *Autobiography* was not a record of facts but a carefully constructed work of art in its own right, a myth, part of the purpose of which was to establish "his own identity and to assert a personality independent from that of his father," noted Joseph Ronsley (1968, 40). In spite of a lack of conclusive evidence, we must continue to suspect that

Yeats's artist father was the most likely source of Yeats's first introduction to Japanese art.

So Yeats happened upon a pamphlet on Japanese art sometime, perhaps, in the 1870s. Of course, the 1870s and '80s in Britain were the height of the movement that would come to be known as Japonisme, and London became permeated with Japonisme in its various forms, particularly following the Great Exhibition of London in 1862 and the Paris Exhibition of 1867. The effect of these and other exhibitions in America was, said Sir Edward Reed in 1880, to create "so great a further demand for [Japanese] products that it was not easy to sustain a proportionate supply" (1880, II: 63). Japanese arts and artifacts were all the rage in London and really, it would be difficult to imagine that a young Yeats whose father was a painter, whose friends were artists, and whose "imagination was highly visual" did not respond to the Japanese arts that were all around him (Engleberg 1988, 96). He did, as we will see shortly.

Many of Yeats's friends and acquaintances expressed an enthusiasm for Japanese prints; some like York Powell collected them, and some like Charles Ricketts and Laurence Binyon would eventually become renowned authorities on Japanese art themselves. But the greatest early influence on Yeats from among his acquaintances may have come from none other than the apostle of the Aesthetic Movement and champion of Japanese arts, Oscar Wilde. Wilde was for some years the constant companion of Whistler, who was known in London as "the Japanese artist." Whistler and Wilde together were commanders of the intellectual world in the 1880s, and they "kept literary London continually agog to know what they will say next," recalled Yeats (1966, I: 205). In Wilde's 1882 lecture in the United States entitled, "The English Renaissance of Art," he spoke of the "secret" of "the influence which Eastern art is having on us in Europe," and of the "fascination of all Japanese work." While praising Japanese art he criticized the western intellectual spirit for being unreceptive to the sensuous element of art; for "laying on art the intolerable burden of its own intellectual doubts," while the east had always "kept true to art's primary and pictorial conditions" (1969, 260-1). In his famous essay, "The Decay of Lying" (1889), he declared that "the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people," and that

if you desire to see a Japanese effect, you will not behave like a tourist and go to Tokio. On the contrary, you will stay home and steep yourself in the work of certain Japanese artists and then, when you have absorbed the spirit of their style, and caught their imaginative manner of vision, you will go some afternoon and sit in the Park or stroll down Piccadilly, and if you cannot see an absolutely Japanese effect there, you will not see it anywhere. (1954, 927)

Wilde's argument was profoundly perceptive, for it recognized that Japan in the western mind was an artistic construct and Japanese artistic effects were more likely to be seen in London than they were in Japan itself, thanks to the influence of Japonisme. It was an argument that Yeats would absorb completely, for he never visited Japan but stayed home and steeped himself in the work of certain Japanese artists. He would always prefer the

artistic construct to the grey truth.

Yeats first heard Wilde lecture in Dublin in 1883, and five years later in 1888 met him at the home of the poet William Henley, author of the forgettable “Ballade of a Toyokuni Colour Print” (1888). In December of that year Yeats was invited to Wilde’s home for Christmas dinner where, joked Richard Ellmann, Yeats “consumed not only his portion of the turkey but all Wilde’s esthetic system, which Wilde read to him from the proofs of “The Decay of Lying” (1967, 3). Equally interesting was Yeats’s recollection of Wilde’s house at Chelsea. It had been decorated by the architect E. W. Godwin “with an elegance that owed something to Whistler...

There was nothing medieval, nor pre-Raphaelite, no cupboard door with figures upon flat gold, no peacock-blue, no dark background. I remember vaguely a white drawing room with Whistler etchings, “let in” to white panels, and a dining room all white, chairs, walls, mantelpiece, carpet, except for a diamond-shaped piece of red cloth in the middle of the table under a terra-cotta statuette, and I think a red-shaded lamp hanging from the ceiling to a little above the statuette. It was perhaps too perfect in its unity. (1965, 90)

If Yeats had been less polite and more inclined to ask, he might have been told that these rooms were designed upon the Japanese principles that Godwin had derived from his study of Japanese interiors, where all display was carefully avoided. “The pale and subtle gradations of clear colour,” Elizabeth Aslin observed, “were inspired by Japanese prints” (1962, 781). True to Wilde’s analysis, the Japanese effect could be seen in London, and Yeats was observing it all around him. The twenty-three year-old poet had inadvertently found in Wilde, Whistler and Godwin the three men most responsible for the contemporary English enthusiasm for Japanese things.

Sometime in that same year of 1889, Yeats also met Laurence Binyon at ‘Fitzroy,’ one of the great bohemian centres of the 1890s (see Hatcher 1995, 25–27). Yeats and Binyon quickly became friends, and often met at Fitzroy or at the Vienna Café, another literati hangout that attracted artists and odd sorts from everywhere. Binyon would join the British Museum’s Department of Printed Books in 1893, moving to the Print Room in 1895. From that time until 1910, through Binyon’s influence, the Museum garnered “a collection of Chinese and Japanese art as good as any public collection in Europe,” writes Binyon’s biographer (Hatcher 1995, 64). The Museum’s Reading Room alone had an influence on early modernism so profound that it would be difficult to overestimate. Ezra Pound would later call those years from 1907 to 1910 the “British Museum era,” but the Reading Room had been attracting scholars and artists for a half century before Pound arrived late on the scene (the Reading Room opened in 1857). The visitors’ books are a who’s who of the London literary world, and Yeats was a regular.

It was Binyon’s *Painting in the Far East* (1908) that became an important source of information on Japanese art for Yeats. Binyon was Yeats’s authority to maintain that Whistler had been wrong about Japanese painting having “no literary ideas.” Binyon showed Yeats “how traditional, how literary” Japanese painting was (Yeats 1965, 332). Yeats may

have been aware that the legendary painter Kanaoka discussed by Binyon was the same legendary animal painter Yeats claimed to have read about as a boy. Kanaoka was “noted for his horses,” wrote Binyon (1908, 106). Binyon also described for Yeats the Heian period in Japan (794–1100), when “the original impulses of the race revived” and when “a consciously national tradition in literature and in art” was inaugurated (1908, 103). “A consciously national tradition in literature and art” was precisely what Yeats had always aimed at for Ireland, and this idea of Japan excited him to no end: “I thought to create that sensuous musical vocabulary, and not for myself only, but that I might leave it to later Irish poets, much as a medieval Japanese painter left his style as an inheritance to his family, and I was careful to use a traditional manner and matter” (1965, 102). The irony of this passage, of course, is that Yeats did not always use a traditional manner and matter, but often created some of the most innovative and inaccessible poetry in the English language.

But the idea of artistic dynasties became one of the most compelling and lasting ideals for Yeats. It haunted his thoughts and influenced his politics, which became increasingly undemocratic in his later years. It is worth quoting this passage from “The Bounty of Sweden” at length:

The politic Tudor kings and the masterful descendants of Gustavus Vasa were as able as the American presidents, and better educated, and the artistic genius of old Japan continually renewed itself through dynasties of painters. The descendants of Kanoka [sic] made all that was greatest in the art of their country from the ninth to the eleventh century, and then it but passed to other dynasties, in whom, as Mr. Binyon says, “the flower of genius was being continually renewed and revived in the course of many generations.” How serene their art, no exasperation, no academic tyranny, its tradition as naturally observed as the laws of a game or dance. Nor has our individualistic age wholly triumphed in Japan even yet, for it is a few years since a famous player published in his programme his genealogy, running back through famous players, to some player of the Middle Ages; and one day in the British Museum Print Room, I saw a Japanese at a great table judging Chinese and Japanese pictures. “He is one of the greatest living authorities,” I was told, “the Mikado’s hereditary connoisseur, the fourteenth of his family to hold the post.” (1965, 369–370)

It is amazing how little this passage has actually to do with Japan — the misspelled name of a medieval Japanese painter about whom very little is known — but everything to do with the Nobel laureate and his reflections on the modern world, from his first snipe at democratically elected American presidents to the ‘exasperation’ and ‘academic tyranny’ that Yeats finds in his contemporary intellectual scene, though exactly what is meant by these terms is unclear. The other thing that stands out is Yeats’s willful ignorance of anything going on in *modern* Japan, for Japanese culture and society in Yeats’s own lifetime underwent the most radical and total transformation of any modern nation before or since. Where art was

concerned, as Fernando Gutiérrez explains,

artistic circles in Japan were given over to unconditional acceptance of all that originated in the West. The intensely felt need to know and copy all the unfamiliar styles and techniques was satisfied in a restless and rapid way. This tendency resulted in an effort to break away from native artistic traditions as a result of the stimulus offered by Western art. (1968, 162).

So much for the dynasties of painters. The influence of Binyon's book, however, was lasting, and even at the end of his life, Yeats continued to call for the establishment in Ireland of a small aristocratic elite and the perpetuation of "men of talent" through "marriage and descent" because "the Far East has dynasties of painters, dancers, politicians, merchants . . ." (1962, 413).

Yeats's first recorded estimation of Japanese art appears in an 1894 review of Villiers de l'Isle Adam's symbolic drama, *Axël*. *Axël* moved Yeats deeply and helped shape his *Rosa Alchemica* (1893). Some parts of it were also reflected in *The Secret Rose* (1897) and *The Shadowy Waters* (1911). Nevertheless, "the final test of the value of any work of art to our particular needs," concluded Yeats,

is when we place it in the hierarchy of those recollections which are our standards and our beacons. At the head of mine are a certain night scene long ago, when I heard the wind blowing in a bed of reeds by the border of a little lake, a Japanese picture of cranes flying through a blue sky, and a line or two out of Homer. I do not place any part of 'Axël' with these perfect things. (Yeats 1966, I: 324)

By 1894 then, a Japanese print had become one of Yeats's "standards and beacons." The print of "cranes flying through a blue sky" could well have been Hokusai's "A Family of Cranes," one of the few stray colour prints in the British Museum at the time (Binyon 1916, v). This was probably the same print as "Cranes nearby Mt. Fuji" (1827):



Although a Japanese print had become one of Yeats's "perfect things," there is little reflection of its importance in his poetry. However, the long narrative poem "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889) contains several images that are suggestive of Hokusai's cranes. Oisín, recalling his heroic days before the arrival of St. Patrick and Christianity, reflects:

And now I am dizzy with the thought  
Of all that wisdom and the fame  
Of battles broken by his hands,  
Of stories builded by his words  
That are like coloured Asian birds  
At evening in their rainless lands. (1989, 357)

It might seem curious that Yeats could have an ancient Celt in the far west of Ireland seeing visions of Asian birds, particularly Japanese ones, but Yeats subscribed to the belief that the Celts had hailed from the east. "When we turn toward the East," he wrote some years later, "we are turning not less to the ancient West and North" and, he continued, the "Song of Amergin," from the *Book of Leinster*, "seems Asiatic" (1937, 11).

Yeats's notion that Asia or Asian culture resembles in some way the ancient west and north; that Asia and Ireland have something deeply in common culturally or spiritually, brings us to the discussion of Yeats's idea or image of Japan. As mentioned above, alongside the late twentieth century development of postcolonial criticism has arisen a new perspective of Yeats as a poet of decolonization. Said in "Yeats and Decolonization" makes the claim that Yeats belongs less to the canon of modern *English* literature than he does to the canon of the literature of the colonial world ruled by European imperialism. Yeats "articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the restorative vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an offshore power," and thus in Said's view, "India, North Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America, many parts of Africa, China and Japan, the Pacific archipelago, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, North America, and of course Ireland belong in a group together" (1993, 220–221). Such an argument is certainly compelling, though one immediately wonders if the people of some of those less economically advantaged regions mentioned by Said would share his outlook. Complicating the view is Yeats's Anglo-Irish Protestantism and his very undemocratic ideas about an Anglo-Irish Protestant aristocracy ruling over a nation of Catholic peasantry and middle class. In other words, it can be argued that Yeats belongs as much to the camp of colonizers as he does to the colonized.

Clearly Yeats's political identity is not so easily defined, and many alternative arguments have been made on one side (postcolonial) or the other (not postcolonial). They are summarized nicely by Deborah Fleming in her introduction to *W. B. Yeats and Postcolonialism* (2001), which also contains a useful article on Yeats's "imagined East" by Rebecca Weaver. Weaver argues that Yeats occupies a middle or ambivalent position between the scylla and charybdis of colonizer and colonized, and that his imagined eastern landscapes were "outside

or beyond personal or political conflict . . . [They were] spaces of physical or psychological escape” (311). The escapist tendency was certainly one of the most important impulses for Yeats, from the early poems of *Crossways* (1889) and *The Rose* (1893) to later poems like “Sailing to Byzantium.” But Yeats’s early ‘Indian’ poems analyzed by Weaver are replete with typically orientalist or imperial tropes such as exotic, natural atmospheres, timelessness, and characters who are simplistic and stereotyped (306–307). Where in Yeats’s mind was Japan?

In Yeats’s 1894 review of *Axël*, the Japanese image of cranes is associated with two other perfect things: a line or two out of Homer and ‘the wind among the reeds.’ We might rephrase these as the civilization of classical Greece and the idyllic natural world of western Ireland. Together with the Japanese pictorial image of nature, all three appear to be cultural products of imagined utopias, natural spaces beyond science, industrialism or time. I shall suggest that this *Japoniste* image of Japan and Japanese culture remains pretty much unchanged in Yeats from the late 1880s until the end of his life, even though modern Japan in this time experiences an industrial revolution so rapid and complete that within fifty years it becomes a first-world modern power challenging the west is science, industrialism, finance, even in the colonization of other countries.

In typical orientalist discourse, the west is depicted as masculine, logical, and scientific, whereas the east is constructed as its opposite: feminine, illogical, irrational and primitive. Both Wilde and Binyon reinforced for Yeats these binary opposites. Wilde, as mentioned above, derided western art in explicitly gendered terms, labeling it “intellectual,” as opposed to Japanese art, which was “sensuous.” Binyon reiterated the Aesthetic view that it was “the scientific aim which warped and weakened certain phases of modern painting in Europe.” The west was “so complex and entangled in materials,” while the east by implication remained happily free of “the scientific aim” with its baggage of intellectual complexity (1908, 16). As we shall see, these ideas become pronounced in Yeats’s idea of Japan, but he carries them to an extreme not seen in either Wilde or Binyon.

In the essay “Certain Noble Plays of Japan” (1916), which is as much about Japanese visual arts as it is about the *no* theatre, Yeats described Japanese colour prints as “a child’s game become the most noble poetry” (1961, 231). The notion that Asian culture is childlike or simplistic is a common imperial perspective, even if for Yeats it is an ideal state and not a call to paternal intervention. Then in a letter of 1921 to Yone Noguchi, Yeats offered this description of Japanese art and his own aims:

...your Hiroshige has given me the greatest pleasure. I take more and more pleasure from oriental art, find more and more that it accords with what I aim at in my own work. European painting of the last two or three hundred years grows strange to me as I grow older, begins to speak as with a foreign tongue...all of your painters are simple, like the writers of Scottish ballads or the inventors of Irish stories. . . . I would be simple myself but I do now know how. I am always turning over pages like those you have sent me



hoping that in my old age I may discover how. I wish some Japanese would tell us all about the lives - their talks, their loves, their religion, their friends - of these painters. I would like to know these things minutely, and to know what their houses looked like, if they still stand. . . . It might make it more easy to understand their simplicity. A form of beauty scarcely lasts a generation with us, but with you it lasts for centuries. (Oshima 1965, 20–21)

What leaps out at us from this passage is once again, Yeats's notion of Japanese cultural simplicity. Japan and its art is also seen as unchanging, another familiar orientalist trope. Japanese artists are identified with simple or primitive Irish and Scottish storytellers, a comparison that might come as a surprise to the artists and storytellers themselves. Indeed, their simplicity is not something they actually possess but merely something Yeats has ascribed to them. Contrasted with this image is the complexity of modern European art and poetry, notably the poetry of Yeats himself —“I would be simple myself but I do not know how.” There is the assumption, taken for granted, that Europe and European modernism just *is*, more advanced. For Yeats, the less advanced cultures are seen as superior, and modern civilization debased, “grown strange,” which is certainly a reversal of the typical orientalist attitude, if there were any truth to it. The letter is obviously attempting to show gratitude and appreciation, yet the tone of condescension is unmistakable.

Yeats's views on Japanese art were neither new nor unique. They owed a debt to primitivism in art, which had ultimately derived from Romanticism. Rousseau himself had argued that the Enlightenment lacked sensitivity to Nature, feeling, instinct and mysticism. It is precisely these qualities which are then ascribed to the inhabitants of the non-Western world, particularly Asians and Africans. Attention was also given over suddenly to the child who, like the noble savage, apparently retained the lost magical virtues. Romantic artists looked to other, supposedly primitive parts of the world to find what they believed was missing in European culture. What followed was a set of analyses that were simplistic, racist, and conditioned by the primitivists' own desires and lack of real understanding of other societies. This is the crux of modern orientalism. From Conrad to Nietzsche to Picasso to Yeats, modern European artists have sought to escape European conventions by creating an other, and ascribing to it characteristics they either abhorred or idealized. So a few glimpses of Japanese art was enough to comprehend an entire civilization, which becomes essentialized or unchanging. This is nicely summarized by Elisa Evett:

The Japanese approach to nature as the main topic of discussion and the avenues to explain it were both based on general Western perceptions of Japanese civilization and the spirit of the Japanese people. Long-standing myth, often reinforced by biased travelers' reports but nurtured mostly by an escapist longing for the opposite of advanced, complex-Western civilization perpetuated a vision of the Japanese as simple, innocent, primitive people living in blissful harmony with gently, nurturing, benign

nature. The Japanese pictorial images of nature seemed in turn to confirm this picture, and an intricate set of intertwined observations and explanations of Japanese art and the people who created it produced a general view that the Japanese civilization had been arrested in permanent infancy – Unlike the West, it had not experienced progressive development and had remained fixed in its original state. (1982, xiii)

This is Yeats exactly.

Yeats's image of Japan was an artistic construct that had little to do with Japanese reality. An actual visit to Japan might have served as a valuable corrective and lead to a more balanced view, but Yeats declined several invitations that were extended to him. As it was, he fell under the spell of Japanese art and his descriptions and analyses of that art were unable to escape from an orientalist discourse in which Japan was seen as part of the exotic, natural, simplistic, childish and unchanging East. There appears an “inability to imagine the East outside of the imperial stereotypes circulating in his culture,” as Rebecca Weaver puts it (307). Ultimately, Japan was less a place or a nation than it was *a style*, or a state of mind. As the poet himself concluded, “Whenever I have been tempted to go to Japan, China, or India for my philosophy, Balzac has brought me back, reminded me of my preoccupation with national, social, personal problems, convinced me that I cannot escape from our *Comedie humaine*” (1961, 448).

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