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# Visualisation of Japanese Nature in Josiah Conder's Works

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## Abstract

Since Japan had opened her ports to the world, the country aggressively assembled Westerners to introduce systems, techniques, and cultures from the West, and those who came to study the unknown country in the Far East and published books. A British architect Josiah Conder (1852-1920) is one of them who tried to reveal Japanese culture. He wrote books about Japanese flowers and flower arrangement in *The Flowers of Japan and the Art of Floral Arrangement* (1891) and *The Floral Art of Japan* (1899). In addition, he published *Landscape Gardening in Japan* (1893) with its companion book *Supplement to Landscape Gardening in Japan* (1893). This paper is going to focus illustrations and photographs in those books to illuminate Conder's attempt to discuss Japanese beauty with Western point of view and Japanese artistic sense.

His first book about flowers in Japan *The Flowers of Japan and The Art of Floral Arrangement* adopted Japanese style while its content was written in Western scientific point of view that based on a paper for Asiatic Society of Japan in 1889. The cover of the book was drawn by a popular Japanese woodcut painter and has some coloured Japanese woodcuts by native artists. In contrast to the first book, *Landscape Gardening in Japan* contains Western style expressions. He cited pictures by a Japanese Western-style painter instead of woodcuts. He also adopted photographs in *Supplement to Landscape Gardening in Japan* as he explains them "the most scientific means". However, these Western style expressions could not be seen in his third book though the contents become more scientific. These shifts of illustrations reflect Conder's attempt to illuminate possibility of Japanese art and 'universally accepted art truths'.

**Keywords:** *Josiah Conder; The Flowers of Japan and the Art of Floral Arrangement; Landscape Gardening in Japan; The Floral Art of Japan; Botanical Illustration*

## Introduction

Josiah Conder (1852-1920) was a British architect who was a *Yatoi*, the term used for a foreigner employed as a specialised consultant by the Japanese administration of the Meiji period to modernise the country. He is known as the father of modern Japanese architecture because he contributed to the Japanese government, delivered lectures in architecture to Japanese architects that enabled his influence on Japanese architecture to continue even after his death, and designed and built many famous buildings of Meiji era Japan, both for official and for private clients [Checkland 208]. Conder studied Japanese culture as he introduced Western culture to Japan. He became very interested in the Japanese associations with nature, and several wrote books about Japanese flowers and flower arrangement.

Many previous researchers have revealed the influence of these texts on Japan. Nicolas Fiévé, elucidates that Conder introduced illustrations from original Japanese materials but that he did so without carefully reading the source materials. Also, he never drew his own illustrations

for his books [Fiévé 67]. Viewed from a different perspective, this act could be taken to imply that Conder valued his sources for their illustrations rather than for the texts.

This paper will focus on the illustrations and photographs in Conder's books to illuminate his attitude toward Japan at a time of great vicissitude.

### **1. The Flowers of Japan and the Art of Floral Arrangement and Japanese Prints**

Conder's first book, *The Flowers of Japan and the Art of Floral Arrangement*, adopted a Japanese style. The front and back covers of the book were drawn by a Japanese woodcut painter named Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (月岡芳年, 1839-92). One reason for this treatment of the cover could be Kawanabe Kyosai (河鍋曉齋, 1831-89), who was Tsukioka's colleague when they both trained under Utagawa Kuniyoshi (歌川国芳, 1797-1861) [Sugawara 97-98]. Kyosai was Conder's master in Japanese art, and it may be that Kyosai connected Tsukioka and Conder. This connection developed over the course of their collaboration on the book. Conder also inserted 14 *nishikie*, coloured Japanese woodcuts, and he also used Kawanabe Kyosui (河鍋曉翠, 1868-1935), one of Kyosai's daughters, as a painter. In addition, the signature of a person called Yamamoto Shinji (山本信司, year of birth and death unknown), whose art name was Yamamoto Katana (山本刀), is found on some plates. Shinji/Katana was an active engraver of woodcuts who carved wooden blocks for Tsukioka and learned painting from him [Iwakiri 101]. This association suggests that Tsukioka created the plates with his disciple and that they were not merely illustrations for the book, but art pieces in their own right.

Conder appears to have used his connections with Japanese artists to ensure that his book become more than just an illustrated volume of text about Japan; he also intended his book to be a work of Japanese art with accompanying text that described Japanese flowers. In spite of the reduced durability of the method, Conder adopted Japanese style bookbinding with silk threads and Japanese art, decisions that suggest his strong insistence on maintaining a traditional Japanese style for his book.

Conder mentions that he attempted to discuss Japanese flower arrangement 'in a fuller and more attractive manner' [Conder, 1891, vii]. The colourful printings by native artists could be an aspect of what he meant by the words 'attractive manner' but more, he tried to depict the aesthetic core of Japanese art through the woodcuts.

Conder dedicated the book 'To the old folks at home' [Conder, 1891, v]. Thus, though his book was published in Japan, it was actually intended for 'folks' in Britain. He suggests that a Japanese flower is 'worthy of imitation in the West' [Conder, 1891, vii]. In other words, he tries to explain Japanese culture to the Western point of view. The book was based on a paper Conder wrote for the Asiatic Society of Japan in 1889, a fact that speaks to the academic nature of the work. In the eight chapters of the book, Conder describes typical seasonal flowers, combinations, tools, methods, theories, history and examples of good and bad flower arrangements with inputs from professors of Tokyo Imperial University. He lists the popular English names, the Japanese names and also the botanical names of the flowers he describes; and his discussion is academic and scientific. In fact, the book written in such a manner that English speaking Westerners can easily grasp its content.

On the other hand, he adheres completely to the Japanese style when it comes to the illustrations. He provides plates of Japanese flowers that depict whole or parts of flowers like a Western picture dictionary. However, if the black and white diagrams are scrutinised closely, it is their clear lines and lack of shading may be observed. This style is more characteristic of the Japanese style of painting than the Western. In addition, many of the illustrations are accorded a black frame, which is a clear reminder of Japanese textbooks of the Edo period.

Conder's comparison of Japanese and the Western flower arrangement may provide a clue to his adoption of the Japanese style of drawing:

An analysis of Japanese flower arrangements shows that the lines or directions taken by the different stems or branches form the basis of all compositions. While European floral decorations are merely combinations of masses of colour, in which blossoms and leaves alone play a part, those of Japan are synthetic designs in line, in which every individual stem, flower and leaf stands out distinctly silhouetted [Conder, 1891, 45].

Conder believes that one of the important characteristics of Japanese flower arrangements is the treatment of line and shape. According to his description, they 'form the basis of all compositions' while the Western style considers mainly the colour. If shading may be considered a 'colour', it could be more pertinent to describe Japanese flower decoration as having clear lines than being shaded. In other words, the Japanese style of painting is more suitable to Conder's text in his opinion.

In fact, he discovers a clear commonality between the Japanese way of drawing and the style of flower arrangement:

The flower charm which exists in Japan is not, mainly one of pastoral associations, but is closely connected with the national customs and the national art. The artistic character of the Japanese people is most strikingly displayed in their methods of interpreting the simpler of natural beauties. [Conder, 1891, 2]

He insists that the beauty of Japanese flowers is related to the Japanese people's customs and art. Both Japanese flower arrangement and Japanese drawings use 'their methods of interpreting the simpler of natural beauties'. Conder finds a connection between Japanese flower arrangement and Japanese art, and makes use of Japanese art to explain the aesthetic of the flower arrangement.

In summary, Conder actively used his relationships with Japanese artists to include their works of art in his book. The addition of these illustrations makes the book not merely a textual descriptor of an academic nature but also an assemblage of Japanese beauty that presents the book in a 'more attractive manner'. In addition, considering Conder's belief about the characteristics of the subject matter of the book, Japanese painting is more relevant and evocative of his intent. For these reasons, Conder's first book about Japanese flowers and flower arrangements adhered to the traditional Japanese style despite the Western academic perspective of the text.

## **2. Landscape Gardening in Japan and Western Style Expression**

Conder's first book acquired respectable reputation, and two years later, he published another book about 'the more comprehensive but kindred art' of gardening [Conder, 1893, v]. In this volume, Conder again displayed the value he placed on native Japanese sources and listed Japanese works that he had cited [Conder, 1893, vi]. He especially mentioned the work of Honda Kinkichiro (本多錦吉郎, 1851-1921), referring primarily to *Zukai NiwatsukuriHou* (『図解庭造法』, 1890). This Japanese volume by Kinkichiro was published three years before Conder's gardening book was written, and added aspects such as a list of flowers with Latin names, and a description of the gardens of Japanese feudal lords. In *Zukai NiwatsukuriHou*, Honda described the illustrations to his text in the following manner:

Conventionally, many gardening constructions start their planning with pictures. Old books on the subject also have illustrations and help us understand. However, many of them are lacklustre, and are different from the actual sight in perspective and sense of distance. The illustrations in this work are drawn correctly and in an artistic way. I have tried to maintain the perspective, high-low, light and dark, backward and forward clearly so that they become not so different from the actual landscapes. This is a characteristic of this work when it is compared with books on gardening published in the past [Honda, 1890, i].

Honda insisted that the illustrations of older books are different from the real sites because of their difference in perspectives and he believed that drawing ‘perspective’ and conveying ‘light and dark’ clearly is the ‘right way’ to depict the actual scenes. Considering that perspective and shading are aspects that Western paintings consider important, his opinion was that the Western style of illustration was more accurate than the traditional Japanese manner. Conder mentioned Honda’s work in his book in addition to listing his work as a reference.

In the preface to his book on gardening, Conder explained that Honda’s lithography in *Zukai Niwatsukuri Hou* emanated from Akisato Rito’s (秋里離島, year of birth and death unknown) *Tsukiyama Teizo Den* (『築山庭造伝』, 1828) a famous gardening book of the Edo period. Conder declared that Honda’s work was a reproduction of this Edo period work ‘in a modern style’ [Conder, 1893, vi]. If he had adhered to the traditional Japanese style, as in his book on flowers, he could have used Akisato’s work directly. His adaptation of Honda’s work instead suggests that Conder agreed, at least partly, with Honda’s opinion that the characteristics of Honda’s work, and its literary quality, and its modern Western style of illustration were more persuasive and were, as Honda commented, the ‘right way’.

This experiment of introducing a more Western style of artistic expression can be seen in Conder’s 1893 *Supplement to Landscape Gardening in Japan*, a complementary addition to his book on gardening. This work described some actual gardens in Japan to exemplify the account provided in Conder’s book. Conder did not add any drawings to illustrate the text of this supplement. Instead, he inserted photographs of gardens. Conder explained his rationale for so doing as: ‘the illustration in a separate form of some of the best compositions remaining, by the most scientific means available, presented itself as a fitting and desirable addition to the analytical work’ [Conder, Supplement to Landscape Gardening in Japan iii]. He added photographs to analyse the subject thorough ‘scientific meaning’, and he expounded each photograph to make his point. In his primary volume on gardening, *Landscape Gardening in Japan*, Conder described the history of Korakuen garden and its full characteristics; in the supplement, he focused only on what could be seen in the picture, and explained the manner in which each depicted feature such as the waterfall, the bushes and the bridges comprise the scenery. It was photography, which did not deviate from the actual site as Honda had asserted, that enabled Conder to accurately analyse the garden scenes. In this way, the photographs supported the scientific aspects of his book on gardening.

Adopting the Western style exerted another effect. Honda commented that he wrote his book to provide superior material for armatures to plan gardens [Honda, 1890, i]. His ‘right way’ assisted in this aim because illustrated that were likenesses of what readers could actually see were especially useful for those who were actually planning their gardens. In other words, the Western style made Honda’s book more practical. In the preface to *Landscape Gardening in Japan* (1893), Conder declared that readers ‘may even supply suggestions for a modified form of Western gardening’ [Conder, Landscape Gardening in Japan vi]. Conder also assumed that his readers would use the information he provided when they were considering the construction of their gardens. Exemplifying such information with Western art that was more familiar to his

readers would help them to understand his instructions more easily.

Thus, Conder introduced a more Western style in his book about gardening. Instead of referencing his text with pictures from traditional illustrative works, he cited Honda's pictures, which actually reproduced old paintings in the Western style. He also borrowed photographs, a Western technique, for the supplement to his book. These Western style illustrations brought the ideas he expressed closer to what his readers could witness in reality and made them more practicable. Although Conder referred to many native texts written in a previous period, he placed contemporary work as his copy and used photography, a contemporary mode of expression so that his work become more than just a description of old techniques. Instead, through such changes in his techniques, he ensured that his ideas became more directly accessible to his modern readers.

### 3. Balancing the Western Scientific Aspect and the Japanese Artistic Aspect

In his first book on Japanese flowers and flower arrangements, Conder inserted many native style art pieces as illustrations of and insisted on the Japanese way of expressing the beauty of nature. In his second work, he added the Western style of expression and used Western painting techniques or photographs to make his text more scientific and practical. However, even when he adopted the Western style of expression for accuracy, the Japanese artistic aspect did not disappear from his sensibility.

For instance, the first photograph of the book depicted Lotus Lake in Ueno. It was taken from the back of a pine tree, and the lotus lake could be seen under the tree. The tree occupied more than half the space of the photograph. The composition of the picture is more like a Japanese woodcut than a diagram to explain an ordinance of a garden. Considering that the main text starts with this picture, which exerts a strong impression on readers, it may be deduced that Conder utilised photographs not only for scientific purposes but also to express their artistic qualities.

The photographer Ogawa Kazumasa (小川一眞, 1860-1929) took the photographs in Conder's book on gardening. He was selected as a photographer by the government in 1888 to preserve Japan's cultural heritage. Okatsuka Akiko commented that Ogawa's method of photography, like lightning, sometimes made details appear, it also created shades or patterns that rendered the object unclear. Thus, Ogawa's works were less suitable as materials for study. His photographs exert a stereoscopic effect that relay the charm of the object [Okatsuka 46]. Although his technique was reliable as he shouldered the task offered to him by the government, he sometimes tended to place the vividness or the artistic effect of his work above its quality as scientific material. This prioritisation can also be observed in Conder's selection of the first photograph of his book, an image that is more akin to Japanese art than to a scientific diagram that visualises a garden. In fact, Conder called Ogawa a 'well-known Japanese photographic artist' [Conder, Supplement to Landscape Gardening in Japan iii] instead of using the term 'photographer'. Thus, Ogawa could prioritise his artistic sense over journalistic accuracy.

Six years after he published his book on gardening, Conder returned to his exploration of Japanese flower arrangement in his third book (1899). The very title of the book revealed that it was a revised version of his first work. He added another chapter explaining practical techniques such as the manner of cutting or bending stems and how to use moss. He also described the characteristics of the styles of the Ikenobo school in the appendix. The number of illustrations was increased and all the coloured *nishikie* of Tsukioka and Kyosui that found place in the previous work were substituted by illustrations created by Ogata Gekko (尾形月耕, 1859-1920).

In the preface to the third book, Conder described Japanese flower arrangement from an architectural viewpoint. He described the similarities between the Japanese form of flower arrangement and architecture: both required an understanding of the intrinsic nature of the

materials to treat them effectively. Thus, over the years, Conder's perspective became more specific: that of a Westerner who found the Japanese style of flower arrangement interesting as an architect who understood the subject. Western readers interested in flower arrangement had increased and to distinguish himself from such readers, he emphasised his position as a professional architect. This shift also highlighted the scientific aspects of the work.

The new parts of the book generally enhanced its scientific and practical aspects. For example, updating the data to reflect the time, Conder described the Ikenobo school as 'of late years become somewhat popular among armatures in Japan' [Conder, 1899, viii]. Being popular meant that people were afforded more opportunities to see or experience this method, so it could also be taken to mean that the methods had become more practical. Also, some additional illustrations explained the structures with symbols or short descriptions to make readers follow them more easily. Consequently, the 1899 version was more scientific and more practical than the book Conder wrote in 1891.

On the other hand, unlike his previous work on gardens, Conder did not introduce any Western style artwork in the form of images with perspectives or shading, or photographs. Instead, he added illustrations in the traditional native style, and in some cases, he directly inserted explanations on them. While the content of the 1899 version became more scientific, he reverted to the adoption of traditional Japanese styles of illustration. In the 1899 book, Conder mentions the purpose of his previous book on flowers as:

I felt assured that the aesthetic rules governing this Floral Art, though novel to us in their application to flower decorations, would, nevertheless, appeal to European taste as true art principles derived from a close study of natural laws, and not merely as the outcome of a quaint and capricious fancy from the Far East [Conder, 1899, v].

Conder believed that Japanese flower art was worth studying for Westerners because it contained 'true art principles' that resulted from the 'natural laws'. It connected to the mission of Conder's 1893 book on gardening in the sense 'that beneath the quaint and unfamiliar aspect of these Eastern compositions, there lie universally accepted Art truths [Conder, 1893, v]'. Conder thus sought 'art truths' that could be accepted by both the East and the West through his series of Japanese arrangements of natural phenomena. Therefore, his three volumes encompassed both the Japanese artistic aspect and the Western scientific and practical facet. Together, they led to an understanding of the third feature of an universal 'art truth'. Consequently, while the first two aspects seem to contain conflicting elements, in his work they serve to support and balance each other.

Conder's introduction of the Western style of artistic expression in his book on gardening (1893) represented an attempt on his part to articulate the 'art truth'. 'Universally accepted', it could be expressed in the Western style. From this point of view, his experiment to draw from 'the quaint and unfamiliar aspects of these Eastern compositions' and to reveal 'true art principles' in his first book may not have been evaluated by him as totally successful. His 1899 publication did not include Western style imaging could be one of the results of the 1893 experiment. Unlike this experiment that combined modern and traditional pictures that may have proved 'inappropriate and misleading', the 1899 volume unified the style and even harmonised the artistry of the coloured woodcuts.

It may also be pertinent that one year after Conder published his book of gardening Japan initiated the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95). Victory in this war encouraged Japan to rush toward modernisation. This quest relegated many Japanese traditions to the position of 'a quaint and capricious fancy'. Seeking 'universally accepted art truths' could have been Conder's attempt to find fixed value in what could be lost in the near future.

## Conclusion

Conder's first book on flowers and flower arrangement (1891) utilised the Japanese style of illustration to make the volume more attractive for Western readers. In addition, he believed that the beauty of Japanese flowers was connected to the customs and art of the Japanese people. Hence, it was more suitable for Japanese art to express the beauty of Japanese flowers and their traditional arrangement style in Japan. His second book (1893) included Japanese drawings along with Western style lithographs and photography for more practical reasons. They helped Conder analyse the gardens he described more precisely so that his Western readers would understand the ideas he presented more easily and apply them to gardens in the West.

In fact, this volume may be viewed as Conder's experiment in search of the expression of universally acceptable beauty. Even when he adopted the Western technique of photography, the artistic images he selected did not completely contribute to his scientific purpose. Conder's attitude toward Japanese and Western expression can be seen most clearly in this second work. With his third book (1899), he returned to the Japanese style illustrations of his first book (1891) even though the contents of his 1899 work were more scientific. His choice of styles may have resulted from the experimental techniques he attempted in his second book (1893) and his fear that the clash of styles may cause the disappearance of the beauty Conder was seeking to describe.

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## Author Biography

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