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Representation of Japanese Art by Nordic Women Artists

Yuka Kimura

Abstract: Japanese artifacts became popular in Europe in the late 19th century, serving as a source of inspiration for many artists. Like other European artists, Scandinavian painters took an interest in Japanese art. With the International Symposium “Modern Art and Japonisme in the North” held in 2015, recent years have witnessed a dedicated exploration of Nordic Japonisme. However, further research is needed to cover unexplored aspects concerning the relationship between Nordic women artists and Japanese art. This paper explores how Nordic women artists have incorporated Japanese objects into their paintings. The end of the 19th century marked a pivotal moment when women artists sought independence. Given the limited access to academic training for women in Scandinavian countries, many of them studied in Paris or Munich. Bertha Wegmann (1847–1926), a Danish painter who studied in Munich and Paris, successfully established herself as a sought-after artist. By analyzing the environment surrounding Wegmann and the images of Japanese artifacts in paintings by Nordic artists, this paper aims to elucidate how Japanese-inspired motifs appear in paintings by Nordic women. Additionally, it seeks to highlight the potential role of these motifs in contributing to these women’s self-assertion as artists.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 1880s, an interest in Japanese art gradually grew among the Nordic countries. In this paper, the terms “Nordic” and “Scandinavia” refer to Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Japan’s reopening of trade with the West in the 1850s led to the emergence of several opportunities for encountering Japanese artworks, such as the World Expositions and various periodicals. Paris, recognized as the center of arts and a transmitter of Japonisme, fueled the craze for Japanese art. During the 1870s, many Scandinavian artists studied in Paris and then brought their artistic learnings back to their homelands.

The study of Nordic Japonisme has gained momentum in recent years. For example, in 2015, the international symposium “Modern Art and Japonisme in the North” was held at the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo. This symposium showed certain connections between Nordic artists and Japanese art, but the only presentation that highlighted Nordic women artists was the one centered solely on the Finish painter Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946) (Sato, 2016, pp.51-75). Therefore, the relationship between Nordic women artists and Japanese art has scope for further exploration.

The end of the 19th century was also the time when women artists sought independence. In European countries, the women’s movements for education, employment, and suffrage grew. Some women artists were active in the campaigns for women’s greater participation in the public world of work. Considering this situation, focusing on women artists at that time is meaningful. One of the leading artists from Scandinavia was the Danish painter Bertha Wegmann (1847–1926). In this paper, I first explore the environment surrounding Wegmann. Next, I introduce

how Japanese motifs spread among Nordic countries and how Nordic female artists painted them. Through such analysis, I elucidate how Japanese-inspired motifs appear in paintings by Nordic women, with Wegmann as a central figure.

Bertha Wegmann

The Danish painter Bertha Wegmann was the first woman to be a member of the plenary assembly of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Renowned for her exceptional portraiture, Wegmann's artistic repertoire included painted landscapes, genre scenes, and still life. One of her still life paintings, *Blue Fan beside a Green Pitcher with Blossoming Apple Branches* (Figure 1), represents a fan, which was regarded as a Japanese artifact. However, the circumstances surrounding when and why she painted this painting remain unclear. Therefore, I explore the environment that shaped her artistic journey. How did she become a celebrated painter, and were there any encounters with Japanese art?

Born in Soglio, Switzerland, Wegmann moved to Denmark with her family when she was five, subsequently obtaining Danish citizenship. Her father, an amateur painter, encouraged her to become an artist. She began to study in Munich when she was 20 years old in 1867 because of the limited opportunities for academic training available to women in Scandinavian countries at that time. Women were not allowed to study at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts until the late 1880s. She also traveled to Paris, where she joined classes at the Académie Trélat from 1879. At that time, Paris offered many encounters with Japanese objects, and Wegmann participated in world exhibitions in Paris in 1889 and 1900, events also attended by Japan. Considering this situation, she must have become fascinated with Japan.

In 1881, Wegmann joined an exhibition called the Paris Salon. The following year, she won a third-class medal, the highest award at the Salon won by a Nordic woman artist at that time (Cox, 2014, p.231). To begin with, securing a medal in Paris was challenging for foreign artists. Wegmann wrote about the Paris Salon during her stay in France in a letter to her patron family's third daughter, Harriet Melchior (1851–1917). Moritz Gerson Melchior (1816–1884), the head of the trading house Moses & Søn G. Melchior, and his affluent family supported many artists financially. They were Wegmann's most important patrons, supporting her stay abroad. In the letter, she expressed grievances about French artists. I quote a part of it in Danish along with the English translation below.

Ellers er her en stor Agitation blandt de franske Kunstnere at alle de udenlandske Kunstnere skulle udelukkes fra Belønningerne, og Aarsagen, som de angive, er særdeles schofel. De paastaar nemlig at naar de fremmede Kunstnere have erholdt Medaille i Paris, saa faar de derigjennem Anseelse i sit Fædreland, og saa sælge de franske Malere Intet i Udlandet. Det er en temmelig lav Anskuelse for en By der kalder sig la Capitale de l'Art -. Der[for?] har heller ingen af de fremmede Kunstnere i Aar faaet nogen Medaille. (Letter from Bertha Wegmann to Harriet Melchior, June 24, 1886, source from Den Hirschsprungske Samlings Arkiv)

Otherwise, there is great agitation among the French artists that all foreign artists should be excluded from the rewards, and the reason they state is

extremely obscene. They insist that when foreign artists receive a medal in Paris, they thereby gain respect in their native country, and then the French painters sell nothing abroad. It is a rather low opinion for a city that calls itself *la Capitale de l'Art*. Therefore, none of the foreign artists this year have received any medals. (Translated by author)

This correspondence signifies that she was angry that French painters tried to exclude foreign artists, obstructing foreigners from receiving acclaim in Paris. For women, already a minority among students, the struggle was likely even more formidable. Munich, where Wegmann honed her painting skills, was also a favorite place for women artists, but the men artists outnumbered their women counterparts. The Norwegian painter Kitty Kielland (1843–1914), who studied in Munich concurrently with Wegmann, recounted that she and three other women artists were sitting among men, and the men expressed great surprise at their good behavior (Cox, 2014, p.212).

Although the career development of foreign women artists in Paris posed challenges, their artworks likely reflected the art trends in the city. One example is Wegmann's still life painting mentioned earlier (Figure 1). In the painting, she chose a blue fan as the central motif. The connection between Wegmann and fans is evident in the fan commissioned by her patron. Louise Melchior (1849–1934), the second daughter of the Melchior family, was fascinated by Japanese-inspired fashion and invited several leading artists to decorate a fan. Each artist was responsible for a slender part of the fan (Figure 2). Wegmann was the only woman artist who contributed to this fan (The Hirschsprung Collection, 2022). The fan is tangible proof of Wegmann's recognition as an important painter.

This section shows that Wegmann studied in Munich and Paris for years during the peak of the Japanese art craze. On the one hand, her discontent with the exclusive mindset of French painters at the Paris Salon implies that Nordic artists faced challenges in career development. On the other hand, they often chose Japanese motifs, which were in fashion particularly in Paris. Wegmann's patron, the Melchior family's daughter, was interested in Japanese fashion, which might have inspired Wegmann's artistic choices.

Reception of Japanese artifacts in Nordic countries

This section explores how Japanese artifacts were found in Nordic countries and how contemporary Nordic artists painted Japanese motifs. According to Halén (2016), by the mid-1880s, Japanese artifacts had become widely available in virtually all bibelot stores in the Northern capitals. In 1885, the Danish critic and art historian Karl Madsen (1855–1938) published a book in Danish on the Japanese painting tradition. Moreover, in the late 19th century, the arrival of operettas such as *The Mikado* and *The Geisha* offered people the opportunity to see performances featuring *kimonos*, parasols, and fans. *The Mikado* originally premiered in London in 1885. The following year, a condensed version with original costumes played at the Tivoli Theatre in Kristiana, Norway; it was then performed in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1888 (Halén, 2016, p.257). *The Geisha*, which debuted in London and gained success in Europe, also visited Norway and Stockholm, Sweden (Halén, 2016, p.260). *Mikado* refers to a title given in the past to Japan's emperor,

and *geisha* refers to Japanese women entertainers who dance and attend to guests during meals. Therefore, live performances provided ample opportunities to witness authentic Japanese artifacts, influencing painters to portray women adorned with exotic motifs.

One example is from a photograph of Wegmann's pupil, Marie Krøyer (1867–1940). Her husband Peder Severin Krøyer (1851–1909) was a celebrated Danish painter. He was also interested in taking photos, and he captured a portrait of Marie standing in their garden dressed in a *kimono* and holding a parasol (Figure 3). The portrait shows her as a Japanese woman. At that time, Western women with exotic Asian motifs became a variation in portraiture. The image of the *geisha*, showing the model as part actress and part prostitute, prevailed among painters in Paris. The Finish painter Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905) was one of the Nordic painters who embraced this fashion (Sato, 2016, pp.66-67). *Virginie* (Figure 4) shows a woman gazing at viewers with an inviting smile in front of a screen with bamboo tree motifs. The Swedish painter Anders Zorn (1860–1920) painted his wife with a Japanese parasol (Figure 5), using the motif to draw attention to her face. The above discussion reveals that people could find Japanese artifacts in Nordic capitals, and some Nordic painters used these motifs when depicting women.

Japanese motifs in paintings by Nordic women artists

How did Nordic women artists paint Japanese objects? Kortelainen (2016) revealed that images associated with the *geisha* are considerably less frequent in the works of women artists of the time. However, when examining paintings by artists connected to Wegmann, Japanese-inspired motifs often appear in atelier paintings. These artworks show that women painters depicted fellow women artists in their atelier. Such portraits had been a prominent theme because some artists cohabited to provide mutual financial support and served as models for each other.

Wegmann and her friend, the Swedish painter Jeanna Bauck (1840–1926), painted each other many times. They met in Munich in 1871 and shared accommodations in Munich and Paris. In *The Danish Artist Bertha Wegmann Painting a Portrait* (Figure 6), Wegmann is depicted working on a portrait of a man in their shared studio in Munich. Cox (2014) discussed the Japanese parasol in the upper left corner of this painting; the details of the parasol are unclear, but its presence indicates Wegmann's familiarity with the motif. Another example is from the Norwegian painter Kitty Kielland who painted her fellow painter, Harriet Backer (1845–1932) (Figure 7). Both from Norway, they studied painting in Munich during the same period as Wegmann and shared an atelier in Paris. In the painting, a Japanese parasol and two fans are hung on the wall behind Backer, who is reading. Japanese motifs in atelier settings can also be seen in *My Studio in Paris* (Figure 8) by the Swedish painter Jenny Nyström (1854–1946). A Japanese parasol and paper lantern are placed above a woman lying on a divan, and there is a fan on the floor. Thus, women artists portrayed Japanese objects in their artwork, departing from the men artists' focus on the *geisha* or women in *kimono*.

Further, Wegmann painted a blue fan as a central motif in a still life painting. Other still life works by Nordic women artists also included a fan, which is called

uchiwa. The Finish artists Helene Schjerfbeck and Maria Wiik (1853–1928) painted the same flowers in the same vase and a Japanese fan (Figures 9 and 10). They occasionally shared the same studio in Finland and France, which led to the use of the same subjects. Schjerfbeck, like Wegmann, studied at the Académie Trélat.

This section reveals that Nordic women artists surrounding Wegmann often depicted fellow artists in their studios adorned with Japanese objects or focused on these objects in still life compositions.

Conclusion

Considering the prolonged stays of Nordic women artists in Paris and other European countries, they were exposed to the image of the *geisha*, showing the model as part actress and part prostitute. In this imagery, Japanese objects often function as exotic motifs to enhance the allure of the woman. The Nordic painter Edelfelt, who also studied in Paris, created such images. However, women artists refrained from adopting this trend. A notable distinction emerges in the approach of men and women artists to depicting Japanese imagery. This distinction in portraying Japanese objects suggests that Nordic women artists, in their depiction of fellow women artists, sought to portray women as artists rather than as subjects. In addition, incorporating Japanese motifs into their paintings allowed them to convey their alignment with the latest fashion trends in the art world. This deliberate choice enabled them to participate in contemporary artistic movements. The paintings featuring Japanese motifs thus served as a means for these women to highlight their achievements as artists who were well-versed in the evolving art landscape.

In particular, Wegmann left her mark as a distinguished painter by being chosen to decorate a fan. In the late 19th century, Scandinavian countries provided limited opportunities for artistic education for women; thus, women in these countries experienced challenges in establishing themselves as artists. Women painters faced the hurdle of presenting themselves not merely as models but as genuine artists. In an era marked by the sensationalization of Japonisme in Europe, which embraced exotic Japanese elements, Nordic women artists actively sought to assimilate new trends in the art world. Demonstrating an understanding of the latest fashion trends, especially through the incorporation of Japanese artifacts, became a significant avenue for them to assert themselves in their roles as accomplished and knowledgeable contributors to the contemporary art scene.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 9



Figure 8



Figure 10

Figure legends

1. Bertha Wegmann, *Blue Fan beside a Green Pitcher with Blossoming Apple Branches*, Undated, Oil on canvas, 56×69cm, The Hirschsprung Collection
2. The fan that Louise Melchior ordered, *Bertha Wegmann. At male på mange sprog*, [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.hirschsprung.dk/en/udstillinger/udstilling-bertha-wegmann>, The Hirschsprung Collection (2022)
3. Marie Krøyer in Japanese dress in the garden by the house in the plantation, 1895 the earliest possible date, Local history collection, Skagen
4. Albert Edelfelt, *Virginie*, 1883, Oil on canvas, 73.5×92.5cm, Joensuu Art Museum, Arla Cederberg Collection
5. Anders Zorn, *Castles in The Air*, 1885, Watercolor, 37×26cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

6. Jeanna Bauck, *The Danish Artist Bertha Wegmann Painting a Portrait*, 1889, Oil on canvas, 100×110cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm
7. Kitty Kielland, *Interior*, 1883, Oil on canvas, 43×37cm, Lillehammer Kunstmuseum
8. Jenny Nyström, *From my studio in Paris*, 1884, Watercolor, 42×26.5cm, Owner unknown
9. Helene Schjerfbeck, *Violets in a Japanese vase*, 1890, Oil on canvas, 35×30cm, Signe and Ane Gyllenberg Foundation, Helsinki
10. Maria Wiik, *A Study of Pansies and a Japanese Fan*, 1887, Oil on canvas, 38×31cm, Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation

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