



# The 160th Anniversary of Franco-Japanese Diplomatic Relations: How France Discovered *Japonisme*

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## The age of cultural diplomacy

On July 14 this year (Bastille Day, or France's national day) Foreign Minister Kono Taro traveled to France in place of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, who had canceled his French trip due to damage from heavy rain in the Chubu region of Japan. The Foreign Ministers of both countries took part in the opening ceremony of "Japonismes 2018," the start of eight months of events to mark the 160th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Japan and France. At the beginning of September in Paris there was a gagaku performance by the Gagaku Department of the Imperial Household Agency, which has protected its historic traditions for a thousand and several hundred years. This first overseas performance by the department in a quarter of a century was a huge success. That same month, the Crown Prince visited France and an exhibition of the work of Ito Jakuchu also opened.



Prof. Watanabe Hirotaka

Additionally, mainly centered on Paris, various other events on Japan's diverse cultural arts were staged, such as Shochiku Grand Kabuki, kyogen and noh theater, *wadaiko* drumming, an exhibition of work by the Rimpa school of painting, an exhibition of Buddha statues from Nara, and other traditional arts. There was a festival of Japanese films that included works by Kawase Naomi and modern theater such as a performance of *Kafka on the Shore* directed by Ninagawa Yukio. In addition, there was a discussion on Paul Claudel as part of Franco-Japanese intellectual exchange and a social sciences symposium which took as its theme the France-Japan cooperation that this writer has organized for ten years. The illumination of the Eiffel Tower by Motoko Ishii and her daughter Akari-Lisa Ishii was a bold endeavor to apply Japanese lighting technology to advanced European architectural technology from the age of steel, and a Japan-France cultural collaboration.

Japonisme 2018 was a repeat of the Japan Year that took place a decade ago, a program which celebrated the 150th anniversary of Franco-Japanese diplomatic relations, and during which there were 758 cultural events registered with the Japanese Embassy in France alone. Ten years

ago, this writer experienced being there working on the ground to make those various events happen as a diplomat in charge of public diplomacy to the Japanese Embassy in Paris and during all of them Japanese culture was well received in France. At the time, I was well aware that this popularity would be extremely favorable to Japan's diplomacy.

To come to the point, external cultural communication (or international cultural exchange) has a close relationship with the logic of capital and of diplomacy. Balance in this triangular relationship is vital. In addition, there are three essential fundamentals to external cultural diplomacy: conceptualization, creating contents (storification), and expanding networks. Although the aim is to spread a positive image of the country and to create a national brand, most crucial are the diplomatic goals backing up such efforts. What is the direction and aim of these external communications and activities to promote cultural overseas? If this is not solidly fixed, cultural diplomacy will not work. I will discuss this again later.

The role occupied by culture in Japan's diplomacy is gradually getting larger. At the root of diplomacy is "dialogue" between diplomats. Since this is contact between individuals from different countries, the exchange of words and opinions equates to the exchange of different cultures and values. Carl Von Clausewitz famously pointed out that war is what happens beyond (i.e. after the failure of) diplomacy and politics. If so, cultural diplomacy (in the sense of the exchange of opinions and values) is the first step in diplomacy.

When the cold war ended there was a rapid shift in thinking around the world from settling international conflicts through the use of military force to the direction of peaceful issue resolution. Although the actual number of regional conflicts has increased, and although there are more issues yet to be resolved, it is clear that emphasis is now placed on concepts such as soft power and public diplomacy. In that sense, Japan is one of the world's most trusted and favorably considered countries. And in fact, historically it was France that set the stage for this latent power of Japan's.

## **How France discovered *Japonisme***

To begin with, the impetus for the arrival of Japanese culture in Western Europe came from the second half of the seventeenth century when the Ming dynasty went into decline and Japanese porcelain was imported in place of Chinese. It was at this time that porcelain such as Imari ware, Iro-Nabeshima, and Kakiemon was created. It is said that during the three decades from 1652 to 1683 around 1.9 million pieces of porcelain were sent from Japan to Europe. The export of Japanese culture did not begin with ukiyo-e.

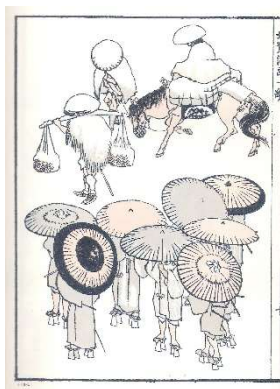
The birth of the new artistic field known as "Japonisme," however, was given an impetus by the deep appreciation of ukiyoe as art. This began in 1856 when the woodblock print artist Félix Henri Bracquemond, a man considered the godfather of Japonisme, was astounded by the high artistic quality of Hokusai "manga" prints stuffed as packaging into a box containing imported porcelain.



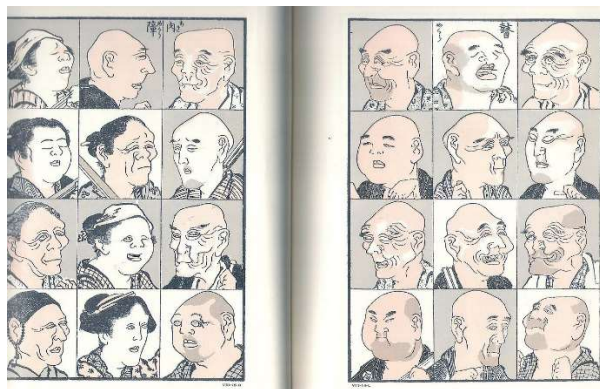
Kakiemon square bottle with plums and stylized flowers in glaze and gilding. Edo period, 1670–1690, PUBLIC DOMAIN



Iro-e Nabeshima-yaki: Nabeshima ware plate with floral design in the Kakiemon style, Arita, late 17th century, Edo period, PUBLIC DOMAIN



Hokusai's (1760—1849) Hokusai Manga, PUBLIC DOMAIN



In 1851 the Goncourt brothers portrayed a salon (set sometime in the 1800s) where Japanese art works were put on display. Around the beginning of the second French republic a small craze for Japanese things occurred. It is recorded that at the time of the 1867 Paris International Exposition there were already avid fans of Japan.

It is well known how Japan's ukiyoe was much admired by a number of the Impressionists and thus became internationally renowned. Édouard Manet's 1868 "Portrait of Emile Zola" shows a Japanese folding screen in the background. Claude Monet entered a painting named "Camille Monet In Japanese Costume" into the second Impressionist exhibition, while Degas, Gauguin and Toulouse-Lautrec were also influenced by Japanese art. Encouraged by Japanese art dealer Hayashi Tadamasa, in 1881 Edmond de Goncourt published the books *Hokusai* and *Utamaro*. This period in which the first craze for Japan things occurred was when Japanese art such as ukiyoe was admired.



From 1888 to 1891 the picture dealer, critic and magazine writer Samuel Bing published a luxurious magazine in French, English, and German, with many color illustrations, titled *Le Japon Artistique* (Artistic Japan). It introduced a range of genres, from ukiyoe, metalworking and ceramics to architecture and kabuki. As a general guide to Japanese art, it influenced van Gogh and many other artists. It is significant that this magazine was called not “Japanese Art” but “Artistic Japan.” In other words, the life of the Japanese in its entirety was seen as artistic, and that admiration was directed towards Japan itself. It is said that following this, Japonisme went on to influence Les Nabis (a group of Post-Impressionist avant-garde artists), multicolored woodblock prints for use as interior decoration, posters, and Art Nouveau ceramics and architecture.

Meanwhile, Japan’s art and traditional crafts were exported to the United States and Europe. The British Consul-General to Japan Rutherford Alcock and his successor Ambassador Ernest Satow took a large number of art pieces back to the UK. Edward S. Morse, an American foreign expert employed by the Japanese government, took home 4,000 pieces of ceramics, while Edoardo Chiossone returned to Italy with 15,000 pieces, including Nikuhitsuga (paintings in the ukiyoe style), woodblock prints, Buddhist paintings, lacquer works, porcelain and noh masks. Henri Cernushi and Theodore Duret traveled to Japan from France in order to buy Japanese artworks. On the other hand, it was Hayashi Tadamasa who contributed to the dawn age of Japan-France cultural exchange. He traveled to France for the 1878 exposition, later setting up a company trading in artworks, fostered exchange among intellectuals and worked to promote understanding of Japanese culture. The story of how Hayashi sold large numbers of ukiyo-e has long been famous; and he even published translations of Japanese poetry and novels featuring Japanese characters.

Conventionally, it is said that the craze for Japanese things termed “Japonisme” finished around the time of the First World War, or at least before the Second World War. Once Japan had



Claude Monet, *Madame Monet en costume Japonais*, 1875, PUBLIC DOMAIN

succeeded in its modernism, and following the Russo-Japanese War and the First World War when Japan was transforming into a great Asian power, impressions of Japan changed. At first the image of Japan was Japonisme's skill contained in simplicity, a gentle aesthetic couched in Asian exoticism, but as the footsteps of war drew closer that image became more modern and Western. At the same time, it appears there was a change to an image of an aggressive Japan, not so different from Western countries, and that Japan became less popular. The Oriental fashion that was called "Japonisme" lost its freshness and passed its best before date.

### **From the postwar reevaluation of Japan to Cool Japan. A new Japonisme?**

Although Japonisme thrived, it was not the case that ordinary people were broadly interested in and knowledgeable about Japan. It was after the war in the 1970s that Japan really began to make itself felt in the European consciousness. Japan became the second largest economy in the free world, and was acknowledged as an advanced high-tech nation by both itself and others. This was not an understanding of Japan based on exoticism, as among some intellectuals during Japonisme; it was a distinct image of "Japan" that showed itself in people's everyday lives via electrical appliances, cars and other products.

Yet, the image that foreigners had of this Japan that achieved rapid economic growth was often of aggression. Suspicions about the mentality of the seemingly belligerent Japanese were difficult to dispel. This has often been said before, but Japan was dogged by an image of rampant pollution due to rapid industrial growth, workers who lived in rabbit-hutch like little houses, and Honda-bike riding frowning business warriors. Initially, Japanese manga had an image abroad as being crude and violent. Behind this was the negative impression Europeans had of Japan.

That this gradually changed to a positive reassessment of Japan was thanks to things such as Ezra Vogel's book *Japan As Number One* and a reevaluation of Japanese manufacturing methods. In France, a group of young economists known as the "Regulation school" greatly admired Japanese manufacturing methods, in particular Toyota's pursuit of efficient manufacturing methods and management methods involving close cooperation with labor unions.

Thus, a new and positive image linked to Japan's social and economic development gradually formed. In other words, we saw a change to the former stereotypical image of the Japanese. It was a trend that started in the 1980s.

Japanese companies such as Toyota, Nissan, Sony and Panasonic became known worldwide for consumer electronics, motorbikes, cars, videos and other products. It was a new image of Japan as an economic and technology superpower, not based on *wabi-sabi* and other traditional Japanese culture such as before. There was a Japanese presence in a wide range of areas closely connected to daily life.

As an extension of this, the fuse having been lit by Japanese manga and anime, from the end of the 1970s there was an expansion in the contents industry market for games software (notably

Nintendo), DVDs and other products. At the same time, this was Japan's pop culture penetrating the West, and in a broad sense it led to increased interest in Japanese culture and society. The best known event connected with this, and probably the largest Japan culture event in the world, is the Japan Expo. The first Japan Expo was organized in 2000 by three French youths who were infatuated with Japanese pop culture. Since then, it has been an annual festival of Japanese culture held each early summer in Villepinte in the Paris suburbs. It boasts an attendance of more than 200,000 people over three days, and at least one third of the visitors come in cosplay dress. As well as cosplay shows, Japanese "idol" celebrities and singers are invited, while the large exposition space is crowded with booths for manga, anime and DVDs. In fact, AKB48 were invited to the Japan Expo some ten years ago, and it is the view of some involved that this impetus gave a key boost to the Expo's popularity.

Now, curiosity towards and knowledge of Japan is no longer limited to a small group of experts and those with high-status occupations and experience of overseas. It has gone beyond a fad for exoticism, and Japan's image is now established as an example of a nation that succeeded in combining tradition with modern culture and society. In particular, one notable feature is how interest in Japan has increased among the young.

For them, Japan's image is different from both the image of those who experienced the war and from the negative image of Japan's high economic growth period. Through manga they have an image of Japanese people as peaceful, and Japan as a modern society with varied aspects. The Japanese are accepted positively as a sensitive people with subtle affections and aesthetics.

*Translated from an original article in Japanese written for Discuss Japan. [September 2018]*

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Born in 1954. Watanabe specializes in French diplomatic history, analysis of French politics and diplomacy in the modern age, the EU, European politics including Pan Europe and U.S.-Europe relations and Cultural Diplomacy. His publications include *Gendai Furansu—Eiko no jidai no shuen, Oshu e no katsuro* (Contemporary France — The end of the postwar boom and the opening to Europe), *Charles de Gaulle, Furansu gaiko senryaku ni manabu* (Studying from the French cultural diplomatic strategy) and *Bei Oh Domei no Kyocho to Tairitsu* (The Cooperation and Rivalry of the Euro-American Alliance).

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