

Monet's Unified View: The Fusion of Eastern and Western Cultures

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ABSTRACT

When Japan opened its borders in the 1850s, citizens, especially those from France, were awed by the different styles of art the Japanese had compared to the West. As this interest in Japanese culture grew, more and more people collected Japanese prints, books, and other goods. Many artists took inspiration from the Japanese art style, such as the use of bright colors, unusual compositions, and flat, unrealistic perspectives.¹ This eventually led to the creation of a new art movement called *Japonisme*. One major artist within the movement was Claude Monet, who fell in love with Japan's style of art and admired nature's role within it. Inspiration from the culture can clearly be seen in his Japanese-styled garden at Giverny but also in the painting *La Japonaise* (1876), which allowed him to critique fellow French artists who embraced the *Japonisme* movement for its exoticism (Fig. 1). He instead relied on Japanese forms and color to create his own style of art. While most scholars agree that Monet was trying to criticize *Japonisme*, they mainly focus on identifying elements of Japanese culture in the painting, without fully addressing why and how Monet utilized these stylistic traits.² Rather than focusing solely on aspects of Japanese culture in the painting, my paper positions Monet as a critic of those who denigrated Japanese art by analyzing how he unifies Japanese and French culture in *La Japonaise*, mainly through examination of the Japanese story depicted on the woman's kimono. Within this painting, Monet, thus, simultaneously critiques the French appropriation of Japanese culture for its exoticism while melding Japanese literary and artistic traditions with Western ones to showcase to the rest of the art world his specific vision of the unification of the two cultures.

Introduction

La Japonaise depicts a smiling, blonde European woman wearing a bright red kimono and holding a fan that is purposefully colored red, white, and blue to resemble the French flag. The woman in the painting is Monet's wife, Camille Doncieux. The kimono is decorated with golden and green maple leaves with the bottom half of the robe portraying a Japanese warrior in traditional costume wielding two swords. Within the painting, only the kimono has an eye-popping red color, while the rest of the painting is rendered with a much more muted color palette. In sharp contrast to the red kimono, the warrior is costumed in a much cooler color palette, using a variety of grays and blues. The background also has a much more muted color palette, similar to the one used on the warrior, and is decorated with uchiwa fans, each with its own unique design. The fans hang on the walls and a few are placed on the ground. Inspired by Japanese art, the painting has a flat, two-dimensional perspective, with the large kimono-ed figure juxtaposed against a heavily patterned floor and wall.³

¹ Lesso Rosie. "How Did Japanese Art Influence Impressionism." accessed November 17, 2021. <https://www.thecollector.com/how-japanese-art-influenced-impressionism>.

² Geneviève Aitken, *Claude Monet's collection of Japanese prints* (Montreuil: Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2023).

³ Rosie.

Japonisme was an art movement that took the Western world, mainly France, by storm, but it also garnered a culture of appropriation. This allowed many people from the West to be influenced by Japanese art, especially with how the country used unrealistic perspectives and directional lines of perspective in their compositions.⁴ The country's simplistic, but bright use of colors also influenced Western artists, with this period being called one of the most creative and revolutionary periods in Europe because they started to stray from the conventional Western style and apply non-Western art techniques. *Japonisme* fostered a culture of appropriation and commerce within France, with advertisers utilizing the exoticness of Japan to sell products.⁵ Advertisements incorporating Japanese and French culture portrayed Japanese culture as superficial in comparison to French culture, as evidenced in the advertising for Japan Kanga Water Perfume (1907), where the model is an over-sexualized embodiment of France's obsession with Japanese products (Fig. 2).⁶ The people of France were drawn to Japan due to the country's secluded, and therefore exclusive, nature. Within this context, impressionists forged a special relationship with *Japonisme*: the early impressionists even claimed to have "discovered" Japanese art. Indeed, Claude Monet became fascinated with Japanese art, and he soon became an avid collector of Japanese prints, gathering over 200 of them.⁷ Although Monet followed the trend of incorporating both Western and Japanese aspects into his paintings, he was able to make witty interjections to criticize those who took advantage of the country's culture—more specifically, those who used it for monetary gain. He also demonstrated his appreciation for Japanese culture with his incorporation of cultural references and use of Japanese artistic techniques.

The Kimono

One of the most striking elements of Monet's painting is the red kimono: Monet's depiction of a blonde-wigged woman in a red kimono, a traditional color for Japanese women's wear, is significant because of its symbolic meaning. The red kimono immediately catches the viewer's eyes due to the sharp contrast between the bright red and the cool background. By making the kimono such a vibrant color, Monet successfully conveys the clothing's importance. Within Japanese culture, the color red was seen as a vivid and lively color of blood, making it a sacred color.⁸ Due to it being sacred, much of the public was prohibited from wearing red kimonos.⁹ The only times this color was worn were during the autumn and winter seasons. By using a sacred color for the kimono, Monet showcases his awareness of its significance, distinguishing him from the West's ignorance of its purpose. This is further backed by the fact that the woman in the painting, Camille, was originally a brunette, but was put in a blonde wig for the work of art, emphasizing that this painting was intentionally created as a way to show cultural appropriation within the art world, as it depicts a stereotypical blonde European woman rather than keeping her natural hair color. With this decision, it is also safe to assume that the kimono is also used as a way of depicting cultural appropriation, due to how sacred the color was and Camille holding a care-free expression. Within Japanese culture, a red kimono is said to ward off evil in return for a good future.¹⁰ In the context of *La Japonaise*, it is inferred that Monet is saying that the appropriation of Japanese culture is

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Eliza Browning, "Buying Japan in France," accessed September 16, 2023. <https://wheatonarthiverevue.com/essay/buying-japan-in-france/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Aitken.

⁸ FUN! JAPAN Team, "Red Kimono: Is it Passionate? Or Noble?" accessed June 25, 2020. <https://www.fun-japan.jp/en/articles/11434>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

seen as the evil being warded off in return for an appreciation for the culture. The theme of warding off evil is also connected to the story, *Maple Viewing*, which is referenced in the lone figure of the warrior on the kimono.

On the kimono, the story, *Maple Viewing*, connects back to the red symbolism of warding off evil due to the hypothetical demon the warrior chases, presumably on the other side of the kimono. *Maple Viewing*, also known as *Momijigari*, is a Japanese kabuki and was written by Kanze Nobumitsu during the Muromachi period. In the tale, a warrior is tricked by a princess, who in actuality is a demon, and tries to eat him.¹¹ The warrior is able to fend off the princess-demon, ultimately killing her.¹² On the kimono, the warrior is about to draw his sword to defend himself from something, most likely the princess-demon mentioned in the story. When interpreted in terms of the symbolism of the color red, the kimono suggests the literal warding off of the evil princess-demon. In this context, the princess-demon might even be taken to represent the art world that takes advantage of Japanese culture, and the warrior a representation of those who fight against this appropriation. The color red also ties back to the season of the *Maple Viewing*, for the warrior goes to the mountains to enjoy the maple trees during the autumn, and in the painting, Monet decorates the kimono with maple leaves. By having the story take place in a setting where the season is autumn and by making the kimono red, Monet demonstrates his knowledge of esoteric Japanese customs. It is significant that Monet did not portray the princess-demon in the painting—perhaps because she represents a true hidden evil, which, in the case of late nineteenth-century France, represents the craze for Japanese art.

It is also possible that the red uchiwa fan that hangs on the right side of the wall may also represent the princess-demon within the story of *Maple Viewing*. The red fan appears to have a woman painted on it—a woman who stares at Camille. Not only does the red color of the fan match the dress that Camille is wearing, but this fan is also isolated and distanced from the other fans. This separation may hint at the danger the princess-demon presents, keeping her removed from the other fans. Not only that, the three figures—Camille, the woman in the fan, and the warrior, who looks off into the distance as if he is sizing up his enemy—create tension within the painting as if the warrior is attempting to protect Camille, who is ignorant of the princess-demon watching her.¹³ With the figure of Camille, it's as if Monet has inserted another character into the story of *Maple Viewing* and has given the warrior another role, one of protection and honor. The red fan may instead prove to be the real danger all along, hiding in plain sight. Though the fan represents a hidden danger, it also shows an imbalance in power. While the princess-demon is staring directly at Camille, she does not acknowledge her gaze, even blocking it with the fan that is made up of the colors of the French flag. This is significant as not only is the warrior, representing Japan, protecting Camille but so is the fan, which represents France, showing that the two countries can be united. With Camille representing the unification of the two cultures, by not acknowledging the demon, the painting is able to show that those who break this bond of the countries will ultimately fail.

The warrior on the kimono also represents the connection between Western and Eastern cultures as he melds an impressionistic style with a Japanese one. Though the painting is done in a Western style, the work has many details that follow a Japanese approach. The warrior's exaggerated features, such as his large eyes and bushy eyebrows, were based on the style that can commonly be seen in Japanese prints. In Japanese prints, the artist lavishes attention on the detailed rendering of clothing, and this holds true in *La Japonaise*, with the warrior's extremely detailed patterned clothing. Within traditional Japanese art, colors of choice were typically

¹¹ Kanze Kojiro Nobumitsu, , attr., "The Maple Viewing," trans. Meredith Weatherby, in *Three Japanese Plays from the Traditional Theatre*, ed. Earle Ernst (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 17-34.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Browning.

limited to red, blue, or yellow, with the colors purple, orange, and green being used as secondary colors.¹⁴ Within *La Japonaise*, Monet mainly uses a color palette of red, blue, and yellow, showing another connection between the two cultures. Monet is able to combine the two cultures' distinct artistic styles while still incorporating the most important aspects of each one: The extremely loose brushstrokes of impressionistic art and the use of contrasting colors of Japanese art.

The folding fan that Camille holds can mean two things: a unification between French and Japanese cultures or another critique of cultural appropriation. The fan's colors and design correspond to that of the French flag: red, white, and blue. By making a European woman hold this fan as well as wear a Japanese kimono and be surrounded by Japanese fans, Monet presents an imaginative unity between the two countries and an exchange of each other's cultures. The painting shows that despite the two countries' vastly different cultures, they are able to coexist with one another without exploitation through the use of the fans and the kimono. On the other hand, the fan may also be a symbol of the ongoing fascination with the exotic nature of Japanese culture. By having the fan resemble the French flag, it shows the erasure or Westernization of Japanese culture. While this can be seen as a sign of cultural appropriation, rather than having an insulting meaning, it further adds to Monet's criticisms. This side shows those who are using Japanese culture for commercial value rather than having genuine interest.

The multiple uchiwa fans in the background show Monet's appreciation and understanding of Japanese culture as well. Many of these fans resemble traditional Japanese fans, indicating that Monet did examine a variety of authentic uchiwa fans while completing this painting. Within Japanese culture, uchiwa fans were a symbol of dignity.¹⁵ By having so many fans surround Camille, Monet foregrounds respect over ill intent. Not only that, but one fan on the left side of the painting, appears to have a crane painted on it. Cranes in Japanese culture represent honor and loyalty—sentiments that match Monet's respect towards the culture that inspired him.¹⁶ With the warrior, who is imbued with meanings of protection and honor, gazing at the crane in the painting, there is an overriding emphasis on honor. The concept applies to Monet himself, who through this painting shows honor to the culture he represents. By having Camille be surrounded by fans, showing that she is surrounded by the spirit of Japanese culture, Monet reveals his appreciation for the country's heritage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *La Japonaise* represents Monet's thoughtful and respectful combining of two cultures in a way where they coexist, with neither one reigning superior over the other. Where some French artists' appropriated Japanese culture to denigrate Japanese culture, Monet instead used his painting to show his detailed study of Japanese culture, both literary and artistic, and a desire to bring a respectful marriage of French artistic culture with Japanese. Moreover, with the use of *Maple Viewing*, as well as including multiple fans, Monet transposes a famous Japanese tale into a French context in order to tell a story of unification, protection, and lurking evils.

Figures

¹⁴ Kevin Shaw, "Three Inspirations from Japanese Woodblocks," *Finalcolor*, March 31, 2021.

<https://www.finalcolor.com/colorblog/inspiration#:~:text=Early%20Japanese%20prints%20were%20often,reds%20and%20later%20some%20yellows.>

¹⁵ A. C Yu, "Uchiwa Fan - Japanese Wiki Corpus." Uchiwa Fan - Japanese Wiki Corpus. Accessed September 16, 2023. <https://www.japanesewiki.com/culture/Uchiwa%20Fan.html>.

¹⁶ "Crane Symbolism: Cultural Significance & Meaning." *Bird Gap*, May 4, 2023. <https://birdgap.com/crane-symbolism-culture/>.



Figure 1. Claude Monet, *La Japonaise*, 1876, oil on canvas, 231.8 cm x 142.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Figure 2. Imp Chaix, Paris, Advertisement for Japan Kananga Water perfume 1907. Japonisme-Collection.com

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