

Inspired by the land of the rising sun

Gill Crabbe // FNG Research

The 'Japanomania' exhibition in Helsinki is the culmination of an innovative inquiry into Nordic Japonisme that began in 2011. Gill Crabbe meets the show's Chief Curator, a leading authority on Japonisme, Professor **Gabriel Weisberg**, and **Riitta Ojanperä**, Director of Collections Management at the Finnish National Gallery, and reports on the highlights of the exhibition's accompanying conference

Gabriel Weisberg, Professor of Art History at the University of Minnesota, is a world expert on Japonisme, a term that was first used in 1872 by the French art critic and collector Philippe Burty to describe the influence of Japanese art on Western art and design that began around 1870 and flowered through to the end of the First World War.

Prof. Weisberg was recently in Helsinki, as Chief Curator of 'Japanomania in the Nordic Countries 1875–1918', which opened at the Ateneum Art Museum, and which travels to the National Museum, Oslo, this summer, and to the Statens Art Museum, Copenhagen, in 2017. The project was started at the Finnish National Gallery in Helsinki in 2011 as the museum wished to establish a deepened research collaboration with Prof. Weisberg. The curatorial team consisted in the beginning of Prof. Weisberg and Finnish National Gallery's Chief Curator Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff and was later increased with art historians from other Nordic countries.

I met Prof. Weisberg, along with Riitta Ojanperä, Editor in Chief of the *FNG Research* web magazine, to discuss key themes in the exhibition and in art-historical research relating to Japonisme in Finland and other Nordic countries. The meeting took place ahead of a day-long international conference on the topic, with distinguished art historians and experts on Japonisme taking part, including Director of the Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Akiko Mabuchi.

Prof. Weisberg's interest in Japonisme began in the 1960s when, as a student, he wrote his doctoral thesis on Philippe Burty, who had put his finger on the start of a phenomenon that was to sweep across Europe and America. For Weisberg too his research was the start of an enduring passion that has lasted almost 50 years – one that he shares with his wife Yvonne – and perhaps following the footsteps of Burty, Weisberg himself has now coined the term 'Japanomania' in giving the title to this groundbreaking exhibition.

'Japanomania wasn't a term that was used in the 19th century,' Prof. Weisberg explains. 'It's a word we have come up with to deal with what was previously called Japonisme, and I now call Japanomania because it was a phenomenon that touched every aspect of life.' While Japonisme can be seen as an influence on Western art and design, Japanomania implies a much bigger impact, one that caused a frenzy of interest from artists, collectors and fashionable society. 'It overtook everything,' says Yvonne Weisberg. 'Japanomania was huge in America, for example. It was chic. People had their houses redecorated with Japanese objects. The son of the American poet Henry Wadsworth-Longfellow even went to Japan and came back with his body tattooed.'

As Prof. Weisberg points out in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition: 'The impact of Japanese art throughout the Nordic countries would not have been possible had Japonisme not become more than a mere curiosity.'



Nikolai Astrup, *June Night in the Garden*, undated, colour woodcut with handcolouring, 31.2cm x 41.3cm, from the collections of the Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo.

Photo: The National Museum, Oslo / Børre Høstland

As Weisberg explains to Riitta Ojanperä, 'We are trying to give a word to a tradition, a movement. We could equally use the term Japanomania in relation to the UK and France but it is good we have invented it here in the Nordic countries because this exhibition has material that almost no-one knows about, and the way the exhibition has been framed challenges Japonisme studies.'

Japonisme came to the Nordic region later than it did in France, England, and America, becoming part of a second wave of the phenomenon towards the end of the 19th century that consolidated what had already begun elsewhere in Europe in the 1860s and 70s. It was a development in the Nordic countries that was characterised by a deeper assimilation of Japanese aesthetics into its native cultures.

'What was your idea for the show?', Ojanperä asked Prof. Weisberg. 'You were saying that there were some surprises.'

'One of the key things we have done is to consider the unity of all the arts, whether it's textiles, paintings, prints or ceramics,' says Weisberg. 'The novelty is to be able to see these things together. There's no way that anyone doing research could visualise this exhibition. When you see the total impact – there are around 425 pieces in this show – when you see the paintings with the decorative arts, when you see the art alongside the Japanese works that were potential sources for the Nordic artists and designers, it's quite revealing.'

Indeed it is revelatory to see how clearly this show demonstrates that Japonisme influenced both applied arts and fine arts, and because art historians have traditionally studied these as separate disciplines, exhibitions have tended to steer away from the kind of multi-disciplinary presentations that would have shown the full extent to which



**Chief Curator of
 'Japanomania in the Nordic
 Countries 1875–1918',
 Professor Gabriel Weisberg,
 with his wife Yvonne Weisberg,
 at the Ateneum Art Museum,
 Helsinki, 2016**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery
 / Pirje Mykkänen

Europe had been caught in the grip of Japanomania. For example, at the same time that ceramicists in the Nordic region played a leading role in taking on Japanese aesthetic influences, painters such as Pekka Halonen and Akseli Gallen-Kallela in Finland and Munch in Norway were influenced by the compositional elements in Japanese scroll paintings, as well as touching the deep sensibility to nature they shared as subject matter.

I asked Prof. Weisberg why Japanomania touched Nordic sensibilities when it did? Was there a certain receptivity to it?

'The Nordic ceramic companies, for example, had contact with those in other European countries. It was important for the firms such as Bing & Grøndahl in Denmark and Rörstrand in Sweden to produce material that would be competitive with other European ceramics factories that were already catering for Japoniste tastes. So they hired designers at the apex of their creativity. For example there is Pietro Krohn's *Heron* ceramic service (1885-88), produced by Bing & Grøndahl, which was shown at the World Fair in 1889.'

This receptivity to Japonisme flowered in the Nordic arts into a full assimilation of the phenomenon. So how does one distinguish between artistic assimilation and cultural appropriation? 'Assimilation is not about direct copying,' explains Prof. Weisberg. 'It's about absorbing and taking the ideas further. One of the great pieces in this show, for example, is the *Seagull* ryijy rug (ca. 1904) by the Finnish designer Jarl Ecklund. Here he has completely assimilated the Japanese *katagami* and Hokusai's print *The Great Wave* (1830-32). And this rug has this fantastic wave and the movement of a bird through space.'

This level of assimilation of Japonisme can also be seen in the work of Finnish painters such as Albert Edelfelt and Akseli Gallen-Kallela. 'Among the Finnish artists from our collection that are in the show we have thought of Edelfelt as the first Japoniste painter,' Ojanperä pointed out. Weisberg however, was less convinced. 'I think you have to look again at Gallen-Kallela. He had a lot of opportunities to see what other artists in Europe were doing so the influences are not just coming directly from Japan. Gallen-Kallela is able to assimilate and create something new out of different passages of space, the organisation of his paintings, even the facial structures he uses in some of his works may have been influenced by Japanese masks (see *The Defence of the Sampo*, 1896). Recent discoveries of black-and-white Japanese print albums of famous heroes by Mitsunobu in his collection reveal images that have some kind of spatial invention that is pertinent to what he wants to achieve in his own painting. Now Edelfelt to me is a little more academic and I don't think he has as much imagination as Gallen-Kallela. The Japoniste influence

remains more on the surface in his works, whereas Gallen-Kallela's treatment is more profound and creative.'

The Nordic relationship to nature is a key theme in 'Japanomania', a theme that was also explored in papers presented at the conference, 'Changes in Visual Culture – Japanomania in the Nordic countries 1875–1918', held at the Ateneum Art Museum during the opening week of the exhibition.

Prof. Weisberg gave his plenary lecture on 'The Reinvestment in Nature: Japonisme's impact on designers and illustrators', concentrating on the French decorative arts that Nordic artists and designers would have seen in the Paris salons of collectors and dealers, such as Siegfried Bing and Herman Antell. In a fascinating presentation, Weisberg took Henri Fantin-Latour's 1870 painting *Atelier aux Batignolles*, with its line-up of leading French artists, writers and critics, as his starting point for exploring French Japonisme through two objects placed on the table in the painting. One was a spherical vase with a floral motif by Laurent Bouvier, a leading Japoniste ceramicist and painter, who collected Japanese print albums and whose ceramic motifs of birds, fish and flowers showed an intense interest in nature inspired by Hokusai's manga. 'And manga was the bible for Japoniste ceramicists,' Weisberg pointed out. From here the lecture unfolded the key developments in French Japoniste ceramics, from the early one-off works to the popularised ceramic services such as Félix Bracquemond's *Rousseau* dinner service (1866–67). Weisberg concluded that 'the presence of the ceramic objects on the table together with the people gathered in Fantin-Latour's painting demonstrated an understanding that the development of all the arts would lead to modernity and that Japanese influences were helping to free European creativity from its stale modes of making'.

Chief Curator at the Ateneum Art Museum Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff gave a paper on 'New Forms of Nature in Nordic Art' that focused on the language of visual metaphor that the second wave of Japonisme in Nordic countries emphasised in communicating a spiritual relationship to nature. In the 1890s, as Nordic artists became more active on the

Félix Bracquemond, serving dish, ca. 1867, faience with transfer-printed design, dia. 216cm, Eugène Rousseau (1827–91)

Photo: Weisberg Collection of Dr and Mrs Gabriel P. Weisberg





Installation view of
 'Japanomania in the Nordic
 Countries 1875–1918' at
 Ateneum Art Museum, 2016,
 with Seagull ryijy rug (ca.
 1904) by Jarl Eklund, from the
 Design Museum, Helsinki
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery
 / Hannu Pakarinen

international arts scene, they looked to Japanese art which they felt contained the potential for renewal though the purity of its aesthetics and its focus on the microcosmos in nature. In this regard Von Bonsdorff has reinterpreted artworks in Finland that have more traditionally been viewed primarily in the context of its national Romantic tradition. Gallen-Kallela's *Great Black Woodpecker* (1893) is reassessed as an example of a landscape painting that used the vertical format of the *kakemono* (hanging vertical painted scrolls) with its use of diagonals to lead the eye up to a high horizon line, to emphasise the spiritual aspect of wild nature. It is compared to Hiroshige's woodcut print *Stork on a Pine Branch, Kacho-ga* (ca. 1830–50). As the Ateneum Art Museum's Director Susanna Pettersson commented in the conference discussion, 'Here Japan becomes the new Karelia'.

The spiritual relationship to nature that was manifest in Japanese aesthetics also resonated with equivalents in Nordic paganism, which had its own themes of metamorphosis, shape shifting and nature spirits. Pekka Halonen, Von Bonsdorff suggests, perhaps identified himself with the arctic hare that appears as a kind of alter ego of the artist in his painting *Winter Day* (1895). The creature, which is depicted from behind, is seen larger than life in the foreground, as if leaping through the picture plane into the snowy hills beyond.

This focus on nature themes was echoed in other presentations, including a paper by Vibeke Waallann Hansen, Curator at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, that assessed the illustrative art of Theodore Kittelsen, Thorolf Holmboe, and the graphic works of Nikolai Astrup and Edvard Munch in the light of Japonisme.

Waallann Hansen drew parallels between Holmboe's illustration, *A Bird Cried Out*, from 1894, with the frontispiece of the key Japoniste magazine *Le Japon Artistique* (1890), and included new research on Nikolai Astrup, documented in letters to his wife, concerning his studies of Japanese composition techniques, which were typically assimilated in his colour woodcut *June Night in the Garden* – a view of the Norwegian Mt. Klauva that echoes Hokusai's views of the sacred Mt. Fuji.



Installation view,
 'Japanomania in the Nordic
 Countries 1875–1918',
 Ateneum Art Museum, 2016
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery
 / Hannu Pakarinen

The use of Japanese compositional techniques in new media after 1900 was noted in presentations by Dr. Harri Kalha, Adjunct Professor in Art History and Gender Studies at the University of Helsinki, on Japoniste postcard imagery in Finland, and by Director of Old Masters and Modern Art at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, Dr. Nils Ohlsen, who considered Nordic photography. In fascinating new research, Dr. Kalha noted how the theatrical kitsch of popular Japonisme found one of its 'most compelling vehicles in the picture postcard,' with Western women in Japanese dress seen 'striking a pose, as instantly recognisable cultural attributes – kimono and fan – embraced the stereotype'. In 1900, 1.7 million cards were sent in Finland, and these provided fertile ground for innovative illustrators who placed Japoniste visual devices at the service of pragmatic demands. Under international postal rules messages had to be written on the picture side of the card. The Japoniste interplay between surface and depth thus manifested in postcards with space for messages to be written on the picture side, echoing the way that empty space – and text – is emphasised in Japanese art as part of the overall composition. In the arena of photography, Dr. Ohlsen's presentation included a description of how the Norwegian photographer Anders Beer Wilse adapted new viewpoints from Japanese composition and directed them through his lens at the arctic landscape, resulting in enigmatic, snow-covered vistas with very high horizons (*Hardagerjökulen's Glacier, Ulvik, 1908*).

Other presentations at the conference documented the dissemination of Japanese art and artifacts across Europe, mainly during the second half of the 19th century, that spurred Japonisme. The afternoon's plenary lecture, given by Prof. Akiko Mabuchi, focused on the influx of thousands of *katagami* – paper stencils used in Japanese textile designs – into key collections in Vienna, Dresden, Nancy, Lyons and Paris during the late 19th century. Here the phenomenon of reverse Japonisme was also noted, as fashionable Japan in the 1880s and 90s eschewed *katagami* designs in favour of western designers, putting the traditional dye houses out of business. The unwanted *katagami* were snapped up, no doubt at bargain prices, for a European art and design culture hungry for Japanese images.

The spread of Japanese artifacts and images across Europe, via collectors, dealers and fairs, was documented in several presentations. Susanna Pettersson told of the journeys made by Herman Frithiof Antell, who was one of the first European collectors to travel to Japan in the 1870s, and whose collection and bequest formed the basis of the Ateneum's collection. Nordic artists who travelled to Paris would have been invited to view Antell's collection at his salon in the city and hear of the traveller's tales associated with the works he had gathered. A presentation by Malene Wagner, a specialist in Japanese decorative arts, from Copenhagen, focused on Japan's presence at the World Fairs from 1873–1900, noting that in the 1880s a shift took place from providing westernised objects for the Japoniste market – such as teacups with Western-style handles – to a revivalist development manifesting, for example, at the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900 with displays of Buddhist objects celebrating Japan's heritage. Dr. Leila Koivunen, Professor of European and World History at the University of Turku, presented research into exhibitions of Japanese artifacts and prints in the Nordic countries, highlighting the significance of the Royal Collections in Copenhagen, the Museum of Applied Arts in Helsinki, (established in 1874), and selling exhibitions that travelled through Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki, arranged by Julien Leclercq.

The conference demonstrated a rich panoply of research, with much significant new material emerging in the field of Japonisme, and indeed Japanomania. Returning to the interview with Prof. Weisberg earlier in the week, Riitta Ojanperä asked him what was the future for Japonisme studies?

'This depends on young scholars going forward with the material. For example, there's more than enough material in the 'Japanomania' exhibition to write three or four books and around 50 articles, but it depends on the educational system and professors saying Japonisme is a legitimate field.'

So has contemporary research tended not to look back at this period of history with a unified perspective?

'Art historians in general have never been trained in design – they are trained as painting scholars, as print scholars, decorative arts scholars but not in all of these disciplines. In order to understand Japonisme you have to bring it all together because that was the way it was appreciated at the time. The promoters of Japonisme in the Nordic countries – Siegfried Bing, Louis Sparre, Jans Thiess – saw that this was the key point, that all of the arts could work in common with one another as they did in Japan. So Japan became the model for this approach.'

'Researchers have to dig into material that is sometimes quite obscure but it wasn't obscure at the time,' Weisberg continued. 'And to find it you have to go to archives, not just those of the creators but of businessmen, including Arthur Lasenby Liberty in London, or Bing in Paris. And this doesn't always lend itself to easy research.'

The challenges of this kind of research have the potential to reap considerable benefits however. As Editor in Chief of the recently launched *Journal of Japonisme*, Professor Weisberg is ideally placed to facilitate the dissemination of new material. As he pointed out: 'The 'Japanomania' exhibition is a model for global studies and so is this project and that's a big thing.'