Japanese influence on decorative arts in Barcelona

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At the end of the 19th century a fascination for all things Japanese arrived in Barcelona (Spain) influencing much of the artistic work in the city. Japanese art brought a new manner of understanding esthetic beauty that played an outstanding role in the process of the development of new forms of expression that attained a high degree of creativity in the epoch of Modernism. This paper aims to analyze and present an overview of the Japanese influence and its significance during the renovation process that affected Barcelona's decorative arts in the last quarter of the 1800.

Keywords: Decorative Arts, Barcelona, Japonisme, Modernism, Aestheticism

On October 7th, 1881 the Imperial Japanese Pavilion (fig.1) was inaugurated in the Gran Via, one of the main avenues in the heart of Barcelona. It was a building imitating the Japanese style built to display Carles Maristany’s Japanese art collection. Maristany was a traveler who in the previous year had returned from Yokohama and had shared a compartment with two Japanologists: Chamberlain and Gubbins, during the journey. La Vanguardia, one of the youngest newspapers in the city at that time, wrote the following note about the inauguration event:

Therefore, it must be deeply interesting and instructive to know about the customs and the progress of such cultures, since the study of many of their arts and industries would be very convenient for our artists and artificers, who can be inspired and learn from them new forms and maybe new procedures which can help to improve the arts of our country.1

Barcelona was in a period of great industrial, economic and urban growth. A plan to demolish the constraining medieval walls surrounding the city was approved in 1854 and from the 1860’s onwards there was a frenzy of urban expansion around the old quarters of the city.

Fig. 1. Imperial Japanese Pavilion (La Ilustración, Barcelona, 1881).

Around the same time, a new romantic movement started, La Renaixença. Its main objective was to recover the Catalan nation’s cultural past. However, in the artistic circles, there was a strange feeling about a movement based on revivals and eclecticism; the artists felt orphaned of an art which they could claim as their own and which could represent their present time, in the same manner that other movements had done in the past classical and medieval eras. For lack of
their own original style, some people believed they should be working and struggling towards overcoming the uncertainties created in an era defined by many as artistically poor. The critic Carles Pirozzini (1852-1938), from the newspaper *La Renaixença* and one of the voices of conservative Catalans, asked for a collective nationwide effort to achieve the new birth of the Catalan Fine Arts by moving heaven and earth to find a new infinite source of fresh and powerful inspiration for our artists and writers.

This idea was just one of the main objectives of the inauguration of the exhibition organized at the *Imperial Japanese Pavilion*. It was intended to embrace recommendable advices from Japanese art in order to help develop a new style which would identify itself with the necessities and aspirations of the people at the turn of the century. In that sense, Japanese designs played a key role to overthrowing academic and historic motifs in favor of developing and creating new artistic styles. The artist José Mariera explained in 1902:

*After a period of doubts and hesitation without a fixed criteria on what should be understood and accepted as an artistic revelation of our times, where we were worshipping all the styles and not owing one of our own, looking for peace inside all this confusion, we focused our attention on Japanese art and its natural aesthetic principles brought to decoration by harmonic simplicity. Japanese art has brought us back to the study of natural forms and colors in their most rudimentary form, creating a powerful influence on our arts. Then European imagination […] devoted itself to studying Japanese art, which in turn changed the character of decoration, and after lengthy studies it began to appear as our own particular style in the twentieth century, a styke known as Modernism.*

It is clear that Japanese designs offered a new world to be discovered to the Catalan artists. The first knowledge of Japanese art arrived in Barcelona at the beginning of the 1870’s. Richard Risley’s (1814-1874) Japanese acrobatic group visited Barcelona in 1868, the same year as the Meiji restoration. After that event, Barcelona began to open its eyes to the Japanese trends. This fact is even recognized by the newspapers of that period. Frequent acrobatic exhibitions, Japanese art exhibitions, collectionism, customs, carnival’s parades, private parties, living rooms decorated using *Japanese style*, etc, all being signs of the increasing influence of Japanese style on the city.

Barcelona’s Universal Exhibition in 1888 was one of the culminating points of this first period. Japan officially introduced itself for the first time to Spain by building a pavilion and a Japanese home for the exposition. This sign was the ultimate testimony to the spread of Japanese arts throughout the city. Matsuo Gisuke (1837-1902) had great success coordinating the Japanese presence at the exposition. It was a unique occasion to contemplate some of the main works of top Japanese artists such as Namikawa Yasuyuki, Miyagawa Kozan, Shomi Eisuke or Suzuki Chokichi. In addition, prestigious companies like Kiriu Kosho Kaisha, Shobey, Koransha or Haibara were present exhibiting a large number of pieces, like ceramic, silk, bronze, enamel, papers and furniture; many of which were decorated with the characteristic representation of Nature named *kachouga*. However, maybe the most relevant fact was that it was not only a short term experience but, on the contrary, it allowed for the establishment of the first trading contacts to import Japanese art. An attestation to these agreements is the contract signed that same year between the president of Kiriu Kosho Kaisha, Matsuo Gisuke, and the main trader of Japanese art in Spain, Odó Viñals.
As mentioned earlier, Japanese designs had a great influence on the development of Catalan art from the very beginning. However, it is important to note that different artists copied and acknowledged Japanese art in various ways. Some decided to reproduce it while others decided to use it as a stylistic and/or conceptual inspiration.

We will not deal here with the sporadic and superficial imitation of Japanese motifs. This type of imitation was created to satisfy an increasing demand for an art with exotic touches. Japanese art contributed more elements than just geishas and samurais. The stereotypical exotic Japanese image was introduced through figurative decorations. Some examples are the ukiyo-e or products for export such as Satsuma style ceramics. These elements, especially the Japanese prints, also introduced a large array of possible decorative qualities, which proved to be very appealing. Following the trend in France and England, Catalan painters developed new representation techniques. Some of them were inspired by elements in Japanese prints such as solid color surfaces, elevated perspective and other figures that can be found in paintings by Marià Fortuny (1838-1874), Alexandre de Riquer (1856-1920) or Santiago Rusiñol (1861-1931). Most of these elements can be seen in publicity banners and paintings.

The artists who were inspired by Japanese designs drew upon different sources, and not only from the ukiyo-e. The fact is that, in the field of decorative arts there were other types of design that had a special influence, such as those featuring nature themes, proceeding from Nipponese art industries, geometric or abstract, or proceeding from Japanese repertories and albums, as well as from other books and plates being published in Europe at that time.5 This great variety of styles and influences in artistic design is what makes it very difficult to define what the label Japanese means when applied to a particular decorative style. What was described as Japanese style were sometimes geometric figures, others naturalist or even figurative. However, it is true that all of those elements were copied, directly or indirectly, from the traditional Japanese decoration.

During the 1870’s some Japanese art expositions were organized in different buildings and shops around Barcelona. For example, during the second half of 1878, four small expositions of Japanese art were organized -in the city center; the date of these expositions coincided with the arrival of the first steam warship built in Japan, the Seiki. One of those exhibitions displayed a collection of drawings of Japanese plants that were sent from Yokohama by the Japanese government. In addition to the many individual Japanese art exhibits that took place throughout Barcelona during the 1870s, the Richard Lindau (1831-1900) Museum of Japanese Art opened in the early 1880s. The museum was centrally located on the Passeig de Gràcia and boasted Lindau’s collection that he had acquired in Edo (Tokyo) while serving as consul for Prussia in Nagasaki from 1866 to 1868.6

Thanks to both descriptions in the newspapers and the catalog that was published illustrating the objects shown at the 1888 Universal Exhibition, we can imagine that most of the pieces arriving in the city coming from Japan were decorated with motifs inspired by Nature. In the case of the Universal Exhibition, for instance, about sixty percent were representations of flowers, plants and birds. This fact fully coincides with the designs that Seihin Gazu-gakari had been publishing in the Onchizuroku volumes: a collection of designs aimed at being used as decorative models in Japanese art industries destined to export. In this sense, the design bureau of the Meiji government, which since 1882 was dependent from the Japanese Agriculture and Commerce Ministry, became, during this period, a new organ of
influence in terms of the diffusion of the stylistic models being made known in the West. These were designs were mainly based on the decorative traditions from the Rimpa, Kano and Maruyama-Shijo schools—as it was the Kiriu Kosho Kaisha and others. They represented delicate and elegant motifs featuring flowers and birds which, undoubtedly, quickly attracted the Europeans (fig.2).

If we compare aesthetic decorations created by artists from Barcelona in such very different domains such as furniture, bookbinding, ceramics or crystals, with designs created in the early Meiji era, one can easily realize that there are many similar stylistic elements. This desire of Barcelona, to find its way in what had initially appeared to be an unfruitful search of a style, began to produce some results. These were namely designs where Nature showed itself as streamlined and free, where man’s hand did not appear, and where the old thigh rectangular compositions were overthrown by a new concept of space and emptiness.

These characteristics were perfectly applicable in the field of illustration and graphic arts in general. In books and magazines, texts and drawings could coexist in better harmony, letters and images could merge and freely dialog inside the same space in a fair and poetic manner, without needing to be subjected to any rigid composition structures (fig.3); this form of composition was one of the characteristics that could be observed in works coming from Japan. It was a new way to understand the concept of space, which was more suggestive, with a richness of expression that, by resorting to original repertoires or editions like *Le Japon Artistique*, some artists such as Mestres, Riquer and Pascó soon knew how to put all this to good use. In particular, a certain number of these artists played an outstanding role in the enrichment of Catalan industrial bookbinding. Likewise, driven by powerful editorial houses such as Miralles’ or Casa Montaner i Simón, Japanese influence materialized into the design of industrial bookbinding such as the collection “Arte y Letras”, created under the artistic direction of Lluís Domènech i Montaner.

The ambit of bookbinding is especially interesting by the way in which—due to the particular technical characteristics of this branch of the art industry—different features from Japanese art could satisfactorily combine: flat chromatic surfaces and new compositions and points of view; elements mainly proceeding from the observation of the *ukiyo-e*, together with stylization and poetizing of natural forms, often starting with the *kachou* designs that could be observed in very diverse works, from Utamaro’s illustrated albums.
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From the 1880s, and particularly during the 90’s, all these characteristics were soon diffused throughout many fields of the decorative arts. These new forms of composition, and the will to continue with the same model of representing Nature, can also be seen in the engraved crystals manufactured from mid 1870s’ onwards. Nature, as represented on the storm doors of porches in the “Eixample”, or newly developed area in Barcelona, constitutes an example of how a composition could grow without limit beyond the dimensions of each crystal. These were spaces conceived as artificial gardens, crystal gardens where butterflies flutter, where dragonflies glide at ease, where lilies and bamboo canes flourish; flowers, insects and plants of all types inspired by the Japanese repertory (fig.5). It is true that, together with these kinds of representations, other manufacturers created crystals that showed typical Japanese images such as women dressed in kimono carrying umbrellas, just like those of Casa Rigalt, but designs inspired by Nature were, no doubt, the ones that had more influence not only on engraved crystals, with a similar format to that of the kakejiku, but also on those painted by artists like Riquer, or at workshops like those from Francesc Vidal or Casa Buixeres i Codorniu. One example of this is a piece of crystal decorated with kachou designs that was created at Vidal industries and exhibited early in 1883 in the city center. The newspaper Diario de Barcelona wrote as follows:

*Occupying one of the windows of the artistic shop of Mr. Vidal in” pasaje de Crédito” there is a stained-glass work of large dimensions, and in a Japanese style, which has been manufactured for the house of an industrialist in the city. Within the different compartments into which the glass is divided we can see figures, such as birds and flowers perfectly represented, both in their drawing as in their colors, as those seen in Chinese and Japanese tapestry and ceramics*
As earlier mentioned, in Europe, in cities like Barcelona, many and varied types of Japanese designs archived a wide diffusion, which did not simply represent only natural motifs of realistic nature. Additionally to Le Japon Artistique or the Grammar of Japanese Ornaments and Design (1880), some Spanish publications like the Galería del Arte Decorativo (1890) or the Historia General del Arte (1897, fig.6) were illustrated with, when it was the case to look for models to apply in decorative arts, plate repertories often inclined towards Nipponese designs of geometric or abstract types or those based on the schematization of Nature frequently drawn from katagami. We have several cases as examples of the influence exerted on art work produced in Barcelona, going from material printing in industrial textile factories to more exceptional examples like the decoration of Finca Güell’s pavilions by Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926) where, on a surface which is made of adobe the architect applied a traditional Japanese ornamental motif (seigaiha) frequently used in fabrics, lacquers and handcraft objects as shown, for example, by one of the ivory amphorae in Richard Lindau’s collection (fig.7). 12

As far as Japanese painted papers were concerned, in addition to those exhibited by Lindau together with other corrugated papers decorated with all kinds of Oriental designs, these could also be found in certain shops which specialized in the import of Nipponese handcraft. Taste for Japanese style decoration meant that these models also influenced the painted paper industry in Barcelona, where we can cite manufacturers like Miguel Tarragó and Salvador Roura, and stores like those from Salvador Salvia, Francesc Vidal and Rosendo Moragas.

The same occurred with fabrics. In addition to importing clothes and pieces made mainly from silk manufactured in Japan, Catalan textile industries also began to create Japanese style fabrics by the mid 1880s’ On one hand, this fact demonstrated the wide diffusion of Japanese style during the carnivals, were at both public and private dances, attendants consistently elected Japanese fancy dress. Similarly, theater representations often used pieces like kimono, yukata and Oriental fabrics for all kinds of atrezzo. On the other hand, this fashion, in turn, managed to establish itself among the bourgeois class not only as a peculiar or extravagant disguise, but also as a sign of fine taste, of exclusiveness and, therefore, of distinction.
Together with the appearance of Japanese hairstyles, Japanese ribbons, umbrellas, fans and other types of inventive complements, Nipponese fabrics were notable for their delicacy and elegance and very soon such models extended not only into the field of garments, but also into other sectors of the textile industry, such as production of drapery, carpets, etc. In this sense, we must mention fabrics from Codina Sert, from La España Industrial, from Sert hermanos y Solá, from Malvehy (1837-1892), as well as Balsells silk-shops although among the principal designers who were inspired by and reinterpreted Nipponese models we must once again mention Alexandre de Riquer, as well as Gaspar Homar, Josep Pascó and Lluis Masriera (1872-1958), among others. Riquer, for example, on several occasions created designs similar to those offered by the katagami (fig.8).

Riquer, who in 1907 was in charge of the organization of the Japanese Hall at the V Exhibition of Art Industries in Barcelona, is also an example that helps us to extend this idea on to the field of ceramics, mosaics and pavements with some examples included by himself in the catalog of the house of mosaics Escofet, Tejera y Cia (1900), as it was with catalogs from other firms, such Hermenegildo Miralles. We must also remember that Alexandre de Riquer and many other artists from that époque were collectors of Japanese pieces of art, prints and illustrated books, these ranging from Utamaro’s entomology encyclopedias to Hokusai’s Manga, Hiroshige’s prints or Bijitsu sekai’s collection volumes. These models, adaptable to any type of decorative arts, were soon widely diffused. In addition, many of the artists were characterized by being versatile and performing all kind of artistic jobs, from either illustrating books or magazines and designing publicity advertising, to creating fabrics, ceramics, jewelry or wall paints; hence the great permeability of the decorative models.

A good part of the industrial arts, fabrics, crystals and painted papers, among others, applied to home interior also played a very important role in the decoration of rooms. If these types of products were ordered and purchased it is because, usually, they formed part of bigger global projects in which, once again, Japanese art participated. The specialty of room decoration, i.e., interior design, was prestigious in Barcelona at that time, just before the beginning of Modernism and at the end of the 1870s. To impulsion achieved by this trend must be attributed particularly to the figure of Vidal, one of the defenders of the introduction of Japanese art in the city.

Francesc Vidal (1848-1914), educated in Paris, and who was well acquainted with the artistic tendencies developed in Europe during the 60s and the 70s, opened an outlet in a central and modern street in Barcelona in 1879, the “Passatge del Crèdit”. The shop was an authentic novelty. It was a kind of shop practically unknown in Spain at that time, a store of art objects devoted to the sale of artistic pieces of furniture and deluxe complements, and specialized in room decoration. Thus, Vidal responded, in Barcelona, to the European trend, which was also safeguarded by several sectors in the city, according to which industry had the moral duty to associate with art in order to prevent...
mechanization from the dehumanizing creation of industrial products. Oscar Wilde stated “industry without art is a barbarity”. In keeping with this approach and following a similar direction to Siegfried Bing, Vidal decided to become one of the driving forces of renovation and modernization of industrial arts by introducing novelties such as the application of Japanese style to indoor decoration in all types of furniture and ornamental arts (fig.9).

It would appear that, in a matter of a few years, towards the end of the 80s and starting from the time of the Universal Exhibition, and notably during the decade of 1890s, the success in furniture manufacture for Japanese lounges and oriental studies, so described due to their oriental inspiration in both shape and wood or tapestry decoration, reached several workshops in the city, among those of note the Busquets and Ribas houses. The diversity of Japanese influenced ornaments in the field of furniture also extended to decorative painting and marquetry. There are some descriptions and photographs which help us to get closer to these spaces of Oriental inspiration, usually pertaining to wealthy families from Barcelona, where they were admired together with ornaments drawn from previously published repertories, lacquered folding screens, vases or other pieces acquired in the city. The list of examples might continue from Lluís Masriera’s enameled jewelry to the publicity advertisements of colognes, perfumes and cosmetic products. However, the important thing is not so much to appreciate the quantity but rather the diversity of the creations that were influenced by Japanese art: designs that reproduced the micro-cosmos of Nature, as well as attractive and novel sensual shapes.

Japan was not the only source of inspiration- this fact needs to be noted. Artists drew from multiple different sources as it was normal in a society that wished to reencounter its past while becoming a cosmopolitan center: models from the Middle Ages, initiatives coming from Northern Europe and others from Eastern Asia and the Muslim world. Barcelona was, at that time, a city undergoing a total metamorphosis, an incipient metropolis full of conflicts and ambivalences that struggled to preserve its dreams and ideals of becoming a habitable populous city while being a modern and international center. As an industrial capital and a big business center, Barcelona explored new forms of art expression in line with the new epoch. In this sense, we can say that Japanese art esthetics, with its modern and original characteristics, from the European standpoint, was powerful in revitalizing Catalan art at the end 1800s. Japan brought a new manner of understanding esthetic beauty and decoration that, in the same way that it had an influencing role on the Aesthetic Movement in England, in Catalonia it played an outstanding role in the process of the development of some forms of expression that accomplished a high degree of creativity in the epoch of Modernism.

Endnotes
[1] La Vanguardia, October 16th, 1881, p.5709-5710.
We talk about “decorative arts” rather than applied or industrial arts so as to emphasize the ornamental and stylistic qualities of productions having an artistic-industrial character in that Barcelona of the 800’s.

The vertical format of the kakejiku, also known as kakemono, was very present, too, in the field of graphic arts: poster design, illustration and books such as, for instance, Apel-les Mestres’ designs for Vobiscum (1892) or Crisantemes books (1898) from Alexandre de Riquer.

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