

**BOOK REVIEW:**  
**BY PHILIP CHEONG**

**The Influence of Japanese Art on Design**

Author: Hannah Sigur

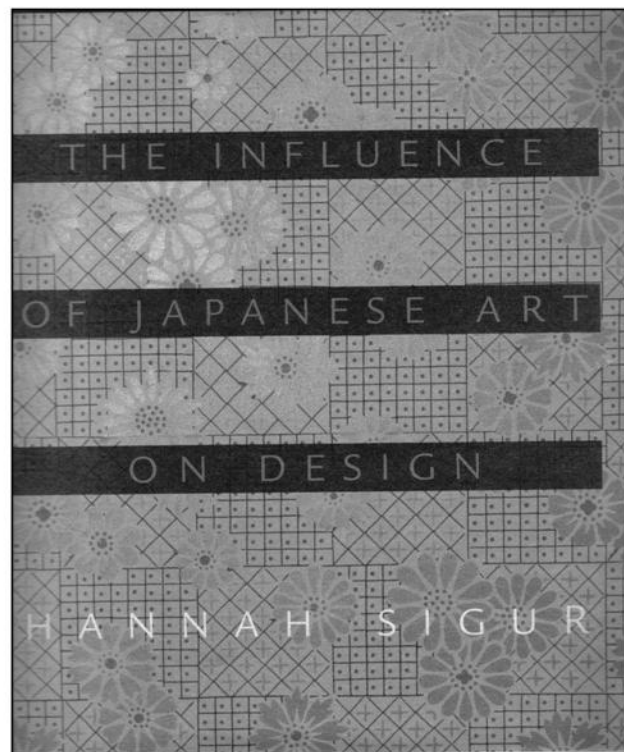
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When the American Commodore Perry first compelled the Japanese authorities to open their nation to trade, little did he foresee the extent to which American design would be linked inextricably to Japanese aesthetics decades after his encounter in 1853. This book, by Hannah Sigur, who is an American art historian, lecturer, and writer on Japanese and American decorative arts explores the theme of aesthetic dialogue between Japan and the West and how Japanese art acted as a catalyst for western, and in this case, American design in the Gilded Age to become a hybrid culture. Set between Europe and East Asia, neither European or Japanese, this hybrid ultimately becomes American in the land of its creation.



Within the academic world, much has been written on the influence of Japan on the fine arts of Europe and North

America, especially in the area of ukiyo-e prints and its influence on Impressionist painters like Renoir and Cassatt. Its neglected sibling, the decorative arts have not had the same attention paid to it and Sigur's book along with several other predecessors addresses this important aspect of the American decorative arts from the 1860s to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The French and English were amongst the first to be influenced by Japanese designs, the former giving the term "Japonisme" to this particular cross cultural style. It would be these that the Americans would most likely have been first exposed to, rather than the actual Japanese objects.

In the first several chapters, Sigur gives the reader the historical background leading up to the final products in different mediums set in separate chapters devoted to glass and textiles, silver and

bronze, and ceramics, incorporating along the way, chapters on subjects such as advertising and furniture design. The chapter "Arts and Agenda on the Public Stage: The World's Fairs" chronicles the reception of Japanese art in America at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, the 1893 Columbian Exhibition and the 1904 St. Louis Exposition. The various chapters are peppered with Japanese examples ranging from the high end of the market which represented the zenith of craftsmanship and design to mass produced materials for the middle class market.

The chapter "Silver and Bronze: The Gladiators of the Tabletop" would be of particular interest to members of the Silver Society of Canada. There are good



Sardine fork, Gorham Japanese, ca. 1880,  
Photo courtesy: Collection W.P. Hood Jr.

examples of silver flatware from the collection of Bill Hood, a regular contributor to our journal and lectures. These are pieces manufactured by the great design houses of American silver – Tiffany and Gorham. They show the ingenuity of the designers in adapting Japanese design and aesthetics to what was an important and competitive market.

The book addresses the success of the mania for things Japanese, or Japan Craze, in part to the historical circumstances of the period. Industrialization had been in full swing, and there was a yearning in western society for values that were lost during the transformation from a traditional society to an industrial one. This loss was found embodied in the traditional arts of Japan. Through various agents including artists, dealers, thinkers, collectors and curators like Edward Morse and Ernest Fenollosa, they helped preached and spread the gospel of Japanese design which infiltrated all levels of society. Sigur traces the seeds of Japanese design that is sown in America which transforms it from tradition to modern, from the Aesthetic movement to the Arts and Crafts and to the modernity of Frank Lloyd Wright.

A good bibliography at the end is an additional resource to this important but neglected subject. Sigur's contribution to this field will hopefully spur more research and publications on the various aspects of the decorative arts influence by Japan. At the Silver Society of Canada, we are already prejudiced towards the area of silver and metalwork and we hope that there will be more expanded research on this topic.

Philip Cheong is a Program Officer with Museum Services of the City of Toronto's Culture Section. Outside of work, Philip volunteers at the Royal Ontario Museum as Chair of the Bishop White Committee, which raises funds for the Far Eastern Section of the ROM. In addition to being president of the Silver Society of Canada, he also is the president of the Oriental Ceramic Society of Toronto.