

Oscar Wilde's Orientalism and Late Nineteenth-Century European Consumer Culture

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A Japanese young man

A blue-and-white young man.

W. S. GILBERT and A. S. SULLIVAN, *Patience*

THOUGH WESTERNERS' DISCOVERY of Japan can be traced back to Marco Polo's time, the climax of modern interest in Japan or "the era of 'Japonisme'"¹ began in the mid-nineteenth century, a period that witnessed "Japan-mania" in England and France. In 1853-54, the American Commodore Matthew Perry visited Japan to enforce a commercial arrangement, little realizing that "he was opening an epoch of art as well as of trade" (Gaunt 42). Francis Hawks gave an official account of Perry's extraordinary experiences in the oriental country in a massive volume, which aroused great imagination and curiosity in the West.² In 1856, Félix Bracquemond, painter and etcher, discovered Japanese colour prints from the exotic designs on the wrapping papers around some imported oriental china. Most impressionists were influenced by the block-print art. Several years later, the "Second Great International Exhibition" of 1862 systematically and magnificently displayed "Japanese objects" to upper- and middle-class Londoners. These events, associated with lucrative trade with Japan, marked the beginning of the flourishing of Japanese art and commodities in late-Victorian England and France. Subsequently, the use of Japan as a subject in painting, poetry, theatre, and even in literary criticism, became increasingly popular. Towards the turn of the century, Japan became an artistic symbol, and Japanese art became "a cult" (Gaunt 51) or "the gospel" (Hough 203) for *fin de siècle* artists. In the process

of popularizing Japan, Oscar Wilde is a crucial figure. He attempted to redeem Japan from the marketplace and endow it with aesthetic and theoretical significance. But for the post-modern/postcolonial reader, Japan is a meeting-place of Wilde's artistic dream and the "vulgar" world—a juxtaposition of the modernist notion of art and popular culture.

I Japan as an "Artistic Utopia"

Wilde's love of things Japanese is noticeable in his Oxford period, when he is said to have announced that he wished to live up to his blue and white Japanese china (Ellmann, *Biography* 44). He developed this notion of Japan as an ideal culture on his American tour; in his lectures, he imbues Japanese art with theoretical meanings, frequently relating Japan to his aesthetic enterprise—to the search for "pure beauty," to the "flawless devotion to form," and to art's "external qualities of its own" (Wilde, *Essays* 114, 125). He argues that Eastern art "is a beautifully coloured surface, nothing more" (134). In his presentation of Orientalism and exoticism, he places much emphasis on the "physical beauty," the distortion of the "facts of common life," and the enhanced sensibility and artistic effects. In "The English Renaissance," he maintains that

this indeed is the reason of the influence which Eastern art is having on us in Europe, and of the fascination of all Japanese work. While the Western world has been laying on art the intolerable burden of its own intellectual doubts and the spiritual tragedy of its own sorrows, the East has always kept true to art's primary and pictorial conditions. (Wilde 134)

Essential to this argument is Wilde's heightening of formal awareness of the necessity to differentiate subject-matter or content from artistic techniques. He regards form as the primary element in art and exemplifies the notion with Japanese works. In the first version of "The Decay of Lying" (1889), he pays homage again to the "sense of form" in oriental decorative art, which translates experience into conventions. He argues, as Epifanio San Juan, Jr. notes, that pure aesthetic formalism and a sensory world are present in "Oriental art, with its gorgeous materialism, its frank rejection of imitation, its wonderful secrets

of craft and colour, its splendid texture, its rare metals and jewels, its marvellous and priceless traditions" (80). Although this argument refers mainly to Byzantine art, it also represents Wilde's view of Japan, which is especially noticeable in his other lectures, such as "The Decorative Arts."

"The Decorative Arts" addresses colour, design, and the formal elements of Japanese "beautiful works of art." Wilde points to "the exquisite gradation of colour" of Eastern carpets, the "lovely design" of Japanese fans and lacquer cabinets, and that "most gorgeous Eastern tapestry" (*Essays* 179-81). He asserts that art can never have any other claim but its own perfection, and he goes on to praise Japanese artists who set ordinary things in a new, artistic order:

With a simple spray of leaves and a bird in flight a Japanese artist will give you the impression that he has completely covered with lovely design the reed fan or lacquer cabinet at which he is working, merely because he knows the exact spot in which to place them. (181)

Compared to what obtains in "The English Renaissance," the emphasis seems to shift from the discussion of formal principles to practical art. Yet Wilde does not limit himself to the technical problems of artistic design. His argument always returns to general aesthetic ideals. Fundamental to his technical concerns is the "oriental spirit" that is present in Japanese works of art. "Do not imitate the works of a nation, Greek or Japanese . . . but their artistic spirit of design and their artistic attitude to-day, their own world" (186). Western artists "should absorb" this "spirit" or "attitude" in their art, developing a real artistic taste to confront the ever-increasing ugliness of the environment. By awakening people to the charms of form and colour, the artist can open their eyes to the formal beauty of life.

Other aesthetes also gathered under the banner of Orientalism and launched a campaign to reinforce the cultural trend that was to aestheticize, with the help of Japanese art, late nineteenth-century sensibility and discourse. In France, Japanese colour prints were already treasured by Bracquemond, Baudelaire, the Goncourt brothers, and most Impressionist painters. The Japanese influence can be seen particularly in the Impressionists' works, from the utmost simplicity of line to the most sen-

sual forms of colour. In England, John Ruskin, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, James Abbott Whistler, E. W. Godwin, and William Morris also admired Japanese *objets d'art*, which stress line, shape, colour, and the beauty of design. The Japanese fashion was in full swing among these writers and artists, and Japanese artistic principles were applied to furniture design and interior decoration. In poetry, Edwin Arnold, renamed "Sir Edwin Mikarnoldo" by *Punch*, showed his idealized Japanese women, and used Japanese poetic forms in his poem called "Some Japanese Uta" (see Miner 31-34). In a speech delivered at the Japanese Society Banquet in May 1894, he saluted his artistic ideal which he called "the Empire of the Rising Sun": "We admire the secret of that delicate artistic gift . . . which makes you the Greeks of Asia. . . . It is impossible that a splendid future should not lie before the Empire of the Rising Sun" (12).

This conception of Japan and the uses of Japanese art, I would argue, are part of Wilde's and other aesthetes' own modernist concern. Japan is an aestheticist or modernist "discovery"; Japanese art confirms Wilde's aesthetic longings and therefore is frequently used to illuminate his own formalist principles. In these delicate "Japanese things," he finds his artistic ideal—formalism, artistic autonomy, sheer "surface" with intensified colour, design, and sensibility. The Japanese "artistic spirit" can therefore be paralleled to the modernist "will to style" (to use Fredric Jameson's phrase), to modern artists' search for an aesthetic order which transfigures a rough and chaotic subject-matter. And Japan, with its mystery and exoticism, offers an artistic Utopia, a pure, untainted territory which Wilde and other aesthetes always longed for.

In his interviews with American journalists and in the letters written on his American tour, Wilde said many times that he planned to visit Japan. This could be an aesthetic adventure, an artistic mission to the "wonderful country" where he wanted to spend his youth. "I must go to Japan," he wrote to Norman Forbes-Robertson on 25 May 1882, "and live there with sweet little Japanese girls" (Wilde, *Letters* 120). Although his Far Eastern voyage fell through for financial reasons, his remarks on Japan had already aroused attention among critics and journal-

ists. An article from the New York *Daily Tribune*, 11 June 1882, announced Wilde's intention to travel in Japan: "His intentions for the future are . . . to visit Japan, and remain for two months at least in that wonderful country, contemplating its artistic treasures . . ." (Mikhail 88). In *The Aesthetic Movement in England*, Walter Hamilton, who devoted a whole chapter to Wilde, regarded Wilde's journey as part of his aesthetic practice: "Mr. Wilde intends to set out for a trip to Japan, with a view to study art as it exists in that singular country, art indeed to which much that is really Aesthetic has been frequently compared—we shall know on his return with how much justice and accuracy" (124). Apart from these contemporary records, the most illuminating remark is perhaps Wilde's own powerful imaginative description of that oriental country, which represents an aestheticist understanding of Japan:

I feel an irresistible desire to wander, and to go to Japan, where I will pass my youth, sitting under an almond tree in white blossom, drinking amber tea out of a blue cup, and looking at a landscape without perspective. (*Essays* 120)

Japan becomes a Japanese picture in which everything displays aesthetic meanings: "almond tree," "white blossom," "amber tea," "blue cup," decorative "landscape without perspective," and together with the "little Japanese girls" he mentioned in the previous letter, all of these images are combined into perfect harmony producing the decorative effect which parallels Japanese colour prints. Wilde imagines a country in which everything is transformed into images: life becomes a fairy tale, objects are rendered unreal but sensual, and women are conceived as doll-like people. This artistic country represents something that he could not find in actual life, but which could exemplify his artistic ideal. In other words, Wilde applies his "art for art's sake" principle to Japan. In his later writings, Wilde changes this exaggerated view of Japan. In "The Decay of Lying," he confesses that the Japanese people presented in art do not exist, and "the actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people" (*Complete Works* 988). We can see therefore that his former image of Japan, in his own words, is "a pure invention." In effect, it is an "invention" within his own aesthetic

framework, and it represents an enthusiastic effort of *fin de siècle* aesthetes to create an artistic Utopia. In this respect, John Ashmead's comment on late nineteenth-century ideas of Japan is illuminating: "As the art of Japan became known, there was a new growth of the idea of Japan as a Utopia, now as an artistic Utopia. To Fenollosa, La Farge, Hearn, and others, Japanese art was a refreshing change from the commercialized art of the West."³

Wilde's modernist enterprise of aestheticizing reality involves further the impressionistic presentation of what Wilde calls the "Japanese effect." In the opening paragraphs of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), we see a vivid description of the painter's garden and studio. The studio is rendered, to a large extent, as an impressionist "picture" whose beauty is "so flame-like." Japanese motifs are decorated in the "framed" space, best represented by "birds in flight," "honey sweet blossoms" and "tussore silk curtains." The "picture" is dominated by an oriental mode of perception, that is, the "immobile" conveys a "sense of swiftness and motion." Images are all arranged into a pictorial harmony, making one "think of those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio." The room and garden produce what Wilde terms "a kind of momentary Japanese effect" (*Complete Works* 18). The "Japanese effect" suggests an impressionistic way of seeing: the object is not a thing in itself, but a transfigured image on a pictorial "surface"; space is no longer a geometrical medium but a container of colour and light in which artists render realities into sensations.

For Wilde, natural objects are transformed into images on a verbal "canvas"; landscape is rendered unreal and colourful. In these aesthetic "spaces"—the Japanese room and the impressionist garden—busy urban life cannot be sensed, the noise of modern transport and turbulent crowds cannot be heard, and "vulgar and glaring" posters and advertisements cannot be seen. Reality is distanced or blurred. In the room, "The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ" (18). Wilde's impressionist spaces are a purified, tranquil, and transcendental territory, a container of lyrical words and joyous images, a domain of vibration of light and shadows, and a realm of pleasurable sensations. It is exotic and rhythmical, a type of artistic realization par excellence. The artist "accepts the facts of

life, and yet transforms them into shapes of beauty, and makes them vehicles of pity or of awe, and shows their colour-element, and their wonder, and their true ethical import also, and builds out of them a world more real than reality itself, and of loftier and more noble import—who shall set limits to him?” (Wilde, *Works* 1049). Wilde’s presentation of Japan is in effect based on a modernist binary opposition between imaginary art and ordinary life, or between the new sensual experience of pure form and the banality of the everyday. His dream of artistic Japan is therefore not only a refreshing change from Western commercialized art, but also a protest against the commercialized reality in which, as he told his American audience, “the vulgar and glaring advertisements . . . desecrate not merely your cities but every rock and river that I have seen yet in America . . .” (*Essays* 178-79). For Wilde, only art can offer a better alternative and “beautiful surroundings.”

Thus Wilde’s mythical notion of Japan, characterized by over-evaluation and pure imagination, represents the modernist attempt to escape from the nightmare of commercialism and its socially unprecedented situation. Yet has the Japanese artistic ideal really created, as aesthetes thought, an untainted world of art? It is ironic that although the impressionistic principle enabled Wilde and others to develop a “pictorial” sensibility and to transcode everyday life into beautiful, sensual images, consumerism still enters on a purely aesthetic level into their artistic experience and literary practice. From the very “absence” of consumerism in the Japanese dream, one can trace the “presence” of consumerist experience set around Japanese art. In the poetic and impressionistic representation of the “Japanese effect,” pleasurable and consumable images are fostered and foregrounded.

Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* develops a “symptomatic” reading of Joseph Conrad’s sea fictions, pointing to “the symbolic social value of his verbal practice.” His account of Conrad paves the way for us to approach literary impressionism in the light of late nineteenth-century consumerism. He argues that Conrad’s works shift between “two distinct cultural spaces, that of ‘high’ culture and that of mass culture” (201). The im-

pressionistic transformation of realities makes it possible for Conrad's works to be consumed "on a purely aesthetic level." In this sense, Conrad's fiction finally becomes a "consumable verbal commodity" which offers a pleasurable moment for the reader (214). Jameson's "commodification approach" sheds a light on our investigation of Wilde's impressionism and leads us to rethink his modernist claims in the context of the ideas and experiences of the time. Wilde's writings can also be treated as clues to the ways in which feeling and perception are restructured to accommodate the ubiquity of the commodity form. Wilde's impressionistic account of the "Japanese effect" or Japanese *objets d'art* always has a close association with his notion of pleasure, which he sometimes calls "the new Hellenism" or "new Hedonism."

"Pleasure" is a central concept in Wilde's thinking. It frequently refers to the purpose of life, to self-realization, artistic creation, designs and decoration, the beauty of the human body, heterosexual and homosexual experiences, and, first and foremost, impressions and sensations. In "The Soul of Man under Socialism," which ends with a eulogy of the new Hellenism, Wilde claims that "Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval" (*Works* 1104). He argues that pain and pleasure are two modes of self-realization: Christ developed the former mode, and true "Individualism" is based on the latter. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Henry Wotton regards pleasure as the "aim" of living; it is the only thing one should live for. He maintains that the pleasure of life exists in the pursuit of bodily beauty and "new sensations." Henry persuades Dorian to take his instructions as practical guides for life: "Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. . . . A new Hedonism—that is what our century wants" (Wilde, *Works* 32). Wilde's new Hedonism, which proposes that pleasure is the only good in life, owes something to the philosophical debate in the 1870s and 1880s at Oxford, led by F. H. Bradley and T. H. Green.⁴ This debate, in which Hedonism played an important part, initiates Wilde's Hellenistic ideal. Lord Henry's concept of "self-development" and his experiment with Dorian is substantially close to Bradley's idea of "self-realisation," which he sees as the ethical end of life. Yet Wilde's notion of

pleasure combines hedonistic ethics with an aesthetic principle, that is, it stresses the formal, sensual aspects of the pleasurable object. In this respect, Wilde appears closer to Walter Pater, whose sensual aesthetic laid the theoretical ground for the concept of pleasure in *The Renaissance*.⁵

Following Pater, Wilde also believes that the basic purpose of art is to produce sensual pleasure. Speaking of "the joy of poetry" in Keats, he argues that "the thorn-crown of the poet will blossom into roses for our pleasure" (*Essays* 135). As regards decorative art, he maintains, as Kevin O'Brien points out, that Whistler can "teach you the beauty and joy of colour" (406). As for oriental *objets d'art* used for decoration of a "charming room," he suggests that one should use blue and white china, such as an "old Nankin vase," coupled with a "warm yellow floor and wall," to give people "a sense of joyousness" (O'Brien 406). The joyousness and pleasurable colour is also the chief advantage of Whistler's Japanese rooms. Jonathan Dollimore observes in "Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide" (1987) that Wilde's aesthetic as a whole is accompanied by "something reminiscent of Barthes's *jouissance* [in *The Pleasure of the Text*]," or what Borges has perceptively called Wilde's "negligent glee . . . the fundamental spirit of his work [being] joy" (62). Barthes argues that the "textual pleasure" involves the production of a join between the reader and language, as if naked flesh meets a garment (9-10). The text is therefore transformed into an erotic surface, like a body without organs, on which the reader is wandering. In fact, the impressionistic "Japanese effect," in Wilde's own words, aims to "seek to materialise" a space (which Wilde has already turned into a sensory "text") "in a form that gives joy to the soul through the senses" (O'Brien 199). Wilde's visual experience of Japanese things and space thus reveals the convergence of impression and pleasure.

The aesthetic enhancement of the visual experience therefore suggests something beyond modernists' purely formal concerns. Wilde attempts indeed to retain his aesthetic dream by restoring pleasure to impressionist art, and he believes that his passionate choice of the "Japanese effect" wrenches the living raw materials of life into an artistic spatial "text." Yet can this literary practice

really distance him from the “vulgar” cultural environment? Is this transcendental process not a disguised way of “degrading” oneself into a consuming passion in terms of intensified pleasure? Is Dorian Gray’s pursuit of bodily pleasure Wilde’s own search for homosexual pleasure or the pleasure of commodity consumption in actual life—not a logical development of this impressionist pleasure? Or, to put it more generally, is this pleasurable visual experience, produced entirely by the sensual “surface” of Japanese *objets d’art* (later, by Japanese commodities in a literal sense), not associated with lived consumerist visual pleasure of the spectacle which is so common an experience in the newly established department stores? In “Pleasure: A Political Issue” (1983), Jameson gives a theoretical explanation of “the determinate relationship between commodification and what we may have been tempted to think of as pleasure” (*Syntax* 63). For Jameson, “the pleasurable experience of the Beautiful” is a consumerist issue. He claims that “the aesthetics of ecstasy” or “Barthesian *jouissance*” is “a properly 60s experience” when consumer society was at a high point and postmodernism came to be a dominant force in art and literature. He therefore maintains that it would be “desirable for another moment to explore the historical relations between this new experience—what I will call the ‘pleasure of the simulacrum’—and its aesthetic objects—henceforth called ‘postmodernism’—as well as its socially and historically original situation—‘consumer society,’ . . . the ‘society of the spectacle’” (71).

This relationship—the increasing convergence of art and consumerist pleasure—could be approached through the perspective of the newly emergent late nineteenth-century consumption-oriented society and the aesthetes’ lifestyle. Wilde’s impressionistic strategy of the “Japanese effect,” beyond his conscious awareness, overlaps, reinforces, or parallels the very experiences of the commodity spectacle in terms of his personal activities as consumer and the consumerist conception of *jouissance*. It is true that commercial details are no longer visible in his impressionistic presentation of Japan and that social factors have been driven underground. Yet the consumerist way of life affects one’s perceiving and experiencing of the world,

including the world of art. Therefore, the bond between the artistic and the commercial is strengthened in many ways, and consumerism as an underlying historical trend still operates as a determinate force. It is at work within the very aesthetic impressions and sensations, releasing its voice in artistic experience and changing the nature of "pleasure." The late-Victorian passion for consumption, though Wilde and other aesthetes transcoded it into an elitist experience of purely aesthetic forms, is marked by what Jameson calls "a genuine Unconscious." The pleasure of the "Japanese effect," which becomes the "pleasure of the simulacrum," provides a clue for us to gaze through the aesthetic mist into the displaced cultural reality.

II Japanese *Objets D'Art* in Popular Consumerist Cultural Milieu

On 7 June 1884, *Punch* published a piece of satirical verse about tea and Japan, accompanied by a picture. This piece of work is in many ways like a modern advertisement: it is pictorial, persuasive and exaggerating, relating the commodity to a seemingly irrelevant thing—Japan. A quiet Japanese woman is dressed in a beautiful loose traditional costume covered by oriental designs. The setting is typically oriental, decorated by a huge round window with blossoms. In front of her lie cups, a tea-box, a pot, and a tiny stove. The picture shares the features of Japanese prints, presenting the beauty of lines and shapes, of casual symmetry and harmony, and of an exotic subject-matter. Yet its theme is consumerist, dealing with drinking and eating, and presenting a eulogy of the commodity: "By me for aye the praise be spoken / Of Tea, Tea, only Tea!"

This combination of Japan and the commodity or the connection between Japanese art and social consumption and entertainment is not an isolated phenomenon. It represents a popular understanding of Japan. Japanese subjects were not only used in "high" literature and art but also associated with popular culture, entertainment, and even the consumerist way of life. On 26 May 1888, *Punch* presented Japanese subjects again in a series of cartoon pictures called "Our Japanneries," in which a "cele-

brated Japanese Artist," Lika Joko, was involved in everyday entertainment and consumption.

In effect, *Punch* used the "Japanese Artist" as an allegorical disguise for the consumerist English of the time. He visited the "seaside" (8 Sept. 1888), went "fishing" in Scotland, had a "picnic," eating and drinking as at a banquet (25 Aug. 1888, 29 Sept. 1888). He was also interested in hunting ("Shooting grouse on the moors," 18 August 1888) and sport ("Cricket match," 16 June 1888). The "artist" was described as a pleasure-seeking person and the pictures refer to typical English social life. There is nothing but entertainment and consumption, masked by the forms of Japanese settings, characters, costumes, and oriental architecture. The pictures themselves are amusing and entertaining, showing a pleasing distortion of the image of the Japanese to the reader and reinforcing the link between the artistic and the consumerist.

In other social sectors, such as popular shows and theatre, Japanese subjects were also widely used. According to Earl Miner, Japanese "stage-types," associated with exotic refinement and "fumbling jollity," appeared in the 1870s and soon became popular. "The jolly Jap' is a frequent type in variety shows, musicals, and as a fillip to otherwise tame productions" (53). These "stage-types" could hardly be regarded as players in serious dramatic art. The Japanese subjects were arranged mainly for the purpose of fun and entertainment. The Japanese "stage-types" were still prevalent during the 1880s, but severely criticized as a "mania for Japanese pieces" by "serious" dramatic critics. One critic from *The Theatre* (1 October 1885) attacked "The Japs," a Japanese stage-type produced at the Novelty Theatre in 1885, claiming that "I should think that 'The Japs' was even too silly for the ordinary patrons of these essentially tedious entertainments, and also regard the modern music-hall, with its collar grinning horse-play, as the ne plus ultra of fun" (230). The critic launched an "aestheticist" assault on the "vulgar" uses of Japanese subjects in popular theatre, which he called the "Japanese craze," declaring that this handling of "Japan" was void of high seriousness. He was certainly not pleased to see that "Japan" in the modern theatre was mainly involved in the form of fun and entertainment that

reflected popular taste. As regard Japanese *objets d'art* with their ornamental design, the critic argued that "we admire their bold and beautiful scheme of colour" (230). This remark suggests that his criticism of Japanese stage-types is actually based on an aesthetic notion of Japan similar to Wilde's. Both regard Japanese culture as a perfect example of the "artistic spirit" that has equipped aesthetes to reform the Victorian sensibility. They were particularly unwilling to see the exotic Japanese subjects contaminated in everyday entertainment, which obviously betrayed the essential nature of their artistic ideal. Thus the defence of the purity of artistic "Japan" and the protest against the popular use of Japanese subjects are notable everywhere in their writings. Yet, as their criticism shows, "Japan" had become deeply and widely involved in popular culture and the commercial theatre of the time.

The influence of the "jolly Jap" stage-types and the "degradation" of artistic "Japan" in the popular cultural milieu can also be seen in the presentation of Japanese subjects in "high" literature and aesthetic theatre, namely, in W. S. Gilbert's and A. S. Sullivan's comic operettas *Patience* (1881) and *The Mikado* (1885). *Patience* is a lively satirical drama, which intensely magnified the notoriety of aestheticism and of Wilde. The "Fleishly Poet" Reginald Bunthorne (obviously Wilde) asserts how popular Japanese things were among aesthetes: "all one sees / That's Japanese" (Gilbert 173). He is a lover of Japanese commodities, and acknowledges himself to be "A Japanese young man / A blue-and-white young man" (Gilbert 204). Bunthorne-Wilde therefore offers himself on the stage as both an aesthete and consumer, appearing frequently at auctions to acquire blue and white Japanese pottery. Here Gilbert and Sullivan refer to Wilde's eccentric behaviour at Oxford: a young aesthete, living a materialistic life, announces his artistic notions by displaying cultural commodities from oriental countries. The drama satirized his material motives, thus exposing the ironical nature of aestheticism.

According to Miner, to conceive "vivid" characters for *The Mikado*, Gilbert searched the stock of theatrical Japanese types that had been popular on the stage for decades. *The Mikado* is a

representative of the cruel oriental, and in *Ko-Ko* we see the “jolly Jap.” Miner argues that “the only knowledge of Japan really necessary to understand the operetta could have been gained from any of the pseudo-Japanese plays of the time” (56). This parody of Japanese stage-types gives the operetta the features of popular shows and made it so entertaining that it soon became one of the best loved plays of the time. Yet its popularity was achieved at a high price: the aesthetic image of Japan as an artistic ideal evaporated without a trace. Gilbert and Sullivan’s two aesthetic operettas, which played so important a part in the aesthetic movement in England, are in effect a kind of parallel to the entertaining Japanese stage-types which belong to popular culture. It is not surprising to note that the audience regarded *The Mikado* as one of the “jolly Jap” plays. When *The Mikado* was staged in the Savoy Theatre in 1885 and 1886, *Punch* responded with review articles and cartoon pictures, in which the dramatis personae of the play were called “Funny Japs” (28 March 1885 and 27 February 1886) and the entertainment value of the operetta was emphasized. The “Funny Japs” therefore can be seen as the artistic use of the image of the “jolly Japs,” which, as we have seen above, was developed by popular plays and variety shows. “Japan” on the stage became a meeting place of “high” literature or art and “light” entertainment.

The convergence of the aesthetic notion of Japan and the popular use of Japanese images is ultimately the result of the connection between Japanese art and the mass consumption of “Japanese things” in the late nineteenth-century market. The consumerist way of life actually affected people’s conception of Japan and taste for the exotic. More specifically, the popular understanding of Japan owes something to the appearance of Japanese things in the marketplace where they were classified and systematically displayed. Miner points out that “‘The jolly Jap’ may have grown in part out of English contact with the Japanese who came to London for the International Exhibition of 1862, or with those who came to establish shops and even small factories to cater to the craze for Japanese bric-à-brac in the last decades of the century” (53). In fact, the Japanese pieces originated from the interests of panorama shows in London after

the Exhibition of 1862. A "grand panorama for making us better acquainted with the important empire of Japan," which was designed by Captain Wilson and opened in May 1862, is perhaps the earliest. This "great work," composed of a series of pictures which cover "9000 ft. of canvas," shows "with scrupulous fidelity, the costumes, temples, streets, bridges, scenery, and rivers of the Japanese empire." The advertiser of the panorama spoke highly of it, proclaiming that "Japan, once a sealed book, is now unclashed, and we may freely inspect its treasures" (*The Illustrated* 545). Yet the remark is only correct if it is applied to the International Exhibition of 1862 itself, a great event that no doubt transformed Japanese objects into spectacles and aroused curiosity and national interest in Japan and Japanese art. On May 1, 11 years after the successful Great Exhibition of 1851, the second International Exhibition was opened by members of the Royal family in South Kensington, London. The spectacular effects of this large sum of commodities, displayed magnificently in French, Italian, Austrian, Danish, German, Egyptian, Indian, and Chinese courts, struck the eyes of upper- and middle-class Londoners who came to enjoy the sensual feast (Burgess 1862a). The opening ceremony and the parade were splendid, and the frequent turn-out of Japanese ambassadors who wore impressive traditional dress excited journalists and reporters. As a big advance over the Exhibition of 1851, there was a "Japanese court," presenting oriental manufactured articles and goods in front of curious visitors. This was perhaps the most systematic and influential representative body of imported Japanese things.⁶

The gorgeous commodities displayed at the Japanese court were largely from Sir Rutherford Alcock's collection, who was the first British Consul to Japan. In a review article, "The Japanese Court in the International Exhibition" (1862), William Burgess, architect and collector of Japanese *objets d'art*, gives the most detailed description of the many specimens of Japanese goods, which were classified into three categories: "Metal-work," "Ivories" and "Wood-work." Other articles which are equally important were recorded in Alcock's book, including blue and white porcelain, fabrics, silks and robes in beautiful design, colour and texture (3-5). All of these commodities were professionally ar-

ranged at the Exhibition, and thus brought to the Victorian public with elegance, perfection, and beauty of shape, colour and design.

In fact, the system of spectacular representation of Japanese commodities perfected in the display laid the basis for the movement of aestheticizing and idealizing Japan. For it is surely the case that the systematic display of the oriental objects by which their forms and colour are foregrounded is identical to the aesthetic way of seeing. The exhibition inaugurated spectacular production and consumption which were paired in the single process of commodity representation. It saturated the marketplace with a world of self-referential signs in which nothing else mattered except their surfaces. It was a world producing sheer visual pleasure of colour, shape, and design. In another article on "The Great Exhibition" (1862), Burges compared Japanese and Chinese commodities in their different uses of colour. "The Chinese likes glaring colours," he described, and "manages to make them harmonious." On the contrary, "the Japanese colouring is never gaudy and, when compared with the Chinese, it is much lower in tone" (10-11). Burges's concern with colour was intertwined with the "pleasure" of seeing. Perhaps "seeing" itself is the core of Burges's description: "an hour, or even a day or two, spent in the Japanese department will by no means be lost time" (254). Twenty years later, aesthetes could see them day and night as they wished: these artistic commodities were set and displayed in the "aesthetic homes" of Wilde, Whistler, and many others. The "era of Japonisme" began, and the Japanese "book" was first opened in the marketplace.

After the Exhibition of 1862, Japanese commodities were indispensable in subsequent exhibitions throughout Europe. In 1867, the *Exposition universelle* held in Paris showed a fine collection of Japanese-style pottery, faience, and porcelain, of which the forms, designs and colours were "copied and reproduced" from Japanese ceramic wares (Alcock 285). According to a journalist's report, Wilde once said that he attended "the Paris Exposition" when he "was a lad" and "heard a Chinese fiddle" (Mikhail 63). In 1873, Vienna witnessed a similar display of Japanese goods at the International Exposition; they were sold and dis-

persed, and later collected by museums (Alcock 4). In 1878, Japan was again represented in Paris at the Exposition universelle, with a large collection of Japanese prints and applied art including Japanese lacquer. As regards the consequence and influence of these exhibitions, Alcock says: "Nor was I mistaken in my estimate of the value and importance of such a public display of Japanese industries, fabrics, and artistic works. Within a very few years, on my return from Japan a second time, I found Japanese fabrics, silks, and embroideries, Japanese lacquer, china, faience, bronzes, and enamels exhibited for sale in the shops of every capital in Europe" (3).

Paris and London were the cities that accelerated the spread of the fashion of Japan. Inspired by the swift trade in Japanese things at the exhibitions, dealers began to import oriental wares. At first the articles obtainable were mostly small and easy to transport, such as ivory netsuks, fans, textiles, sword-guards, and ceramics. They were often wrapped in the flowered or designed prints which were to excite painters and exercise tremendous influence on the fine arts. Soon afterwards, Japanese things made their appearance in the newly-established shops of Paris and London, where they were displayed and sold under the name of decorative artifacts. In the early years before Japanese literature was introduced to the West, these art-commodities, with their exotic beauty and graceful strangeness, were the only source from which to conceive an aestheticist Japan. The oriental shops popularized Japanese commodities. One early shop for the sale of oriental objects was established by Monsieur and Madame Desoye in 1862, in the Rue de Rivoli in Paris. It was visited by Baudelaire, the Goncourt brothers, Manet, Whistler, James Tissot, Jules Jacquemart, M. L. Solon, Philipp Burty, and Henri Fantin-Latour.⁷ The Japanese commodities revealed an everlasting world of art, in which these literary figures experienced something that was absent in actual life. They admired the purity of artistic spirit, the delicacy of the workmanship; and they could buy the oriental objects to realize their doctrine of art for art's sake.

The most famous oriental shop which exercised immense influence upon late-Victorian taste and fashion was Arthur

Lasenby Liberty's in London.⁸ Liberty's was selling oriental goods of all kinds: furniture, wallpapers, jewellery, silver, pewter, silk, fabrics, fans, and Japanese prints. In 1881, Gilbert and Sullivan enhanced the fame of the shop by using its fabrics for costumes in *Patience*. In 1884, E. W. Godwin was in charge of the costume department of the shop. During the 1880s, the shop was frequented by many painters and men of letters, including Ruskin, Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Whistler, Alma-Tadema, and Charles Keene. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Art and Crafts and aesthetic movements were partly due to the widespread fashion of the extraordinary variety of Japanese commodities, which proved to be the most entire and perfect joy to the aesthetes. The exotic colour of the blue, the exquisite lines and shapes, the flawless beauties of form are treasured in the marketplace by those artists. By 1880, Lasenby Liberty himself was an active participant in Arts and Crafts society. The Japanese commodities in his shop carried their fascination into the twentieth century.

The magical appearance of Japanese things displayed, classified, and formally foregrounded in the various oriental shops accelerated the spread of the Japan mania. Frequented by artists and men of letters, they further extended consumers' admiration of Japanese *objets d'art*. The fascinating display of oriental art-commodities caused a fashion of consuming Japanese goods in the name of art. Wilde followed this fashion, first at Oxford, then in London, using oriental objects to decorate his rooms. David Hunter Blair recalled that he once helped Wilde buy two large vases of Japanese blue and white china to set in his room in Magdalen College at Oxford. Blair believed that it was "a fruit of Wilde's gospel of aestheticism" (Mikhail 4), but for us, it is equally a mode of consumption. In London, Wilde carefully made his house on Tite Street an oriental "space." His son Vyvyan Holland describes that "a certain amount of Japonaiserie had crept in" (43). The house was designed by E. W. Godwin, decorated by black and white bamboo chairs, bulrushes in tall Japanese vases, and with two large, many-hued "Japanese" feathers on the ceiling. The fanciful and fantastic aesthetic aura entirely derived from these Japanese commodities. In "The House Beau-

tiful," Wilde recommended the same style to his American audience. According to Kevin O'Brien's reconstruction of the "most effective" lecture (401), Wilde suggested that one should use oriental objects in house decoration. "When the breakfast table is laid in this apartment, with its bright cloth and its dainty blue and white china, with a cluster of red and yellow chrysanthemums in an old Nankin vase in the centre, it is a charming room" (O'Brien 406). I have mentioned this "charming room" in the context of impressionism; now, filled with these Japanese commodities it shows its consumerist meaning. Wilde also listed other Japanese things to strengthen this aesthetic but also consumerist "charm," including "pretty Japanese racks in light wood or bamboo," "the beautiful Japanese mattings," "very handsome and economical rugs from China, Persia, and Japan," "large, noble Japanese dishes could be suspended on the wall," and so on. These oriental objects, though presenting the highest artistic quality of house decoration and intensifying one's visual impressions and aestheticist sensations, also refer back to "common life." They fashioned what can be called the private exhibition of commodities, and the artistic arrangement can be seen as parallel to the technology of commodity representation in the marketplace.

Other aesthetes also were keen to consume Japanese goods, and exhibited them in their "aesthetic homes." Whistler's house, an oriental "space" on Tite Street, was also ornamented with Japanese-style coffee tables, sideboards, and blue pottery. Entire rooms were decorated with wallpapers designed around motifs such as Peacock, Sparrow, and Bamboo. Further, Whistler and other aesthetes seemed more active in dealing with Japanese goods. William Gaunt recorded that Whistler, Rossetti, William Morris, and Charles Augustus Howell collected large numbers of Japanese screens, fans, prints, and blue and white china. Japanese objects demonstrated not only their beauty of shape and design for aestheticist domestic use but also proved to be valuable for making money. Howell sold a collection of oriental pieces to a pawnbroker. Their value was more than his own estimate. He then produced a second collection, but unfortunately this time his collection was mostly modern and worthless (49-50). In the 1870s, Rossetti and Whistler also sold their

Japanese treasures. The dispersal of the oriental objects and their circulation as commodities in the market helped to increase the popularity of "Japan." Gaunt points out that "From being the private sport of a few collectors, the art of China and Japan became a cult: and twenty years after it had first made its appearance in Paris it became absorbed into that strange rapture called English aestheticism" (51). Yet this aesthetic cult stems from the early consumerist culture in England and Europe.

It is clear that the aestheticist mode of promoting everyday life into an art is related to a consumerist craze for Japanese objects, and the exotic taste in house decoration is achieved by the consumption of Japanese commodities. Wilde himself admitted, as O'Brien notes, that the school of decorative art was related to commercialism: "this school should be in direct relation with manufacture and commerce" (402). The exotic and tasteful house decoration is in effect the aesthetic mode of domestic consumption. The artistic use of Japanese things, therefore, suggests the juxtaposition of aestheticism and consumerism. The marketplace played a vital role in the process of popularizing Japan. In fact, the aesthetic notion of Japan is gradually established by a common effort of commercial dealers, consumers, and artists. Wilde discovers his artistic ideal in the fascinating forms and designs of Japanese things which signify an artistic Utopia. He thinks, as O'Brien observes, this aesthetic territory transcends everyday life and therefore can be used to "temper and counteract the sordid materialism of the age" (417). Yet, ironically, his "love of the beautiful" has deep roots in the consumerism of the time. The "Arch-aesthete," who introduced the "English Renaissance of Art" to America, adumbrated at the same time the English consumerist way of life. This paradox is well presented by *Punch* (30 July 1881) in a cartoon picture, of which the caption reads as follows,

Twopence I gave for my sunshade,
A penny I gave for my fan,
Threepence I paid my straw—foreign made,
I'm a Japan-Aesthetic young man!

This "aesthetic" young man, with a Japanese umbrella and a Japanese fan in his hands, parallels Wilde and other aesthetes

who consumed Japanese objects in the name of art. It indicates their double identities as both aesthete and consumer. It also shows the double-sided nature of Japanese *objets d'art*, especially in the image of the fan. For Wilde, as well as for other aesthetes, the Japanese fan is art, "out of any ordinary collection of Japanese fans . . . any young artist will get the most perfect models." The Japanese fan gives one "the right sense of ornament, the effect of the whole surface being decorated" (*Letters* 116). It is an aestheticist symbol which identifies one's artistic taste. Yet when Wilde uses Japanese fans to decorate his home, he actually plays the role of a real consumer, just as *Punch* suggested. For us as well the artistic symbol derives from the consumerist society which Wilde and other aesthetes inhabited and by which they were influenced. The distinction between the aesthetic world and the commercial reality is therefore obscured. This paradox conforms to my view of Wilde's impressionistic "space," in which the fusion of the artistic and the consumerist is evident but on a higher, aesthetic level.

NOTES

- 1 Also phrased as "an era of 'Japanisme'" (Alcock 80). Philipp Burty (1830-90), the French art critic and collector of Japanese *objets d'art*, is the originator of the term "Japonisme," which was first coined in his book *Le Rappel* (1869). The term appears again in his series of article on Japanese artifacts in 1872-73, in which Japonisme applies to both Japanese art and commodities. Alcock employed the term in his book in 1878. It was then widely used by French and English writers and artists, such as Jules de Goncourt and Arthur Symons. See Dufwa 42, 47; and Symons 101.
- 2 In fact, it was a three-volume book, edited by F. Hawks: *Narrative of the Expenditure of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan, Washington: 1856*. For more details of the Westerners' rediscovery of Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, see Gaunt 42-51; Miner 16-24; and Sandberg 295-302.
- 3 See Ashmead's dissertation abstract; also Miner 42-43.
- 4 See Smith and Helfand; and Kohl 157-60.
- 5 In the "Preface" of Wilde's "golden book" (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 9), Pater argues that "The aesthetic critic, then, regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind" (Pater ix). In Pater's view, pleasure stems largely from artistic representation and all sorts of beautiful external forms of life and nature. Pleasure can therefore be regarded as inscribed in the impressionistic style.
- 6 The earliest display of Japanese art and wares can be traced to a provincial exhibition of 1854, held in London, in the gallery of the Old Water Colour Society,

Pall Mall East. It was perhaps inspired by Commodore Perry's trip to Japan. But this exhibition, as Elizabeth Aslin observes, "made very little mark and to contemporary press comment there was no suggestion that the exhibition was an event of any significance" (781). The exhibition of 1862 then serves for most historians as the starting-point.

- ⁷ For more details on Desoyes's shop, see Pennell 84; Gaunt 43; Dufwa 40; W. L. Schwartz 798-806; and Weisberg 16.
- ⁸ Liberty was initially inspired by the Exhibition of 1862, and dreamed of establishing an oriental warehouse to sell Japanese things. In 1875, he opened a shop in Regent Street. Eight years later, he expanded it and acquired two shops further south along the street.

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