

JAPANESE CULTURAL INFLUENCE IN AMERICA: THE BOSTON-NEW YORK EXCHANGE

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It is well known that much of the artistic impact of Japanese art on American culture came to New York by way of Boston, where Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), a passionate collector and promoter of Japanese traditional arts, served from 1890 to 1895 as the first curator of the Japanese department of the Museum of Fine Arts. Born in Salem, Massachusetts, of Catalan ethnicity, Fenollosa graduated from Harvard before leaving for Japan in 1878 to teach political science and philosophy at Tokyo University at the invitation of the Meiji government. Despite the usual assumption that American knowledge of Japanese art in this period originated in Boston, some publication and exhibition projects featuring Japanese art and culture actually began in New York and only then traveled to Fenollosa in Boston. I will document connections between these events and the few artists who would make important careers for themselves in New York, while benefiting indirectly from the initiatives that Fenollosa launched in New England.

From the moment Fenollosa arrived in Japan, his focus began to shift to Japanese art. By 1880, he was concerned that, as a part of the push to modernize, the Japanese government's policies supported the study of Western art, ignoring Japan's own artistic treasures and traditions. Fenollosa advocated a contemporary Japanese art with its own national subject matter. His ideas were spread by his disciples, prominent among them the artist and teacher Arthur Wesley

Dow (1857–1922), born in Ipswich, Massachusetts. He worked as Fenollosa's assistant for two years and then moved to New York to teach at Pratt Institute in 1895. His students there included Max Weber and Edna Boies Hopkins, the latter particularly influenced by Japanese prints. In 1897, Dow returned to the Museum of Fine Arts for two years as curator of Japanese painting and prints. In 1903, Dow moved back to New York and taught at Columbia University's Teachers College until his death in 1922. Among his best-known students was Georgia O'Keeffe, whose engagement with nature may be related to Japanese art as filtered through Dow. He insisted that Japanese artists had already found more completely than any modern painter "a purely abstract language—visual music."¹

Perhaps Fenollosa's single most important disciple was Kakuzō Okakura (1862–1913), a Japanese scholar and writer who attended Tokyo Imperial University, where he first met and studied under Fenollosa. In 1904, the *New York Times* described Okakura as "one of the world's greatest critics and authorities on the art and architecture of China, Japan, and India."² He interpreted Fenollosa's lectures, then joined him on his research excursions to study Japanese temples.

Okakura also became close to Fenollosa's associate William Sturgis Bigelow (1850–1926), a wealthy Boston-born physician who had traveled to Japan with Fenollosa in 1882 and had remained there for seven years,

becoming an art collector and embracing Japan's culture and religious traditions. Okakura and Bigelow traveled around Japan together. In 1886, Bigelow, Okakura, Fenollosa, the New York-born artist John La Farge (Fig. 1), and Bigelow's cousin, the Bostonian writer Henry Adams, all spent time together in Japan.

Also in 1886, Okakura, along with Fenollosa and Hamao Arata, a former vice-president of Tokyo Imperial University, was appointed to the Japanese imperial government's Commission of Enquiry and sent to Europe and the United States to study the teaching of fine arts in the Western world "with a view to the establishment of a similar institution in Japan."³ In 1890, less than two years after his return, Okakura succeeded Hamao Arata as director of the School of Fine Arts, Tokyo, the new imperial art school.

Okakura was instrumental in locating and registering art treasures in Japanese temples and monasteries, a process begun by Fenollosa in the early 1880s. This work eventually led to laws protecting important works of art as national treasures while, at the same time, many collectors outside of Japan were increasingly buying such works and removing them from the country.

In 1898, Okakura, bowing to political pressure, resigned his position at the government-sponsored school and formed an alternative institution. Seventeen painters on the faculty also resigned to join him in the new private venture called Nippon Bijutsuin, or Japan Art Institute. Conservative critics, however, did not respond positively to the new "hazy style" of the painters on the faculty, calling instead for the more traditional emphasis on line.

In 1904, Bigelow, then a trustee of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, invited Okakura to work at the museum. Okakura

was by then well known because of his book *Ideals of the East* (1903), which discussed art and thought in Asia.⁴ He accepted the invitation and, in February 1904, left for America, taking with him three of the artists on his faculty: Yokoyama Taikan (1868–1958), Hishida Shunsō (1874–1911), and Rokkaku Shisui (1867–1950), the latter a lacquer artist who came to help with object conservation at the museum.⁵ Like Okakura, these three artists wore only Japanese-style dress, even though by this time Japanese traveling abroad usually wore Western-style garments. Their appearance was described in the *New York Times* in March 1904 as "picturesque."⁶ They, thus, made a point about cultural dominance and asserted their own dignity. By 1910, Okakura had been appointed the head of the Asian art division at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Okakura immediately used his network of friends in America to arrange shows for his friends in New York, Cambridge, and Washington, D.C. In 1903, the year before Okakura left for America, he met opera singer Emma Thursby (1845–1931) and her sister, Ina, in Japan; both were well placed in New York society. Okakura also became a close friend of the Boston collector Isabella Stewart Gardner, who had opened her Fenway home as a museum in 1903; it was just around the corner from the Museum of Fine Arts. Okakura stayed in close touch with Bigelow and La Farge in New York, where both were members of the Century Association, a private club with many artist members and an active exhibition program.

Bigelow and La Farge also helped make sure that Okakura's subsequent books were published and widely read in New York, especially *The Book of Tea* (1906) but also *The Awakening of Japan* (1904). At the same time, their influence enabled Yokoyama

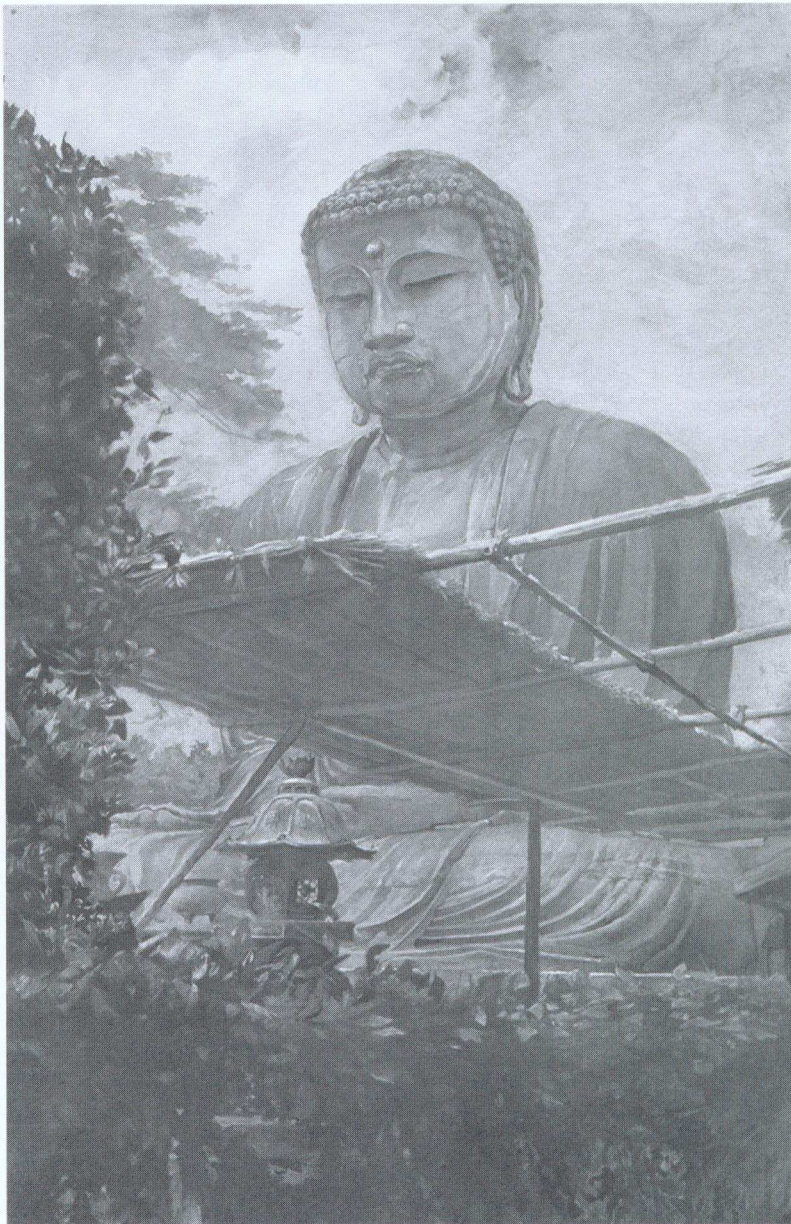


Fig. 1 John La Farge, *The Great Statue of Amida Buddha at Kamakura, Known as the Daibutsu, from the Priest's Garden*. 1887. Watercolor and gouache on off-white wove paper, $19\frac{1}{4}'' \times 12\frac{1}{2}''$. (48.9 \times 31.8 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of the family of Maria L. Hoyt, 1966 (66.143). (Photo: © Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Taikan (Fig. 2) and Hishida Shunsō, two traditional Japanese painters who had been Okakura's students and who arrived in New York with him in 1904, to show their work at the Century Association from April 12 to May 1, 1904.

According to the Century Club catalogue, both artists were "prominent members of the Nippon-Bijitsuin," and each exhibited twenty-five paintings on silk. Okakura was the author of the catalogue essay in which he referred to his first book, *Ideals of the East*, which discussed art and thought in Asia. After the show, the two artists traveled to St. Louis with Okakura to take part in the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition. Their show later went to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Among the collectors who purchased work from the Century show were J. P. Morgan, Jr. (1867–1943), who bought Taikan's *East Wind*, and John La Farge's secretary, one Miss Barnes, who bought Taikan's *The Sea—Moonlight* and Shunsō's *Twilight*. According to Taikan's memoir, this was remarkable since in Japan at that time "we couldn't sell our pictures for twenty yen. But in American exhibitions, small watercolors went for thousands."⁷ Prices actually ranged from \$75 to \$3,120. With the help of Sara Bull, from whom they rented a studio and living space, Taikan and Shunsō were able to show their work in Cambridge during November 1904.

Japanese art was then in vogue among American collectors and artists, not only in New York, Boston, and elsewhere on the East Coast, but also in Chicago and on the West Coast. Okakura's importance was significant (on par with the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright or Ezra Pound). Around the time that Okakura and his party arrived in America, Japanese woodblock prints were exhibited at the Lenox Library in New York, where

they caught the attention of artists such as Robert Henri and his students at the New York School of Art, including the future poet Vachel Lindsay and Edward Hopper, among many others.⁸ American artists such as La Farge and the Boston painter and printmaker Charles Hovey Pepper (1864–1950) had long been collecting Japanese prints. Pepper showed his collection of prints in October 1905 at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C.⁹ Even photographer and dealer Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946) showed a group of Japanese prints at his 291 gallery from May 18 through June 2, 1909, art that had come from the Frederick William Hunter Collection in New York.

It was the opera singer Emma Thursby who would provide Okakura hospitality in New York.¹⁰ Thursby had first traveled to Japan in 1903. She had already met Norwegian violinist Ole Bull while performing in Europe in 1878 and, after his death, remained close to his widow, born Sara Thorp (1850–1911) in Madison, Wisconsin. In 1903, during her nearly five-month stay in Japan, Thursby made many friends with whom she corresponded for years.¹¹ Surviving letters from Japanese friends discuss their visits and Okakura's work on establishing the Asian art wing at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Thursby and her sister, Ina (who had joined Emma in Japan during the summer of 1903), held Friday salons at their Gramercy Park home in Manhattan. They honored Okakura in 1904 by making him and the artists in his party their guests of honor at their salon for two weeks in a row.¹²

After their New York exhibition, Okakura brought Taikan and Shunsō to Boston, where they rented a studio from Mrs. Bull, who had been one of Okakura's traveling companions in India. When Okakura and his entourage first arrived in America, Mrs. Bull's



Fig. 2 Yokoyama Taikan, *Moonlight in the Woods*. c. 1904. Ink and color on silk, 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ " \times 20 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (75.6 \times 51.0 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of the Estate of Mrs. James F. Curtis (27.806)

outbuilding was already rented. Therefore, at her suggestion, Okakura turned for help to Bigelow in New York. At the time, Sara Bull was involved with Green Acre, a conference center in Eliot, Maine, dedicated to the study and promotion of peace and religious harmony. The Green Acre Conferences, held since 1894, were attended by leading figures in culture, social science, and religion, including Swami Vivekananda, the first American female physician Elizabeth Blackwell, and Emma Thursby.

In the summer of 1904 at the annual Green Acre Conference, Emma Thursby dressed in Japanese costume and sang the national anthem of Japan, even as the war between Japan and Russia raged.¹³ Afterward, the audience stood and sang the national anthem of Russia and prayed that the two nations would make peace. In 1905, hearing that the signing of the Portsmouth Peace Treaty to end the Russo-Japanese War was to take place at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, the founder of Green Acre, Sarah Farmer, invited the American, Japanese, and Russian embassies to join in a celebration. Only the Japanese delegation accepted the invitation and appeared at Green Acre on August 31, 1905, to discuss peace.

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) was a charismatic teacher of Hinduism in the United States and Great Britain, where he went on popular lecture tours in the 1890s. Such teachers offered American Protestants spiritual comfort against what they saw as Western materialism. In contrast, both Vivekananda and Okakura, who had sought him out, emphasized Asian spirituality and its expression through the visual arts.

Also affected by this same intellectual milieu was the then little-known American painter Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), a native of Lewiston, Maine, who worked as a

handyman at Green Acre, where he had his first exhibition at the home of Mrs. Ole Bull in 1907. The show was a success, and Hartley moved from Maine to Boston. In 1908, he had an exhibition there and received a letter of introduction from the artist Maurice Prendergast to meet the painter William Glackens (1870–1938) in New York. This led Hartley to move to New York in 1909.

Upon his arrival in New York in 1909, Hartley impressed Glackens, who arranged a small exhibition of the artist's work. Hartley's paintings soon caught the attention of Alfred Stieglitz. In May, following the show of Japanese prints at 291, Stieglitz gave Hartley his first extensive exhibition, introducing Hartley to the New York avant-garde. Spirituality that reflected both Vivekananda's India and Okakura's Japan as well as the milieu at Green Acre would continue to reverberate for Hartley. A few years later, he depicted a seated Buddha in his 1912 painting *Musical Theme (Oriental Symphony)* (Fig. 3).

While in New York, Okakura had lunch with Howard Mansfield (1849–1938), a lawyer who collected Japanese paintings, prints, pottery, lacquer, and sword fittings. He was a trustee and treasurer of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His essay "American Appreciation of Japanese Art" chronicled American collectors of Japanese art and appeared in a 1915 publication, *America to Japan*, a volume edited by Lindsay Russell, president of the Japan Society in New York, which was founded in 1905 and is still active today.¹⁴

Indirectly, Okakura also influenced Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1893–1953), who first arrived in New York in the fall of 1910. Four years earlier, Kuniyoshi, at the age of sixteen, had immigrated to California from his native Okayama. Although we now think of



Fig. 3 Marsden Hartley, *Musical Theme (Oriental Symphony)*. 1912–1913. Oil on canvas, 39" × 32" (91.1 × 81.3 cm). Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, gift of Mr. Samuel Lustgarten

Kuniyoshi as a painter and printmaker in the Western style, his formative years in New York intersected with one of Okakura's students, Masao Kawabe (1874–1918). Once in New York, Kuniyoshi boarded with and worked for Kawabe, a Japanese artist and

designer who was a friend of his father from Okayama. Kawabe, who probably raised Kuniyoshi's awareness of Japanese traditional arts, lived and worked at 147 Broadway at Sixty-sixth Street. Now forgotten, Kawabe studied with Okakura in Tokyo and

graduated in 1899. He arrived in New York in 1903 and opened a design studio.

Kawabe designed an elaborate Japanese tearoom for the auditorium annex of the Congress Hotel on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. He employed additional craftsmen, including the carver Professor K. Takouchi from the College of Fine Arts in Tokyo. A critic described the tearoom with its carvings and murals as "not of the modern Japanese architecture, but more after the style of temples built between the Fujiwara (thirteenth century) and the Ashikaga periods (fifteenth century)."¹⁵ This description connects Kawabe to his teacher's mission to preserve the traditions of Japan's artistic legacy.

Kawabe also participated in the 1904 St. Louis exhibition, connecting there with fellow Japanese artists, including Okakura, who gave a lecture entitled "Modern Problems in Painting." Thus, through Okakura, Kawabe was also linked to the Boston network of Fenollosa and Japanese art and culture. Japan's art exhibitions at the St. Louis World's Fair were so successful that Japan came to be regarded as "one of the first nations of the world" just at the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Japan's first war against a Western power. In "Modern Problems in Painting," Okakura spoke about his concern with art and nationalism, as he defined the relationship "between art and war—art as a form of warfare in which its distribution becomes a method of cultural defense."¹⁶

In discussing the history of painting and "the problems of lines, light, and color," Okakura inserted a reference to "the mystery of color-equations as conceived by your living master, John LaFarge," paying homage to his friend.¹⁷ Okakura recognized the importance of an artist's relationship to nature as a universal aspect of art: "Although the

development of painting in different countries has created different methods of approaching nature, the original relation to it has never been broken."¹⁸ Okakura stated his interest in "the relation of painting to society" because "society regulates the conditions under which art is produced."¹⁹

Okakura lamented that "society has broken the ancient harmony," meaning that artists today could no longer count on the same status accorded artists when art was a "hereditary profession," as it was in the East, where families of artists or monasticism protected "the brotherhood of painters."²⁰ "The modern spirit," he proclaimed, "in emancipating the man, exiles the artist. The painter of to-day has no recognized function in the social scheme. He may be nearer to nature, but is further from humanity."²¹

The largest dilemma for Okakura was "the onslaught of Western art on our national painting. A great battle is raging among us in the contest for supremacy between Eastern and Western ideals."²² He explained that in Japan "the word 'modernization' means occidentalization." Okakura spoke of the folly of allowing Japanese traditional painting to disappear, a victim of industrial development. He expressed his desire to preserve "the art-inheritance of Asia" not only in museums, but among contemporary artists.²³

With his lectures and through his English-language books and articles, Okakura wanted to promote Japan as a country of culture. He hoped to preserve historic Japanese art and its traditional styles and materials. He was fortunate in meeting a number of Americans in both Boston and New York who supported his goals, especially Fenollosa, Bigelow, and La Farge.

Okakura's influence in America has been greater than one might imagine. Among his

students was Langdon Warner, a Harvard professor of Asian art who served in the United States Army's Antiquities Division in World War II and became a legend in Japan, where he is credited with saving the culturally rich cities of Nara and Kyoto from nuclear destruction.²⁴ Warner's book *The Enduring Art of Japan* was first published in 1952 and purchased that year by the artist and patron Alfonso Ossorio, who befriended Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner.²⁵ Warner's book and teachings introduced Ossorio to Zen and to Daisetz T. Suzuki's 1934 *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, a book much read in art circles in New York during the 1950s.²⁶ Warner wrote that "in the practice of putting down their paintings in ink on paper Zen artists discovered that the principle of *muga* (it is not I that am doing this) opens the gate for the necessary essential truth to flow in. When the self does not control the drawing, meaning must. The principle runs all through Zen teachings especially where action is involved."²⁷

This concept of action is closely related

to what Harold Rosenberg describes in "The American Action Painters," which appeared in *Art News* in December 1952: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined."²⁸ Rosenberg's landmark article, in which he first coined the term "action painting," follows just months after the publication of Warner's book, which he may well have heard Ossorio discussing when they socialized in their shared summer community in East Hampton, New York.

The intricate early twentieth-century connection between Boston and New York helped to make Japanese art and culture better known in the United States and changed the trajectory of more than one artist working in New York. The influence of Japanese culture thus continued to permeate American art, literature, and architecture well into the twentieth-century.

NOTES

The author wishes to thank Professor Michitaka Suzuki of Okayama University for his help. This essay was originally presented as a paper at the College Art Association's annual meeting in 2011.

1. See Sarah Whitaker Peters, *Becoming O'Keeffe: The Early Years* (New York: Abbeville, 1991), p. 86.

2. "Greatest Critic Tells of Japanese Art," *New York Times* (20 Mar. 1904), p. SM 6.

3. William Sturgis Bigelow and John Ellerton Lodge, "Okakura, Kakuzo," obituary first printed in *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* 11, no. 67 (Dec. 1913):72–75; repr. in *Okakura Kakuzo Okakura Tenshin and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Nagoya and Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2000), p. 14, n. 4.

4. Kakuzō Okakura, *Ideals of the East with Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (New York: Dutton, 1903).

5. Victoria Weston, *Japanese Painting and National Identity: Okakura Tenshin and His Circle* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2004), p. 245.

6. "Art Experts from Japan," *New York Times* (7 Mar. 1904), p. 7. See also Weston, p. 233.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 248–249.

8. Vachel Lindsay wrote about this in a letter to his father. See Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 36.

9. *Nishiki-Ye from the Collection of Charles Hovey Pepper and Dr. Swan M. Burnett*, Cosmos Club (24–27 Oct. 1905), catalogue with essay by Pepper.

10. Emma Thursby, *Diary* (2 Mar. 1904), series 5, box 15, Emma Thursby Papers, New-York Historical Society; *New York Herald* (13 Mar. 1904). The painters stayed at 41 East Nineteenth Street with "a fellow countryman" whose identity remains unknown. See



SOURCE

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