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Pre-Raphaelite *Japonisme*?
Enthusiasm for and Ambivalence Towards a New Culture

The art of the Pre-Raphaelites and the phenomenon of *Japonisme* have received popular and scholarly attention within the last fifteen years. But did such a thing as "Pre-Raphaelite *Japonisme*" ever come about?[1] If we take Gabriel P. Weisberg's very succinct definition of "*Japonisme*" as a "taste for things Japanese" (Meech and Weisberg, 7), there certainly was a period during the 1860s when a number of Pre-Raphaelites had such a taste. But artists of the so-called first Pre-Raphaelite phase in the late 1840s and 1850s showed little interest in Japan. In fact, before 1862, when there was a much-discussed Japanese section in the London International exhibition, Japan was still very little known among most British artists and designers. A rare early exception was the publication of *Rudiments of Curvilinear Design* by George Phillips (London, 1838-1840), with two freely adapted plates of "Japanese" designs.[2] However, this does not seem to have made much impact on the generation of the late 1840s and 1850s.

Artistically this was also a period when British artists in general showed less interest in foreign art than in either the previous or the next generation. Nude paintings went out of fashion at the Royal Academy Summer Shows, which was not the case in Continental salons. Even the Great Exhibition of 1851 was ideologically parochial and inward-looking. It tried, not wholly successfully, to overcome French dominance in design by establishing London as the center of the world, to which all other nations might flock. This chauvinism in art and design was not universal - as, for example, Owen Jones's enthusiasm for Oriental design shows - but was nevertheless very widespread, especially among fine artists.[3]

The first-phase Pre-Raphaelites could certainly not be characterized as cosmopolitan, and their attitude to foreign culture was in general ambivalent during this period. Their art education and cultural outlook at this time seem to have been intensely parochial, in spite of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's family connections with Italy and William Holman Hunt's travels to the Near East.[4] The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's admiration for Lasinio's engravings of the Campo Santo frescoes at Pisa at their inaugural meeting in September 1848 indicates their lack of general knowledge of European art and culture. It has even been suggested that they became interested in Lasinio in the first place because they had heard that Benjamin Robert Haydon had lent his copy of Lasinio to their idol John Keats (Bowness, 13). Their artistic struggle was fought out within the parameters of the British art world. This was in marked contrast to the next generation of artists: Frederick Leighton, Edward Poynter, and James McNeill Whistler trained in Paris and elsewhere in Europe and were knowledgeable about contemporary European art trends. It is characteristic that the only exception to insularization among the artists of the early Pre-Raphaelite circle was Ford Madox Brown, who had a Continental art education, though he remained a loner among the group.

How and when did the Pre-Raphaelites then become interested in Japan? Whistler is credited with having aroused this enthusiasm among the second generation of Pre-Raphaelites of the Rossetti circle. In *Some Reminiscences* (1: 276), William Michael Rossetti states that

> the "Japanese mania" did not exist at the date [October 1862] when we entered Tudor House. It began in our quarters towards the middle of 1863. . . . It was Mr. Whistler who first called my brother's attention to Japanese art.

"The middle of 1863" seems plausible as the start of Japanese interest within the Rossetti circle, with Whistler as the initiator, and there is ample circumstantial evidence for this assumption.[5]