

**THE FINE ART OF IMPERIALISM:
JAPAN'S PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL
EXPOSITIONS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY¹**

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In Japanese history, the nineteenth century can be sharply and unequivocally divided almost exactly in half. American gunboat diplomacy led Japan, closed to all Western nations but the Dutch for 215 years, to sign the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854 and commercial treaties with several European nations in 1858. This set Japan on a course of modernization that resulted in the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate and the establishment of an imperial oligarchy. The top foreign policy goal of the new government was to renegotiate the unfair treaties that had granted foreigners extraterritoriality and took control of tariffs out of Japanese hands.

The Meiji government perceptively realized that to accomplish this, they would have to be taken as equals, and that formed the basis for many political acts. Defining these acts in the context of Westernization and modernization is one of the central questions about this period. The new government imposed changes that altered the social fabric of Japan, changing everything from the architectural style of official buildings to dress, diet, and timekeeping. In a more practical vein, the government also needed to find a way to obtain foreign currency and prevent the flood of cheap mass-produced imports from decimating the domestic economy.

Both economic issues and the effort to receive equal treatment could be addressed through active participation in World's Fairs and international expositions. By definition, these fairs served to promote commercial interests and display national pride. For Japan however, there was a dichotomy between what was occurring internally, with the external adaptation of Western ideas, and what was exhibited at the fairs, which although not necessarily purely traditional, presented a Japanese aesthetic. Despite immense external changes, the Japanese sought to maintain their sense of self, as exemplified in the phrase coined by novelist Mori Ōgai, *wakon yōsai*, or "Japanese spirit, Western technology." Expositions were therefore used to market Japanese civilization as equal to that of the West.

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Because in the nineteenth century they could not compete with machinery, aesthetics became the battleground.

The earliest appearance of Japanese goods in an international exposition was in the Great Industrial Exposition in Dublin in 1853. Just a hodgepodge of objects that had been previously collected by Europeans, this continued to be the pattern of Japanese participation for fifteen years. Even the much larger London International Exhibition in 1862 was assembled by former Consul General to Japan, Rutherford Alcock, rather than the government. A Japanese delegation to Europe, the first since the sixteenth century, was not impressed, calling the exhibit “a jumble of sundries like a curiosity shop.”² But in regards to the Fair itself, the Japanese understood exactly what they were seeing. Fukuzawa Yukichi, a translator on the mission, wrote that, “Expositions are held for the purpose of teaching each other and learning about each other, mutually taking the other’s strengths for one’s own benefit.”³

It should be noted that the idea of exhibiting domestic and imported products was not entirely new to Japan. For example, Hiraga Gennai (1729-1779) organized four exhibitions of useful plants, animals and minerals in the 1750s and 60s, publishing the results of his studies in *Butsurui hinshitsu* [An Appraisal of Natural Products] (1763). In the Meiji period too, small expositions were held all over Japan from around 1870.⁴

The Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867, however, was the first government-sponsored participation in any event of this sort. Nevertheless, this exhibit was also arranged with the aid of French ambassador Leon de Roche and was indicative of the internal political trouble that made this the final year of the shogunate. Two domains, Satsuma and Saga, even sent exhibits independently. On the other hand, it was the first time a major exhibition of Japanese art had been held in France, and the modest exhibitions of prints and decorative arts provided by the Japanese government set off an explosion of Japanese influenced design known as Japonisme. Some weapons were also included but this was not really new technology, as guns had been produced in Japan since the sixteenth century.

² Fuchinabe Tokizō, quoted in Yoshimi Shunya, *Hakurankai no seijigaku* (Tokyo: Chukoronsha, 1992), p. 112.

³ Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Fukuzawa Yukichi chōsakushū I-seiyō jijō* (Tokyo: Keio Daigaku shuppankai, 2002), p. 50.

⁴ Yoshimi, *Hakurankai no seijigaku*, p. 122.

The 1867 Paris Exposition was also important because Sano Tsunetami (1822-1902), who was actually on his way to Holland to commission a battleship, was charged with managing the Japanese commission. This was fortuitous because although Sano would spend most of his government career in the Ministry of Military Affairs, he was also a moving force behind Meiji government involvement in expositions. He witnessed the intense interest in the Japanese sales floors, drawn perhaps by the teahouse staffed with geisha, and conversely the inability to sell all the merchandise because it had been poorly selected. Although he was only seventeen at the time, his experiences both at the Fair and abroad led him to be selected for the Imperial Commission for the next World's Fair.

Between Paris and the next World's Fair in 1873, the Welt Ausstelleng in Vienna, Japan underwent a revolution, and the new government was only five years old. It is natural then that advice was again sought from a foreigner, this time Gottfried Wagener, a German employed in Japan who was instrumental in the transformation of Japanese decorative arts, adding new techniques and advising on what might sell. Wagener was also employed as technical director for the Fair by the Austrian government. But Sano was also instrumental in ensuring that quality products that would sell were sent to Vienna. It was the stated purpose of the Meiji government to participate by gathering the best things from all over Japan to show the West the ingenuity of the Japanese people.⁵ Exhibits included a golden fish from the roof of Nagoya Castle and a paper mâché reproduction of the Kamakura Daibutsu, a thirty-seven foot bronze Buddha statue from the thirteenth century. Kido Takayoshi, who was traveling Europe on a fact-finding mission, was critical of these efforts. He wrote in his diary:

The people of our country are not yet able to distinguish between the purpose of an exposition and of a museum; therefore, they have tried to display a mountain of tiny and delicate Oriental objects without regard for the expense. This seems to invite contempt for dignity of our country on the part of others.⁶

⁵ Yoshimi, *Hakurankai no seijigaku*, p. 117.

⁶ Kido Takayoshi, *The Diary of Kido Takayoshi*, vol. 2, trans. Sidney DeVere Brown and Akiko Hirota (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1985), p. 322.

Nevertheless, Vienna was a greater economic success for the Japanese than Paris had been, not only in terms of sales, but also because, for the first time Japanese exhibits received prizes, a total of 264. While the best that any Japanese entry received was an honorable mention, rather than the lucrative medals, it was a first step to acceptance.⁷

The Philadelphia Centennial in 1876 was a landmark for Japan as much as it was for its host. Although America had been responsible for opening Japan to free trade, this was the first large exhibition of Japanese art in the United States. Perhaps even more significantly, it was the first exposition where separate pavilions were constructed rather than being housed under one large roof. And it was architecture where Japanese aesthetic had arguably the greatest impact.

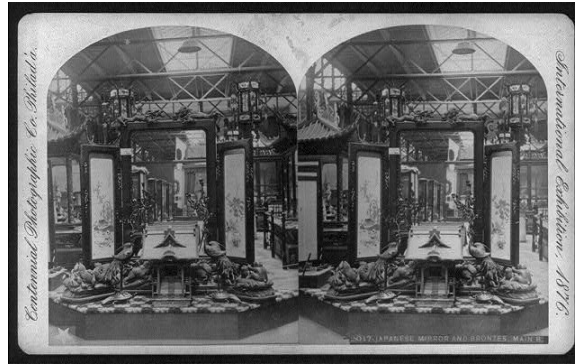


Fig. 1. Japanese Mirror and Bronzes, Main Building, Philadelphia Exhibition, 1876⁸

Although it was common practice to use local labor, Japanese builders were sent to erect the Fair buildings and all the materials were imported, comprising fifty boxcar-loads. Despite their strange attire and methods, the carpenters attracted admiration, creating “a credible specimen

⁷ See Tōkyō kokuritsu bunkazai kenkyūsho, ed. *Meijioki bankoku hakurankai bijutsuhin shuppin mokuroku* (Tōkyō: Chūō kōron bijutsu shuppan, 1994), pp. 198-201.

⁸ Centennial Photo Co. Collection of the Library of Congress, 1876.

of most thorough workmanship.”⁹ The Japanese exhibit was comprised of two buildings. One was a typical beam construction, part of which the commissioners lived in. The other building served as a bazaar and teahouse set in a prime location near the entrance.

These efforts were not diminished at smaller events. At the New Orleans World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition held from 1884-1885, for example, the Japanese exhibit was described as “much more nearly complete than any other Oriental and than most European displays.”¹⁰ Indeed, the efforts were thought to show the “enlightened and progressive spirit manifested by the Island Empire.”¹¹ In fact, few foreign nations participated in this Fair at all and yet Japan participated in several other international fairs this very same year: the London Sanitary Exposition, the St. Petersburg Horticultural Exposition and the Edinburgh Silver Exposition; and three the following year: the London International Exhibit of Inventions, the Nuremberg Metal Works Exposition, and the Barcelona World’s Fair.

Although even more awards were won at the Paris World’s Fair in 1889, it was really at the Columbus Exposition in Chicago in 1893 that Japan came into its own. Chicago was the biggest Fair in the nineteenth century, and the Japanese effort was the biggest and best yet. Japan was among the first foreign nations to accept and invested more than \$630,000, one of the largest expenditures of any country.¹² They managed to negotiate one of the best locations in the site, even overriding landscaper Frederick Law Olmstead’s objections to make use of the wooded island in the middle of the lagoon. The Japanese pavilion was some five times the size of the Philadelphia effort. A modified version of the Hō-ōden [Phoenix Hall], a temple near Kyoto was erected by Japanese carpenters.

⁹ “Japanese Carpenters’ Tools,” *The Manufacturer and Builder* 8/4 (1876), pp. 73-74.

¹⁰ Lafcadio Hearn, “The New Orleans Exposition: The Japanese Exhibit,” in Albert Mordell, ed., *Occidental Gleanings* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1925), p. 209.

¹¹ Herbert Fairall, *The World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, New Orleans, 1884-1885* (Iowa City: Republican Publishing Company, 1885), p. 395.

¹² Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 48

Not only was it much larger than the buildings erected in Philadelphia, this temple was a composite of several wings added to the original structure over a six-hundred year period, from the late Heian (980-1185) to the Tokugawa periods (1615-1867). The Japanese compound was regarded as “one of the most charming and idyllic spots of the whole exposition.”¹³ It was visited by architects such as Greene & Greene and Frank Lloyd Wright, and that influence has shaped modern architecture. In fact the Japanese buildings were among the few structures that survived the end of the Fair, and remained until being burned in a fire in the 1940s. The fine arts exhibits were specifically selected to “conform to the classification adopted in Japan,” representing “only the best and most truly representative specimens of Japanese art”¹⁴



Fig. 2. Construction of Hō-ōden Pavilion, Chicago, 1893¹⁵

¹³ Marion Shaw, *World's Fair Notes* (St. Paul: Pogo Press, 1992), p. 66.

¹⁴ Gozo Tateno, “Foreign Nations at the World’s Fair,” *North American Review* 156/434 (1893), p. 40.

¹⁵ Japanese carpenters and stone masons in distinctive native attire starting to construct the pavilion at World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893. C.D. Arnold. “Three Men on Homemade Wooden ‘Pile Driver,’” Collection of the Library of Congress, 1892.

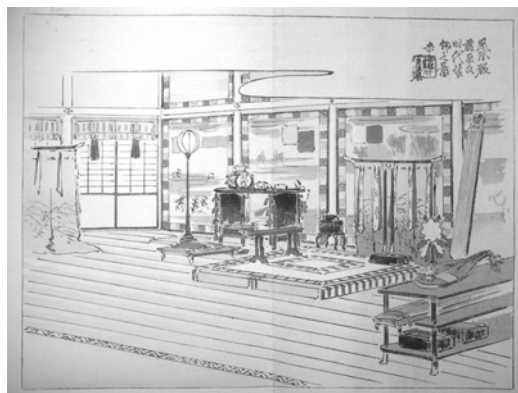


Fig.3. Interior of the Hō-ōden Pavilion, Chicago, 1893¹⁶

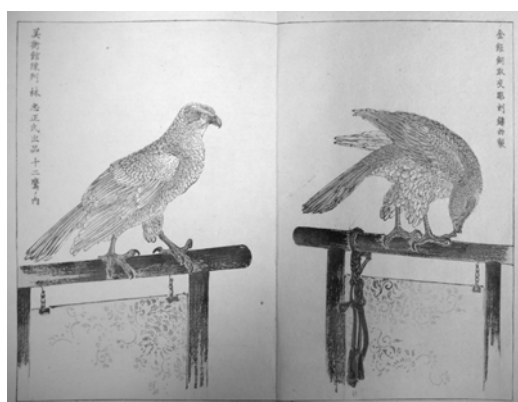


Fig 4. Illustration of two of the twelve bronze falcons, Chicago, 1893¹⁷

It was common practice for nations to publish fact books about their exhibits and conditions in their country but for Chicago, the Japanese

¹⁶ Hakuranki, *Kakuhin Sekai Hakurankai – Bijutsuhin gafū* (Tokyo: Okura Shoten, 1893). Collection of Seijo University.

¹⁷ Bronze figures designed by Hayashi Tadamasu and made by Suzuki Chōkichi. Originals in the National Museum for Modern Art, Tokyo. Hakuranki. *Kakuhin Sekai Hakurankai – Bijutsuhin gafū* (Tokyo: Okura Shoten, 1893). Collection of Seijo University

Fair Committee commissioned a special *History of the Empire of Japan*, written by top scholars under the Ministry of Education and translated into English by the well-known scholar Frank Brinkley for distribution at the fair. This work was copiously illustrated with traditional prints and expounded the glories of the empire.

Moreover, in order to improve efforts abroad and reap similar benefits domestically, a series of “Domestic Industrial Fairs” were staged. After all, as one scholar phrased it, “holding an exhibition...became one of the obligatory tasks for a country that had achieved world power status as well as for those countries aspiring to do so.”¹⁸ Sano Tsunetami was the impetus behind establishing these Fairs, and Gottfried Wagener was enlisted to serve as judge on the first three, prevented from any further participation by his death in 1892.¹⁹ Four domestic industrial fairs were held in the nineteenth century – 1877, 1881, 1890, and 1895 – all off years for World’s Fairs. The first Domestic Industrial Fair in 1877 was held despite the fact that civil war had ended only three months previously. It was closely patterned after the fairs that had been observed abroad.

The entrance had a large gate with turnstiles as had been used at the Centennial Exhibition the year before. Because these were industrial exhibitions, a much greater attempt was made to show industry and not just art, including silk reeling. There were also exhibits of mundane objects which, until a few years previous, had been imported, including “surveyors’ instruments, large trumpets; foreign clothing; beautiful dress; boots and shoes...; trunks; chairs and furniture of all kinds; soap; hats; caps; matches and some machinery, though not much.”²⁰ Although opened and closed by the emperor, the domestic fairs were much lower key than international expositions. They did however improve. One observer of the 1890 Fair called it a “capital, though not very extensive imitation of the annual Exhibitions that used to be held at South Kensington.”²¹

¹⁸ Ayako Hotta-Lister, *The Japan-British Exhibition of 1910* (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1999.), p. 4.

¹⁹ Yoshida Mitsukuni, *Oyatoigaikokujin-sangyō* (Tokyo: Kajima Kenkyūjō, 1968).

²⁰ Edward S. Morse, *Japan Day by Day*, vol. 1 (Atlanta: Cherokee Publishing, 1990), pp. 254; and William Elliot Griffis, *The Mikado’s Empire*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper Brothers, 1903), p. 589.

²¹ Douglas Sladen, *The Japs at Home* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1892), p. 202.

The Meiji government made fairs a priority, funding them even when the domestic fiscal situation was shaky. For much of the early years of the Meiji period, in fact, currency exchange issues, trade imbalances, investments in infrastructure and limited ability of the government to collect taxes meant that government spending was consistently in the red. In 1873, for example, the year of the Fair in Vienna, there were riots all over Japan against government-imposed social changes, rice prices, the taxation method, and conscription.²² For the Chicago Fair, the Diet and the executive branch agreed to the large expenditures, despite considerable domestic budget cuts.²³

I have as yet been unable to come up with an accurate number of how many fairs and expositions the Japanese participated in during the nineteenth century, but there were at least twenty-seven Japanese exhibits during the thirty-three years between 1867 and 1900, in addition to the four Domestic Industrial Exhibitions. The government remained committed to the effort because it obtained positive benefits from those efforts.

This aggressive marketing of Japanese aesthetics ended with the nineteenth century. In 1894, Japan entered the Sino-Japanese War, well on the way to flexing her wings as a regional power. New treaty agreements were signed that year, although they did not take effect until 1899. Most forms of Western industrialization had been adopted, civil unrest was temporarily calmed, and the economy had recovered. Japan was ready to present a new, more confident image to the world and this was evident in the exhibits in the Paris World's Fair of 1900. While Japanese art was still esteemed, there for the first time, "tubular boilers, armour plate and guns" were not just shown, but appreciated.²⁴ Efforts to promote trade and the efforts to promote Japanese civilization went hand in hand because recognition of equality was as important as economic prosperity. World's Fairs were prioritized because they could achieve these goals with finesse.

²² Joseph Heco, *The Narrative of a Japanese*, ed. James Murdoch, vol. 2 (San Francisco: American-Japanese Publishing Association, 1980), pp. 178-180.

²³ Tateno, "Foreign Nations," p. 37.

²⁴ Richard Mandell, *Paris 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 84.