

The Beginning of Japonisme in Italian Fashion

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1. Introduction: the beginning of Japonisme in Italy

The term “Japonisme” refers to the process of discovering and assimilating Japanese art in some Western countries.

This phenomenon, which began in France during the second half of the 19th century, also spread to England, to Germany and later, at the end of the 19th century, to Italy, where the “Esposizione Internazionale delle Arti Decorative” (“International Fair of Decorative Arts”) in Turin in 1902 confirmed the fervor of the passion for Japan¹.

From this moment on, Japanese esthetics and art had an influence on several aspects of Italian cultural life: painting, furniture, literature, theater, fashion and even flower-growing.

Italian Japonisme was thoroughly studied in 2003, on the occasion of the publication of a book in 2 volumes *Italia - Giappone 450 anni (Italy – Japan 450 Years)* by Adolfo Tamburello, published by the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente (The Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient) in Rome and the Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” (University of Naples “The Oriental”)². Without a doubt the most interesting essay was written by Roberta Boglione and it deals with Japonisme in Italian painting. She presented all the artists, of which Giuseppe De Nittis is the most well known, who were influenced by the style and the iconography of Japanese art³. Boglione points out that at the beginning of the 20th century the influence of Japan had spread even to graphic arts and especially to advertising posters, such as the ones used for the Mele Department Store in Naples.

In fact, Japonisme in Italy was, especially till the 1920s, a widespread phenomenon which involved different artistic forms and which had an influence not only on the elite but also on popular culture. One example of this can be seen by the fact that in 1904 Liebig, a company which made meat extracts, gave its faithful Italian clients figurines featuring Japanese scenes⁴ (**Fig.1**).

A confirmation of the fact that Japan was fashionable in Italy at the end of the 19th century, one must remember that in 1896 the “Corriere della Sera”, the most important national newspaper, issued a poster of a Japanese woman dressed in a kimono, as part of a campaign to promote annual subscriptions of the newspaper (**Fig 2**).

2. Japonisme in Italian Fashion

¹ M. Fagioli, *La presenza del Giappone all’Esposizione internazionale d’arte decorativa moderna in Torino 1902*, in *Torino 1902. Le arti decorative internazionali del nuovo secolo*, 1994, pp. 369-371.

² *Italia-Giappone 450 anni*, II voll, by A. Tamburello, Roma – Napoli, 2003.

³ R. Boglione, *Il fenomeno del giapponismo artistico in Italia: la pittura*, in *Italia-Giappone 450 anni*, by A. Tamburello, 2003, I, pp. 307-327. See also R. Boglione, *Il japonisme in Italia 1860-1900 – Parte prima*, in “Il Giappone”, XXXVIII, [1998], 2000, pp. 85-113 and R. Boglione Roberta, *Il japonisme in Italia – Parte seconda 1900-1930*, in “Il Giappone”, XXXIX, [1999], 2001, pp. 15-47. About Giuseppe De Nittis see M. Moscatiello, *Le japonisme de Giuseppe De Nittis: un peintre italien en France à la fin du XIX siècle*, 2011.

⁴ L. Dimitrio, *Figurine Liebig*, in *Riflessi, Incontri ad Arte tra Oriente e Occidente*, 2009, pp. 136-139.

In Italy there is no extensive research on the beginning and the later development of Japonisme in Italian fashion.

Only Sofia Gnoli, from Rome, in 2003 published a brief essay *La moda tra Oriente e Occidente: Giappone, Europa, Italia (Fashion in the East and the West: Japan, Europe, Italy)*, where she showed that the 70s and 80s of the 20th century was the time when Italian fashion was influenced by Japan in a very significant way⁵.

But in Italy there is no comparable study to the one that was made for the exhibition *Japonisme & Mode* in Paris in 1996⁶.

In an essay of the catalogue, Akiko Fukai traced the evolution of Japonisme in Western fashion in four stages: first the introduction of the kimono as an exotic garment, then the imitation of Japanese motifs in making fabrics, then “the realization of the plastic quality of kimonos,” and lastly, a free interpretation of Japanese aesthetics⁷.

One can point out the stages of this process in Italian fashion as well, even if there is no rigid chronological separation between one stage and another. One can nevertheless state that Italian fashion was influenced by Japan especially after the Russian-Japanese War (1904-1905).

In the following paragraphs I will try to present the first three stages of the influence of Japonisme on Italian fashion.

2.1 The introduction of the kimono as an exotic garment

From the beginning of the 20th century the “Kimono-mania”, which had arrived in France in the 1880s, even fascinated Italian women, especially those belonging to the upper classes. Traditional Japanese clothing was appreciated because of its comfort and it was worn almost exclusively as a house coat.

There was no store in Italy which imported the kimonos directly from Japan: they were imported ready made from France. In the magazine “La Scena Illustrata. Rivista Quindicinale di Arte e Letteratura,” between 1908 and 1912, there appeared, in nearly each edition of the magazine, the advertisement for the “Sada Yacco” kimono, which one could buy, and have it delivered through the postal service, from the “Mikado” stores in Paris (**Fig. 3**).

So Italian women, especially those from the middle and upper social classes, began wearing kimonos in the privacy of their own homes.

This fashion can be seen in an old photograph entitled *The Geishas*, taken in 1903 in Palermo⁸ (**Fig. 4**)

This photograph shows Alice Maude Gardner, a bourgeois Sicilian with English roots, who is having tea with two friends and a child. Many details show the influence of Japan: the big fans, the Japanese doll held by the woman on the left and, in the background, a screen decorated with a motif

⁵ S. Gnoli, *La moda tra Oriente e Occidente: Giappone, Europa, Italia*, in *Italia-Giappone 450 anni*, 2003, I, pp. 299-303.

⁶ *Japonisme & mode*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, Palais Galliera-Musée de la Mode et du Costume, 17 April – 4 August 1996), 1996.

⁷ A. Fukai, *Le Japonisme dans la mode*, in *Japonisme & mode*, 1996, pp. 28-55: 29.

⁸ *Mon Rêve. Fondo foto/grafico di Alice Maude Gardner (1860-1920)*, 1981, p. 58.

of flowers and animals. The three women are dressed in Japanese style clothing, but the style of their kimonos - which are simple and without decorative motifs typical of most Japanese kimonos - leads us to think that their garments are not original, but rather an Italian imitation. Furthermore, they are wearing the kimonos European style, with the closing not tightly over-lapping.

In fact, from the beginning of the 20th century, kimonos began to be manufactured directly in Italy. In Italian woman's magazines, around 1910-1920, one can find house coats made in Italy that imitate the lines and the decorative motifs of kimonos. For example, in the woman's magazine "Corriere delle Signore," published in 1913, one sees a house coat with long, wide sleeves made of brocade, tied with a high waist sash similar to a Japanese *obis* and decorated with swallows, which at the time was seen in Europe as a decorative motif that was typically Japanese (**Fig. 5**).

As Akiko Fukai points out, the opera and the theater contributed to reinforcing the widespread use of kimonos⁹. Beginning 1870 in France many plays with Japanese themes were created for the opera and for the theater. This trend spread to Italy as well, where two of the most important composers at the time, Pietro Mascagni and Giacomo Puccini, composed music for their works that had a Japanese theme: Pietro Mascagni wrote the music for *Iris*, which opened at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome in 1898, and Giacomo Puccini for *Madama Butterfly*, which opened at Teatro La Scala in Milan in 1904.

According to critics, the image of Japan that was presented in *Iris* was an imaginary country, while the image represented in *Madama Butterfly* was authentic. In fact, Puccini, after having studied traditional Japanese music, introduced Japanese sounds and melodies into his music¹⁰. The same philological scruples which inspired Puccini also inspired Giuseppe Palanti, the painter who was in charge of designing the costumes for the opera¹¹.

Unfortunately the costumes that were made for the opening of *Madama Butterfly* have not been saved, but the Museum of the Teatro La Scala has conserved the 73 drawings that Palanti made for the costumes.

Since *Madame Butterfly* takes place in Japan, most of the characters wear traditional Japanese clothing. The costumes, especially the kimonos worn by the women, are very authentic-looking, because they imitate both the decorative Japanese motifs, such as irises, chrysanthemums, peonies, bamboos, dragon-flies, cranes and fans, also the integral-style decoration typical of Japanese clothing¹².

For example the figurine of costume n. 36 depicts a member of the chorus wearing a kimono where on the train one can see a meadow with clovers and thin bulrush stems which go up till the obi-decorated with dragon-flies -, against a blue sky amid white clouds (**Fig. 6**).

Here the unity of the kimono is seen in the bulrush stems which blend with the green of the meadow and the blue of the sky.

One can find the same similarities in the male garments as well.

Giuseppe Palanti never visited Japan. However he showed a profound knowledge of Japanese fashion and Japanese art. He was able to do this because of the research he did on Japanese culture:

⁹ A. Fukai, *Le Japonisme dans la mode*, in *Japonisme & mode*, 1996, pp. 28-55: 38.

¹⁰ See M. Girardi, *Giuseppe Puccini. L'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano*, 1995, pp. 216-223.

¹¹ About Giuseppe Palanti's life and works see *Giuseppe Palanti. Pittura, teatro, pubblicità, disegno*, by V. Crespi Morbio, 2001.

¹² L. Dimitrio, *I figurini di Giuseppe Palanti per i costumi della prima rappresentazione di "Madama Butterfly"*, in "Quaderni asiatici", n. 68, 2004, pp. 53-85.

he consulted numerous publications that were published at the time regarding Japan, and thus he used the images as a source of inspiration for designing the costumes for *Madama Butterfly*. For example, to dress two men of the chorus, he took the image from the book by Pietro Savio *La prima spedizione italiana nell'interno del Giappone e nei centri sericoli effettuatisi nel mese di giugno dell'anno 1869 da sua eccellenza il Conte De la Tour (The First Italian Expedition to the Inner Areas of Japan and to Silk-Producing Centers in the month of June 1869 by His Excellency Count De la Tour)* published in Milan in 1870 (**Fig 7**).

Giuseppe Palanti worked with philologic precision, with the intent of designing costumes that were as similar to Japanese clothing as possible, exactly like Giacomo Puccini, who tried to imitate the traditional Japanese melodies.

2.2 Imitating Japanese motifs in fabrics

According to Akiko Fukai, the second stage of the affirmation of Japonisme in Western fashion was the imitation of Japanese motifs in fabrics. This tendency brought about the introduction of a new iconographic repertory, based on themes with flowers (for example, chrysanthemums and iris) and animals (such as swallows and cranes) as well as, among other themes, clouds, waves and waterfalls. The fabrics manufactured in France, especially in Lyon, between 1880 and 1920, are proof of this trend¹³.

At the same time, in Italy, there was a spread of decorative Japanese motifs on fabrics, without necessarily modifying the traditional line of Western clothing.

For example, in 1885, the magazine “Margherita” published a dress decorated with small fans on the skirt, while in 1902 the “Corriere delle Signore” published a garment with red, silk embroidered chrysanthemums.

The presence of motifs coming from Japan lasted, in Italy, till the 20s, when Guido Ravasi, the owner of a silk factory in Como, manufactured various fabrics of which the drawing were inspired by the iconographic tradition in Japan¹⁴.

For example, he made, in 1923, a fabric woven with butterflies and another woven fabric decorated with weeping willows (**Fig. 8**). Both butterflies and weeping willows are decorative motifs from Japanese tradition. Butterflies were used in Japan to decorate porcelain as well. Weeping willows, in Japanese culture, are considered a symbol of elegance and some Japanese poets wrote of their beauty in their poems in the Heian Age.

As one can see in the photograph, the design of this fabric has especially emphasized the curved trunks, to the point that on first seeing it, it is not recognizable and the trees seem like waves breaking. One can see an echo of the engraving by Hokusai, the *Big Wave of Kanagawa* (1830-32), which, from the end of the 19th century on, had an enormous influence on Western art.

Furthermore, Guido Ravasi knew Japanese art well because in Germany he had associated with intellectuals who were passionate about Japan, and also because he was a collector of original Japanese fabrics.

¹³ *Lyon en 1889: les soyeux à l'Exposition Universelle de Paris*, exhibition catalogue by P. Arizzoli-Clémentel (Lyon, Musée Historique des Tissus, December 1990 – March 1991), 1990.

¹⁴ *Guido Ravasi. Il signore della seta*, exhibition catalogue (Como, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, 2008), by M. Bellezza and F. Chiara, 2008.

2.3 The “awareness of the plastic quality of kimonos”

The third stage of the affirming of Japonisme in Western fashion was “the awareness of the plastic quality of the kimono”, that is to say, mainly of the straight lines of the kimono and its suppleness.

If in France Paul Poiret played a decisive role, in Italy the first two fashion designers who showed they had understood the plastic quality of the kimono were Mariano Fortuny and Maria Monaci Gallenga. The versatile Spanish artist Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo (1871-1949) worked in Venice the first half of the 20th century¹⁵. In the field of fashion he is known especially for his studies of ancient Greek clothing, for their “Delphos” tunics and “Knossos” stoles. But he enlarged his studies to include decorative Japanese motifs, the Japanese techniques of stencilling on the fabrics and also the lines of oriental garments, especially Japanese ones.

For example, an evening coat made of brown silk velvet from 1910, printed with polychrome stencil, recalls the Japanese style not just for the designs of the fabric (butterflies, mallow leaves and the *tatewaki*), but also for the straight lines, the large sleeves and the enclosure that overlaps¹⁶ (**Fig. 9**).

The same year, Fortuny created a white, silk gown stenciled with traditional Japanese motifs, which is similar to a kimono for the simple line, the long collar, the sleeves and for the *fuki* (padded hem)¹⁷.

Maria Monaci Gallenga (1880-1944) was also inspired by kimonos for certain garments such as, for example, for the evening coat in black velvet, from around 1922, with long sleeves and folded-back collar which imitated kimonos¹⁸.

3. Conclusion

At the end of the 1920s, Japonisme in Italian fashion, as in European fashion in general, slowly disappeared. One had to wait till the 1970s for Japan to once again have an influence in fashion. If, in France, Kenzo Takada, Issey Miyake and Kansai Yamamoto revived the interest in Japanese fashion¹⁹, in Italy, Giorgio Armani, Gianfranco Ferré and Krizia paid homage to Japan through their collections. Even nowadays some designers are still inspired by Japanese motifs: Giorgio Armani, for example, dedicated his collection “Armani Privé” fall-winter 2011-2012, to Japan.

Japonisme, in fact, is a kind of thread that weaves in and out of Italian fashion. Consequently, if one really wants to understand the history of Italian fashion of the last two centuries up till now, one has to keep in mind the influence that Japan has had and continues to have even today.

¹⁵ About Fortuny’s life and works see G. de Osmá, *Fortuny. The Life and Work of Mariano Fortuny*, 1994.

¹⁶ This coat was published in *Fashion. A History from the 18th to the 20th Century. The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute*, 2011, II, pp. 357 and 359 and in *Japonisme & mode*, 1996, pp. 69 and 194.

¹⁷ This gown was published in *Fashion. A History from the 18th to the 20th Century. The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute*, 2011, II, p. 361.

¹⁸ This evening coat was published in *Fashion. A History from the 18th to the 20th Century. The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute*, 2011, II, p. 428 and in *Japonisme & mode*, 1996, n. 19, p. 176. About Maria Monaci Gallenga and her probable studies on Japanese techniques of stencilling on the fabrics, see R. Orsi Landini, *Alle origini della moda italiana. Maria Monaci Gallenga*, in *Moda femminile tra le due guerre*, 2000, pp. 30-41:33.

¹⁹ Y. Kawamura, *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion*, 2004.

FIG. 1: Liebig figurine, “Scenes of Daily Life in Japan,” 1904. Private collection

FIG. 2: Vespasiano Bignami, advertising poster from the “Corriere della Sera”, 1896. Milano, Civica Raccolta delle Stampe “Achille Bertarelli.”

FIG. 3: Advertising for a Sada Yacco Kimono. “La Scena Illustrata,” 1908.

FIG. 4: Alice Maude Gardner and two friends dressed in kimonos: *The Geishas*, 1903

FIG. 5: An Italian brocade house coat, which imitates the kimono, with swallows as a decorative motif. “Corriere delle Signore,” 1913.

FIG. 6: Giuseppe Palanti, Figurine n. 36 for the costumes of the opening of *Madama Butterfly*, 1904. Milano, Museo Teatrale alla Scala.

FIG. 7. On the left, Giuseppe Palanti, *Choir Member*, *Figurine n. 41 for the costumes of the opening of Madama Butterfly*, 1904. On the right, Giuseppe Palanti, *Choir Member*, *Figurine n. 47 for the costumes of the opening of Madama Butterfly*, 1904. In the center, an engraving from the book by Pietro Savio, *La prima spedizione italiana nell'interno del Giappone [...]*(*The First Italian Expedition to the Inner Areas of Japan and to Silk-Producing Centers in the month of June 1869 by His Excellency Count De la Tour*), 1870, showing two Japanese interpreters. The man on the left was used by Palanti as a source for figurine n. 41, while the man on the right, as a source for figurine n. 47.

FIG. 8: Guido Ravasi, Silk fabric showing weeping willows, 1923. Como, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Museo Studio del Tessuto (Museum of Fabrics of the Antonio Ratti Foundation).

FIG. 9: Mariano Fortuny, a brown, silk, velvet evening coat, 1910. Kyoto, Kyoto Costume Institute.

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