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Translating the Beauty of Japan: Lafcadio Hearn's Art Writing

Stefano Evangelista

Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904) is well known for his essays about Japan but his analyses of Japanese art have been overlooked, no doubt because he had no formal training in art history. This article examines the features of Hearn's art writing. It discusses how Hearn framed aesthetic questions within formally complex essays that often blended criticism and fiction, and how he interacted with the increasingly specialized field of Japanese art history that was then starting to take shape in the West. It argues that Hearn's art writing contributed to making Japanese art comprehensible to readers at the turn of the century by translating and explicating its own distinctive beauty.

Hilary Fraser's work has taught scholars new ways of understanding the relationship between literature and art history in the nineteenth century. From her monograph on the literary reception of the Italian Renaissance to her recent work on women art historians, she has uncovered the fundamental contribution that literary writings, in a variety of genres, made to the formation of aesthetic sensibility and art knowledge in this period. In *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century*, she encapsulates what is at stake in locating this enlarged canon of art writing within the broader culture of the time:

> Art criticism had an unprecedentedly important public function in nineteenth-century Britain. Writers such as Ruskin and Walter Pater formulated and disseminated an entirely new concept of the cultural and moral value of looking at art. The capacity to respond critically to paintings, sculpture and architectural forms was enshrined as a crucial dimension of human experience.[1]

Drawing on Fraser's insight that art writing offers a privileged point of view on the discursive formation of nineteenth-century cultural modernity, this article outlines the role played by the writer Lafcadio Hearn in formulating and disseminating knowledge about Japanese art in the years around the turn of the century. Implicitly and explicitly, Hearn argued that an appreciation of Japanese art should form part of a cosmopolitan modern aesthetic sensibility. However, educating readers on how to respond to the art of Japan posed different cultural challenges than writing about the medieval and Renaissance European traditions, as Ruskin and Pater did. Rather than providing a systematic analysis of the large corpus of Hearn's Japanese works, this article introduces some of the distinctive features of Hearn's art writing, focusing on how it tests traditional Western ideas of beauty and how it blurs boundaries between fields of knowledge. Underlying this exploration is the question of what is at stake in framing a writer like Hearn, who has no place within traditional art history, in relation to the 'public function' of art criticism that Fraser has unravelled in her work.

Seeing and writing Japanese art

For a generation that saw itself as the 'discoverer' of Japan, looking at Japanese art was exciting but not always easy. How were Western critics and art lovers to understand forms and techniques that appeared alien to the tradition in which they were trained? How should nineteenth-century art writers view and translate the distinctive idea

[1] Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 95 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 2.

of beauty embodied by Japanese art? In 1875 Philippe Burty, the French critic who is routinely credited as the inventor of *japonisme*, addressed some of these questions in a series of articles in the *Academy*, especially aimed at the English public. Burty noted the difficulty experienced by Europeans in obtaining general knowledge about Japan that would help them contextualize their favourite artistic and decorative pieces; and he therefore advocated the extensive translation of Japan's literature, as well as scientific and philosophical writings, as the first stepping stone towards an informed appreciation of its artistic culture.[2] The same perception of general ignorance persisted into the *fin de siècle*. In 1888 the *japoniste* art dealer Siegfried Bing set up the international journal *Artistic Japan* with the stated aim of providing instruction on 'the real and rare beauties of an Art which has hitherto attracted chiefly through its superficial qualities'. According to Bing, 'in the shop and the bazaar only has Japanese Art been represented, and there merely in its least refined and elevated form.' The first priority should therefore go to rescuing Japanese art from an undiscerning Japanomania that fed on what was in fact 'feeble' and 'effeminate', and represented but a poor reflection of what art was really like in Japan.[3] Disseminated in the public sphere, such assessments portrayed Japanese art as a potentially treacherous field, which stimulated the gaze but also exposed it to deception and cultural misunderstandings.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Hearn took on Bing's challenge to help viewers in the West improve their appreciation of Japanese art. He did so by no means as a professional art historian. Indeed, Hearn had little in the way of conventional education, having migrated from Ireland to America at the age of nineteen and having subsequently entered the literary field in the relatively marginal roles of journalist and translator. In 1890 Hearn settled in Japan, where he produced a series of books that had a profound impact on the history of the cultural relations between Japan and the West.[4]

Hearn's Japanese writings are primarily concerned with folklore, religion, and the supernatural (his Japanese ghost stories have always been particularly popular with readers); but they are scattered with references to art, which can be difficult to see because art rarely features as the headline topic of his essays. In parallel with the growth of *japonisme*, Japanese culture and art were then becoming objects of specialized knowledge thanks to the work of scholars such as the British philologist Basil Hall

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[2] Philippe Burty, 'Japonism', *Academy*, 7 August 1875, pp. 150–51; 16 October 1875, pp. 413–15; 22 January 1876, pp. 83–84.

[3] Siegfried Bing, 'Programme', *Artistic Japan*, May 1888, pp. 1–7 (p. 2).

[4] There is a large bibliography in English on Hearn as a figure of cultural mediation. See, for instance, Carl Dawson, *Lafcadio Hearn and the Vision of Japan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); and *Rediscovering Lafcadio Hearn: Japanese Legends, Life and Culture*, ed. by Sukehiro Hirakawa (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 1997).

Chamberlain and the American art historian Ernest Fenollosa. Hearn, however, wrote from the point of view of the amateur: he combined a deep but essentially generalist knowledge of Japan with a highly artful handling of the essay and short fiction forms. This position of amateurism enabled him to cross boundaries between fields of knowledge in original but also sometimes problematic ways that would later earn him charges of orientalism, in Edward Said's well-known use of this term.

Hearn's engagement with art was primarily aimed at showing that the ubiquity and variety of art forms in Japan broke down Western distinctions and hierarchies: his essays thus ranged from discussions of painting and sculpture — mediums that could be assimilated to Western notions of fine art — to applied arts such as pottery to quintessentially Japanese arts such as calligraphy, flower arrangement, and women's coiffures, which stretched the reader's expectation of what counted as art in the first place. Descriptions of the rich diversity of Japanese art culture are interspersed with studies of aesthetic questions. For instance, an essay titled 'Azure Psychology' (1898) explores the mental perception of the colour blue, leaning on evolutionary science and reaching in its examples from the colour of the Gulf Stream to the roof tiles and shop draperies of Japan, which Hearn calls 'the land of perfect good taste in chromatics'.[5] This was Hearn's way of proving that Japanese art should not be regarded as a marginal or eccentric field, but as central to the study of aesthetics. At the same time, Hearn was highly aware of the close interconnection of aesthetics and geopolitics, remarking several times that the Western desire for Japanese objects had upset the Japanese domestic artistic economy, and lamenting the disruptive influence of international markets.[6]

What was truly new and challenging about Hearn's take on Japanese art was not only his choice of objects but also the way he wrote about them. An essay titled 'Hōrai' (1904), for instance, starts with a striking ekphrasis of a *kakemono* — a traditional style of Japanese silk painting — that, we are told, hung in the alcove of Hearn's own home in Tokyo:

> Blue vision of depth lost in height, — sea and sky interblending through luminous haze. The day is of spring, and the hour morning. Only sky and sea, — one azure enormity .... In the fore, ripples are catching a silvery light, and threads of foam are swirling. But a little further off no motion is visible, nor anything save color: dim warm blue of water widening away to melt into blue of air. Horizon there is none: only distance soaring into space, — infinite concavity hollowing before you, and

[5] Lafcadio Hearn, 'Azure Psychology', in *Exotics and Retrospectives* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1905), pp. 227–37 (p. 230).

[6] See, for instance, the essay 'In the Twilight of the Gods', in *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1896), pp. 210–21.

> hugely arching above you, — the color deepening with the height. But far in the mid-way-blue there hangs a faint, faint vision of palace towers, with high roofs horned and curved like moons, — some shadowing of splendor strange and old, illumined by a sunshine soft as memory.[7]

Hearn's ekphrastic technique eschews descriptive realism in order to concentrate instead on sensations, notably on the impressions of light, transparencies, and colour effects on the viewer, who is imaginatively projected into the space of the painting. The visual perception of abstraction is rendered through the use of highly metaphorical language which gestures to something beyond language and indeed beyond the limits of rational thought. The result, while focused on the aesthetic particularities of Japanese art, also enters a dialogue with the late nineteenth-century English tradition of impressionistic art writing as practised, for instance, by Pater. Artistically literate readers in the West would also have recognized a possible allusion to James McNeill Whistler's very modern colour symphonies or his Japan-inspired 'nocturnes', in which forms likewise melt into each other and narrative is sidelined in favour of the evocation of blue-tinted atmospheres. As mediated through Hearn's aesthetic prose, the *kakemono* therefore takes on the form of a translational object, which opens up a dialogue between Japanese and Western art cultures.

More typically, the cross-pollination of the aesthetic and the literary occurs within the more everyday context of the applied arts. An essay titled 'From a Travelling Diary' (1896) contains a striking description of traditional Japanese houses, with their characteristic paper windows or *shōji*, as inverted magic lanterns:

> By night a Japanese house with only its shōji closed looks like a great paper-sided lantern, — a magic-lantern making moving shadows within, instead of without itself. By day the shadows on the shōji are from outside only; but they may be very wonderful at the first rising of the sun, if his beams are leveled, as in this instance, across a space of quaint garden.[8]

This realization — which is in fact also a form of ekphrasis — is prompted by an experience in a Kyoto inn, where the morning sun projected onto the paper screen of Hearn's window the perfectly delineated shadow of a peach tree outside, creating a blue and yellow effect that set Hearn speculating on the artistic use of paper in Japanese architecture. As the natural rhythm of the day causes a shift from artificial to natural

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[7] Lafcadio Hearn, 'Hōrai', in *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1908), pp. 173–78 (pp. 173–74).

[8] Lafcadio Hearn, 'From a Travelling Diary', in *Kokoro*, pp. 47–70 (p. 49).

light, the paper used in Japanese windows, as a material technology, behaves in ways that anticipate the Western inventions of photography or film, capturing an ephemeral record of the aesthetic life of Japan. There is something almost archetypal in this encounter with visuality, which brings to Hearn's mind the Greek classical legend, as told by Pliny, according to whom painting originated in tracing lines around the human shadow.[9] The significant difference is that the Japanese version of the myth, as experienced by Hearn, hinges on the representation of nature as opposed to portraiture and the human form, as in the West. But Hearn is also keen to distance his version of Japan from discourses of primitivism; he therefore stresses that the *shōji* relies on the highly crafted materiality of Japanese paper and the careful tendering of Japanese gardens, where trees are shaped to artistic perfection over a long time.

Undisciplining aesthetics: culture and science

Théophile Gautier, an author who experimented extensively with art writing, famously described himself as 'someone for whom the visible world really exists'.[10] In the English *fin de siècle* this quotation came to stand for the close connection between visual impression and literary sensibility, with Pater applying it to Plato and Wilde to the character of Dorian Gray and subsequently also to himself.[11] The examples in the previous section show that Hearn, who translated Gautier and was profoundly influenced by him, also elaborated an 'aesthetic' style of art writing that arose out of a heightened receptivity to visual impressions. This imaginative engagement with the visual resisted the pressure of specialization. In a letter to Fenollosa, who admired Hearn's writings and who befriended him in Tokyo, Hearn defended his preference for cheap modern colour prints over the more refined specimens that were then on show in an *ukiyo-e* exhibition in the Japanese capital:

> I do not wish to learn better. While I know nothing I can always follow the Shintō code and consult my heart about buying things. Were I to know more, I should be less happy in buying cheap things. It is like the Chinese characters on the shop-fronts.

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[9] Pliny, *Natural History*, ed. by A. C. Andrews and others, Loeb Classical Library, 10 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938–52), IX: *Books 33–35*, ed. by H. Rackham (1952), p. 271.

[10] 'Je suis un homme pour qui le monde visible existe.' See *Journal des Goncourt: Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, 9 vols (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1891–96), I: *1851–1861* (1891), p. 182.

[11] *The Library Edition of the Works of Walter Pater*, 10 vols (London: Macmillan, 1910), VI: *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures*, 134; *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, The Oxford English Texts Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000–21), III: *The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (2005), p. 107; and *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, II: *De Profundis; Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*, ed. by Ian Small (2005), p. 15.

> Once you begin to know the meaning of a few, the magical charm — the charm of mystery — evaporates.[12]

Hearn was proud of his amateurism because he felt that it added an element of artful impressionism to his writings that helped him convey the *feeling* of Japan — a distinctive type of exoticism captured here in the image of the illegible Chinese characters.

Apart from his dealings with Fenollosa, Hearn's interest in Japanese art rarely brought him to interact directly with art historians. A notable exception is the essay 'About Faces in Japanese Art' (1897), where Hearn explicitly addressed the limitations of Western art history, narrowly conceived, in dealing with Japanese art. The essay was prompted by a meeting of the Japan Society that took place in London on 13 November 1895, at which Edward F. Strange delivered a lecture on the Japanese collections held by the National Art Library. A former civil servant, Strange was appointed to the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert) in 1889 to work in the library, cataloguing and indexing prints and drawings.[13] In the 1890s he became interested in Japanese prints. His lavishly illustrated first book on Japan, *Japanese Illustration: A History of the Arts of Wood-Cutting and Colour-Printing in Japan* (1897), would be published as part of Bell's 'Connoisseur Series', edited by Gleeson White, the founder of the important art magazine the *Studio*. In keeping with the aims of the South Kensington Museum, Strange's lecture to the Japan Society focused on the possible uses of Japanese art in British manufacture and industrial production. It included technical information on the process of making *ukiyo-e* prints and their potential to improve the quality of English poster art, notably theatrical advertising. Strange, who was obviously a vigorous advocate for his subject, also attempted to correct the widespread mistake of judging Japanese art by Western conventions (e.g. the rules of perspective), and encouraged the audience to see similarities between the principles and methods of Japanese art and modern Impressionism.[14]

Hearn read Strange's lecture in the proceedings of the Japan Society, which made their way to him in Japan. He was in full sympathy with Strange's argument that a true appreciation of Japanese art necessitates a different way of seeing. However, he

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[12] Hearn to Fenollosa, May 1898, in Elizabeth Bisland, *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, 2 vols (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1906), II, 381–84 (p. 382).

[13] Anthony Burton, 'Cultivating the First Generation of Scholars at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 14.2 (2015), 145–61 <https://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/summer15/burton-on-first-generation-of-scholars-at-victoria-and-albert-museum#_ftnref71> [accessed 10 October 2022] (p. 155).

[14] Edward F. Strange, 'The Japanese Collections in the National Art Library, South Kensington Museum', *Transactions and Proceedings of the Japan Society*, 4 (1900), 2–17.

was troubled by the discussion that, as was customary, followed the lecture, and that was also reported in the bulletin. Members of the London audience had challenged the speaker, objecting that *ukiyo-e* prints were 'absolutely wanting in human facial expression', that they consisted of 'mask-like heads', and that the Japanese depiction of female beauty exhibited a 'conventionality' that was similar to ancient Egyptian art (Strange, pp. 16, 17). Particularly upsetting for Hearn was the intervention of the Japanese envoy and president of the society, Katō Takaaki, who would go on to become the Japanese prime minister in the 1920s. Katō apologetically explained that the artworks discussed by Strange 'were only regarded as common prints in Japan' and 'were usually bought as presents for children'.[15]

Piqued by the fact that these statements had gone unchallenged, Hearn set out to clear what he saw as the fundamental misunderstanding of the 'philosophic part' — that is, the aesthetic argument — of Strange's paper ('About Faces', p. 99). He focused especially on whether Japanese colour prints could be considered a truthful representation of reality — a topic that fed into Western debates on realism and naturalism. In order to do so, he reminded readers that the main use of studying Japanese art was precisely that it called into question the supposedly universal standards of beauty attached to Western art; in other words, that Japanese artworks were the product of an altogether different way of embodying the experience of reality and the material world. Rather than a minute study of detail as in the West, realism in Japanese art consisted in the ability to 'see the typical, never the individual peculiarities' (p. 108).

The most ambitious part of Hearn's argument concerns his use of scientific evidence. He cited the work of the leading British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, who had expressed his admiration for Japanese sketches of plants, judging their execution to be 'most scientific' ('About Faces', p. 109). Building on Wallace and injecting his art criticism with scientific language, Hearn argued that the value of Japanese drawing — of humans no less than the natural world — lay in 'the recognition which it exhibits of a general physiognomical or biological law' (p. 113). The focus on the general type meant that details only needed to be suggested, never expressed: the result is that more is left to the imagination of the viewer:

> Everything in a common European engraving is detailed and individualized. Everything in a Japanese drawing is impersonal and suggestive. The former reveals no law: it is a study of particularities. The latter invariably teaches something of law, and suppresses particularities except in their relation to law. (pp. 113–14)

[15] Strange, p. 17; cf. Hearn, 'About Faces in Japanese Art', in *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields: Studies of Hand and Soul in the Far East* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1897), pp. 97–123 (p. 100).

Defending the realism of *ukiyo-e*, Hearn argued that, by expressing 'the systematization of natural law, this Japanese art is by its method scientific in the true sense' (pp. 115–16). Far from lagging behind Western realism, Japanese art was therefore more closely aligned with the modern scientific understanding of nature and its laws. It followed that a Western scientific eye, like Wallace's, was better suited to comprehending its true spirit and beauty than an art historical one.

Herbert Spencer's essay 'Personal Beauty' (1854) provided Hearn with further evidence that 'works of mere art critics' were not enough to form a true understanding of Japanese art ('About Faces', p. 116). Shifting the focus of analysis from the form of the art object to the dynamic act of perception, Spencer's evolutionary psychology gave Hearn a key to the universal mental mechanisms that regulate the very idea of beauty. Hearn hoped that the new *science* of aesthetics would one day bridge the cultural gap that separated Japan from the West, undoing false hierarchies based on culturally specific perspectives and values. Hearn trod very carefully around the problematic racial bias that permeates 'Personal Beauty' — an aspect of Spencer's work that Hearn glossed over in his own use of evolutionary thinking. By adopting a physiognomical method encapsulated by Spencer's formula, '*Expression is feature in the making*' ('About Faces', p. 117), he proposed instead an ambitious comparison between the representation of human facial features in classical Greek sculpture and Japanese *ukiyo-e* that undermined the charge of 'conventionality' expressed by the sceptics of the London Japan Society. Hearn's scientifically informed snapshot of global art history cast modern art culture in the West in a position of unmitigated ethical inferiority:

> Greek art expressed the aspiration of a race toward the divinely beautiful and the divinely wise. Japanese art reflects the simple joy of existence, the perception of natural law in form and color, the perception of natural law in change, and the sense of life made harmonious by social order and by self-suppression. Modern Western art reflects the thirst of pleasure, the idea of life as a battle for the right to enjoy, and the unamiable qualities which are indispensable to success in the competitive struggle. (p. 121)

Conclusion

In 'About Faces in Japanese Art', Hearn suggests that the distinctive beauty of Japanese drawings remains difficult to see because Japanese art 'has not yet found its Winckelmann nor its Lessing, whereas Greek art, by the labor of generations of modern critics and teachers, has been made somewhat more comprehensible to us than it could

have been to our barbarian forefathers' (p. 106). His own art writing contributed to making Japanese art comprehensible to readers at the turn of the century by celebrating and explaining its own distinctive beauty. Writing outside the disciplinary boundaries of art history but engaging with contemporary thinking about aesthetics, Hearn looked to Japanese art in order to educate the Western eye in how to see, and *feel*, differently.