

RYTŲ ESTETIKOS IDĖJOS LIETUVOJE



The Reception of *Japonisme* from the Late 19th to Early 20th Century Europe and its Aesthetic Influence on the Art of M. K. Čiurlionis

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Japonisme was the aesthetic trend inspired by Japanese art and culture in the late 19th and early 20th century Europe. The term was used for the first time in 1872 in France, and was thenceforth often distinguished from *japonaiserie*, European imagery of Japanese fashion and objects. *Japonisme* had a strong impact on Western artists, challenging their traditional way of seeing.

In this paper, the reception of *Japonisme* from the late 19th to the early 20th century Europe will be examined, followed by consideration of how it was imported into Poland and Russia through Polish and Russian art students absorbing the style during their studies in Paris, London, Munich and Vienna. The paper will also examine how the aesthetics of *Japonisme* were taken into art of Čiurlionis. Finally, by using Hokusai's *ukiyo-e* (woodcut prints) of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* as an example, the influence of the *ukiyo-e* on the works of painters throughout Europe and Russia will be considered with Čiurlionis' painting of *Finale* from *Sonata of the Sea*.

Keywords: *Japonisme*, *japonaiserie*, Čiurlionis, Młoda Polska, *Mir Iskusstva*, Hiroshige, Hokusai

The Reception of *Japonisme* from the Late 19th to Early 20th Century Europe

The international influence of Japanese art was only possible after the end of the *Sakoku* policy which strictly banned foreign exchanges in Japan from the 17th to the 19th century. The major opportunities to introduce Japanese arts in Europe were in the International Exhibition in London (1862) and the Exposition Universelle in Paris (1867). Simultaneously, several merchants in Paris and London actively imported

Japanese artworks, mainly *ukiyo-e*. From 1870s onward, Japanese art fascinated European artists such as Charles Baudelaire, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Aubrey Beardsley, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Gustav Klimt and Claude Debussy, to name but a few.

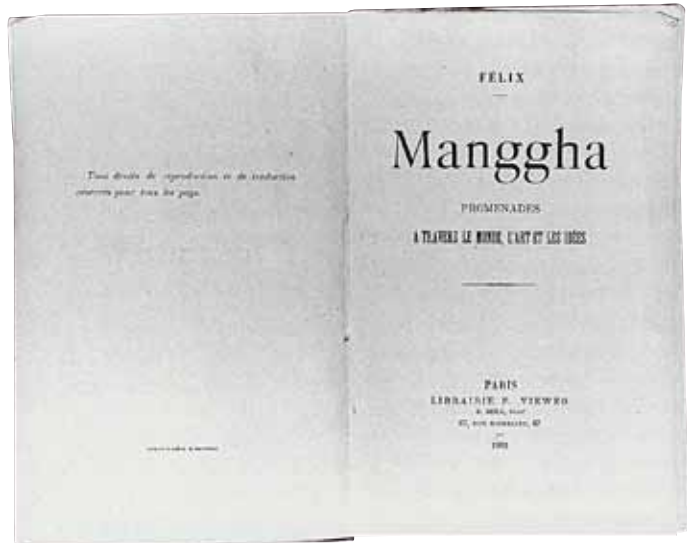
Lithuanian composer and painter, M. K. Čiurlionis (1875-1911) was born at the very time when *Japonisme* was in full flourish throughout Europe. He was educated both as composer and painter in Warsaw and under-



Fig. 1 Feliks Jasiński (1861-1929)
Feliks Jasiński in his flat against a folding screen depicting *Four Seasons of the Year*, before 1906
Archival photograph, National Museum in Krakow

Fig. 2 Feliks Jasiński
Feliks Jasiński on a balcony of his flat, before 1906
Archival photograph, National Museum in Krakow

Fig. 3 Feliks Jasiński
“Manggha, Promenades à travers les mondes, l’art et les idées” (1901)
Private collection



took further compositional studies in Leipzig. He travelled to Prague, Dresden, Nuremberg, Munich, and Vienna in 1906. He moved some years later to St. Petersburg to meet Russian artists. Though, he never visited London and Paris, he had chances to encounter Japanese artworks directly and indirectly.

The Reception of Japonisme in Poland

In Poland, an abundant collection of Japanese artworks was brought by Feliks Jasiński (1861–1929, Figs. 1 and 2). He stayed in Paris

from the mid-1880s where he encountered arts from all over the world and especially was fascinated by Japanese art. Moreover, his stay in Paris gave him the opportunity to become acquainted with the latest aesthetic trends. This experience made him a more ardent collector of oriental art. Even after he returned to Poland around 1890, he continued purchasing oriental arts such as lacquer and ivory items, Japanese swords, paintings, textiles, and *ukiyo-e* through auctions and art dealers. At the same time, he made effort to



Fig. 4 Olga Boznańska
(1865-1940)
"Japanese Woman"
(1889)
Private collection

Fig. 5 James Abbott
McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)
"Symphony in White
No. 2" (1864)
Tate Gallery, London

introduce Japanese art to Poland by holding exhibitions and contributing many articles to major journals. He published a book titled *Manggha, Promenades à travers les mondes, l'art et les idées* (1901, Fig. 3). The name of "Manggha" is taken from *Hokusai Manga*, 15 volumes of sketches by Hokusai (1760-1849). Jasiński also used "Manggha" as his own nickname. His collection of oriental art, donated to the National Museum in Krakow in 1920, consisted of 15,000 objects in total including 6,000 Japanese works. The existing 4,500 *ukiyo-e* that Jasiński considered to be "the most elegant and powerful expression of human spirit":¹

Many Polish painters from the *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland) movement studied abroad and were inspired by the aesthetics of *Japonisme* and painted works *à la japonaise*.

Olga Boznańska (1865-1940) was a female painter active in Krakow and Paris

as a follower of French impressionism. In 1886-90, she went to Munich to study and encountered the art of the Far East. In those days *Japonisme* was at its height in Munich, where several dealers sold artworks from Japan and articles on Japanese culture were often published in journals. In 1890 there was an exhibition of Japanese artefacts at the Glaspalast in Munich. At the time, *ukiyo-e*, parasols, fans, ceramics and kimonos were purchasable even by students including Olga.² Several Japanese artefacts could be seen in her paintings: in *Japanese Woman* (1889, Fig. 4), in which an influence from Whistler's *Symphony in White No. 2* (1864, Fig. 5) is admitted in a white dress and a typical Japanese *uchiwa* [fan]. Japanese parasols could be found in her other paintings (Figs. 6 and 7). Chrysanthemums, symbolic flowers of Japan, appeared in *A Girl with Chrysanthemums* (1894, Fig. 8) by Boznańska.

1 Martini (1999): pp. 162-166.

2 Król (2011): pp. 88-90.

Fig. 6 Olga Boznańska
“In the Studio”
(ca. 1890)
Private collection



Fig. 7 Olga Boznańska
“Portrait of a Woman
with a Japanese
Parasol” (1892)
National Museum in
Wrocław



Julian Fałat (1853-1929) is supposed to be the first Polish artist who made a trip to Japan in 1885. He brought back several objects including souvenirs of wooden, ivory and porcelain works, and a lot of photographs. He continued to purchase *ukiyo-e* and Japanese sculptures in Europe. His collections may now be seen in the District Museum in Bielsko-Biała.³ In his *Soap Bubbles in Japan* (1885, Fig. 9), we could see the real life of common people in Japan. *Landscape with Ducks* (1908, Fig. 10) reveals his strong affinity with typical winter scenes of *ukiyo-e*, especially by Hiroshige and Hokusai.

Józef Pankiewicz (1866-1940) studied at the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg in 1880s and moved to Paris in 1889. In his *A Japanese Woman* (1908, Fig. 11), an actual Japanese *byobu* of Kiitsu Suzuki's *Kikushōbuzu* [Chrysanthemums and irises] (mid-19th century, Fig. 12) from Jasieński's collection was included in its background. Here we can also see an influence from Claude Monet's *La Japonaise* (1876).

Fig. 8 Olga Boznańska
“A Girl with
Chrysanthemums”
(1894)
National Museum in
Krakow



Ferdynand Ruszczyc (1870-1936), from a Polish-Danish family, lived in Lithuania and completed his studies at the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. He encountered Japanese art at an exhibition during his studies there. According to letters to Jasieński, he was especially fascinated by Hiroshige's *ukiyo-e* of landscapes and adopted his way of depiction in his own paintings.⁴ In his *Winter Fairytale* (1904, Fig. 13), the snowscape itself suggests the influence from Japanese art, and the resemblance of its shapes of branches to an illustration from Hokusai's *Manga* (Fig. 14) is hardly accidental. Interestingly, a similar

3 *Ibid.*: pp. 116-118.

4 Król (2011): pp. 172-177.



Fig. 9 Julian Fałat
(1853-1929)
"Soap Bubbles
in Japan" (1885)
Lost and not found



Fig. 10 Julian Fałat
"Landscape
with Ducks" (1908)
Podlasie Museum in
Białystok



Fig. 11 Józef Pankiewicz
(1866-1940)
"A Japanese Woman"
(1908)
National Museum in
Krakow, donated by
Feliks Jasieński 1920

Fig. 12 Kiitsu Suzuki
(1796-1858)
"Kikushōbuzu
[Chrysanthemums
and irises]" (mid-19th
century)
National Museum in
Krakow, donated by
Feliks Jasieński 1920

representation of a tree appears in Čiurlionis' etching *Leafless Tree* (1905-06, Fig. 15).

Jan Stanisławski (1860-1907) was influenced by *Japonisme* probably during his stay over a decade in Paris. Jasieński pointed out Japanese characteristics in Stanisławski's works and their profound affinity to oriental philosophy, aesthetics and art.⁵ In his *Poplars*

on the Water (1900, Fig. 16), the compositional scheme which shows distant views through trees was surely from the aesthetics of *Japonisme* (especially of French impressionists such as Monet).

Wojciech Weiss (1875-1950) studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, but his aesthetics of *Japonisme* seemed rather international. His *Różia in Kimono* (Date unknown, Fig. 17) was a distant echo of

⁵ *Ibid.*: pp. 136-162.

Fig. 13 Ferdynand Ruszczyc (1870-1936) "Winter Fairytale" (1904) National Museum in Krakow



Fig. 14 Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) Illustration from "Manga" (published ca. 1814-78) Private collection

Fig. 15 Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875-1911) "Leafless Tree" (Fluor etching, 1905-06) National M. K. Čiurlionis Art Museum, Kaunas



Whistler's famous portrait. In his *Musicians* (1904, Fig. 18), we can easily recognize the influence from Whistler's *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge* (ca. 1872-75, Fig. 19), the reminiscence of the famous *ukiyo-e*, Hiroshige's *Kyōbashi takegashi* (1857, Fig. 20).

Leon Wyczółkowski (1852-1936) encountered art of the Far East during his several stays in Paris. He also visited Expositions Universelles in 1878, 1889 and 1900 and gradually became a collector of Far Eastern art. As a friend of Jasiński, Wyczółkowski was strongly influenced by him. He was also inspired by the depictions of nature by Hokusai and Hiroshige, and took them into his paintings of Tatra landscapes. His *Flowers in the Window* (1908, Fig. 21) and *Still Life*

(1905, Fig. 22) are good examples of the combination of *Japonisme* and Impressionism.

Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) had opportunities to see artworks of the Far East in his several stays in Paris in 1890s.⁶ *Irides* (1904, Fig. 23) and *Flowers* (1904, Fig. 24) show Wyspiański's deep knowledge of Japanese ways of depicting plants; the nearest point of view from objects and the cutting-off of their branches, stalks and leaves by pictorial frames.

Thus, keen interests in Japanese art were shared among many artists within the *Młoda Polska* movement. However, the level of their interests were different, ranging from super-

⁶ Król (2011): pp. 198–200.



Fig. 16 Jan Stanisławski
(1860-1907)
“Poplars on the Water”
(1900)
National Museum in
Krakow

Fig. 17 Wojciech Weiss
(1875-1950)
“Rózia in Kimono”
(Date unknown)
Private collection

ficial ‘*japonaiserie*’ which borrowed Japanese props as mere motives, to substantial level of ‘*Japonisme*’ employing Japanese pictorial expressions such as compositional devices and combinations of flat colours.

During Čiurlionis’ studies in Warsaw, two epoch-making exhibitions of Japanese art were presented: the first was of Japanese *ukiyo-e* printings, held at J. Kriwult’s salon in 1900-01, and the second, an exhibition of Feliks Jasiński’s famous collection of Japanese artworks, was presented at the beginning of 1901.⁷ It is possible that Čiurlionis saw Japanese art directly at these exhibitions. Moreover, he had a chance to get to know members of *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland) movement, who almost all studied in Paris, London, Munich or Vienna and absorbed the aesthetics of *Japonisme* in these cities. Čiurlionis must have been in touch with *Japonisme* trends and its aesthetics. His own travel to Prague, Dresden, Nuremberg, Munich, and Vienna in 1906 gave him some impression of Japa-

nese art as he wrote in his letters. Distinct characteristics of *Japonisme* could be found in some of his later works after 1907.

The Reception of *Japonisme* in Russia

Japonisme flourished also in Russia at the end of 1890s. Russia is the closest country to Japan; however Japanese art works were imported mainly via European cities such as Paris or Munich. Like Jasiński in Poland, Russia had an ardent collector of Japanese art, Sergey Kitaev (1864-1927) a Russian naval officer. He had chances to visit Japan in the course of his duties in 1885-96, and collected 6,000 works in total.⁸ Now his collection belongs to the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow.

Exhibitions of Kitaev’s collection were held in 1896, 1897 and 1905. The last one was organized by Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), a famous painter of the *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) movement. Roerich encountered Japanese art at the Kitaev

7 The fact was told by Prof. Andriušytė-Žukienė directly to the author through e-mail on October 12th, 2010.

8 The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts (2011-2013).

Fig. 18 Wojciech Weiss
“Musicians” (1904)
Private collection

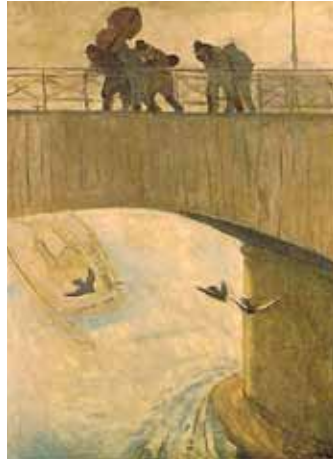


Fig. 19 James Abbott
McNeill Whistler
“Nocturne: Blue and
Gold - Old Battersea
Bridge” (ca. 1872-75)
Tate Britain, London



Fig. 20 Utagawa
Hiroshige (1797-1858)
“Kyōbashi takegashi”
from ‘One Hundred
Famous Views
of Edo’ (1857)
Private collection



exhibition in 1896 when he was a student at the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. Since that time, he championed Japanese art by writing articles for several journals and newspapers. He acted as the leader of *Mir Iskusstva* in 1910-1916. In his painting *At the Far East* (1904), the influence from Japanese *ukiyo-e* is quite obvious.

Russian painters Igor Grabar (1871-1960) and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (1875-1957) both studied in Munich and became great admirers of Japanese art. After their return to Russia, they were active as prin-

cipal members of *Mir Iskusstva*: *Japonisme* was indeed one of the group’s notable artistic traits.

In his memoirs, Dobuzhinsky described how he got to know Japanese art:

I am thankful to Grabar for my first acquaintance with Japanese art – in his collection in Munich I saw woodcut prints of Hokusai, Hiroshige and Utamaro. He had already new examples. In 1902, a small and joyful Japanese person, Hasegawa, appeared in St. Petersburg. He spoke little Russian, but visited a lot of artists here



Fig. 21 Leon Wyczółkowski (1852-1936) "Flowers in the Window" (1908) District Museum in Tarnów

Fig. 22 Leon Wyczółkowski "Still Life" (1905) National Museum in Warsaw

and brought perfect Japanese woodcut prints. Everybody bought them from him with enthusiasm, because the prices were not high. Three years after, the war with Japan broke out and many of us supposed Hasegawa was maybe a spy or an officer of Japanese main headquarters, or even a general! Personally I had no possibility to spend much money, so I bought only several woodcut prints and a book of Hokusai's 'Manga'. (I had in my collection not only Hiroshige and Hokusai but also Kuniyoshi, Kunisada, Toyokuni, Eisen and others. After Grabar moved to Moscow, he also gave me some wonderful woodblock prints as his presents.)⁹ Especially I was fascinated by Hiroshige because of his unexpected composition and decorative landscapes. For me, the view from the corner and 'cutting of nature' were the biggest discoveries.¹⁰

Here are the paintings by Grabar and Dobuzhinsky which expressed the aesthetics of *Japonisme*. In Grabar's *The Frost* (1905) and *Winter Morning* (1907), the snowscape itself suggests the influence from Japanese art, similarly as in cases of Ruszczyk and

Stanisławski in Poland. The compositional scheme which shows distant views through trees in the foreground was surely a distinct characteristic of *Japonisme* (and of French impressionists, especially Monet). In addition, both Grabar's *Sunbeam* (1901) and Dobuzhinsky's *Gate of Cameron's Gallery* (1904) depict a tree with a large trunk in the middle of scenes, a typical device which Hiroshige had repeatedly used in many of his *ukiyo-e* landscapes. This device may also been seen in Čiurlionis' "Andante" from Sonata No. 4 (*Sonata of the Summer*) (1908). It could be assumed that Čiurlionis probably referred to examples of Hiroshige.

Dobuzhinsky was the very person who introduced Čiurlionis to the artists of *Mir Iskusstva*. In his reminiscence on Čiurlionis, Dobuzhinsky recalled when Čiurlionis was in St. Petersburg:

I spoke of the [Čiurlionis'] paintings I had seen to my friends, whose interest was greatly aroused, and before long I invited A. Benois, Somov, Lansare, Bakst, and Sergei Makovsky (editor of the journal *Apollon*) to show them all the works that Čiurlionis had brought with him. [...] During that time Makovsky had plans to organize a large art show. Čiurlionis' works made

⁹ Text in parenthesis originally presented as a footnote in Dobuzhinsky's memoir.

¹⁰ Dobuzhinsky (1987): 192.

Fig. 23 Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907)
“Irisés” (1904)
Jacek Malczewski
Museum, Radom

Fig. 24 Stanisław Wyspiański
“Flowers” (1904)
National Museum in
Warsaw



such an impression on everyone present then and there that a unanimous decision was made to invite him to participate in the Salon show. Čiurlionis' works amazed everyone first of all with their originality and singularity – he resembled no other painters – and the source of his art seemed profound and mysterious.¹¹

In his writings, Dobuzhinsky wrote about his strong affection for Japanese art, especially for Hiroshige: “I liked to choose the point of view [in painting] in such a way that its composition should be more acute, not banal, and here each time an example of Hiroshige was in my mind”¹² Moreover, Dobuzhinsky mentioned in reminiscence on Čiurlionis: “In my home, he was a frequent guest. Aside from C. Sasnauskas, he knew no other families in St. Petersburg; he often visited Sasnauskas and once accompanied the latter to my home.

Čiurlionis apparently felt comfortable and at ease with my family [...] I had a good library of volumes of art books and a great library of engravings”¹³ Therefore, together with above-mentioned Hokusai's “Manga”, there must have been some opportunities that Čiurlionis absorbed the aesthetics of *ukiyo-e* from Dobuzhinsky's library.

In Čiurlionis' paintings, several traces of influence from *ukiyo-e* of Hokusai and Hiroshige could be found in its pictorial schemes and fragmental uses of motives. What is the difference from other painters is that Čiurlionis absorbed Japanese *ukiyo-e*; however, he accomplished his personal approach by adopting the whole composition and the characteristic point or view. Some of Čiurlionis' paintings show strong resemblance to specific *ukiyo-e* of Hiroshige in its pictorial scheme. In *Raigardas* (triptych) (1907, Fig. 25), Čiurlionis borrowed the

11 Goštautas (ed.) (1994): pp. 160-61.

12 Dobuzhinsky (1987): 190.

13 Goštautas (ed.) (1994): pp. 162.



Fig. 25 Mikalojus
Konstantinas Čiurlionis
“Raigardas (triptych)”
(1907)
National
M. K. Čiurlionis Art
Museum, Kaunas



Fig. 26 Utagawa
Hiroshige
“Whole View of
Asukayama” (triptych)
from ‘Famous Views of
the Eastern Capital’
(ca. 1835-39)
Private collection

format of triptych, landscape-oriented wide screen and bird’s-eye view from Hiroshige’s triptych *ukiyo-e*, especially *Whole View of Asukayama* (ca. 1835-39, Fig. 26).

Hokusai’s *ukiyo-e*, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* and artists in Europe and Russia

Here is Hokusai’s most famous *ukiyo-e*, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* from the series of *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (ca. 1831-33, Fig. 27). Because of its unforgettable uniqueness, Hokusai’s masterpiece influenced many French artists including Georges Lacombe (1868-1916)’s *Blue Seascape, Effect of Wave* (ca. 1893), Henri-Gustave Jossot (1866-1951)’s *The Wave* (1891) and Camille Claudel (1864-1943)’s *The Wave or The Bathers* (ca. 1893-1903). It is a well-known fact that French composer Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was an ardent collector of Japanese art and hanged Hokusai’s *Great Wave* on a wall in his room. On the cover of his score, *La mer*,

three symphonic sketches for orchestra, he used a partial copy of the same image (1905, Fig. 28). After three years, Čiurlionis adopted the similar “Great Wave” motive in his painting “Finale” from *Sonata No. 5 (Sonata of the Sea)* (1908, Fig. 29). The most unique and extraordinary feature in this picture is that he put his initials “MKČ” in the middle of the wave, probably as a symbol identifying his own high creativity. Incidentally, the similar motive of “Great Wave” could be seen in Ivan Bilibin (1876-1942)’s illustration for the picture book, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* by Aleksandr Pushkin (1905, Fig. 30), published three years before Čiurlionis’ painting. It clearly shows that Hokusai’s masterpiece had been well known among the artists of *Mir Iskusstva* in St. Petersburg.

Conclusion

Finally, from its official introduction in the International Exhibition in London (1862) and the Exposition Universelle in Paris

Fig. 27 Katsushika Hokusai
“The Great Wave off Kanagawa” from “Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji” (ca. 1831-33)
Private collection



Fig. 28 Claude Debussy
“A cover of the score *La Mer, three symphonic sketches for orchestra*” (1905) Private collection



Fig. 29 Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis
“Finale” from “Sonata No. 5 (Sonata of the Sea)” (1908)
National M. K. Čiurlionis Art Museum, Kaunas

Fig. 30 Ivan Bilibin
(1876-1942) Illustration for the picture book, “The Tale of Tsar Saltan” (1905)
Private collection

(1867), Japanese arts were gradually introduced all over Europe via London, Paris, Munich and Vienna. European artists were fascinated by Japanese aesthetics and they adopted the techniques according to their depth of interests such as a superficial ‘japonaiserie’ level borrowing Japanese props as motives, and a substantial level of ‘Japonisme’ employing Japanese pictorial expressions as compositional devices or combinations of flat colours. The trend reached to Poland,

and finally to Russia and gave strong impacts on local progressive artists. Čiurlionis was not an exception. He studied in Warsaw and Leipzig and had travelled to Prague, Dresden, Nuremberg, Munich, and Vienna. He moved some years later to St. Petersburg. It is obvious that he surely absorbed the aesthetics of *Japonisme* from *ukiyo-e* of Hokusai and Hiroshige, however, in his own personal way. In this regard, we could say he is a unique independent figure with full of originality.

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