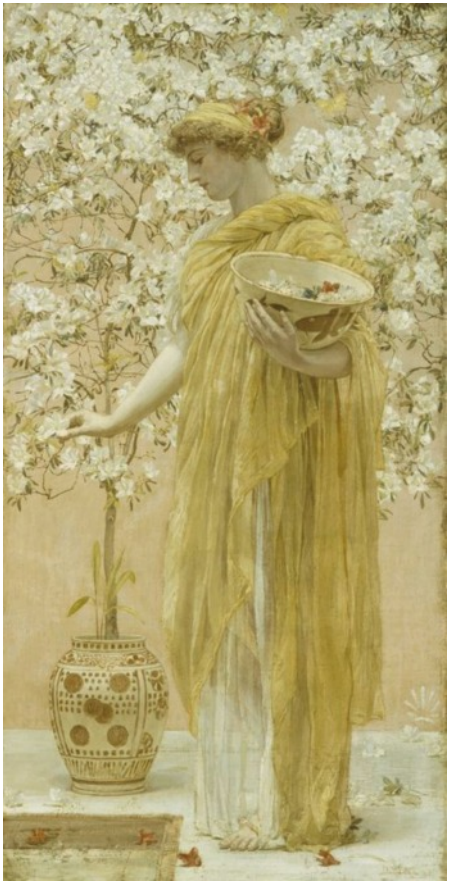
Influences of Japanese Art on 18th and 19th Century British Art

Background Notes

Dr Katie Faulkner - 2 October 2019



Albert Moore, *Azaleas,* 1868, oil on canvas. Hugh Lane Art Gallery, Dublin.

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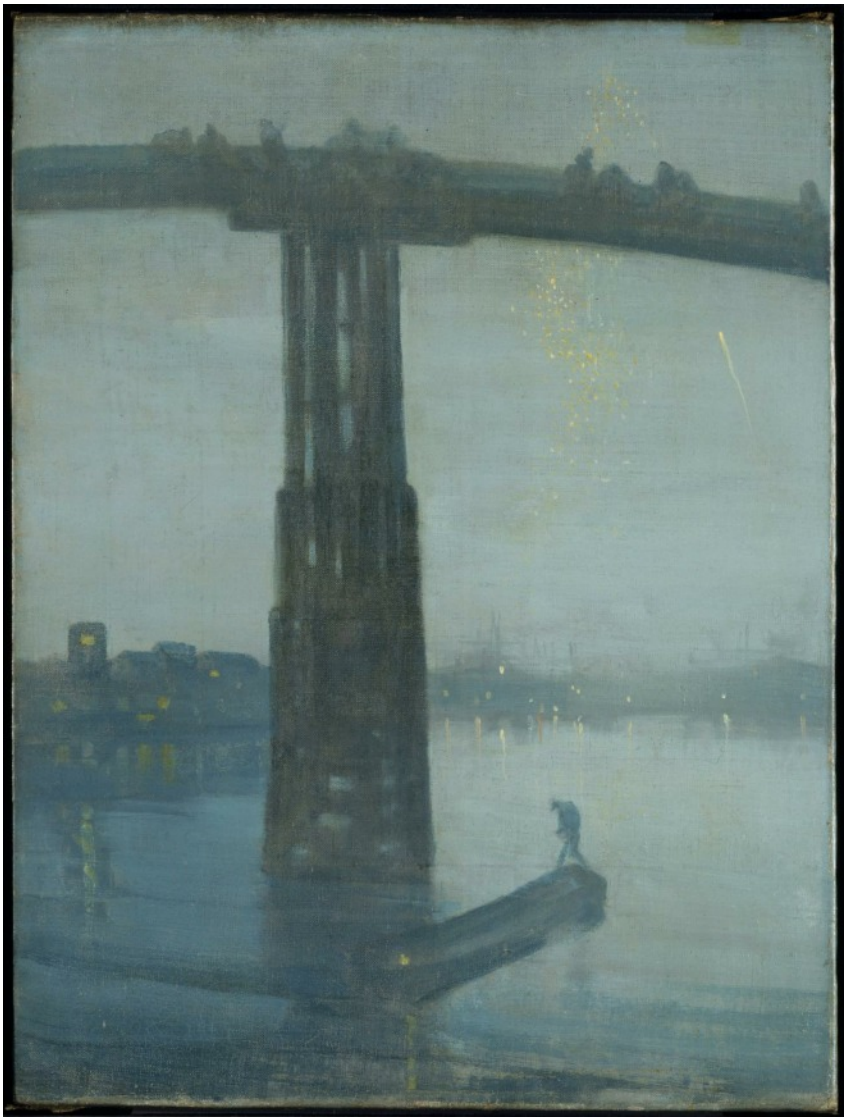
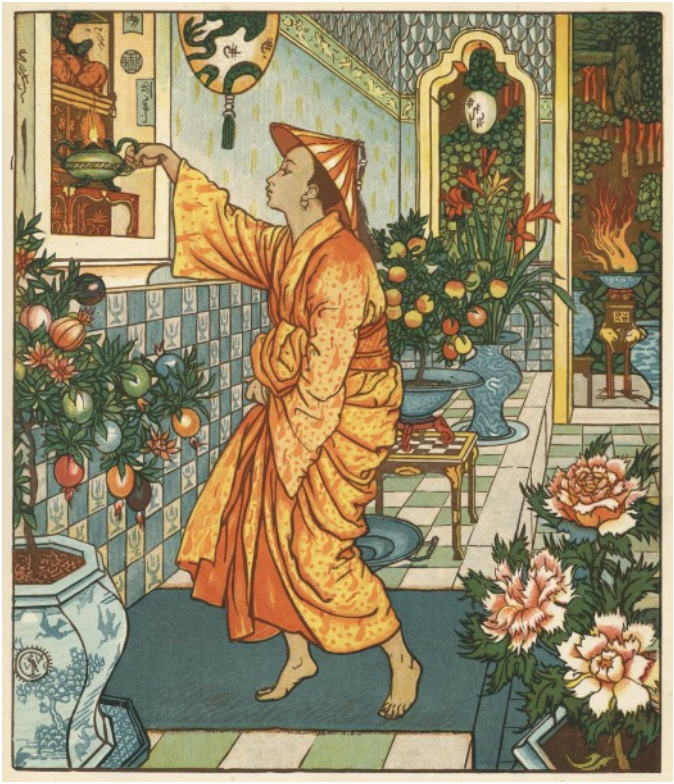
Albert Moore (1841-1893) brings together classical and aesthetic movement styles in his art, as demonstrated in *Azaleas*. Like his close friend James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Moore was committed to the idea that beauty and line were the most significant aspects of painting. Unlike Whistler, however, Moore was very influenced by classical Greek art, particularly the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum. He was less interested in historical accuracy than painters such as Frederic Leighton or Lawrence Alma-Tadema. *Azaleas* is an early example of Moore's work where he was not tied to a particular narrative, but rather aimed to create a beautiful painting.

The single classically draped female figure stands by an azalea bush in a Chinese vase and holds a Japanese porcelain bowl decorated with carp. The painting contains other Eastern influences, for example the asymmetric geometry of the azalea branch, which is reminiscent of Japanese prints. The yellow butterflies, which integrate the woman's yellow dress into the backdrop of white azalea blossoms, could also be allusions to Japanese art.

Nocturne: Blue and Gold, Old Battersea Bridge is one of James Abbott McNeill Whistler's most controversial works, sparking the accusation from John Ruskin that Whistler had flung a pot of paint at the canvas. It was the fifth in a series of scenes of the River Thames or 'Nocturnes' that Whistler painted in the 1870s. The central motif is an outline of Battersea Bridge, with Chelsea Church with the lights of the newly built Albert Bridge in the background. Fireworks can be seen in the background, with one rocket falling in a shower of sparks. Like his friend Albert Moore, Whistler held a keen interest in Japanese art and art historians have suggested that *Nocturne: Blue and Gold, Old Battersea Bridge* may have been inspired by Hiroshige's woodcut, *Moonlight at Ryogoko* (1857).



James Abbot McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold, Old Battersea Bridge,* 1872-9, oil on canvas. Tate, London.

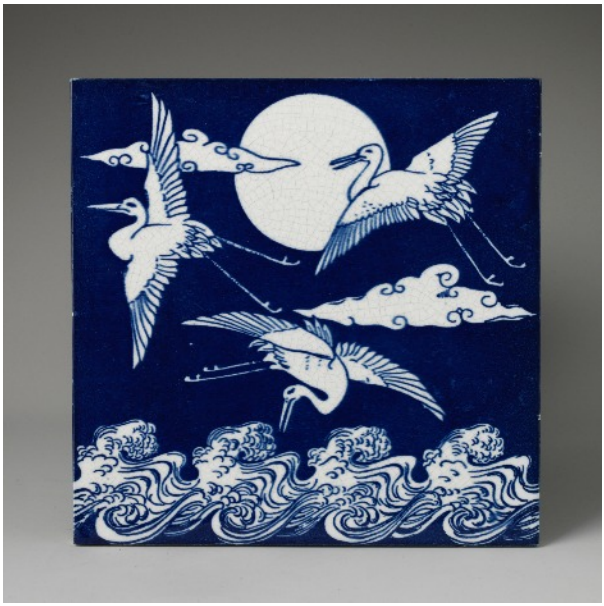


Walter Crane, *'Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp',* c. 1884, From Walter Crane, *Aladdin's Picture Book* (1884), Royal Academy, London.

Walter Crane was one of the most important campaigners for the decorative arts in nineteenth-century Britain. He best known for his children's illustrations, but he was a major supporter of the Arts and Crafts Movement and also a designer of decorative objects. Crane advocated strongly for the recognition of individual craftspeople and to abolish hierarchical divisions between the 'fine' and 'decorative' arts.

Crane began working as a book illustrator in 1862 and by 1875 had an established reputation, working for major publishers such as Routledge. This period also saw resurgence in interest in fairytales and Crane

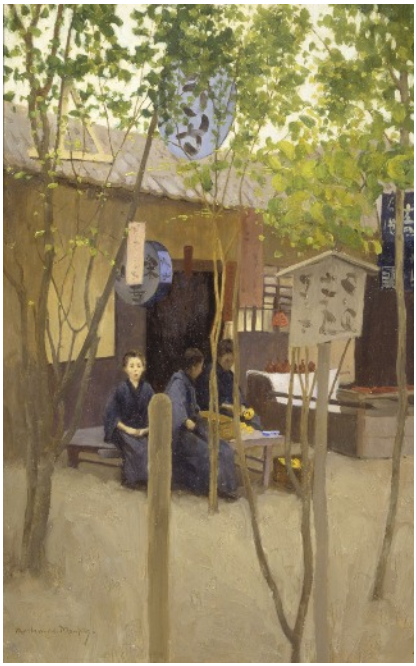
illustrated the stories of *Cinderella, The Sleeping Beauty* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. Crane was also surrounded by the Aesthetic Movement and like many of his contemporaries borrowed from a wide variety of visual cultures, from medieval, Greek, Japanese, Middle Eastern and Renaissance Art. The stories from Arabian Nights were already well-known in Britain when Crane received the commission for *Aladdin's Picture Book* in 1884. Although the stories of Aladdin were set in the Middle East, we can clearly see the influence of Japanese art and design in the costume and decoration of this illustration, perhaps suggesting Crane's preoccupation with colour and pattern over historical or geographical accuracy.



Christopher Dresser and Minton, *Tile with Cranes*, 1875, earthenware. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The designer Christopher Dresser worked for Minton Ceramic Factory from the early 1860s as an art advisor and he created many designs for the company as a freelance artist. This design, depicting

flying cranes, can be attributed to Dresser thanks to drawings in the Minton company archives. Symbols of longevity in Japanese culture, the cranes fly against a full moon, above stylized waves. The use of white on a deep blue ground is also highly reminiscent of the Japanese ceramics Dresser looked to for inspiration and artistic guidance.

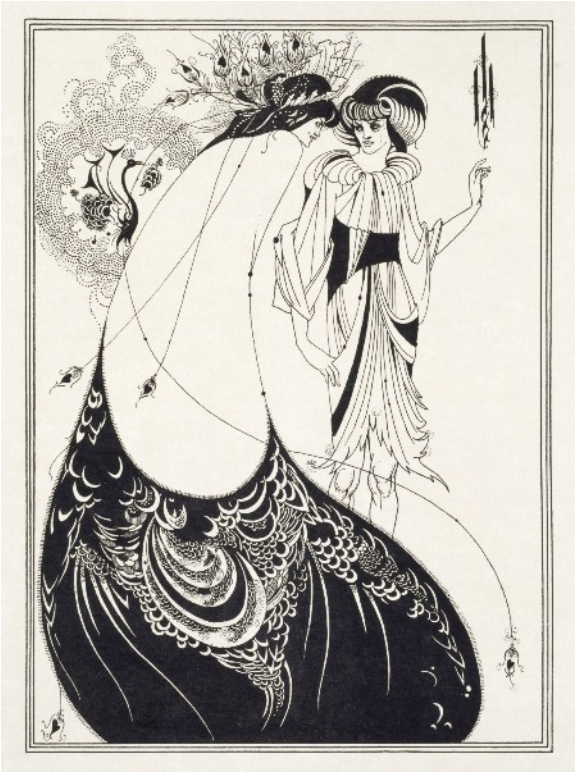


Mortimer Menpes, *Flower of the Tea*, 1887-8, oil paint on wood. Tate, London.

Mortimer Menpes visited Japan in 1887, spending eight months painting and sketching scenes from town-life, customs and rituals, as well as meeting Japanese artists. He returned to England in 1888 and exhibited 140 paintings and 40 etchings of Japanese life at the Dowdeswell & Dowdeswell Gallery.

Flower of the Tea was exhibited with the following note: 'Exterior of a tea-house. The mistress of the house peeling fruit. On the table at the side are vessels containing coloured sugar-waters'.

Unfortunately the painting has lost its original frame, which was painted green gold and had been made by Japanese craftsmen. The frames were made with wide margins of ribbed wood and were sometimes covered with canvas or silk. Menpes had been a student of Whistler, and his innovative exhibition design shows the influence of his teacher, who also adopted unconvential curatorial approaches. His Japanese paintings were hung irregularly in groups, or singly, creating waved lines of frames across the wall.



Aubrey Beardsley, *The Peacock Skirt,* 1894, print. V&A, London.

This illustration is presumed to be of Salome, the eponymous heroine of Oscar Wilde's play of 1891. Like Crane's illustration of Aladdin, Beardsley combines a narrative set in the Middle East with visual elements drawn from Japan. Peacocks traditionally symbolize wealth and worldly power in Japanese art, appropriate for Wilde's independent and sensual characterization of Salome. Here Beardsley has integrated a stylized peacock design into Salome's skirt, as well as including peacock feathers into her headdress. The peacock design in the background, as well as on the skirt, are highly reminiscent of Whistler's *Peacock Room* – a dining room he completed for the important patron Frederick Leyland in 1877.