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**TIME IN SERVICE OF ORIENTALISM:
THE CASE OF POLISH JAPANOMANIA AT THE TURN
OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY***

Abstract

In this article, I investigate Japanomania – the European and American fascination with Japan from the 1860s to the 1910s – focusing on how Western conceptions of time determined perceptions of Japanese culture. Drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Stuart Hall's conception of 'the West' as a historical construct, I claim that Western understandings of time were instrumental in disseminating Orientalism, framing the East as exotic, static, and timeless. The study centres on Japanomania in turn-of-the-century Warsaw, including the reception of Japanese exhibitions and theatre performances, showing that the modern concept of time was a crucial tool of Orientalism. Specifically, the idea of 'universal' time allowed for comparisons between cultures, positioning non-Western societies as inferior and preserving Western hierarchies and narratives. The article demonstrates how Western ideological frameworks influenced Polish cultural identities and shaped local fantasies about Japan and the Orient.

Keywords: cultural hierarchy, Japanomania, *japonisme*, Orientalism, universal time

Tout est japonais maintenant! Everything is Japanese nowadays! – with these words, the character Annette in Alexandre Dumas *fil's* play *Francillon* explains to one of her guests why she had named a salad of her own invention 'la salade japonaise'. Shortly after the premiere of *Francillon* on 17 January 1887, these words rapidly became a popular

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catchphrase describing the Japanese craze sweeping through Paris.¹ At that moment, all things Japanese were in *vogue*.

I explore different strands of the cultural phenomenon known as Japanomania (the Japanese craze, *la folie japonaise*) – referring to the European and American taste for everything identified as Japanese – which began in the 1860s and persisted well into the 1910s. My inquiry focuses on how modern Western conceptualisations of time determined the perception of Japanese culture and people within Polish society. I argue that a specific understanding of time by Western cultural elites served as a principal tool for disseminating and legitimising Orientalism. Framed as a ‘veridic discourse’, Orientalism claimed to present *the truth* about the ‘Orient’, permeating and conditioning Polish imaginary about Japanese people and culture.²

Thus my understanding of Orientalism, as articulated by Edward Said, follows from the notion of the all-encompassing fantasy constructed by Western artists and scholars about the people and cultures of the East. In his field-defining book *Orientalism* (1979), Said exposed the political underpinnings of Western arts and humanities, revealing how the invention of the ‘Orient’ was, in essence, an act of appropriation and domination.³ Furthermore, drawing on contemporary critical interpretations of Said’s seminal work, I acknowledge the heterodoxy of Orientalism, perceiving Polish Japanomania as one of its numerous regional and localised variants.⁴ I focus on the ‘benign’, seemingly harmless, and even ‘benevolent’ manifestations of Orientalism, devoid of the deliberate malice and hostility characteristic of overtly racist stereotypes, to explore what aspects of their invented Japan appealed to Poles.

Following Stuart Hall’s conceptualisation, I understand ‘the West’ not merely as a geographical designation but primarily as a historical construct. According to Hall, the concept of ‘the West’ operates as an ideology, shaping specific forms of knowledge and representing

¹ Lionel Lambourne, *Japonisme. Cultural Crossings between Japan and the West* (London, 2005), 131.

² Andrea Tati, ‘Confessions of a Dangerous (Arab) Mind’, in Ziad Elmarsafy, Anna Bernard, David Attwell (eds), *Debating Orientalism* (London, 2013), 139.

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 2003).

⁴ See, for instance, Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts (eds), *Orientalism’s Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham–London, 2002); Jocelyn Hackworth-Jones and Mary Roberts (eds), *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture* (London, 2005).

diverse European (and North American) cultures as homogenous and markedly distinct from 'the Rest' of the world. The conceptualisation of 'the Rest' and the construction of the Other facilitated the emergence of Western political, economic and social formations, as well as the constitution of the Western identity (i.e. of a modern liberal-democratic subject) and Western modes of knowledge, which also influenced the Polish society.⁵

A cultural studies perspective seems well-suited for an investigation into the notion of time and temporality, considering how deeply the sheer notion of a 'vogue' is intertwined with both circular and linear experiences of time. Things are *en vogue* here and now, and 'being *à la mode*' basically means 'being in the right time' as opposed to being 'out of mode' – outdated or *passé*. Cultural trends have their own chronologies, and in Western imaginary, they are embedded in a particular linear time – they are initiated by narrow groups of experts with particularly high cultural capital, like artists or intellectuals who constitute the avant-garde, whose interests and practices come *before* anyone else's, *avant*. With the passing of time, these interests and practices 'democratise': they become more accessible and more popular across social strata, which results in a widespread cultural 'mania', 'rage', and 'buzz'. Inevitably, such democratisation leads to a devaluation of the cultural trend in question: its prestige and social status decrease, and among the enthusiasts emerge internal hierarchies and divisions into 'authentic' aficionados and 'inauthentic' pretenders. However, this commonsensical trajectory of a cultural 'fad' driven by regression and dependent on a linear conceptualisation of time (even if, in the case of the trajectory of European culture as such, it is progress that aligns with the flow of time, rather than regression) turns out to be only partially relevant for the chronology of Japanomania in the Polish society.

THE JAPANESE VOGUE

Following Japan's gradual abandonment of its policy of commercial, political and cultural isolation from the United States and Europe in the mid-1850s, Western societies gained the opportunity to learn

⁵ Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power', in Stuart Hall, Bram Gieben (eds), *Formations of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1992), 277–8.

about Japanese culture, primarily through Japanese artefacts showcased at events such as the World Expositions in London (1862) and Paris (1867). In 1872, French author and collector Philippe Burty coined the term *japonisme* in a series of articles published in the journal *La Renaissance littéraire et artistique*, to “designate a new field of study of artistic, historic, and ethnographic borrowings from the arts of Japan”.⁶ According to Lionel Lambourne, while *japonisme* found its “wildest acceptance by intellectuals, artists and writers, and became a fashionable craze” in France, it also flourished in the United States and across Europe, including Germany, the Netherlands or the United Kingdom and even in more peripheral regions like the Nordic countries.⁷ Artists such as James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh, and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec were among the many who, in the late nineteenth century, turned to Japanese culture as a means to radically break with Western conventions of representation and thereby ‘rejuvenate’ or ‘revive’ European art.⁸

From its inception, the term *japonisme* has existed alongside its dubious and suspicious counterpart *japonaiserie*, a word that Josephine Lee describes as indicating “a certain irreverence, whimsy, and lack of authenticity”.⁹ Elisa Evett further explains that *japonaiserie*, like *chinoiserie*, was associated with the superficial adoption of select Oriental motifs solely for their exotic appeal, although Evett herself remains sceptical about the supposed opposition between *japonisme* and *japonaiserie*.¹⁰ In this binary entanglement, *japonisme* is viewed in contrast to *japonaiserie*, resulting from a deep understanding of Japanese artistic principles and methods. In the latter half of the twentieth century, art historian Mark Roskill separated and juxtaposed these terms – as it turned out, permanently. However, in the late nineteenth century, people did not use them consistently, and, together, they constituted what

⁶ Lambourne, *Japonisme*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts* (Manchester–New York, 1995), 130.

⁹ Josephine Lee, *The Japan of Pure Invention: Gilbert and Sullivan’s The Mikado* (Minneapolis–London, 2010), xiv. In Polish, the equivalents of these terms are: *japonizm* and *japońszczyzna*.

¹⁰ Elisa Evett, *The Critical Reception of Japanese Art in Late Nineteenth Century Europe* (Ann Arbor, 1982), 106.

was known as ‘the Japanese craze’.¹¹ For instance, the 1902 *Dictionary of the Polish Language* defined *japonaiserie* as encompassing “everything Japanese: Japanese language, customs, wares (etc.)”, although examples of use specifically referred to Japanese trinkets and bibelots.¹²

Toshio Watanabe challenges Roskill’s argument, suggesting that it reflects a modern conception of cultural progression that may not hold from today’s perspective. *Japonisme*, taken as a certain attitude or even a worldview, seems more valuable (because more profound and more ‘authentic’) than the superficial practice of *japonaiserie* that supposedly preceded it in an enthusiast’s experience.¹³

The chronology and trajectory of the Japanese vogue in Polish society differed from that observed in Western Europe and the United States. It began in the 1860s in France as an elitist fascination within a narrow social circle. Over the next two decades, this interest gradually evolved into a popular fad and eventually permeated broader segments of society, persisting, with varying intensity, for the following thirty years. Lambourne vividly describes how, by the 1880s, what started as “acute artistic perceptions” had transitioned into a “popular mania” and disappeared in a flood of “paper lanterns, fans and masks”. He said, “Japanese motifs spread like a rash on everything from cheap platters to biscuit boxes”.¹⁴ In both France and the United States, ‘artistic Orientalism’ predated ‘middlebrow Orientalism’, ‘popular Orientalism’, or ‘commercial Orientalism’.¹⁵ Analysing American Orientalism, Mari Yoshihara also highlights a gendered transformation of “ideas about Asia”. This shift involved a move from the “highly specialised, esoteric knowledge of a small number of male intellectuals” to a “popular commodity” utilised in upper- and middle-class American households, particularly by women.¹⁶

¹¹ Agnieszka Kluczevska-Wójcik, *Japonia w kulturze i sztuce polskiej końca XIX i początków XX wieku* (Toruń–Warszawa, 2016), 14–15.

¹² Jan Karłowicz, Adam Kryński, and Władysław Niedzwiedzki (eds), *Słownik języka polskiego*, vol. 2: H–M (Warszawa, 1902), 135.

¹³ Toshio Watanabe, ‘What is Japonisme? Terminology and Interpretation’, in Agnieszka Kluczevska-Wójcik and Jerzy Malinowski (eds), *Art of Japan, Japonisms, and Polish-Japanese Art Relations* (Toruń, 2021), 215–18.

¹⁴ Lambourne, *Japonisme*, 109.

¹⁵ Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford, 2003), 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

In contrast, among the Polish people, a popular fashion modelled on the Parisian craze for ‘everything Japanese’ – already signalled in Émile Zola’s widely-read novel *Paradise for Ladies* (1883), and directly commented on by Dumas fils in *Francillon* (1887) – either slightly preceded artistic experimentation or emerged concurrently with it in the 1880s. Unlike in France, where elitist interests eventually developed into popular trends, in Poland, elite and popular fads coincided from the outset.

Reflecting on the peculiarity of this chronology, I would argue that while *japonisme* originated among French artists and intellectuals and spread from this elite circle to the broader French populace, its further adaptations took on unique local forms and directions, shaped by national contexts and historical circumstances.¹⁷ When Polish artists, such as Józef Pankiewicz, Leon Wyczółkowski, Wiesław Weiss, or Olga Boznańska ‘caught Japanese fever’ in the artistic circles of Paris and Munich during the 1880s and 1890s, manifestations of ‘Japonomania’ were already evident in Polish popular entertainment, such as comedies, operettas, and circus performances, as well as in shop windows. Thus, ornamental Japanese objects and the practice of Japanese masquerade were first imported from Parisian department stores and boulevard theatres.

JAPANESE OBJECTS

The Japanese vogue in ‘The West’ is primarily concerned with the material dimension of Japanese culture. It was thought that through objects, one could access and comprehend this culture’s spiritual or philosophical aspects. Meanwhile, the everyday life of the contemporary Japanese people, still scarcely present in the Western world, remained obscured, preserving an idealised image of ‘real’ Japan derived from items like vases and fans. Examining the discourse about Japanese objects in the Warsaw press provides a valuable starting point for illustrating how the Western conceptualisation of linear time and progress fuelled, framed and inevitably constrained and crippled the local understanding of Japanese culture and its people. Or, to put it differently,

¹⁷ Christopher Bush, ‘The Ethnicity of Things in America’s Lacquered Age’, *Representations*, xcix, 1 (2007), 77. Bush, for instance, investigates American *japonisme* and its role in the construction of modern American identity.

when Japanese culture was presented to the local population mainly through various expositions of Japanese and ‘Japanesque’ items, how did Polish intellectuals define the temporality of Japanese society?

Japanese objects varied in status and function in the capitalist circulation of things, yet their ornamentality remained a constitutive feature. Some objects, like tea tins, in addition to serving as markers of social distinction and symbols of cultural sophistication, could also serve practical purposes. Others attained the status of artworks, perfectly suited for display in public settings rather than private homes. Nevertheless, any declaration that Japanese art was equal or even superior to Western art, as the most ardent Western enthusiasts of Japan asserted, sparked social controversy by challenging the established hierarchy between the West and the Rest.

According to Said, the logic of Orientalism is premised on the “flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relations with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand”.¹⁸ Orientalism’s “essence” lies in “the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority”.¹⁹ For this reason, despite the rise of popular Orientalism and the burgeoning demand for Japanese goods, widespread acceptance and equal exhibition of Japanese artworks alongside European art in galleries did not occur automatically.

Moreover, the ‘Polonocentrism’ of the intelligentsia, particularly prominent in Warsaw, further limited the reception of any foreign art, including Japanese art. Focused on preserving Polish culture in circumstances of political subjugation to Russia, the Warsaw intelligentsia believed that nothing could rival a Polish artwork that reflected “national hopes and anguish”.²⁰ Therefore, when Feliks Jasiński organised the ‘Japanese Exhibition’ at the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts [Towarzystwo Zachęty Sztuk Pięknych, known as Zachęta] from 14 February to 12 April 1901, it culminated in a scandal, prompting Jasiński’s swift relocation to Kraków.

¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 7. See also Neil Lazarus, ‘The Fetish of “the West” in Post-colonial Theory’, in Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (eds), *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge, 2002), 43–64.

¹⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 42.

²⁰ David Crowley, ‘Seeing Japan, Imagining Poland: Polish Art and the Russo-Japanese War’, *Russian Review*, lxxvii, 1 (2008), 50.

Feliks ‘Manggha’ Jasiński was arguably the greatest Polish enthusiast and advocate of Japanese culture. He caught the ‘Japanese fever’ in the early 1880s in the cradle of Polish *japonisme* and *japonisme* in general – Paris, where both established and aspiring artists made pilgrimages to learn about the latest trends in art.²¹ Jasiński created one of the wealthiest, most extensive, and most prominent collections of Japanese and Far Eastern art in Europe, including 4,600 precious *ukiyo-e* woodcuts among other objects. This collection strongly influenced the directions of Polish *japonisme* and the local perceptions of Japan.²²

Jasiński claimed to have received “hundreds” of anonymous letters after the opening of the Japanese exhibition in Zachęta, which demanded that he “take [his] hideousness out of the exhibition and get the hell back where [he] came from”, or, in a manner doubly insulting to ‘the Rest’: “go teach good taste to Papuans, not Varsovians!” Press critics accused him of “hysteria”, called him a *geszeftman* (pejorative for someone making shady deals) and a “lunatic”.²³ Memoirist of turn-of-the-century Warsaw Jadwiga Waydel-Dmochowska recalls that Jasiński became annoyed with the “naive questions” and “ridiculous remarks” he heard from the audience, so he hung “impertinent inscriptions” on the exhibition, at which Warsaw took offence. Two were particularly memorable for the author: “Chinese tea and Japanese art have nothing in common” and “Not for brutes”.²⁴

In hindsight, it becomes evident that the earlier press critiques of similar exhibitions abroad had already foreshadowed the contentious dispute between Jasiński and the Warsaw intelligentsia during the Japanese Exhibition. In May 1900, the Paris correspondent of the daily

²¹ Kluczeńska-Wójcik, *Japonia w kulturze i sztuce polskiej*, 51.

²² Teresa Grzybkowska, ‘Pseudojaponizm modernistów’, in Elżbieta Karwowska (ed.), *Orient i orientalizm w sztuce* (Warszawa, 1986), 82–3. Most recently, Jasiński’s collection, which also included works of esteemed Polish and Western European artists, was displayed in 2015–16 in the National Museum in Krakow, in The Feliks Jasiński Szolayski House. The exhibition, entitled ‘Long Live Art! Feliks Jasiński’s Collection. From Japan to Europe. Beautiful and Useful Objects’ occupied as many as ten rooms, despite the fact that it featured just a selection of objects from Jasiński’s collection; see <https://mnk.pl/en/exhibitions/from-japan-to-europe-things-of-beauty-and-use> [Accessed: 5 Dec. 2024].

²³ Kluczeńska-Wójcik, *Japonia w kulturze i sztuce polskiej*, 74.

²⁴ Jadwiga Waydel-Dmochowska, *Dawna Warszawa* (Warszawa, 1959), 430.

Słowo remarked on the “fanatical admirers” of Japanese painting in Europe yet expressed perplexity at their enthusiasm: “Even leaving aside the absolute primitiveness of the technique, these paintings lack any grander spirit, which fanciful ideas cannot replace”.²⁵

In a sense, however, Jasiński did succeed. Japanese artworks captured the attention of critics and penetrated the awareness of the average art enthusiast in Warsaw.²⁶ A year and a half later, Stefan Barszczewski, writer, translator, and traveller, noted in the daily *Kurier Warszawski*, during an exhibition of Józef Czaki’s private collection of Chinese art, that Jasiński “managed to instil a taste for the Japanese among Warsaw women through his heroic efforts”.²⁷ Since, in Barszczewski’s opinion, Poles perceived Chinese and Japanese people as “related”, the exhibition of Chinese artefacts similarly attracted numerous visitors, particularly young women. Unlike Jasiński’s Japanese exhibition, this ‘Sino-Japanese exhibition’, as Barszczewski described it, did not provoke spectacular public clashes or even heated debates.

The question of the value of Japanese art in relation to European art by no means ceased to cause controversy, but each exhibition took place in a distinctly defined public space. Jasiński’s collection was showcased in one of the city’s most prestigious art galleries, while the ‘Sino-Japanese exhibition’ was hosted in an ethnographic museum to which Józef Czaki donated his collection. This location categorised the displayed objects as curiosities, posing no threat to the privileged status of Western and Polish art. Such a spatial order, where ‘oriental’ material culture was relegated to ethnographic and anthropological museums rather than art galleries, was closely intertwined with the particular ways in which the cultural elites of turn-of-the-century Europe conceptualised time and temporalities – of both the West and the Rest.

‘UNIVERSAL TIME’, TEMPORALITIES AND TIMELESSNESS

The distinction between time, understood as a unit of measurement, and temporalities, referring to manifold experiences of time, is important

²⁵ S.K., ‘Z wystawy’, *Słowo*, 31 May 1900, 1.

²⁶ Kluczevska-Wójcik, *Japonia w kulturze i sztuce polskiej*, 80.

²⁷ Stefan Barszczewski, ‘W muzeum etnograficznym’, *Kurier Warszawski*, 9 Oct. 1902, 1.

in this context.²⁸ Intensified efforts were underway at the time to unify or reform times and calendars. ‘Universal’ time (defined by Western elites), measured everywhere according to exactly the same rules, was being implemented to pervade the entire globe’s social life. As Vanessa Ogle shows, this *reform* of time – implying that previous notions of time needed to be corrected – its standardisation, as it is now customarily called, was neither obvious nor easy to implement. Not only did it take many decades, but other ways of measuring and experiencing time did not disappear as a result:

In many parts of the world, these transformations for almost a century resulted in an even greater variety of times, as religious and other times and local calendars continued to be used alongside new times. Hybridized and again transformed by changing patterns of communication and occupation in the postindustrial society, these modern times are still with us today.²⁹

For this reason, Allegra R.P. Fryxell argues that historians “must embrace pluritemporalities” to fully grasp “the complex experiences of time in the recent past”.³⁰ That being said, standardisation and unification of time have profoundly influenced the organisation of social life. The modern ideological conception of time – the fiction of mechanical, linear, progressive time – became a significant power tool. Through this framework, Western elites – for it was ‘the articulate classes’ who formulated and propagated this temporal regime – could symbolically elevate the West above other civilisations by positioning them differently in the stream of time. This positioning limited the ways of being in time (temporality) available to the Rest, thus defining its relation to history.

As Ogle argues, the globalisation processes of the nineteenth century revealed an incredible heterogeneity of reality, hardly susceptible to comparison. However, it was precisely ‘universal’ time – *de facto* coupled with the idea of the progress of Western science and technology³¹ – that these new realities became the yardstick

²⁸ See Allegra R.P. Fryxell, ‘Time and the Modern: Current Trends in the History of Modern Temporalities’, *Past and Present*, ccxliii, 1 (2019), 285–98 (at 286).

²⁹ Vanessa Ogle, *Global Transformation of Time, 1870–1950* (Cambridge, MA – London, 2015), 1.

³⁰ Fryxell, ‘Time and the Modern’, 290.

³¹ Before the eighteenth century, Europeans based their alleged superiority mostly in Christian faith; since the eighteenth century, “scientific and technological

for all-encompassing comparison that typified the period and the establishment of meaningful difference.³² While European cultures were immersed in a supposedly homogeneous and forward-moving time, non-Western cultures were allegedly characterised by a kind of timelessness or dislocation in time. In this perspective, they were deemed ‘peoples without history’ or, at best, fixed at “an earlier stage of civilisational and evolutionary development”.³³ Consequently, the appropriate academic discipline to reflect on non-Western cultures thus conceived was, therefore, not history but anthropology, just as the appropriate exhibition space for their cultural artefacts was the ethnographic museum rather than the art gallery. Ogle concludes that “[t]ime, or the absence thereof, thus became a measure for comparing different levels of evolution, historical development, and positionality on a global scale”.³⁴

Therefore, the modern notion of time conditions Western discourses on the Other, including Orientalism. In the same vein, Connor Moynihan writes:

While there is much to be said about the differences between various forms of Orientalism, such as those predicated on national distinctions (French versus British) or based on gender differences (male versus female Orientalists), it is equally important to highlight what remains the same in Orientalism’s renderings of the East: that is, an East that has been thrust out of the West’s temporal progression and has thus become fixed in a queer state of eternal timelessness³⁵

Moynihan claims that Orientalism juxtaposes Western modernity to Eastern timelessness: while Western cultures are situated ‘in time’, cultures of the East are ‘out of time’. In Moynihan’s interpretation of Orientalist logic, time plays a crucial part; he recognises the de-temporalisation of the East as a central premise of the Western understanding of the ‘Orient’. Moynihan builds upon Said’s reflections

criteria” began to gain prominence, see Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca–London, 2014), 26.

³² Ogle, *Global Transformation of Time*, 5–6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ Conor Moynihan, ‘Timelessness and Precarity in Orientalist Temporality: Mehdi-Georges Lahlou’s Aesthetics of Disorientation’, *Contemporaneity*, viii, 1 (2019), 2.

on the relationship between Orientalism and the interconnected categories of time and space, which emphasises that Orientalism displaces the existence of ‘Oriental’ people, who are “fixed in time and space for the West”, or, as Moynihan puts it, “imprisoned” by temporal and spatial limitations.³⁶

However, the ‘timelessness’ of the cultures of the East – both Middle East and Far East – differs from the ‘timelessness’ of the cultures of Black Africa or North America. The latter were often believed not to have a history, denied a historical narrative altogether and thrown into “a permanently anterior time” as “anachronistic humans” allegedly existing unchanged since time immemorial.³⁷ In contrast, Western perceptions of the timelessness of ‘Oriental’ peoples were less absolute. Western intellectuals acknowledged that they had ‘evolved’ to a certain point, after which their historical (and temporal) development abruptly ended, freezing them in earlier times and obsolete social and cultural forms, perceived alternately as ‘primitive’ and ‘barbarian’ or ‘pure’ and ‘unspoiled’.

Regarding the temporality that the West imposed on Eastern cultures, I agree with Edward Ziter, who argues that “‘Orientals’ marked the distance from both a ‘culturally superior’ modern Europe and the distance from the Orientals’ own ‘culturally superior’ past”.³⁸ This temporal perspective on Eastern cultures was shared by both admirers and critics of Japanese culture, as illustrated by the reception of Sada Yakko’s theatrical performances in Warsaw.

SADA YAKKO IN WARSAW

While the Polish society encountered Japanese arts and crafts with some delay, Japanese theatre artists began visiting Polish theatres around the same time as those in cities in Western Europe. The first Japanese tour of North America and Europe took place between 1900 and 1902, featuring performances by a Tokyo group led by

³⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 82.

³⁷ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York–London, 1996), 30.

³⁸ Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge, 2003), 15. Throughout his book, Ziter contends that Europe defined itself against the Eastern Mediterranean rather than the much more distant China or India. However, I would argue that this pattern repeated itself with regard to the ‘Far East’, as well.

Otojirō Kawakami, a pioneer of the *shinpa* theatre movement, and his partner Sada Yakko, who became “Japonisme embodied, all the wonder and mystery of the Orient gathered into one petite person”.³⁹ Their second European tour passed through England, France, Belgium, Germany, Romania, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria-Hungary, and Russia, spanning a total of sixty-nine cities, including Kraków, Lviv/Lwów, and Warsaw.⁴⁰ According to Sada Yakko’s biographer, Lesley Downer:

Westerners often assumed that what they were seeing was traditional Japanese theater. In fact, Yakko was learning as she went along, quite consciously studying Western theater and theatrical techniques, deciding what was relevant for her, and absorbing it into her work.⁴¹

‘Authentic’ Japanese theatre likely blended kabuki theatre conventions with European means of expression, but even more importantly, its arrival in Warsaw followed the premieres of ‘Japanese’ musical shows imported from London. These London productions, featuring European actresses portraying geishas, preceded the appearance of actual Japanese geishas and established a standard for ‘Japanese’ femininity. Two notable West End musical performances were pivotal in sparking and capitalising on the Japanese craze internationally. These were William Schwenck Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan’s English operetta *The Mikado*, which opened in Warsaw on 3 September 1887; and *The Geisha; a Story of a Tea House*, composed by Sidney Jones to a libretto by Owen Hall. The latter, a highly successful Edwardian musical comedy, premiered in Warsaw on 1 June 1898.

The Mikado was set in medieval Japan, while *The Geisha*, just like Giacomo Puccini’s famous opera *Madama Butterfly* produced a few years later, depicted a seemingly contemporary Japan that – as all overseas colonies – functioned as ‘pornotropics’ for European sexual fears and desires.⁴² In this way, these European musical shows consistently distanced and displaced Japanese people in both spatial and temporal terms. The creators of these theatrical productions grounded their

³⁹ Lesley Downer, *Madame Sadayakko: The Geisha Who Bewitched the West* (New York, 2003), 154.

⁴⁰ Nicola Savarese, *Eurasian Theatre: Drama and Performance between East and West from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, transl. Richard Fowler (Holstebro, 2010), 331.

⁴¹ Downer, *Madame Sadayakko*, 155.

⁴² McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 22.

representation of Japan in its temporal dislocation, a framing that was further exposed when an actual Japanese acting company started touring across the United States and Europe. The analysis of its reception in Warsaw reveals how the modern concept of time created an environment for the production and reproduction of Orientalism, or, to put it differently, how the contemporary understanding and experience of time hindered any attempts to transcend the Orientalist discourse.

The turning point in Sada Yakko's European career was the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris. From July 4 to November 3, Kawakami and Yakko's troupe performed for one hundred and twenty-three consecutive days at the Loie Fuller theatre, staging their most popular play *La geisha et le chevalier* (The Geisha and the Knight), a total of two hundred and eighteen times.⁴³ According to Parisian journalist Louis Fournier, "the main attraction of the 1900 Exhibition" was not at all the record-breakingly tall iron Tour d'Eiffel, but precisely Madame Sada Yakko.

In Warsaw, interest in Sada Yakko's performances and in her, already a global celebrity, was equally fervent. As Marian Gawalewicz described it, many people flocked to the theatre "to see a real geisha for once",⁴⁴ resulting in sold-out crowds for the three evenings despite the exceptionally high price. And yet, unlike Paris, London or even Kraków, Warsaw greeted the artist with a rather tepid reception. This unfavourable reaction in the Polish capital became legendary; Zenon "Miriam" Przesmycki, a prominent Polish modernist, scoffed at the limited horizons of the local theatre-goers in his journal *Chimera*:

I actually saw two shows: one in front of me, one behind me and all around me. ... In the auditorium, a kind of farce was simultaneously being staged in the exuberant manner of a barroom, with loud snorting fit to shame Kawakami, loud bursts of laughter in the most tragic scenes, crude "office" jokes being thrown around, male voices shamelessly displaying their hoarseness, as bird-like sopranos of the ladies squeaked in delight. I left somewhat stunned. What was that? This was the "civilised" Warsaw, so much better equipped than the rest of Europe to show "proper critical judgement", looking at "barbaric" Japan.⁴⁵

⁴³ Savarese, *Eurasian Theatre*, 311.

⁴⁴ Marian Gawalewicz, 'Listy z Krakowskiego Przedmieścia', *Kurier Warszawski*, 16 March 1902, 2.

⁴⁵ [Zenon Przesmycki], 'Stara, barbarzyńska Japonia', *Chimera*, iii, 9 (1901), 489. For more information about the reception of Sada Yakko's performances among

The voices were varied, but a tone of dislike and estrangement prevailed, contrasting with the enthusiasm the Japanese troupe elicited elsewhere. Repeated accusations of “barbarism” and “primitivism” petrified the image of Japanese society as ‘stuck’ in a long bygone past and removed from the current of linear time that, in turn, propelled the West toward the light of civilisation and unrivalled advancements in science and the arts. Disappointment with Yakko’s physical appearance, stature, and voice accompanied these accusations as the ‘real’ geisha did not align with the idealised image of a geisha, as seen in characters like Mimosa from Jones and Hall’s comedy, typically played by ‘non-exotic’ and voluptuous stars, such as Wiktoria Kawecka. Edward Lubowski wrote bluntly in the daily *Kurier Codzienny* that it was not even possible to compare Sada Yakko with the great European artists, “the childish firstlings of the Japanese Muse” compared to “the blossoming of the geniuses of European literature”.⁴⁶ Once again, the Western concept of temporal progress and development served to discredit Japanese culture in the eyes of the educated elites of Warsaw.

DIFFERENT SHADES OF ORIENTALISM

When confronted with the ‘real’ geisha and her theatrical practice, most of the audience assumed a position of cultural superiority. What they saw were representatives of a barbaric, irrational, and childish society at a much earlier stage of development who arrived in Warsaw – the centre of a great Western civilisation – to exhibit their “naïve” art. Andrzej Niemojewski delivered an exceptionally critical review, likening Europe to an “old governess” who had to endure a “yellow storm”. He described the audience’s reaction after the performance in these words:

The audience wakes up, gets up, leaves the theatre. The local Momus speaks: ‘Fit for a fairground booth by me...’ ‘Circus stuff...’ ‘Perhaps somewhat interesting from an ethnographic standpoint...’ ‘True. We’ve had the Ashanti, we can watch the Japanese...’⁴⁷

the theatre avant-garde in the West and in Russia, see Min Tian, *The Use of Asian Theatre for Modern Western Theatre: The Displaced Mirror* (Cham, 2018).

⁴⁶ Edward Lubowski, ‘Teatr japoński’, *Kurier Codzienny*, 17 March 1902, 1.

⁴⁷ Andrzej Niemojewski, ‘Japonizm warszawski’, *Głos*, 22 March 1902, 192.

From the perspective of an audience that viewed Europe and its culture as inherently superior to the Rest, the Ashanti or the Japanese were seen, without exception, merely as passing, ‘barbaric’, and rather bizarre curiosities existing ‘out-of-time’. Even though Sada Yakko tailored her performances to European tastes, Warsaw continued to favour its own constructed version of Japan and geishas of its own invention, inspired by the hit musicals of West End. One of Warsaw’s leading critics, Władysław Rabski, dismissed the admiration for the artistry and creative elements of Japanese theatre as a “Parisian blague” and compared it to a Nativity play. He lamented the “cult of barbarism” and candidly stated: “I like Japanese art, but that... of English operettas”.⁴⁸

Rabski was deeply engaged in ongoing discussions about the merits of Japanese culture and the spread of *japonisme*. On the occasion of Yakko’s guest performances in Warsaw, he juxtaposed the imaginary Japan of *japonistes* such as Jasieński, the Japan “of pictures and theatre stages”, the Japan of English operettas and lacquered caskets, with the dynamically modernising state:

At the same time as we became attracted to the golden storks of the Mikado and the fans of the geishas, the Japanese in their own persons appeared on the cobblestones of Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London, and New York. These people were by no means as picturesque as their images.⁴⁹

A year later, he published another article on the subject, noting that Warsaw’s enduring fascination with Japan was an example of local ‘snobbery’. He also made racist and insulting comments against Yakko and Kawakami’s troupe:

The voice of a famous Japanese woman, resembling the squeaking of a chicken, was advertised by snobs as the most beautiful music. Japanese pieces possessing all the characteristics of literary infancy aroused feigned ecstasy.⁵⁰

He also recounted a conversation he allegedly had with a Japanese enthusiast he met in one of Warsaw’s salons, whom he dubbed the

⁴⁸ Władysław Rabski, ‘Teatr japoński’, *Kurier Warszawski*, 14 March 1902, 1–2.

⁴⁹ Kaprys [Władysław Rabski], ‘O czym mówią? Japończycy’, *Kurier Warszawski*, 12 March 1902, 5–6.

⁵⁰ Kaprys [Władysław Rabski], ‘Snobizm i mydlarstwo’, *Kurier Warszawski*, 7 Jan. 1903, 2–3.

“Warsaw Jap”: “And what do you like about this wilderness? ... ‘Oh, sir!’ – she replied with a sneer. – ‘You have to feel it, it “smells” like chrysanthemums’”.⁵¹

Obviously, on the one hand, Rabski perpetuated an Orientalist and racist worldview, in which Japan, still encumbered by barbarism and primitivism, strove to catch up with Europe, which supposedly occupied a much higher position on the ladder of civilisation. On the other hand, however, Rabski dismantled the ‘benevolent’ Orientalism often espoused by followers of the Japanese vogue.

The image of Japan produced by these individuals, despite their genuine admiration for what they considered authentic Japanese culture, remained firmly within the framework of Orientalism and did not transcend its dichotomising and essentialising structure, as highlighted by James Clifford.⁵² Enthusiasts of Japan, including admirers of Sada Yakko’s performances, as well as her critics, fixated on the concepts of ‘naïveté’ or ‘primitiveness’. Although they valorised them differently, they operated within the confines of Orientalism, using its language, imagery, and temporal regimes. They regarded Japanese culture as authentic and powerful because they believed it had resisted the passage of time and had thus remained untainted by progress. They cherished an unchanging image of Japan as a timeless realm of pure values, contrasting it favourably with a corrupted Europe, and were captivated by their own fantasy of Japan. Despite their good intentions, proponents of benevolent Orientalism imposed a divergent temporality on Japanese culture and society, overlooking the lived experiences of contemporary Japanese people. *Japonistes* at large often remained insensitive and oblivious to the realities of Japan in their pursuit of an idealised vision.

The analysis of the Japanese vogue in turn-of-the-century Warsaw demonstrates that the modern notion of time became one of the principal tools of Orientalism, enabling Western elites to secure the superior position of the West in the symbolic global order of things.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² In his review of Said’s seminal work, Clifford notes that Orientalism tends to “dichotomize the human continuum into we–they contrasts and to essentialize the resultant ‘other’”, James Clifford, ‘On Orientalism’, in *id.*, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 258.

This notion shaped the mode of thinking of articulate classes and, through them, entire societies across Europe, including those populations that occupied subjugated political or cultural positions, like the Polish society. The introduction of ‘universal’ time allowed for otherwise dubious comparisons between divergent cultures associated with different fixed temporalities which defined their relation to that ‘universal’ time. Such a global temporal regime prevented ‘the Rest’ from dissolving Western hierarchies and narratives.

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