Richard Bergh’s *Model with a Fan* – Japonisme of a Particularly Fashionable Kind

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The influences of Japanese art which gained a foothold in the West in the 1880s also left strong impressions in Sweden, mainly on the decorative arts. Although there are also obvious Japanese influences to be found in Swedish painting from this time, the particularly fashionable type of Japonisme of which the present painting by Richard Bergh (1858–1919) is an example – a depiction of a Western woman with some of the exotic accoutrements of the Japanese – is relatively rare.

The lasting influence of Japanese art on Swedish painting is, perhaps naturally, primarily to be found in landscapes and other depictions of nature. It almost exclusively affected the compositional aspects of these images, which could show nature in varying ways and different seasons, but nearly always squarely and consistently in a Nordic setting. Swedish artists’ depictions of objects associated with Japan in an exoticised way, so typical and popular in portraits and interiors by painters like James McNeil Whistler (1834–1903), seem, quite revealingly, to have been produced mostly during the time they spent in and around Paris, the epicentre of Japonisme.

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Fig. 1 Richard Bergh (1858–1919), Model with a Fan, signed 1883. Pastel on paper, 64 × 48 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N.D. Qvist Fund 2020. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2776.
Although quite different, Bergh’s more famous portrait of the artist Julia Beck (1853–1935), showing her holding the fashionable Japanese fan, is just like the present painting, recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum, of course to be regarded as an example of the latter category. Both were executed during the artist’s lengthy stay in France, in 1882 and 1883 respectively. In the portrait of Beck, the fan in fact has a deeper symbolic meaning, probably meant to reflect her interest in Japanese art and the influence of Japanese woodblock prints on her own painting (fig. 2). In the other work, however, there are probably no comparable allusions. Here we find a model dressed in the typical Japoniste fashion, wearing a kimono, less in the traditional Japanese manner and more like a dressing gown, and again holding a fan (fig. 1). The execution of the work is quite typical of popular depictions of this type of subject, but it also shows Bergh’s aptitude for emulating the technical aspects of Japanese art in his painting, more so than the portrait of Beck. It has strong similarities to other studies, or to paintings which in part are deliberately finished in an impressionistic, sketch-like manner, but with completely different subjects, also executed by Bergh in the 1880s. Amongst these works we find, for example, *The Flower Picker* (1884, Gothenburg Museum of Art), which has been likened to the works of Jean Bastien-Lepage (1848–1884) and Jean Charles Cazin (1841–1901), and *The Finished Séance* (1884, Malmö Museum of Art), which, compositionally at least, has been interpreted as an example of Japonisme. In this context, one
is tempted to ask if Bergh in the end felt that the present painting could be viewed as a finished work in and of itself, rather than a study, especially as the unfinished parts seem to add somewhat to a sense of decorative symmetry, or rather asymmetry, so typical of Japanese art.4

Apart from the typical paraphernalia of the fan and the kimono, the colours of the painting – the cherry-blossom pink of the background in particular – can also be associated with Japonisme. In addition, there is a sense of graphic execution to the work which to some extent gives the impression of a flat contour rendering more typical of an ink brush drawing, reminiscent of Japanese woodblock prints, and almost completely confined to the surface plane or at least one with shallow depth, as the background wall is quite close to the model in the foreground.5 Here, the choice of a somewhat ephemeral pastel technique, relatively uncommon for this artist, to capture the style and content of Japonisme seems completely deliberate and appropriate, to some extent reflecting the transient nature of the prints. In other respects, the work can also be viewed as a traditional profile portrait, or at least as a study for such a portrait.6 Although the model’s state of dishabille could perhaps be interpreted as a sexualised depiction of her, helped by the Japanese-style trappings and their exotic associations – something not uncommon in paintings in the Japoniste style – in this case it seems rather that they were just props, without any real overt or symbolic meaning of that kind.7 With the subject turned away from the viewer, even looking a little perturbed or discontented, no invitation of a sexual nature seems to be either offered by the model or implied by the artist.

Richard Bergh (fig. 3) belonged to a small circle of artists and patrons of the arts who, starting in the 1880s, exercised considerable influence in the Swedish art world. Apart from being a founding member of the secessionist Artists’ Association in 1886, late in his career he also became the director of the Nationalmuseum in 1915, a professional arc reflecting the power he developed and eventually wielded on the Swedish art scene.8 Exceptionally gifted, he had a keen interest in contemporary artistic trends, several of which are incorporated in his own works.

Bergh was a pronounced theorist, something which also showed in practice in his...
own art, though it could often come across as quite spontaneous in execution. He was particularly adept at achieving artistic variation, and a seemingly inherent sense of grace is apparent in his compositional choices. These almost always seem to the point, but could all the same be deemed radical in his own time. He wrote extensively on art, grappling in particular with the effects of foreign influences in relation to the idea of painting in a manner specifically suited to the Nordic landscape and atmosphere. An obvious ambivalence towards this was reflected both in theory and in practice. In a design sense at least, Bergh seems never to have hesitated in applying and fusing different kinds of influences, for example both realism and symbolism, where he deemed them suitable. In view of this, it is not surprising that both obvious and more subtle Japanese influences can also be found in at least some of his paintings.

At all events, in execution this work is very representative of Bergh’s varying style of the 1880s. His early emulation of Japonisme is especially interesting in view of the development of both his art theory and his art, which can be said to have paralleled the natural evolution of the work of the young artist into that of the seasoned one. Here, a more studied distinction between (the idea of) Nordic painting and continental influences emerged and, along those lines, also a distinction between what was perceived to be manly and what was seen as effeminate art. The adjective feminine has been used to describe Japonisme, both at the time its popularity peaked and in later views, and the idea of a specific Nordic art which Bergh later developed was coloured by the conviction that this was also somehow manlier than the artistic currents he had experienced in Paris. The present work should be considered another important piece of the complicated puzzle of influences in Richard Bergh’s art, further underlining the importance of his formative years in Paris in the 1880s.

Notes:
1. See, for example, Gabriel P. Weisberg, Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff and Hanne Sølkjøkari (eds.), Japonomania (exh. cat.), Atenum, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, National Gallery, Oslo, and National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen, Helsinki 2016. As the exhibition did not have a Swedish venue, it naturally focused mainly on the three participating Nordic countries. Hugo Ingemarsson, To portray the beautiful, exotic and feminine land of cheap export: How Sweden imagined Japan during Japonism, from 1858 to 1914, master’s thesis, Department of History, Uppsala University 2021. http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1561758/FULLTEXT01.pdf (accessed 14 September 2021). Concerning the depiction of interiors in Swedish painting of the time, it is also clear that the influence of Japanese art is for the most part felt in the compositional aspects, rather than in any overt exoticising tendencies.
5. Bergh was clearly quite familiar with Japanese woodblock prints. Several of his contemporaries in Sweden were also collectors of such works, among them the leading academician painter Oscar Björck (1860–1929) and the painter and patron Prince Eugen (1865–1947).
6. For another example of the type, also painted in pastel, see Bergh’s Portrait of the Sculptor Teodor Lundberg (1882): Brummer 2002, pp. 141, cat. no. 4.
7. See, for example, Ingemarsson 2021, pp. 40–49.