

## From the Blade of Grass to Musical Landscapes – Japonisme and Musicality in Nordic Art

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For Western artists at the end of the 19th century Japanese art presented a response to topical needs and requirements amidst the turmoil of contemporary modernism. The ideas in Japanese art expressed the more spiritual aspect of art which was to be found in Eastern traditions generally. It is clear that Eastern art was felt by Western artists to contain the potential for renewal: the crisis of Western art was prompted by the questioning of the mimetic Renaissance tradition of illusionism, and it called for reflections on a different world of imagery. At the same time in Europe, the concept of nature in art was being re-evaluated and many saw the Japanese manner of depicting nature as the answer to this crisis. Accordingly, Japanese artists and their aesthetics were regarded as 'spiritual' and 'pure'. Interestingly, these qualities were also sought after by artists who embraced the concept of correspondence and musicality in the visual arts.

This paper explores these intriguing themes by analysing images of nature depicted in Nordic art. It examines landscape painting from two different points of view: first, from the idea of microcosmos that *Japonisme* and Buddhist art brought to the fore, focusing on the small and ordinary, animals as alter ego, and metamorphoses within nature; secondly, it focuses on a more unknown theme in Nordic art – musicality and its structures in landscape painting. Here I concentrate on nocturnal scenes, the vast untouched wilderness, the decorative crooked pine, waterfalls and especially winter landscapes. These themes and imagery have mostly been identified as national scenes. This paper aims, however, to show the powerful impact that Asian art and Symbolist ideas of correspondence had on Nordic artists in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

This shift from mimetic art towards both silent, nocturnal landscapes and *Japonisme* continued from the days of James McNeill Whistler up until the 1890s, when almost all artists in Europe were familiar with the 'Japonaise' cult in Paris. It should be noted, however, that while on the one hand international artists such as Claude Monet, Paul Gauguin and the Nabis were deeply inspired by *Japonisme*, on the other hand they were visiting and painting in Norway and Denmark. And the Nabis were showing their synthetist art in Helsinki and elsewhere in Nordic countries.

One big promoter for both *Japonisme* and the idea of correspondences was Paul Gauguin. In 1894, after returning from travelling in Tahiti and Denmark, his students Pekka Halonen and Väinö Blomstedt believed that Gauguin had actually visited Sweden, China and

Japan, and they saw him as a guru and spiritual teacher, not merely an academy teacher. In a revealing and important letter to Eero Järnefelt, Blomstedt wrote of how Gauguin had made an impression 'on us as an apostle of freedom in art':

*'He has travelled all over the world ... I imagine that it is just this that has enabled him to free himself from the concept of European art ... His teaching is such as I have never heard from anyone before. He opens our eyes so that each and every one of us learns to know himself and he helps us find within ourselves the best we have to give.'*

(Väinö Blomstedt to Eero Järnefelt, 1894.)<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, we know that *Japonisme* inspired innovation in art and brought new practices, with woodcuts, watercolour, gouache etc. Nordic artists also found new subjects, viewpoints and attitudes and used Japanese formats such as the long vertical *kakemono* and long horizontal *makimono*, as well as the 'round eye' format within their paintings. It is, however, even more interesting to see how *Japonisme* influenced the concept of nature among European artists. The 1890s generation, including Harald Sohlberg, Edvard Munch, Väinö Blomstedt, Axel Gallén, Pekka Halonen, August Strindberg, Prince Eugen and Vilhelm Hammershøi all aspired towards conveying the more poetic, immaterial, and musical in their landscapes, using the high horizon and diagonal perspectives seen in Japanese painting. They were going further away from the narrative and illusory, towards something indistinct, using nature to suggest the profound emotions of human experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Väinö Blomstedt's letter to Eero Järnefelt 16.1.1894. Eero Järnefelt Archive. National Archives of Finland, Helsinki.