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Abstract

If the direct and massive influence of Asia on Western literature of the last century were adequately acknowledged and researched, it would be possible to see Anglo-American Modernist poetry as part of a global, rather than a merely provincial, cultural development. This article demonstrates that imagist poetry, traditionally regarded as the first authentically Modernist literary initiative to appear in English, was in fact a response to a dramatic resurgence in pan-Asian cultural awareness that had begun in Tokyo during the closing years of the nineteenth century, and which spread across Eastern Asia and the Indian Subcontinent to reach Europe a few years before the onset of the First World War. A large quantity of previously

unpublished documentary evidence is presented to show that the imagist experiments of Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, Amy Lowell, and John Gould Fletcher were indebted to an engagement with Japanese visual culture that was far deeper than has ever previously been suggested. The venues for these seminal meetings between East and West were the museums of Britain and the United States.



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In the early years of the twentieth century, traditional Japanese culture underwent a resurgence that not only extended its influence beyond the nation's borders, but fundamentally affected the character of global Modernism as it was beginning to emerge in the art and literature of cities as distant as Calcutta, Boston, and especially London. For more than three decades, Japan had enjoyed under the regime of the Meiji Emperor an openness to international influences that had been systematically denied by the *sakoku*, or "closed country," policy of the Tokugawa Shogunate that preceded it. Novelty had induced fascination, and European conventions of architecture, painting, and writing became increasingly fashionable amid the urban landscape of the new Imperial capital at Tokyo—with a population of nearly two million by 1905, one of the six largest cities in the world.

However infectious this fashion was, however, its products should not be seen as imitations of European styles, but rather as hybrid adaptations that anticipate the Western experiments with Japanese aesthetics that would follow them. Shimizu Kisuke II's design for the headquarters of Mitsui bank, constructed in 1872, is a good example. "The style of construction was diverse, with the lower floors consisting in a Western veranda featuring railings along with supporting columns of bronze," the important urban theorist Maeda Ai wrote of this building in the 1970s, "but above it all was placed a three-story tower styled like that of a Japanese castle complete with projecting gables."¹ Such deliberate and selective incorporation of Western styles and motifs is also visible in the literature of the period. The author Tsubouchi Shōyō,

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