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A Route of Evanescence: Emily Dickinson and Japan

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The Emily Dickinson Journal

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 16, Number 2, 2007

pp. 81-93

10.1353/edj.2007.0007

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

Abstract

Emily Dickinson never traveled to Japan, but her work has had a passionate Japanese readership, and many of her early admirers in the West were connoisseurs of Japanese culture. Among these were Mabel Loomis Todd, Ernest and Mary Fenollosa, and Amy Lowell, along with the Boston-based expert in Asian art Kakuzo Okakura. My essay ventures three explanations for why Dickinson seems at home in Japan: biographical, cultural, and interpretive. Dickinson's temperament recalls the Asian tradition of the scholarly recluse, and so do her haiku-like nature poems and inscrutable letters. Her cultural situation in Calvinist New England has parallels with an older Japan, before Commodore Perry's "opening" of 1854. There was much East-West cultural exchange in the rise of Emersonian Transcendentalism, on which Dickinson also drew. The reception of Dickinson's poetry in the West has Asian resonances. The successive spikes in her reputation—during the 1890s, the 1920s, and the 1950s—correspond to periods of heightened American awareness of Asian

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Emily Dickinson never traveled to Japan, of course, and it is difficult to imagine her doing so. When she ventured as far as Washington, D. C., a small provincial city in 1855, she reported to Susan Gilbert “[A]ll is jostle, here - scramble and confusion” (L178). Imagine how she might have responded to Tokyo! In 1856, when her family moved around the corner in Amherst, a distance of three city blocks, the experience was even more traumatic. “I cannot tell you how we moved,” she wrote Elizabeth Holland. “I had rather not remember. I believe my ‘effects’ were brought in a bandbox, and the ‘deathless me,’ on foot, not many moments after. I took at the time a memorandum of my several senses, and also of my hat and coat, and my best shoes - but it was lost in the *mêlée*, and I am out with lanterns, looking for myself” (L182).

Despite those Asian-sounding lanterns, Dickinson seems to have paid little attention when Amherst friends, such as William Clark, traveled to Japan or when Japanese students attended Amherst College. If Clark was indeed her unknown “Master,” as Ruth Owen Jones has suggested, there is little evidence that his civilizing mission to Hokkaido in 1876 sparked her imagination in any way.¹ As far as Asia is concerned, she was more impressed, as Hiroko Uno has pointed out, with a Chinese Museum in Boston, complete with opium addicts, than with Amherst’s Japanese connections (17).²

Perhaps Dickinson’s greatest awareness of Japan came from the *katsura* trees, ginkgos, and Japanese larches that Clark brought back from Japan to plant along Amherst’s quiet streets. Jones points out that there is a gnarled Japanese cherry



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Compound Manner: Emily Dickinson and the Metaphysical Poets, this understanding of the situation goes back to alrice, and the concept of totalitarianism significantly forms a comprehensive analysis of the situation.

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Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, and the rewards of indirection, according to previous, the intellect creates the scale.

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