

Insects in Japanese culture: Influences on the fin de siècle glass and jewelry design

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Abstract

The following article focuses on the importance of insects as aesthetic, symbolic and allegorical objects of Japanese culture and their importance in terms of mainly their aesthetic influence on the shaping of decorative arts in the West and more specifically in the areas of glass and jewelry design at the end of the 19th century. In particular, it aims to exploring their long history in the culture and art of Japan and their impressive correlations with important historical characters, such as the caste of Samurai and their military and social importance from the time of medieval Japan to the end of the 19th century. Their meaningful presence in traditional Japanese art, especially during the Edo period, through the work of major artists mainly of the ukiyo-e print technique, such as Utamaro and Hokusai, is particularly highlighted. The new historical parameters that would lead Art Nouveau design to disregard the defiantly negative attitude of Western art to insects and to adopt the peculiar and, for many, primitive, cultural traditions of the Japanese, producing brand new design works will be profoundly discussed. In general, the way, according to which insects would be exonerated from their dark past in European art, they would become a new form of aesthetic excellence through glass and jewelry design and would manage to form a new thematic platform for designers of that time, will be highly commented upon, analyzed, and documented with relevant examples.

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The apotheosis of insects in Japanese culture

The love and admiration of the Japanese people for insects that came from the long periods of Chinese conquest of their land was synonymous with their primordial respect for nature itself. Both nature and the seasons gained a ritual value for Japanese society since ancient times, playing major role in the shaping of the country's cultural physiognomy as they greatly influenced science, religion, arts, but above all the personal and social development of Japanese people themselves. Moreover, amid many philosophical and spiritual quests man was regarded as just one entity of the ecosystem, that is, not exclusively the most important or dominant of all. On this basis, the Japanese developed a particular theory that defined the intimate relationship between humans and biodiversity, the notable *Sasayama*, in the framework of which their close relationship with the admirable microcosm of insects was developed. Thus, Japan became one of the first countries on a global scale to embrace the eccentric, beautiful and peculiar insects which never seemed to cause fear or disgust to its people. In the course of time, many Japanese ended up being lovers of certain species, while most of them loved to hear the sounds they produced, to observe their everyday habits, and especially their battles, to eat or even to collect them obsessively. During the Edo period (1603-1867), certain species of singing insects were sold as pets to specific buyers at really high prices. This, of course, does not mean that all the Japanese had developed this relationship with insects, the variety of which was unique in that country, but had rather developed deep feelings of respect and reverence not only for their impressive, fragile morphology, but also for their profound symbolisms and allegories. And this pronounced, close relationship, which had been increasingly strengthened over the centuries, was given the name *mushi* (蟲) which, although difficult to translate into any other language, seems to express a multitude of concepts and terms many of which refer to words like insect, germ, bug, but also spirit. According to Knighton², this rather intense term reveals the existence of a wider

² KNIGHTON. "Insects provide insight into Japanese Culture". Available in: <

Japanese cultural phenomenon whereby insects were divided into beneficial and harmful ones, but always under the umbrella of local beliefs, symbolisms even prejudices. She claims that Japan started its earliest relationship with insects more than eight centuries ago and at the time they represented the allegory of the four seasons. This very early metaphorical and poetic use of the bugs was represented by the *mushi* concept which at the same time reflected the fragility and the mutability of all life. But it was mainly towards the end of the Heian period (794-1185), and especially during the Kamakura period (1185-1333), the time when the class of Samurai, the fearless and violent warriors began to rise in order to dominate the country for more than 600 years, when certain types of insects gained great symbolic significance. The heavily armed Samurai, renowned for their pioneering war uniforms, their elaborately made helmets and deadly weapons, their military tactics and impressive strategy, but also for their strong culture and nobility³, were associated with a species of insect which was reminiscent, because of its body structure, of their mightiness and robustness. The Japanese rhinoceros or horned beetle *Trypoxylous dichotomous* (Linnaeus, 1771) (order Coleoptera, family Scarabaeidae) *kabutomushi* in Japanese, was then the “King of Insects” in Japan because of its strength, lack of fear and fighting power⁴. Of course, its Japanese name was nothing but a straight reference to the Samurai, as the first part of the word *kabuto* stands for the Japanese word for the Samurai helmet, while the second part *mushi* refers to the general notion of insects, making the final meaning of the bug the *Samurai helmet insect*.

Another kind of insect which was associated directly with the agility and power of the warriors of the Japanese Middle Ages was the dragonfly (order Odonata) or otherwise *katchimushi* in Japanese⁵. Etymologically,

<https://www.virginiahumanities.org/2014/10/> >, access on 8/07/2018.

³ MATSURA. **Fukuiken-shi 2**. Tokyo: Sanshusha, 1921, p. 99.

⁴ IGUCHI. “Intrasexual fighting and mounting by females of the horned beetle *Trypoxylus dichotomus* (Coleoptera: Scarabaeidae)”. **European Journal of Entomology**, 107 (1), 2010, pp. 61-64.

⁵ This word was mainly used for the dragonfly before the Meiji period (1868-1912) and by the time was replaced by its modern version *Tombo*.

this name is directly related to the victorious battles of the Samurai, as its first part *katchi* means *I win*, while the name as a whole means the *victory bug*. However, the ability of this insect to fly only forward without the “drawback” to fly backwards, was immediately perceived by the warriors themselves who felt that it was fearless and never backed off, as they really did themselves. This was the main reason that the dragonfly was soon incorporated into their martial culture and gained deep and meaningful symbolisms in their ideology, in general. It was no later before it became an emblem that, as a decorative motif, adorned not only their clothes but also their arms and armor, as they believed that it brought them luck in war. In modern Japanese history, especially during the Meiji period and beyond, the dragonfly gained many meanings. However, it still preserves the primordial notions of sturdiness and bravery, courage, power, but also joy and happiness; it is associated with Autumn and is considered a symbol of luck and longevity⁶.

Perhaps the most joyful, playful and elegant insect with significant symbolisms in the social, political and military character of Japanese culture is the butterfly (order Lepidoptera), the symbol of Spring, but also of family stability and bliss. The fact that there are more than 327 butterflies in the country that thrive either in areas with warm, subtropical climate, or in others with generally cool temperatures⁷, the wide variety of its shapes, colors and patterns, but mainly its miraculous achievement to evolve from a lowly caterpillar to a noble insect, soon made it one of the most popular emblems among Japanese nobility. So, for centuries it constituted one of the most popular kimono motifs, especially of the casual, cotton summer kimonos named *yukata*, as well as many other types of clothing, as the butterfly was considered an insect that brought joy, fortune and abundance of goods. At the same time, its fine and pale qualities were in stark contrast to the tough, bloody reality of the long period of Japanese feudalism⁸.

⁶ BAIRD. **Symbols of Japan: Thematic Motifs in Art and Design**. New York: Rizzoli, 2001, p. 108.

⁷ FUJIOKA. **Butterflies of Japan**. Tokyo: Kôdansha, 1975, p. 312.

⁸ The long period of feudalism began almost from the time of the strengthening of the samurai, that is,

Again, we can notice that this insect, despite its delicate nature, was associated with the bloodthirsty Samurai, whose duality was undisputed: the famous *bushibo* code, a rather broad term that defined Samurais' rules of honor, self-control, faith and obedience to the superiors and the fighting for ideals to death, also defined their subtle nature which had to be refined with dedication to the fine arts, penmanship and poetry. It is no wonder thus, that many and powerful castes of the Samurai used butterfly crests, which were similar to the budes or coats of arms in the heraldic tradition of Europe, commonly known as *chō mon*⁹ in wearing them proudly on their armors, cloths, banners and weapons.

The Japanese artists came very early in touch with the social, aesthetic but mostly symbolic significance of insects, and for this reason they began to incorporate them thematically into their art, capturing them in many ways and techniques. Kano Kagenobu (1434?-1530?), the famous early 19th-century painter, was the first artist to attempt to make on a hand scroll drawings and sketches in the style of many Japanese and Chinese artists who had been involved in depicting insects, many centuries before. This scroll, the so-called *Wakan Hissha Churui*, or else *Insects by Japanese and Chinese Artists*, is probably the most important proof of the insects' timelessness in the art of the Japanese and throughout Asia over the centuries¹⁰.

around the 12th century, and was completed after the middle of the 19th century, that is, after the beginning of the Meiji period. During this time the country was dominated by powerful local rulers, fanatical warlords even by powerful families, both politically and economically. In contrast to all this, the emperor's role was rather formal without much political power.

⁹ NAKANO. "Family crests-mon". Available in: < <http://www.japan-society.org/?nav1=section&secid=5&subsecid=67&articleid=19> >, access on 03/07/2018.

¹⁰ BERENBAUM. **Bugs in the System: Insects and their Impact on Human Affairs**. New York: Perseus Books, 1995, pp. 569-570.



Figure 1
Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)
Dragonfly and Bellflower, Hokusai Manga, 1820, ukiyo-e print
Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

However, it is certain that the most important period of exaltation and glorification of insects through Japanese art was the Edo period. During that time, there was a significant shift towards insect replication not only through two-dimensional techniques, but also through three-dimensional ones and especially through the traditional *netsuke* technique. This was a kind of small scaled carving technique that produced a particularly popular type of accessories in Japan: functional, sculptural, boxlike objects for personal use made usually from wood or ivory¹¹. *Netsuke* carvers were inspired from a wide array of arthropods such as spiders, cicadas, dragonflies and crickets, handing over not only to Japanese artists but also to European art several centuries later a new vision of the philosophy of nature and its miracles.

Of course, the most famous Japanese technique of ukiyo-e, or woodblock prints, was the most distinctive kind of Japanese art that featured a variety of insects. One of the most important artists of this technique during the Edo period, Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), in his work, which was rich from both a thematic and technical viewpoint, included many insect ukiyo-e prints, which are now considered to be some of the most representative works of this kind [Figure 1]. Typical is his fairly extensive study of insects in one of his 15 volumes work, commonly known as *Hokusai Manga*¹², the first volume of which was published in 1814.

¹¹ MILHAUPT. "Netsuke: From Fashion Fobs to Coveted Collectibles". **Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History**. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. Available in: < http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nets/hd_nets.htm >, access on 19/07/2018.

¹² In that work we can see that Hokusai tries to depict images of everything he had observed or had drawn his attention. So, there are "sketches" of people male and female, of different social classes and background performing a variety of activities, all sorts of animals, birds and insects, even deities and ghosts, architectural monuments and buildings, objects of everyday use, beautiful landscapes and detailed depictions of the Japanese flora.



Figure 2
Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806)
Katydid and Cicada, Book of Insects, 1788, ukiyo-e print
Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

Having consciously moved away from the classical themes that made him famous in Japan such as figures and landscapes, one more ukiyo-e print virtuoso, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806), mastered the famous *Book of Insects*, in Japanese *Ehon mushi erabi*¹³ [Figure 2]. This work included fifteen delicate drawings that included typical Japanese insects that resulted in an admirable naturalism. Although the book title suggests only the presence of insects, we have to make clear that it also included a wide variety of flowers and other plants, mammals and birds all depicted in modest fineness and graceful simplicity. In the 20th century, this book was treasured mainly for its impeccable illustrations, but this was not the case initially. The *Book of Insects* was originally designed not as a picture book, but as a book which would “host” a rather peculiar anthology of verses about insects, written by the poet Yadoya no Meshimori (1754-1830), which were accompanied with impressive, unorthodox insects’ drawings. Each drawing which accompanied two poems and stretched across two pages, was made in order to reinforce in the most natural way the meaning and style of these poetic texts. The detailed and subtle way in which Utamaro captured the sectioned, glossy wings of butterflies, the fluffy legs of beetles, the fine limbs and the sensitive antennae of katydids or bush crickets (order Orthoptera, family Tettigoniidae), all framed by delicate plants of all sorts in finely-colored backgrounds, are examples of an admirable work that relies upon a deep scientific observation and unwavering respect for mother-nature. However, it is primarily his love for insects and nature in general, that is “imprinted” on this excellent work which made him particularly popular and recognized in his era. It is not accidental the fact that in the postscript of the book, the prominent artist and Utamaro’s teacher, Toriyama Sekien (1712-1788) admits the value of his student as a great, rising artist stating that “[...] he has succeeded in capturing the life’s breath of insects”¹⁴.

¹³ A more precise translation of the title is *Picture Book of Selected Insects*.

¹⁴ FABRICAND-PERSON. “The Bug Books”. Available in: < <http://library.princeton.edu/news/2011-12-15/%E2%80%98bug-books%E2%80%99> >, access on 19/07/2018.

A new perspective for the European taste stereotypes

In one of his many speeches about Japan, the 19th-century Irish-born author Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904)¹⁵, known for his love of Japanese culture, states: “In old Japanese literature, poems upon insects are to be found by thousands. What is the significance of the great modern silence in the Western countries on this delightful topic? I believe that Christianity, as dogma, accounts for the long silence”¹⁶. It is true that insects as elements of thematic interest in Western art, especially from medieval times onwards, were treated unequally and perhaps unfairly in some cases as they often seemed to be the victims of an undocumented religious prejudice that had its roots in old Judeo-Christian beliefs. For example, the Bible references to insects are, in most cases, rather negative than positive, with main example that of the ten biblical plagues¹⁷, many of which were related to the destructive action of insects (locusts, gnats, gadflies), while many of the rest had also had some connections with them. According to E. Evans, mainly during the medieval times, the Catholic Church seemed to be almost always troubled by the presence of these usually terrifying, disgusting creatures of evil and martyrdom¹⁸. In many cases, the ecclesiastical courts had ruled against many species of insects such as locusts, worms and various kinds of beetles which, claiming they were not found in the Noah’s Ark, were assumed to have appeared arbitrarily again on Earth and that is why they were the devil’s creatures¹⁹. Thus, notwithstanding that they appeared as heraldic symbols in the arms, clothes and armor of medieval knights and warriors, in art their appearance

¹⁵ His love and elaborate writing for Japan led him to receive the Japanese citizenship in 1896 and hence his Japanese name, Yakumo Koizumi (小泉 八雲), with which he became more widely known in that country where even he today is considered one of the most popular writers.

¹⁶ HEARN. **Delphi Complete Works of Lafcadio Hearn**. Hastings: Delphi Publishing, 2017, p. 235.

¹⁷ DOUGLAS & HILLYER. “Plagues of Egypt”. In: **New Bible Dictionary**. Second edition. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1987, p. 98.

¹⁸ EVANS. **The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals**. London: William Heinemann Publications, 1906, p. 4.

¹⁹ EVANS. *op. cit.*, p. 5.

was limited and purely symbolic²⁰. Insects in European art from the Renaissance until the end of the 16th century appeared as religiously-charged symbols that were mainly associated with the fear of losing the soul and the notion of ephemeral²¹. Nevertheless, the major movement of insects' depiction is observed in the 17th century Netherlandish still-lives, and this is due largely to the long-time contact of Dutch seafarers with Japan, which lasted throughout the Edo period, given that the Netherlands was the only country in the West to maintain trade relations with this Asian country that was totally isolated at that time. The Pre-Raphaelites painters of the mid-19th century England produced an amount of works many of which contain a considerable proportion of insects, mainly butterflies. But in most cases, we observe that insects were used as a means of provoking emotions, especially when the themes of many of these works were related to the secular or religious power and war and were addressed to the public²².

The emergence of Japanese cultural and aesthetic ideals in Europe in the 1860s, especially after the official appearance of Japanese goods in a special stand at the Second World Fair in Paris in 1867, was a catalyst for the European art. During that period Japanese prints were bought in masses and thus became particularly fashionable in France and England²³, inaugurating in this way an unparalleled frenzy for anything that came from, or just reminded of, Japan. Obviously, it was quite interesting the fact that the contact of European artists, designers, scholars, writers and poets with such a different, heretical and provocative culture, introduced new

²⁰ For example, the representation of the fly in works of art symbolized the decline, abandonment, depression and death, the depiction of the wasp represented Satan himself, the spider symbolized a person of conspiracy and destruction, the ant was synonymous to the homicide and defeat, while the butterfly was interpreted as the symbol of the life cycle, resurrection and even regeneration.

²¹ KLEIN. "Insects and Humans: a relationship recorded in visual arts". In: **Encyclopaedia of Human-Animal relationships**. Porstmouth: Greenwood Publications, 2007, p. 5.

²² KLEIN. *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²³ WATANABE. "The Western image of Japanese art in the late Edo period". **Modern Asian Studies Journal**, 18, 1984, p. 667.

reasonings, as well as multiple aesthetic and symbolic experimentations in the multi-faceted expressions of their productive creativity.

At the same time, Meiji period, well-known for its political, social and aesthetic reforms, began in Japan (1868-1912). During that time a strong representation of the insects would be achieved beyond their classic, two-dimensional rendition: insects would be represented in an articulated, three-dimensional, model form, made of various types of metals, in a streamlined way, that is more sophisticated and less ornamental than before [Figure 3].

The Art Nouveau, the new and torrential movement which was born and thrived through the new aesthetic and ideological principles of Japan, managed to borrow and eventually adopt many of these new qualities which, until then, were unknown to the consumer mass of Europe. Soon the field of the three-dimensional functional objects aesthetic of that new movement would find a new path of self-expression through the magic of the Japanese idiosyncrasy. At the end of the 19th century in Germany, Belgium, but mainly in France, the U.S. and Spain, nature would begin to dominate the creative fantasies of famous designers and soon would become an inventive thematic palette in which the shapes and colors of flowering branches, delightful fruits, leaves and flowers of climbing plants would be harmoniously combined²⁴. Insects found the chance that history owed them so that they not only began to prevail into the new creative ideas of the great designers of the time, bringing to light a brand new view of the conventional concept of beauty, but were also fully “vindicated” and totally exonerated by the heavy shadow of their unfair course in European art²⁵.

²⁴ DUNCAN. **Art Nouveau**. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1994, p. 15.

²⁵ TSOUHAS. **Η Ιστορία των Διακοσμητικών Τεχνών και της Αρχιτεκτονικής στην Ευρώπη και την Αμερική (1760-1914)** (The History of the Decorative Arts and Architecture in Europe and America (1760-1914)). Athens: ION Publications, 2005, p. 297.



Figure 3

Articulated metal models of a katydid and a stag beetle, Meiji period, around 1900

Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

Additionally, the three-dimensional design industry where the strongest mapping out of insects was observed, would give them an opportunity not only to “communicate” their blatant presence in European art at the end of the 19th century, but also to impose it through the prolific production of glass wares and especially jewelry. This means that through the freedom of design provided by Art Nouveau in these specific areas, insects were fully acquitted in the consciousness of consumers, since they had already been accepted as factors of modernity through the fashionable Japanese culture, however in a rather superficial than a deeply symbolic and allegoric way.

The alluring transparency of insects in glasswork

It was not by chance that the insects wonderland found its “natural kingdom” to thrive and develop into the bright field of decorative and

applied arts in Europe. Coincidentally, the appearance of one of the greatest designers and craftsmen of the late nineteenth century France, Emile Gallé (1846-1904), determined decisively the way in which the cultural and aesthetic invasion of insects would be mapped in the European three-dimensional design, as well as their complete glamorization. With solid knowledge in botany which triggered his real interest in the world of plants, flowers, fruits and their subsequent transformation into forms, colors and motifs, Gallé, as well as many other artists and critics of his time, encountered the miracle of the imported Japanese art in the early 1880s. Since then, he became a fabulous collector of ukiyo-e, but also of many utilitarian or aesthetic objects, started observing, analyzing and finally depicting in many sketches and drawings many of them, with a special focus on insects. In his famous work *Écrits pour l'art*, Gallé states: "The Japanese artist knows uniquely how to translate very natural reproductions into evocative motifs"²⁶. It should be noted, however, that his contact with the Japanese art, which was "liberated" from any pettiness or triviality, gave him the opportunity to free his own creative ideas about the use of insects in his work, because apart from botany he had also developed a special interest in entomology, which he had studied in Weimar, Germany, from 1862 to 1866. As a designer of mainly glassware, Gallé managed to invent many different techniques and, especially after his initial experimental period in the late 1870s and especially during the 1880s, he managed to make some outstanding pieces of glassware that gave him considerable acclaim²⁷. In many of his works, from the very beginning of his design career until its end which coincided with his death, he featured some of the most representative and popular Art Nouveau motifs relating to plants and insects.

In his early works, one can observe a rather stylized rendition of insects, which refers to the way in which Edo period insects were depicted. A typical

²⁶ GALLE. *Écrits pour l'Art Floriculture – Art Décoratif – Notice d'Exposition (1884-1889)*. Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1908, p. 217.

²⁷ GARNER. *Collecting Art Nouveau*. London: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1989, p. 39.

example is his work *petit vase craquelé* (*small cracked vase*), crafted in the early 1880s, which belongs to the first period of his career in terms of technique, known as the *transparent phase*²⁸ [Figure 4]. This vase is a functional, but also highly decorative object: its innovative form with the special, elongated handle along with its bright glossy surface that make it look more like a jug, but also its decoration with plants and insects, promote its initially functional value into an ornamental one. The insects here, a small praying mantis (order Mantodea) and a cicada (order Hemiptera, family Cicadidae) at the other side of the object, are depicted in a rather stylized, two-dimensional way which is reminiscent of the linear drawing technique observed in ukiyo-e prints. Additionally, the use of intense gold and dark brown enameling makes them stand out, as they look like “small, precious jewels” on the impressive transparency of the vase. However, its most interesting feature is its diaphanous, cracked surface, since it represents the white, glossy transparency of the insect wings membranes along with their exuberant vein patterns.

However, as Garner claims, Japanese art became by the time the most significant single stylistic influence on Gallé’s mature work, that is after mid 1890’s. This can be proven, inter alia, by the fact that certain vases bear the inscription “alla japonica” beside his own signature²⁹. It is, however, certain that during this period Gallé would review the way that shapes and figures were depicted on the vase surfaces as they began to be rendered in a rather “three-dimensional” way, in correspondence with the vases forms and textures. For example, the footed bowl titled *La libellule* (*The dragonfly*), a work entirely different from the previous one, made with the technique of marquetry³⁰, seems to bear elements from the Meiji period

²⁸ By the end of 1870s Gallé began to perfect a special technique in his father’s workshop in Nancy, which bore the first promising elements of floral decoration. During this early phase, which lasted until the middle of the 1880s, he dealt exclusively with a transparent, simple type of glass in sometimes bluish or amber tones.

²⁹ GARNER. **Emile Gallé**. New York: Rizzoli, 1979, p. 108.

³⁰ An interesting but difficult glass production technique characterized by the insertion or incorporation of glass or metal elements on the surface of the vases when they were still keeping the high temperature of the kilns and were still porous and soft.

three-dimensional insect art [Figure 5]. The way the dragonfly is depicted here is more convincing and closer to its real image. The interesting, verisimilar colors and the glossy surface of its embossed body, as well as its carved wings, make it an inspiring design that dominates a plain, convex, translucent surface aspiring to be conceived as a three-dimensional entity.



Figure 4
Emile Gallé (1846-1904)
Petit vase craquelé, 1880
Source: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 5
Emile Gallé (1846-1904)
La libellule, 1903
Footed bowl in blown and cased glass
Source: Corning Museum of Glass

Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) was the American glassware designer who managed to “impose” his outstanding work in Europe, as it was apparent that his work, like those of other designers of the time, was deeply influenced by Japanese culture. This was achieved thanks to his close relationship with Edward C. Moore, the chief designer of his father’s successful ceramics enterprise, Tiffany & Company, who was a collector of Japanese crafts and a manufacturer of a series of Japanese metallic

objects and initiated Louis Comfort in the principles of Japonisme at an early age³¹.

Tiffany showed his genuine interest in Asian arts and especially in Japanese art quite early on, as his genius and inventiveness combined with his deep study on exotic Asian birds, but mainly on Japanese insects, gave him the motivation to experiment and finally to manufacture a totally new type of material, the blown favrile glass³². This kind of iridescent glass constituted the basis for the creation of many functional and, at the same time, decorative objects, such as vases, bowls and footed dishes; its main features were its impressive polychromy, but also its “metallic” mirror surface that reflected and simultaneously absorbed all the surrounding colors in an almost magical way [Figure 6]. His particular work proves that he moved beyond the imitation of the exotic Japanese insects themselves as he seemed to have fully understood and assimilated the real concept of Japanese aesthetics. Especially the vase forms and their overall decoration were not directly reminiscent of insects bodies or parts of them, as the iridescent colors of favrile glass evoked intensely the bright, shiny wing and corporal surfaces of several species.

Some years later, he would introduce another type of glass object, the electric table lamp which would prove particularly popular both in the U.S and Europe. Following the European Art Nouveau style and being inspired more than ever by Japanese culture, Tiffany designed a series of objects based on the fruitful combination of stained glass and metalwork. Among his numerous designs for the umbrella-like table lamps, a series based on the wondrous dragonfly which however he rendered in an upside-down form, in a uniquely stylized repeating motif, stood out in the American market almost immediately [Figure 7].

³¹ FRELINGHUYSEN. **Louis Comfort Tiffany and Laurenton Hall: an Artist's Country Estate**. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006, p. 158.

³² GARNER. **Collecting Art Nouveau**. *op. cit.*, p. 49.



Figure 6
Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933)
Blown favrile glass objects, 1896-1902
Source: Victoria and Albert Museum



Figure 7
Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933)
Dragonfly table lamp, 1905
Stained glass, bronze and mosaic
Source: Christie's catalogue, 2008

In most cases four or more hanging or diving-like dragonflies seem to surround the scalloped rim of the shade, giving it a unique organic feeling. The technique of leaded stained glass³³ proved to be ideal for the rendition of the insect's features and colors, as with its application Tiffany managed to aptly depict the peculiar crystalline transparency of the dragonfly wings, but also the characteristic symmetry of its body, painted in dazzling, almost metaphysical colors. It is particularly obvious that Tiffany was much influenced by the characteristic black outline of the ukiyo-e prints which he interpreted into the lead, harmonious line around the glass pieces of the lamp shade. In many cases the same insect also dominated as an embossed design on the bronze base of the object, giving it a subtle elegance. The famous "Hanging Dragonfly" leaded stained glass lampshades series constitutes a very characteristic sample of the American Art Nouveau decorative arts, rendering Tiffany one of the most reputable

³³ FRELINGHUYSEN & OBINSKI. "Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933)". Available in: < https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tiff/hd_tiff.htm >, access on 22/07/2018.

designers in the world glasswork history.

Insects in jewelry: from fear to luxurious intimacy

Jewelry design was the ideal field for the application of the new principles relating to nature itself and which became synonymous to creativity and imagination during the Art Nouveau period. The depiction of natural motifs, many times focusing on feminine characteristics, became even more intense with the inclusion of a series of insects such as dragonflies, spiders, butterflies, bees and cicadas which were rendered in an extremely elegant and seductive manner and were closely associated with the miracle of life cycles, human sexuality and eternal beauty.

This particular area of design thirstily borrowed mainly the Japanese aesthetic approach for the uncannily flawless beauty and historical evolution of insects in art, and transformed it into a multifaceted palette of forms, colors, qualities of precious or semiprecious materials and vanity. However, in order to achieve this, instead of creating just schematically stylized insect compositions, Art Nouveau jewelry designers focused on making new, rather sculptural, ornamental forms retaining, however, the natural beauty and grace of insects³⁴. What should be noted is that the above combination of the then current ideological and aesthetic ideas brought closer insects to the people of the West in an unorthodox but marvelous way. Soon bugs became, through the art of jewelry, integral parts of the everyday life and friends of the most intimate moments of middle and upper class women, since they were closely contracted with the fin de siècle concepts of elegance and fashion. The fear and loathing for them, were quickly replaced by the notions of finesse, luxury and beauty as these, once abominable beings, were transformed through design into desirable, precious, organic forms of high value.

The basic technique for the creation of Art Nouveau jewels was that of

³⁴ LAHOR. **Art Nouveau**. New York: Parkstone Press, 2007, p. 27.

enameling³⁵, which, along with the use of semi-precious stones or pearls on yellow 18k gold, became more common than the use of traditional, precious stones, such as diamonds. Rings, bracelets, earrings, brooches, necklaces, belt buckles, hair combs and hair pins either in pure insects forms or in a fantastic combination between female figures and bug features, were made from multicolored gems and enamel, fulfilling the new aesthetic demands much better than any precious stone would.

The genius French designer René Lalique (1860-1945) is considered as the most prominent personality of Art Nouveau jewelry, as it was him who managed to introduce a brand new stylistic language to the traditional jewelry design in France and also worldwide. With his revolutionary observability, his lively research and various experimentations, Lalique succeeded in creating a new way of interpreting and rendering natural forms, as well as female figures, producing an innovative, dramatic but also “airy” and graceful style which would influence profoundly other designers of his time. Having already worked with glass, he was aware of the transparency and translucence qualities new jewelry should have³⁶. The influence of Japonisme was apparent in his work, since the very early years of his career. However, despite the fact that all forms of nature were important to him, the world of insects became a new, challenging and irrevocable source of inspiration which would shape his new design vocabulary. Mainly dragonflies and butterflies, crafted in the plique-à-jour enameling technique, were depicted in such an unmistakable precision that even the subtle veins of their iridescent wings were visible [Figure 8]. Generally, the way he handled insects in design was profoundly interpreting and symbolic. His works were an ode both to nature itself and women, as through them he could reveal the splendid qualities of female fineness and sensuality, the sense of fantastic and supernatural, the sense of symmetry

³⁵ Plique-à-jour, known also as backless enamel, was the most popular enameling style used. It was extremely effective as it could allow light to pass through the actual enamel body as, in many cases, there was no metal backing. Thus the jewel would finally have a bright, translucent light effect.

³⁶ MARCILHAC. R. Lalique, *Catalogue Raisonné de L'Oeuvre de Verre*. Paris: Editions de l'Amateur, 2005, p. 36.

and repetition, as well as the transformation of physical forms. These were the main reasons that most of his works were massively purchased and worn with ease, breaking down, in a sense, the perpetual prejudice for the, until then, loathsome insects.

Perhaps some of his most characteristic pieces are those in which the union of insects with human figures, especially women, is attempted, a revolutionary idea in the then rigid jewelry design, widely accepted. His work "Dragonfly woman", a fine corsage brooch, is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding pieces in the Art Nouveau design spectrum³⁷ [Figure 9]. There is a sense of severe contradiction in this piece as the, both attractive and repelling, hybrid female figure, a combination of a woman and a dragonfly, seems to dominate the whole composition. The female bust with the lofty head is covered with a kind of helmet ornamented with two blue and gold beetles and it seems to be greedily devoured by a ferocious insect with lethal claws. The open wings of the dragonfly-woman, are finely decorated with opaline enameling, small diamonds and moonstones, whereas its gold, petite, oblong body is also elaborately enameled³⁸.

Lucien Gaillard (1861-1942) was another French jewelry designer of the same period who was seduced by Japanese philosophy and aesthetics, perhaps much more than Lalique himself. With particular interest in the ukiyo-e, but also in objects such as netsuke, with predominant theme nature and mainly insects, Gaillard began dealing with jewelry design as early as mid-1892, experimenting with many techniques³⁹.

³⁷ This characteristic Lalique's piece was presented at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1900 along with the rest of his work which was met with great acclaim and became recognizable thereafter.

³⁸ The brooch used to belong to the wealthy Armenian collector Calouste Gulbenkian and has also been worn by Sarah Bernhardt, the famous Parisian actress.

³⁹ In essence, he continued an already successful jewelry business initiated by his grandfather Amédée Gaillard in the end of the Napoleonic era, in particular since 1811.



Figure 8
René Lalique (1860-1945)
Two Dragonflies brooch, 1903
Enamel and opal on 18k gold
Source: Sotheby & Co.



Figure 9
René Lalique (1860-1945)
Dragonfly Woman brooch, 1897
Enamel, moonstone, diamonds,
chalcedony on gold
Source: Calouste Gulbenkian Museum

Obviously influenced by Lalique's versatile and imaginative approach to the "exonerated" use of insects as predominant themes in his work, as well as by other Art Nouveau designers in techniques and materials, he focused on the massive use of alternative materials such as horn, ivory, various types of wood, but also semi-precious gems, most of them combined successfully with the enameling technique, especially plique-à-jour. What is interesting about his work, as regards its technical part, is the fact that Gaillard was not simply interested in researching Japanese jewelry techniques, but he adopted many of them. For this reason, he did not hesitate to hire more than sixty goldsmith specialists of various specialties, but mainly enamellers and engravers, from Japan who gave to his ideas a special style of exoticism. According to Maurice Guillemot his work, especially that relating to insects, is distinguished for its direct legibility, the light and the purity of its form, since, unlike Lalique's interpretative mastery, Gaillard seems to follow faithfully the lines and the shapes of the bugs, moving towards their harmonious recomposition without confusing or

misrepresenting them⁴⁰.



Figure 10
Lucien Gaillard (1861-1942)
Dragonflies hairpin, 1900
Horn, enamels and ruby
Source: Rijksmuseum

One of his works that carries the above features is a hairpin in the form of two dragonflies. This particular piece reveals mainly Gaillard's technical skill through the almost faithful rendition of the two insects. Using gold for the bodies of the insects and light, almost transparent horn for their, partly enameled, wings, as well as, an astonishing ruby on the top that represents the core of a flower attracting the two insects, Gaillard manages to create a clearly representative piece of French Art Nouveau jewelry.

A little later than Gaillard, the Spanish artistic jewelry designer, Lluís Masriera y Rosés (1872-1958), already known for his intelligent creativity,

⁴⁰ GUILLEMOT. "Quelques bijoux de L. Gaillard". *Art et Décoration: Revue Mensuelle d'Art Moderne*, 1904, p. 134.

received the gifts of Japan. This fact drastically triggered his curiosity, as well as his strong research ability, and he was pleasantly surprised when he discovered the way in which the Japanese respected and honored nature and insects. At the same time, his great admiration for Lalique's work, which he experienced during his multiple trips to Paris⁴¹, was another strong influence on his decision to deal with the adoption of elements from the world of insects and their incorporation into his work. The period of his career in terms of use of such information and in which there is an evident effect of his work on Spanish modern art and design, seems to start in early 1909. Classic themes of his work are either insects as plain units or in combination with plants or flowers, but also fatal women, nymphs or fairies with dragonfly wings⁴². The technique he mainly used was enameling with a special preference to plique-à-jour in 18K yellow or 24K gold combined occasionally with precious or semi-precious stones.



Figure 11
Luis Masriera y Rosés (1872-1958)
Butterfly necklace / brooch
Enamels, diamonds, pearl on gold
Source: Copelend Jewelers

⁴¹ MONTANES & BARRERA. **Joyas**. Madrid: Ediciones Antiquaria, 1987, p. 191.

⁴² ROBINSON, FARGAS, LORD. **Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudí, Miró, Dalí**. New Heaven: Cleveland Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2006, p. 168.

One of his most characteristic, early, totally handcrafted works relating to the use of insects is a famous piece today, the butterfly pearl necklace, which could also be used as a brooch [Figure 11]. In this masterpiece Lluís Masriera has managed to combine both the virtuosity of his technical talent with the staggeringly ethereal texture of butterfly's wings. He has used in a perfectly technical way the strikingly colorful plique-à-jour enameling so as to achieve a luminous stained glass effect which is more enhanced by small, carefully placed diamonds. A blurred, quiet pearl constitutes the abdomen of the insect coming into sharp contrast with its shiny diamond thorax. Generally speaking, however, the versatile approach of his new thematology, which, in our view, was focused mainly on the pure morphology of insects, their embellished rendition or their turning into mythical beings, rather than on their symbolic and ideological significance, found direct recipients in the Catalan market in the first years of his career. Some years later, especially during the Art Deco period, he became known throughout Europe, having changed, of course, the way of dealing with insects: his work had become sharper, more geometrical and stylish, reflecting the confident and free-thinking spirit of the 20th century innovations in art and design.

Conclusion

Japanese culture played a very important role in the review of the social, ideological even political chart in the late 19th century of Europe and even America. At the same time it seems to have contributed to the reform of the decorative and applied arts with the introduction and adoption of new themes, symbols and ideas but also of unknown, until then, techniques, materials and textures, broadening the creative horizons of artists and designers. The new visual language that was shaped had the technical and philosophical qualities of the stylized Japanese art, but it mainly bore vivid elements of its truth and vitality⁴³. All these conditions were proved to be

⁴³ DUNSMORE & MARTIN. "The NGV's Japonisme: Japan and the birth of modern art". Available in: <

significant in the general intention of circumventing the traditional Western academic canon both in terms of technique and thematography. The road to the new ideological and aesthetic standards of modernism, though never easy, would have been more difficult if European and American designers had not come into contact with the profound and enviable knowledge, but also with the great respect of the Japanese for nature which had been inspiring not just their art and also for their very way of life, for centuries. Insects, an inseparable part of nature for them, had a very versatile role in their cultural heritage that, through art, not only managed to penetrate the fertile imagination of Western artists and designers, but also to overcome many old Christian beliefs that wanted them to be synonyms to negative and odious concepts. Through the jewelry and glass design fields, as well as other applied arts of the time such as graphic arts and textiles, insects formed the crucial borderline between the concepts of backwardness and novelty, of authenticity and hypocrisy, of truthfulness and falsehood. We should note though, that they constituted a tremendously important source of inspiration for the designers of the West mainly in terms of aesthetic, technical and thematic value, not as much as a new ideological, symbolic or allegoric trend that would shape their philosophy and thought. However, the way in which they were integrated to the new Western models of aesthetics and functionality charted new paths to the pursuit of abstractness, symmetry and balance in the 20th century applied arts, affecting decisively the concepts of modernity.

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